

Exploring Affordances of Social Media Use in Election Campaigns: What Political Parties Want to Facilitate, Project and Create

Work-in-progress

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Abstract

In recent years, social media have become omnipresent and highly important for social networking and content sharing. Lately we have witnessed how also political parties adopt social media as part of their political campaign strategy. The purpose of this work-in-progress paper is to investigate this tendency by posing two research questions: 1) what do political parties perceive as affordances of social media use in their campaign strategy? And 2) how are these affordances reflected in the political parties' actual actions during the campaign? To address the two questions, we conducted a qualitative case study of the political parties' use of Facebook in the Danish general election in 2011. Our preliminary findings reveal three main categories of affordances that the political parties wish to pursue: 1) they want to facilitate direct communication to promote political interests and create room for dialogue in a controlled environment, 2) they want to project an image of authenticity through an informal media, and 3) they want to create interaction and involvement through dynamic relationships with voters. A closer look at the parties' actual use of Facebook reveals that their intention of generating interaction and involvement is limited by their actions as most of them do not engage with the users' posts and comments. The tensions between perceived affordances and actual use prompt further investigation of what political parties should consider when engaging in social media activities as part of their campaign strategy.

Keywords: Social Media, Affordances, Election, Online Political Campaign

Introduction

The use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and MySpace are gaining momentum in various contexts. For example, social media have become the platform where people communicate and share information with friends and family. More and more businesses are entering the social media sphere to be where their customers are by adjusting their branding and marketing approach as part of an overall social media strategy. Social media are also helping governments increase their openness and transparency towards citizens. The right to access government information is considered essential in order to reflect democratic participation, to ensure trust in government agencies, and to help citizens make informed decisions (Bertot et al., 2010).

Lately we have witnessed how also political parties adopt social media as part of their campaign strategy. For example the US presidential campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 established Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and other social media as integral parts of the political campaign toolbox (Robertson et al. 2010; Yan, 2011). Some analysts even attribute the victory of Obama to his online strategy (Tumasjan et al. 2011). Similarly we see how social media platforms became a driver for the British general election in 2010, which was proclaimed “The First Social Media Election” (Arthur, 2010). The use of social media for political purposes has also entered the scene of Danish politics where the parties adopted social media as part of their campaign strategy in the 2011 general election. A questionnaire sent to Danish voters (a total of 380 responses) showed that 52.3% of the respondents followed the parties’ campaign on Facebook as either “Follower”, “Fan” or “Friend”. Among the respondents, 48.9% agreed that political parties should use social media, and 71.3% believed that political parties would gain votes by pursuing their campaign on social media platforms.

This development is interesting since it shows how social media is gaining terrain in the domain of political campaigning. Following this trend, our research interest lies in the gap between, on the one hand, the increased expectations from Danish voters for political parties to expose their campaign on a social media platform, and on the other hand, the limited knowledge we have about this phenomenon. In particular, we argue that existing research on social media use for election campaigns fails to investigate the affordances of social media from the point-of-view of the political parties rather than that of voters. The purpose of this study is thus to investigate the affordances that social media can bring to political parties in their election campaign. We pursue two research questions: *1) what do political parties perceive as affordances of social media use in their campaign strategy?* And *2) how are these affordances reflected in the political parties’ actual actions during the campaign?* We conducted a qualitative case study of the political parties’ use of Facebook by interviewing representatives from each party and by comparing interview data to log data on the parties’ Facebook website before, during and after the election. Our preliminary findings reveal three categories of social media affordances from the political parties’ point-of-view, explaining what they want to facilitate, project and create through social media use. However, a closer look at the parties’ actual use of Facebook indicates that although the political parties are aware of what it entails concerning social behavior, most of them are inactive and do not respond to the users or engage in a dialogue.

Next we outline the theoretical assumptions underlying our two research questions, namely that of affordances with a particular emphasis on social media. We then present our research design, which focused on the political parties’ perceptions of social media use compared to the actual activity on Facebook during the Danish general election in 2011. Our findings provide us with an in-depth understanding of what social media afford political parties the opportunity to do. A discussion of the tensions between perceived affordances and actual use prompt further investigation of what political parties should consider when engaging in Facebook activities as part of their campaign strategy.

Theory

Social media has become a widely discussed topic among scholars and practitioners alike. Scholars conducting research within social media use have so far studied the challenges and opportunities of social media indicating that their utilization is to some extent inevitable and forthcoming (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The adoption of social media seems to transcend many different organizational contexts due to the opportunities they provide for redefining boundaries and facilitating possibilities of connecting people in spite of their dispersed contexts. In the literature of social media studies, the focus has varied from

personal use (Ozenc and Farnham, 2011) to organizational implementation in SMEs (Zeiller and Schauer, 2011) and to implementation of the media in public contexts (Lampe and Roth, 2012). Bertot et al. (2010) note how e-government and social media are helping governments increase openness and transparency and work as an anti-corruption mechanism. The increasing adoption of social media tools in government processes makes it relevant to look into what it is that these media afford in both the context of government and the voting public.

Affordances

The concept of affordances was introduced by Gibson (1986) as a way of understanding what an object can afford, i.e., “what the object is good for” (Treem and Leonardi, 2012, p.4). The identification of affordances can be used in order to look into what might drive an individual to adopt and make use of an object. In Gibson’s (1986) view the notion of affordances is also related to differences in perspectives making it possible for an object to be assigned a variety of diverse affordances. These mechanisms provide an interesting basis for investigating the differences in adoption and use that individuals can infer into an object. In the study of technology and human interaction, the concept of affordances has been adopted to describe the relation between humans and technology and implications for technology use (Norman, 1999). Gaver (1991) further notes how affordances of technology enable a direct link between perception and action and point to affordances as a key concept in explaining interaction between technology and the world around them. The influence of interaction is also central in Leonardi’s (2010) adoption of affordances to explain the way in which matter or material objects can be said to adopt different affordances according to the perspective in which they are seen. The rise of social and interactive technology puts increased attention on the interplay between human and technology. One of the technologies that have taken part in shifting the boundaries of machine and human interaction is social media. The adoption of social media has created new rules for how humans of all ages and with different technological abilities are interacting both with each other but also with the technology (Shirky, 2008).

Treem and Leonardi (2012) investigate the use of social media within organizations and recognize that there are four main affordances that can be linked to social media in an organizational communication context. In their research they take what they refer to as an affordance approach in investigating what organizational literature says about the perceived use of social media and they discover four consistent organizational affordances of social media, that of visibility, persistence, editability, and association (Treem and Leonardi, 2012, p. 9). The affordance approach (Treem and Leonardi, 2012) allows for a closer look at the ascription of characteristics to social media in relation to the users’ perception of them. Treem and Leonardi (2012) further stress how the affordance approach helps us underline what kinds of behavior social media afford, thereby creating an understanding of when, why and how social media are adopted. Recalling Gibson’s (1986) point on the ability of multiple affordances tied to the same object, the question becomes what affordances of social media can be identified and what implications the dynamic nature of the media have in relation to affordance perception and use. This is of key interest when relating affordances to the creation of strategic use of social media as the way in which the strategy makers and users perceive the media can have a huge effect on their likelihood of adopting them (Rogers, 1995). Following Gaver’s (1991) notion of affordances being the link between perception and action, the strategic relation between the identification of the perceived affordances with the actual action that the media encourage can provide interesting findings for strategizing about social media.

In the e-governance literature, social media is being assigned abilities such as transparency and citizen-centrism (Bertot et al., 2010). Furthermore, specific social media types such as blogs are afforded democratic practice described as ‘finding out about government’ and this ability is making them popular channels for promotion of candidates and political parties (Griffiths, 2004). By investigating the use of social media with respect to campaign success (Tumasjan et al. 2011), the identification of affordances for social media in relation to a pre-designed strategy for use and the actual execution and reflections could provide us with further understanding of how, when, and why social media can be used strategically in online campaign strategy.

Research Approach

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study we adopted a qualitative research approach where we conducted in-depth interviews with a representative from each of the seven political parties that used Facebook to promote their political campaign for the Danish general election in 2011. One political party, Dansk Folkeparti, was excluded from our study as they were not present on Facebook or other social media during the election. We interviewed the web responsible who was in charge of the parties' appearance on Facebook. Each interview, which lasted for approximately 60-90 minutes, was recorded and transcribed verbatim. This resulted in a total word count of 70,395 of interview transcripts. We followed the parties' representation on Facebook and not the individual party member's Facebook account. We chose this strategy as we were interested in studying how each party as a common unit was represented on this media platform.

Furthermore to investigate the actual use of Facebook we registered the activity on the parties' Facebook websites, which entailed counting specific variables, e.g., updates, "likes" and responses to questions. These registrations were conducted before, during and immediately after the election campaign.

The analysis of the interview data was based on an iterative process of working with the empirical material along with the theoretical perspective to tease out insights. Our approach was grounded in principles drawn from qualitative data analysis and involved making sense out of the interview data we collected (Cresswell, 2003). The data analysis followed four steps. First, the data was prepared through transcription of interviews and organization of website registrations. Secondly, we carefully read through all the data in order to obtain a general sense of the information and to understand the overall meaning of what the participants were saying. Thirdly, we conducted a detailed data analysis by carrying out a coding process using the software Atlas.ti. The coding process involved dividing the material into chunks and assigning meaning into those chunks (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). In particular the coding was inspired by the affordance approach from Treem and Leonardi (2012) where we identified the main affordances relative to social media by pursuing the following question, 'What do social media afford political parties the opportunity to do'. Lastly, the codes were divided into a number of overall categories describing the affordances as well as a basis for identification of the interpretation and meaning of those categories to explain the affordance characteristics. An overview of the codes and categories is included in appendix A.

To make a connection between the perceived affordances and the actual use of social media for the election campaign, we contrasted the discovered affordances with the actual use patterns on the political parties' Facebook pages. The method applied for this analysis took its starting point in the discovered affordances and the implications for them as drawn from the interview data in order to see whether the strategic affordances were actually being carried out.

Introducing the Case Study

The empirical material relies on a case study of seven political parties' strategic considerations of social media use during the Danish general election in 2011.¹ On 26 August 2011, the current Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen called for election of the new parliament in Denmark. The election date was set to take place on 15 September 2011 kicking off three weeks of election campaign. The two main political wings within Danish politics were very close throughout the political campaign promoting their political standpoints using different tactics for debates, public appearances and a variety of media as part of their campaign strategy (e.g., road trips, TV debates, radio broadcasts). In particular, social media were used by a variety of political parties; however, whereas all of the parties on the left wing adopted the media, only few parties on the right wing were present on social media platforms. After a thrilling election night and with a voting percentage of 87.74%, the results were in and led to a shift in power from left to right giving the right wing a victory of 92 mandates against the left wing's 87%. One of the big winners of the election votes were the parties Radikale and Enhedslisten that both advanced remarkably in their mandate count with 8 mandates each; news which both parties gladly distributed on their popular Facebook pages.

¹ The seven political parties are: Socialdemokratiet, Radikale Venstre, Det Konservative Folkeparti, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Liberal Alliance, Venstre, and Enhedslisten.

Preliminary Findings

The data coding and analysis provided a set of findings of what political parties perceive as affordances of social media use as part of their campaign strategy. Based on our analysis we were able to group the codes according to certain characteristics of what the political parties want to obtain with social media. We were able to identify three groups of affordances mentioned by the political parties: 1) what we want to facilitate, 2) what we want to project, and 3) what we want to create. These groups of affordances are presented next.

What We Want to Facilitate

The first group of affordances is reflected in the parties' description of the actions they want to carry out through the use of social media. The focus here is placed on the specific actions that the political parties want to *facilitate* through social media.

Within this group we identified four main affordances. The first is DIRECT COMMUNICATION dealing with the way in which the political parties want to use the media as a communication channel that they are in charge of. Here the notions of *promoting own truth* and *communication of important information* describe what type of information the Facebook platform affords. The respondents emphasize how the media afford them to share opinions and provide their own perspective of the story without the interference and interpretation from others. Social media further afford the opportunity of *fast communication* where the parties can respond quickly to critiques, main issues, and opinions from opposing parties or critical voters.

The second main affordance in this group is that of PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES where the parties have the possibility of promoting their political ideas and thoughts and giving the voters a chance to comment on them. An affordance, which can be linked to this category, is that of *reaching the masses* as the Facebook platform allows for visits and revisits of posts and ideas. We also identified the affordance of *linkability*, which gives the parties an opportunity to share the posts with others through 'like' and 'share' functions.

The third main affordance related to what the political parties wish the social media to facilitate is DIALOGUE. This affordance is related to that of *timing* of posts in relation to issues that are present and on the voters' minds. In addition the affordance of *emotion* allows for a connection to be made through dialogue as the political parties have the opportunity to reveal emotions about certain issues.

The final main affordance tied to "what we want to facilitate" is that of CONTROL. The political parties express how control of the media affords them the opportunity to manage what is made public. Further, a strong affordance tied to this is that of *editability* and how each of the parties view their control over the Facebook page as a way of editing what is posted and what is left out.

What We Want to Project

The second group of affordances is linked to what the political parties want the social media platform to afford them to *project*. The affordances in this group are focused on the opportunity to project a strong sense of identity and image for the political parties.

In this group three main affordances emerge. The first is AUTHENTICITY of the political parties and what they believe in. The authentic ability is one that is tied to social media by the way the political parties are able to show their opinion and express their beliefs. Tied to this are the affordances of *likability* and how the political parties aim for this through their authentic behavior. Furthermore the affordance of *positive behavior* is also highlighted as something that the political parties aim at projecting through their awareness of not positing negative statements about their opponents and eliminating the posts that have a negative tone.

The second main affordance is that of INFORMALITY and the way in which social media create an informal atmosphere for the political parties to act within. An affordance tied to this is *unconventionality* where the social media afford different approaches compared to other media for communication.

The last of the main affordances within this group is PERSONALITY, which is tied to what the political parties want to project by using social media. Related to this affordance is the ability of the social media to afford the political party to project an *image* through the affordance of being *present* for their voters. This is also tied to the affordance of *reliability* as the political parties want to present a reliable outlet for their political views and this is often created through the addition of political personalities to the different posts.

What We Want to Create

The last group of affordances is linked to what the political parties would like the social media platform to afford them the opportunity to *create*. In this group the affordances reveal what the political parties wish to provide through the use of social media.

Within this group two main affordances are apparent. Firstly, the notion of INTERACTION is underlined as the political parties note how this is a strong driver for the use of social media. This affordance is tied to that of *activity* and *dynamics* through the availability of responses and replies from the users. The affordance of *reaction* is connected to that of interaction as the social media can afford the reaction from the voters who are following the political parties on their website.

The second main affordance within the ‘create’ affordances is that of INVOLVEMENT. This group has the affordances of *trust* and *support* linked to it as they are underlined as main drivers of the voters choosing to involve themselves in the social media. In addition the social media is also affording the creation of *ambassadors* for the political parties, as they are able to promote the political messages of the party.

In table 1 we have summarized the main affordances within the different groups.

Table 1. Main and Linked Affordances According to Groups	
Groups of Affordance	Main and Linked Affordances
‘What we want to facilitate’	DIRECT COMMUNICATION; <i>promoting own truth, communication of important information, fast communication</i> PROMOTION OF POLITICAL MESSAGES; <i>reaching the masses, linkability</i> DIALOGUE; <i>timing, emotion</i> CONTROL; <i>editability</i>
‘What we want to project’	AUTHENTICITY; <i>likable, positive behavior</i> INFORMALITY; <i>unconventionality</i> PERSONALITY; <i>image, reliability, presence</i>
‘What we want to create’	INTERACTION; <i>activity, dynamics, reaction</i> INVOLVEMENT; <i>trust, support, ambassadors</i>

This overview provides us with a clearer picture of the affordances that are inscribed into social media from the point of view of the Danish political parties. The categorization of the affordances into different groups of what the political parties want to *facilitate*, *project* and *create* enable us to decipher the intended implications linked to the discovered affordances. However, the findings also indicate that the affordances within each group to a high extent are interrelated and dependent on each other.

Discussion

The findings propose three important insights about political parties’ use of social media as part of their election campaign strategy. First of all, our findings contribute insights into political parties’ perceptions of social media affordances rather than looking at the perceptions of voters as has been predominant in existing literature. Secondly, we have conceptualized what political parties expect social media to afford in

their campaign strategy. Third, our study provides a systematic approach for investigating the affordances of social media.

By outlining the perceived affordances we are able to answer our first research question. Our observations of the parties' actual use of Facebook, however, indicate that the majority of the political parties are unable to meet the demands of their Facebook users. This tension, which relates to our second research question, will be addressed in an extended version of the paper, but we would like to reveal some of the observations that we have obtained through coding our empirical material. It appears that in practice the political parties have adopted an ad hoc approach to Facebook. Our observations and registrations of the parties' actions on their Facebook website before, during and after the election reveal a different pattern of behavior on the social media platform than the ones ascribed through the affordance analysis. In particular, our analysis of the parties' actions show that the affordances related to 'what we want to facilitate' and 'what we want to project' to some extent are present in their behavior on Facebook. However, the affordances of 'what we want to create' are to a high extent lacking. The parties' intention of generating INTERACTION and INVOLVEMENT are limited by their actions, as most of them do not engage with the users' posts and comments. Our preliminary observations show that only one of the political parties succeeds in providing the users with value adding responses and in engaging in the social media environment. Furthermore, the party that seems to match the expectation of being active, responding to questions and engaging in debates and discussions, is only active during a limited time frame. This indicates that the activity level during the general election increases significantly in contrast to the periods before and after the election. This may not be surprising; however, it is fair to assume that continuous interaction and engagement with voters are important activities also in periods when there is no election campaign.

These observations provide interesting perspectives for further research in relation to how the perceived affordances require specific actions in order to develop from strategic initiatives to actual value adding components for the political parties. The next step in our research is therefore going to focus on the gap between the perceived affordances and the actual use, including a discussion of the implications that the adoption of social media has on election campaigns in terms of matching the desired intent with the actual outcome.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study was to explore the affordances of political parties' use of social media as part of their campaign strategy for the Danish 2011 general election. The first category of identified affordances relates to the parties' considerations as to "what we want to facilitate". This category reflects that the parties want to facilitate direct communication for promotion of political interests and create room for dialogue in a controlled environment. The second category of affordances relates to "what we want to project" which emphasizes the parties' wish for projecting an image of authenticity through an informal media. The third category of affordances is that of "what we want to create" which refers to the wish to create interaction and involvement through dynamic relationships with voters.

Based on our preliminary analysis, we can conclude that the political parties have to thoroughly consider what it requires to be present on a social media platform such as Facebook. They should not exclusively use Facebook in order to promote political statements but need to integrate the social element in their actual behavior. The affordance approach allowed us to identify the political parties' intent to use social media. It also triggered a discussion of and reflections on the actual actions of the political parties, providing insights into the tensions that are related to achieving a match between perceived affordances and actual behavior of social media use as part of political campaign strategies.

We have only offered preliminary insights into the affordances that social media can bring to political parties in their election campaign. In the extended version of the paper, and for the SIG eGovernment workshop at ICIS 2012, we wish to elaborate on this and discuss how our findings support and contribute to existing literature on social media affordances in an e-government context.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the two Master's students at Copenhagen Business School, Tasja Rodian and Mie D Christensen, for gathering an extensive set of data and for helping us framing the first ideas about this study.

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Appendix A

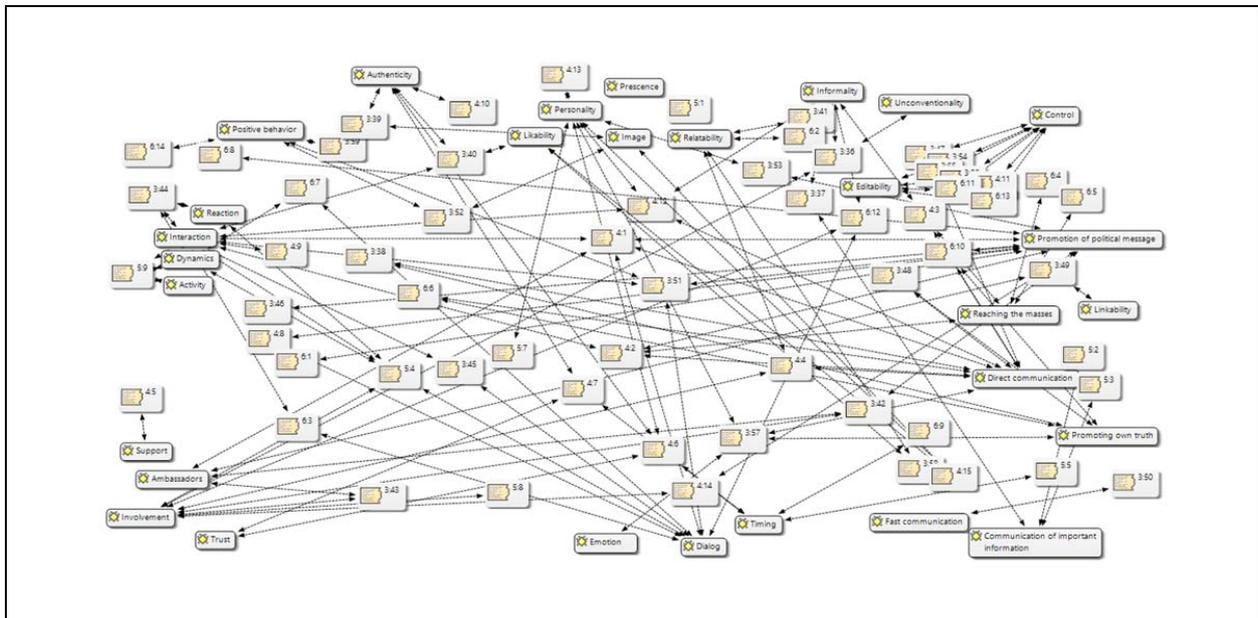


Figure 1. Total Amount of Codes and Links

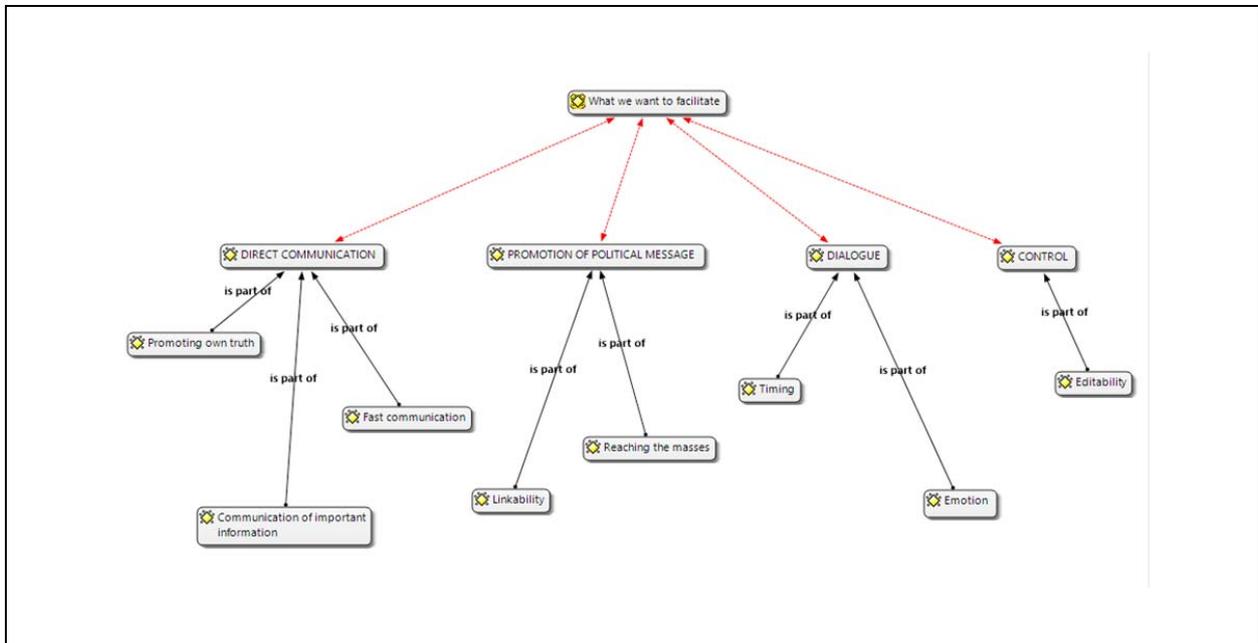


Figure 2. What We Want To Facilitate

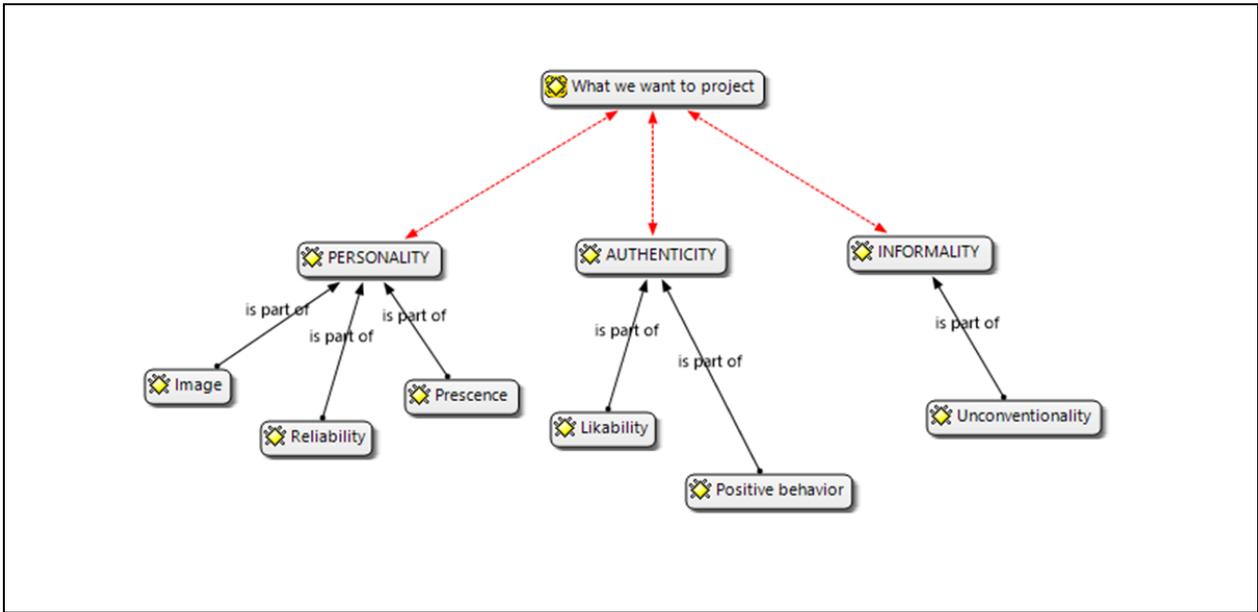


Figure 3. What We Want To Project

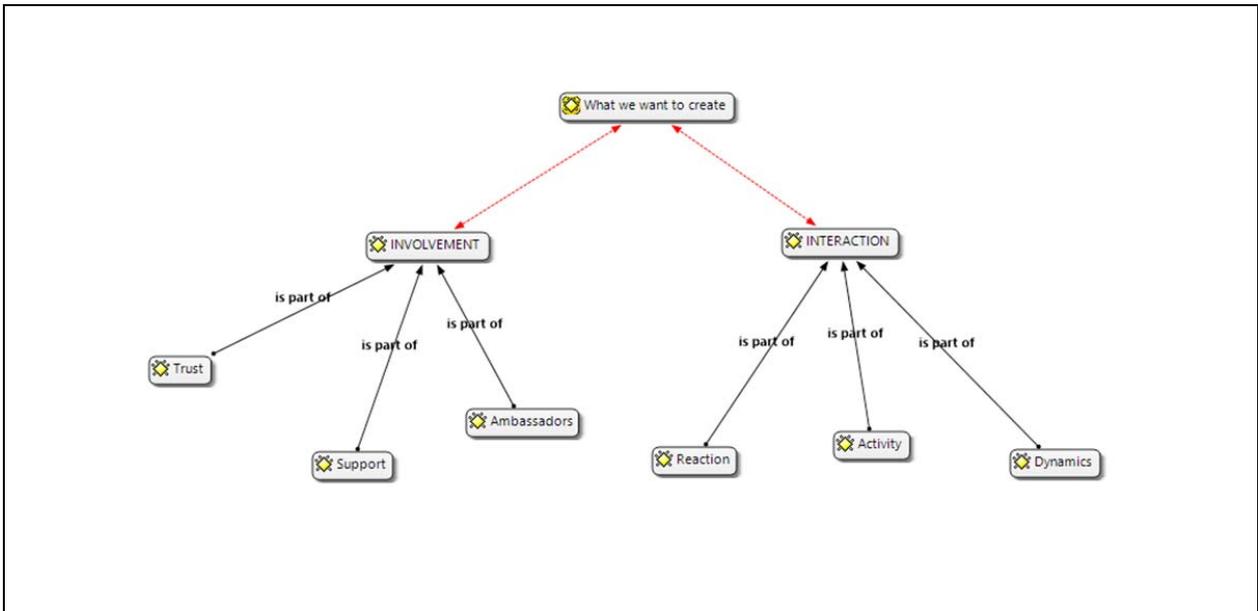


Figure 4. What We Want To Create