



Searchable talk as discourse practice on the internet: The case of “#bindersfullofwomen”



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 August 2014

Received in revised form

14 October 2015

Accepted 17 October 2015

Available online 27 October 2015

Keywords:

Twitter discourse

Searchable talk

Discourse pragmatics

Journalism

Hashtag

Internet meme

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phrase #bindersfullofwomen as an example of searchable talk in the micro-blogging sphere of Twitter. The data were collected and sampled in terms of its temporal development on Twitter. Drawing on the content analysis combined with descriptive statistics, the paper identified and compared the Twitter users as Journalist users and Ordinary users who are engaged with Twitter communication. It shows that Journalists tend to initiate the topic at the early stage of communication. Soon afterwards, the Ordinary participants dominate the Twitter communication. The tweets are textually characterized into three different categories on the formal grounds: Hashtags, Hashtags plus texts and anything with a link" or "a retweet", in the heteroglossic context of micro-blogging sphere. The categorization of tweets contributes as a methodology to distinguish the discourse practice performed by different Twitter users. The results show that both Journalist and Ordinary favor to post the informative tweets throughout the sampled period. The quantity of interactive tweets is becoming less favorable; however, in contrast, the tweets on the indeterminate plane gain high popularity from the early phase of the period. Our comparison indicates that the boundary between Journalist and Ordinary seems to be indistinct in terms of their contents.

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1. Introduction

On October 16, 2012, during the Second U.S. Presidential Debate, Mitt Romney was asked about pay equity for women. In his response, he referred to his past experiences in forming a new cabinet as the Governor of Massachusetts. Romney described how he solicited the advice of women's groups in his search for qualified women and received “whole binders full of women” (see [Appendix 1.0](#) for a copy of the full transcript). Shortly after Romney uttered this phrase at 18:38 PST, reactions were posted on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and other social media sites. Within a very short while, commentary and images with captions related to the phrase began to circulate, and numerous threads discussing the phrase began to appear. This process was greatly facilitated by the early emergence of the hashtag, #bindersfullofwomen.

Searchable talk is referred to as an online discourse whereby people render their comments searchable through the use of hashtags ([Zappavigna, 2011, 2012](#)). The hashtag, as a prefix to a

phrase, is a form of metadata tag that emerged on Twitter and other social networking sites to provide a means for users to identify phrases that may be of interest to other users. Hashtags allow users to search for all comments that contain a specific phrase, so that messages that share the hashtagged phrase can be grouped together to create a community-based discourse on any given topic.

2. Literature review on the Twitter discourse

Twitter, as a social networking site that was originally launched in 2006, provides people with a microblogging service that allows its users to post diverse viewpoints within a 140-character limit. It supports other communicative practices, such as sharing messages, replying, or providing access to other media outlets through hyperlinks. The messages within the 140-character limit are thus known as tweets, and Twitter users share and circulate messages via discourse acts known as tweeting and retweeting.

Previously, a few studies examined the communicative practices on Twitter. Twitter as a form of social media is a distinctive technological platform of connecting social people, and [Schmidt \(2014\)](#) suggested that Twitter, as a particular communicative space, affords the emergence of the “personal public” (p. 4). The

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social networking practices on twitter were well described by [Bruns and Moe \(2014\)](#), who outlined three structural layers (i.e., micro-layer, meso-layer and micro-layer) of communication on Twitter. In addition, [Boyd et al. \(2010\)](#) described retweeting practices on Twitter and mapped retweeting as a conversational practice. [Honeycut and Herring \(2009\)](#) analyzed conversational exchanges on Twitter, exploring the functions and uses of the @ symbol. Their analysis revealed the coherence of conversations on Twitter, which are aided by the use of the @ symbol as a marker of addressivity that helps users track conversations. Drawing on content analysis, [Naaman et al. \(2010\)](#) developed a categorization of the functional use of the @ symbol and explored the content of the reply messages. These studies are based on the content generated on Twitter, and focused on the interactional aspects among users, such as address and reply. The information spread as “internet memes” on Twitter was also widely explored. The term “meme” was initially coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to mean an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture by imitation. The term was subsequently adopted as “internet meme,” designating an activity or concept that spreads from one person to another on internet ([Shifman, 2013a](#): 2). An internet meme may take different forms of semiosis, such as video, hyperlinks, images, or hashtags.

The practice of using a hashtag to mark a keyword or a topic on Twitter represents “the formation of relations between users and texts (single tweets as well as whole conversations)” ([Schmidt, 2014](#): 6). An online discourse whereby people render their comments searchable through the use of hashtags is known as “searchable talk” ([Zappavigna, 2012](#)). The functions of hashtags are explored in linguistics ([Zappavigna, 2015](#); [Scott, 2015](#)). For instance, they are conceptualized into three categories: “marking experiential topics, enacting interpersonal relationships, and organizing text” (2015: 274). In addition to systemic functional linguistic description of hashtags, researchers have explored their social dimensions. For example, [Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson \(2014\)](#), through a content analysis that was informed by feminist theory and critical race theory, disclosed the patterns of eight semantic formations by exploring the hashtagged phrase within each tweet and examined the social relevance of Twitter hashtags. In general, though, the few qualitative studies on Twitter hashtags, despite their critical and sociological perspectives, have failed to identify the linguistic features of all tweets and to distinguish the functions of their different forms. Because Hashtags are searchable, “they connect tweets from users who have no preexisting follower/followee relationship” ([Schmidt, 2014](#): 6); any Twitter user can share hashtags, either to promote the hashtags or blog their ideas–messages to be engaged with “current events, cultural expression, or engagement in ongoing conversations” ([Schmidt, 2014](#), p. 6). Moreover, [Page \(2012\)](#) analyzed the role of hashtags by comparing the discourse styles of corporation, celebrity and “ordinary” Twitter users to reveal that the promotional practices of hashtags are favorably used by both corporate and celebrity Twitter users. The forms of self-branding operate on a continuum, and, in contrast to celebrities and corporations, “ordinary” Twitter users adapt them with low frequency.

Additionally, Twitter studies can be associated with other social disciplines ([Hermida, 2010a, b](#); [Burns, 2010](#); [Crawford, 2009, 2011](#); [Lasorsa, et al., 2012, Lewis, 2012, Barnard, 2012](#)). Twitter, as a social networking site, provides participatory communication to all users and exerts an impact on some professional discourse domains, such as journalism. For journalists and amateurs alike, participatory affordance makes social media, like Twitter, a primary means to disseminate information updates during events. The relationship between journalists and the audience becomes blurred, and some scholars even propose that traditional journalism has become “ambient journalism” due to the digital impact of micro-

blogging practices ([Hermida, 2010a, b](#); [Burns 2010](#)). However, other scholars suggest that professional Journalists are struggling to normalize their professionalism on social media such as Twitter ([Lasorsa, et al., 2012, Lewis, 2012](#)).

The studies described above beg the question as to what the differences are between the Twitter communications of professionals, such as Journalists, and those of non-professional Twitter users; of specific interest are the differences in the content that each group posts to disseminate information, and the difference between verbal practices. Is there any approach to characterize the content of the noisy, searchable talk, in which audiences participate to communicate the topical information?

Employing content analysis mixed with descriptive statistics, our study investigated searchable talk indexed via the hashtagged phrase, #bindersfullofwomen, based on the research questions described below.

3. Research questions

The goal of the present study is to investigate how discourses are practiced in searchable talk. The goal was split into two specific questions:

RQ1: who uses Twitter to engage in political communication, i.e., the U.S Presidential Election, and how is this political engagement fashioned during the period of heightened attention in the digital sphere?

RQ2: what are the variations in micro-blogging verbal practices performed by the different groups of bloggers in noisy political communication?

To respond to RQ1, we needed to identify the different social statuses of Twitter users in the participatory communication and examine the tendencies of communication in which these different social agents participated. To respond to RQ2, we carried out a textual analysis of the discourse in searchable talk on Twitter in order to characterize the discourse in such a noisy and heteroglossic context ([Bakhtin, 1981](#)). We also examined how discourse practices varied among Twitter users of different groups.

4. Methodology

We drew on content analysis mixed with descriptive statistics as a qualitative technique to identify the Twitter users into different categories in terms of their social roles and to characterize the content of the tweets.

Content analysis “is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. These inferences are about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message” ([Weber, 1990](#): 9). This research method has been a widely accepted research technique in qualitative studies of media communication and the other disciplines. It can be used to serve for different purposes, such as “[to] compare media or ‘levels’ of communication; ... [to] reflect cultural patterns of groups, institutions, or societies...; [to] describe trends in communication content and so on” ([Weber, 1990](#): 9). Therefore, in the present study, content analysis was adopted to distinguish the different social identities of Twitter users in order to map out the tendency of their political engagement during the sampled period. Drawing the biographic account available on the homepage of each Twitter account, we classified the Twitter users as distinct social groups, and then investigated how different social groups are engaged with politically topical communication. In addition, as Fairclough suggested, “form is part of content and textual analysis is a part of content analysis” (1995: 197); therefore, a textual analysis was conducted to tease out what Twitter users do to engage themselves with Twitter

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