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Joint Digital Storytelling on Twitter: Creative Appropriation in Political Deliberation

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1 Theoretical background

Partly driven by social media, the mediatisation of society has spawned new forms of political communication in the public sphere, accompanied by high hopes for more deliberative discourse along the Habermasian concept of deliberative democracy (Habermas 1989). Habermas sees the public sphere as a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, reach a solution shared by all. This ideal constellation of public discourse is based on certain normative conditions, which include formal and discursive equality, reciprocity and rational critique as core qualities of the discourse; and ideal role taking. How this model can be adapted to online discourse is a widely discussed question (Davis 2009).

This paper explores on the basis of empirical research, how patterns of interaction and argumentation in political discourse on Twitter evolve as online discursive practices. The analysis is based on the model of Twitter as a ‘discourse universe’ which is constituted by a semiotic sign system of its own. This multi-referential semiotic system consists of language signs, images, and other signifiers. Single tweets have a contextualised communicative function within a larger framework, which is conceptualised as the “functional operator model of Twitter” (Thimm/Einspänner/Dang-Anh 2012).

2 Model

Although Twitter has mostly been regarded as a platform for the diffusion of information and personal opinion for individual or corporate interests, new and creative modes of interpersonal exchange patterns are increasingly leading to the perspective of Twitter as a platform for political debate and deliberation. Due to its format and technological frame, Twitter can even be seen as highly relevant for “public reasoning around social contention” (Vicari 2012). One of these new and creative patterns of interaction takes up the classical extension of the ancient art of storytelling, now interwoven with digital photos, films and sound. However, in contrast to widely accepted definitions of “digital storytelling” as an individualistic strategy to communicate details and stories about one’s own life, digital storytelling in political context takes up the shape of “joint storytelling”. Joint storytelling embraces coordinated activities by multiple actors focusing on a shared topic. By adding personal bits and pieces of information and evaluation, participants construct an open narrative format, which can be inviting and inspiring for others, who then join in with their own narratives. These coordinated activities do not only contribute to the information gathering process in political deliberation, but also create ‘translocal communities’. Translocal communities are often shaped around personal experiences or opinions and reflect the intensity of interpersonal exchanges, particularly on social networking sites with a private and personal character. By using the program code of Twitter, for example by embedded retweets and @signifiers, participants creatively make use of the media logic of twitter for their purpose of building up a translocal community.

3 Data and methods

To underpin the role, function, and creativity of storytelling on Twitter in a political context, we differentiate three media-based levels of political storytelling: (1) the textual level of storytelling, (2) the operative level of storytelling (hashtags, @- and RT-Symbol, hyperlinks etc.) and (3) the visual level of storytelling (embedded fotos, videos). From the perspective of narration, we assess narrative and discursive value to the storytelling episodes by distinguishing actor-centred patterns like multi-

actor joint storytelling, collaborative vs. argumentational storytelling and cascaded storytelling (intensity over time). To demonstrate how joint storytelling on Twitter can be approached from the perspective of political communication, a large body of tweets from a long-term research project was analysed. Background of the analysis is a collection of tweets by proponents and adversaries of a local traffic project (underground train station in the city of Stuttgart, Germany) in 2011 and 2012. This local project became well-known nationally due to violent street fights between protestors and police and stands symbolically for the new power of citizens' online participation. In this context a large body of over 107.000 tweets was collected. For the analysis, a RSS feed reader ("Omea reader") was used for collection of tweets with the hashtag '#s21', the respective hashtag for the train project of "Stuttgart21".

The following dimensions were chosen for the analysis:

(1) *Quantitative operator usage and topic frequency (frequency over time)*: With this method, correlations between storytelling activities, narration intensity and real life developments can be demonstrated. This included an analysis of the embedded multi-modal content (photos, videos, and links to other websites), by which the users were able to substantiate their arguments, i.e., uploading a picture as evidence of a particularly newsworthy situation. Inserted hyperlinks to online articles or blogpostings can provide additional background information and help to create multiple forms of joint narrations.

(2) *Discursive participation on the individual level*: From the perspective of joint storytelling it is necessary to identify and analyse specific interactive activities as 'communicative actions'. Here two perspectives can be taken: the *individual level* (style of tweets) and the *interactive level* (interactive exchanges), by which narrative episodes can be linked. At the individual level, the operator model of Twitter allows for a systematic approach of operator usage and frequency as well as their integration into linguistic practices of personal storytelling.

(3) *Discursive participation on the interactive exchange level*: Direct discursive exchanges and types of storytelling reflect the dyadic approach to the dynamics of political storytelling. For this perspective, direct exchanges on Twitter are taken as 'deliberative discussions', which demonstrate the discursive options of microblogging.

4 Results

Results show that certain narrations can be regarded as more (or less) influential. Here agenda setting functions of Twitter also come into play. Particularly powerful was joint storytelling about the various demonstrations, here the community building and sharing functions were particularly evident.

The paper argues for a micro-level perspective on online activities, as the internet does not only cause societal changes as meta-processes, but also evokes changes in communicative patterns on a micro-level. On a larger scale the paper aims to show that online deliberation and online discussions are becoming more and more refined by creatively adopting options of the respective media logics. In addition, it will be demonstrated using one concrete case, how much influence online discourses already have on political decision making.

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