Living/minimum wage: Influential citizen talk in twitter

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ABSTRACT

There has been a major cultural shift away from 'passive'consumption to more active production of digital texts by citizens. Yet,this does not mean that we all participate in digital media in the same ways and for the same reasons. Nor does it mean that we all have the same level of access to digital networks. This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the diversity and fluidity of citizen participation in digital environments by examining the discourse style of a particular group of digital users, namely citizens whose contributions become crowdsourced to prominence in microblogging. We refer to this form of citizen participation as 'influential', in as much as the discourse of these citizens attracts inordinate levels of attention and can trigger social contagion. We conduct a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study of a corpus of tweets posted by a group of citizens who emerge as 'influential' within a Twitter debate about the minimum/living wage. Our analysis reveals that their discourse style is characterised by (i) limited content originality but a high participation rate; (ii) a continuum of thematic engagement; (iii) high levels of emotionality; and (iv) a preference towards stance-taking acts that convey full confidence in one's views.

1. Introduction

Digital communication constitutes the backbone of everyday life in many societies, 'always on' (Baron, 2008) having become the default mode of social engagement for many of us. As digital citizens, we participate in social life in more and more varied ways than even just a decade ago. Several hybrid terms have been coined – such as 'produser' and 'co-creator' (Bruns, 2007) – that articulate citizens' 'increased production prowess' (Van Dijck, 2009:42) across digital environments. The notion of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2014) captures a major cultural shift away from 'passive' consumption to more active production of digital texts by citizens.

Yet, living in a participatory culture does not mean that we all participate in digital media in the same ways and for the same reasons (Goode, 2010). Nor does it mean that we all have the same level of access to digital networks. This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the diversity and fluidity of citizen participation in digital environments by examining the discourse style of a particular group of digital users: citizens whose contributions become crowdsourced to prominence in microblogging. These citizens not only attract inordinate levels of attention from

others, including high-profile institutions, but can also trigger social contagion (Cha et al., 2010). Throughout the article, we refer to them as 'influential citizens': they are neither celebrities nor official representatives of powerful institutions; their tweets get massively propagated (they may go viral) and acted upon (e.g. retweeted) the most. We examine their discourse through a case study of a concrete practice (debating) in relation to a particular social issue (the living/minimum wage) on Twitter.

2. Citizen participation and influence in twitter

Social media are a key player in the current cultural shift away from citizens' passive consumption of, and towards active involvement in, the production of digital texts. This shift is seen to have resulted in the establishment of a 'participatory culture' (Jenkins et al., 2009:xi), which is characterised by "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others' opinions of what they have created)".

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The notion of participatory culture has been critiqued for its overly optimistic overtones of enhanced media and citizen empowerment (see, e.g., Hay and Couldry, 2011). Yet, right from the outset, Jenkins et al. (2009) acknowledged three key challenges to it, namely the participatory gap (linked to the digital divide that still exists across and within many societies), the need for transparency regarding means and forms of participation, and the ethics of participation. Importantly, too, the notion of participatory culture predates the internet. Within the Social Sciences, concepts such as the 'revalorisation of lay knowledge' in the media (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), the 'demotic turn' in broadcasting (Turner, 2010) and the 'ordinarisation' of television (Bonner, 2003) document a progressive but marked increase, from approximately the 1980s, in citizen participation across 'traditional' media.[1] Science and Technology scholars have also highlighted the increased value assigned to citizen participation in social life – a so-called 'third wave of science studies' considers 'the argument for citizen participation on expertise grounds to have been won at least in principle' and is now interested in better understanding the processes and outcomes of such participation (Evans and Ploughs, 2007: 828). In order to do so, it is widely accepted that we need to move beyond lay-expert or producer-consumer binaries and to focus instead on understanding citizen participation as comprising multiple facets and being dependent upon locally-performed identities (Van Dijck, 2009, Thornborrow, 2015). This is especially so in digital platforms such as Twitter, in which much communication revolves around citizens sharing their knowledge and views and evaluating the knowledge and views of others within large virtual communities (Zhang et al., 2010, Zappavigna, 2013).

Launched in 2006, Twitter is a text-based microblogging service where users can send messages (tweets) of up to 140 characters. Twitter users can place a hashtag symbol (#) before a single character, a word or an up-to-140-character sentence (without spaces) that thus becomes the topic around which further tweets are grouped. By aggregating tweets in this way, hashtags contribute to the three main functions of Twitter, namely news reporting of events as they happen, continuous discussion of events deemed to be newsworthy, and commentary on current events from the users' personal viewpoints (Bruns and Burgess, 2012). Commentary relates most closely to the 'ambient' properties of Twitter (Hermida, 2010; Bruns and Burgess, 2012; Zappavigna, 2013), whereby this microblogging platform serves as an always on, indirect communication medium between users. The non-reciprocal nature of Twitter networks means that hasthag-facilitated ambient affiliation can be 'asymmetrical and need not involve dialogic exchanges.' (Page, 2012: 184).

Example(1). : taken from the corpus used in this study, illustrates the ambient affiliation function of hashtags and other Twitter conventions:

(1) RT @OccupyAustin: Join the #FightFor15! #FastFoodGlobal

Day of Action for Living Wages! THU 11:30 AM

In (1), the names of two events ('Fight for 15' and 'Fast Food Global') are used as hashtags and treated as hyperlinks by the Twitter service: by clicking on them, one is directed to Twitter pages that list all the tweets containing them, effectively enabling Twitter users to access 'with just one click' a virtual community around those hashtags. This makes hashtags like the ones in (1) useful mechanisms for accessing – and potentially influencing – 'ad hoc communities without the need to establish mutual follower / followee relationships with any members of those

communities' (Bruns and Burgess, 2012:3). Example (1) also includes two other Twitter conventions: '@' and 'RT'. The symbol '@' precedes usernames to convert them into hyperlinks and performs a range of mainly addressivity-related functions (see e.g. Honeycutt and Herring, 2009). 'RT' (Re-Tweet) is a tweet that is forwarded to one's Twitter followers, but in which original attribution is retained. RTs play a key part in mediating follower/ followee relations, including validating others' views and gaining followers (Boyd et al., 2010). A further Twitter convention, not used in (1) but frequent in our corpus, is 'via', which enables users to forward tweets that preserve original attribution but admits changes to original content.

These Twitter conventions are thus far from mere technical affordances of the Twitter service. They also fulfil important participation structuring, agenda framing, community forming and opinion articulation functions (see, e.g., Bastos et al., 2013; Puschmann, 2015), often through crowdsourcing practices. Crowdsourcing designates a participative practice in which 'an individual, an institution, a non-profit organization, or company proposes to a group of individuals of varying knowledge, heterogeneity, and number, via a flexible open call, the voluntary undertaking of a task.' (Estellés-Arolas and González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012:192). The term conjures up an image of egalitarian digital participation that does not live up to reality. The call may be open, and the task may be voluntarily undertaken by many. However, the likelihood of one's contribution to the task standing out, as it were, from the crowd – let alone to influence the task's outcome – is contingent upon a range of factors. Citizen participation in social media is, after all, not only varied but also unevenly distributed (Van Dicjk, 2009; Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009; Goode, 2010; Page, 2012). Hierarchies of participation operate across social media and, whilst fluid, they are determined in part by differences in discursive style amongst users and user groups (Weller et al., 2014). For instance, celebrities, corporations and 'ordinary' users are known to select and deploy hashtags differently when trying to 'command the potential attention of an audience within the linguistic marketplace of Twitter'. Whereas ordinary users favour the construction of affiliated over individuated self-identities, celebrity figures and corporate accounts tend to, respectively, 'project their identity as engaged with their audience and to endorse the values of their followers' (Page, 2012:198). [2]

The issue of how Twitter users seek to command attention from other users has generated considerable interest within social network science studies, too. Findings repeatedly show that open web systems develop in ways whereby small groups of users – estimated at between 10% and 20% of all users — attract inordinate levels of attention and can exercise social influence, including triggering 'social contagion' (Cha et al., 2010). This minority group is variously described in the literature as 'leaders' (Sonnenbichler, 2010), 'emergent elites' (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013), 'discussion catalysts' (Himelboim et al., 2009), and 'superparticipants' (Graham and Wright, 2013). In our work, and drawing upon extant studies of influence on Twitter, we use the term 'influential citizens'.

Although influence is a notoriously difficult concept to define and measure, there are two broad academic views on it. One considers influence to reside within a small group of individuals who have exceptional persuasion skills (e.g. Gladwell, 2006). The other challenges the idea that influence can be the possession of a few, arguing instead that anyone can be influential (what Watts

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[1] See also Jenkins (1992) work on television's participatory culture.

[2] Page (2012) appositely borrows the metaphor of the 'linguistic marketplace' from Bourdieau (1977) to describe self-branding practices in social media genres, whereby those genres' users deploy different linguistic resources in order to promote their visibility.