

## **UGOT Challenges EoI: *Democracy in the digital age: Power, language and technology***

### **Main applicants**

*Professor Ulf Bjereld*, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg

*Professor Lars Borin*, Språkbanken (The Swedish Language Bank), Department of Swedish, University of Gothenburg

### **Global societal challenge**

The digitalization of society puts a strain on the ability of the political system to fulfill three central democratic values: realizing the will of the people, political equality, and maintaining a vital and productive political debate. Some argue that the digital revolution and the growth of social media revitalize democracy by lowering the threshold for political participation, increasing the transparency of political decision-making processes and strengthening the public debate. Others instead argue that digitalization consolidates existing power structures, undermines the possibility of political accountability and fragmentizes the public sphere. Digitalization and the emergence of social media open new possibilities for interactivity in the political sphere and in society as a whole, and thereby arguably reduce the significance of territory, promote network organization and strengthen the individualization of society. Whether this leads to greater transparency and effective sharing of information is ultimately an empirical matter, as are questions such as: How does this development affect the conditions for political democracy in Sweden and in other parts of the world? What shifts in power relations can we observe among politicians, the media, voters and transnational networks – in Sweden, Europe and globally? Does equality in political participation increase or decrease? Is the political debate becoming broader and more vital, or simply more fragmented? In what way does the digitalization affect the democratic discourse given multilingualism and the unedited, unregulated language of social media? There is a clear need for empirically based research on how digitalization affects the conditions for political democracy.

### **Proposed approach**

Empirical investigation of these questions using a synergistic combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches will be at the heart of this research collaboration, which will draw on Språkbanken's vast text corpus resources (e.g., newstext, social media, public information), on the language processing tools developed at Språkbanken and the language technology research group in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, and the expertise of the social scientists involved in the collaboration. We foresee two broad strands of investigation in this initiative:

- (1) The questions formulated above will be empirically studied,
- (2) using language-aware text mining and other language processing on huge amounts of relevant text material (billions of words in some cases, putting the processing in the "Big Data" category) in several languages, combined with the development of bespoke interactive user interfaces allowing researchers to select texts and text passages for qualitative studies.

### **Research team**

Political scientists, media researchers, linguists and language technologists active in research groups on democracy research and linguistics and language technology at the University of Gothenburg make up the research team: Professor Ulf Bjereld and professor Marie Demker (*Makt, Identitet, Modernitet, MIM, Department of Political Science*), professor Lars Borin and associate professor Markus Forsberg (*Språkbanken, Department of Swedish*), professor Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson (*Swedish National Election Studies Program and The SOM Institute, Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, JMG*), professor Aarne Ranta (*Computing Science Division, Department of Computer Science and Engineering*) and professor Lena Wängnerud (*Multidisciplinary Opinion and Democracy Research Group, MOD and Laboratory of Opinion Research, LORE*).

### **Suggestion for international evaluators**

Professor Nick Couldry, London School of Economics, UK, <N.Couldry@lse.ac.uk>

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