

Tweet against Nazis?

Twitter, power, and networked publics in anti-fascist protests

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In this article, we address the question of power in networked publics on Twitter in anti-fascist protests. The study is based on the results of an analysis of tweets, which are part of a dataset of three qualitative case studies about nationalist demonstrations in Germany accompanied by counter-protests by anti-fascist groups, NGOs, and civil society. The question asked within this framework is how Twitter is used in the power struggles of the anti-fascist counter protests. The article concludes by identifying tactics, practices, and strategies that activists use both to contest power and to reproduce power on Twitter in interplay with functionalities of the technology and the political (i.e. socio-cultural) context. This leads us to a discussion of power in and between networked publics as part of a communication spiral in a larger media environment.

Introduction

“Anti-fascists tweet with #L1610! Nazis tweet with #RaZ10! Pass it on!” (15/10/2010)¹ was one of the first tweets that was frequently re-tweeted prior to a nationalist demonstration and counter-protest by anti-fascists and civil society networks in Leipzig on October 16, 2010. A few months later, in February 2011, radical right-wing groups mobilised for a march taking place on February 13 and 19 in the city of Dresden, again accompanied by huge counter-protests aimed at blocking the march. In all of these events, the social web was

used intensively not only for mobilisation and coordination but also to interact with the news media. Although the internet was developed within the framework of control in the Cold War, it turned into a utopia of digital collaboration based on hippie culture and rebellion against the war (Turner, 2006; Castells, 2001). This utopia translated into an overly optimistic perspective on the internet's grassroots democratic potential relative to controlled and manipulative mass media. Through different modalities with immediate distribution potentials, the network structure provided by the web was hoped to overcome existing power relations and lead to more evenly distributed communication flows.

Twitter in particular has recently been discussed as an enabler of grassroots action but also critically evaluated in relation to political uprisings in Egypt (Zuckerman, 2011) and Moldova (Morozov, 2009). However, even though Twitter might offer possibilities for engagement, it can also be considered oppressive due to factors such as ownership, use and control of information, surveillance, and privacy. As Winner (1986) argues, technologies are inherently political since they are designed for a specific purpose that fosters certain appropriations more than others. Feenberg (2010, p. 6) argues that technologies reproduce existing hierarchies and systems of power but can be appropriated for subversive action to challenge power and lead to political change. Consequently, the constraints and possibilities of a technological environment differ in different political situations.

In this article, we investigate power and contestation on Twitter in anti-fascist counter protests within the framework of networked publics based on a qualitative analysis of tweets in the protest events. How is power reproduced and challenged in anti-fascist counter protests on Twitter? To answer this question, we identify tactics, media practices, and strategies used by activists for contesting power as well as situations in which it becomes apparent that power is reproduced on Twitter. We discuss power in networked publics on Twitter as the interplay between the *technical affordances* (Hutchby, 2001) of the technology and the political (i.e. socio-cultural, context).

Anti-fascist protests on Twitter: case, context, and data

Since 2009, Dresden, the capital of the German state of Saxony, has played an important role in the discussion of right-wing politics from political, legal, and social perspectives. The march organised by the National Democratic Party (NPD), Youth Association of East Germany (JLO), and affiliated radical right-wing groups occurs on February 13 (and in 2011, on February 19 as well), a day used to commemorate the victims of World War II. This has been accompanied by huge blockades and other forms of counter protest by civil society and anti-fascist groups. In 2011, around 20,000 counter protesters involved in blockades opposed around 2000 neo-Nazis.

Publicly available online communication and representation concerning the following events were included in the data collection: [1] Several nationalist ad hoc marches organised by the Young National Democrats (*Junge Nationaldemokraten*) under the slogan 'Right to

a Future' (*Recht auf Zukunft*) in Leipzig, Germany on October 16, 2010 and counter protests in the form of blockades and sit-ins organised by the anti-fascist group Red October (*Roter Oktober*) and the civil society network Leipzig Takes a Seat (*Leipzig nimmt Platz*). [2] A march organised by the Youth Association of East Germany (*Junge Landsmannschaft Ostdeutschland*) and the Alliance for Action Against Forgetting (*Aktionsbündnis gegen das Vergessen*), a coalition of the National Democratic Party and otherwise non-affiliated groups, in Dresden on February 13, 2011 and counter protests organised by the anti-fascist alliance Nazi-free Dresden (*Dresden Nazifrei*). This event has been referred to as the largest neo-Nazi march in history and has historical significance since it took place on the date on which Dresden was bombed by the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and United States Army Air Force in 1945 during World War II. [3] An additional nationalist demonstration planned by the Youth Association of East Germany on February 19, 2011 and counter protests to block the demonstration organised by the anti-fascist group Nazi-free Dresden by mobilising anti-fascist groups from across Europe, civil society groups, political parties, and NGOs in and around Dresden.

The three events are related to one another. Not only are they geographically close, with both cities located in eastern Germany, but the marches in Leipzig were considered preparations for the larger events in Dresden, which received more attention from the mass media and are generally an important topic in the public discourse. The march planned for February 19 was against police repression and was organised as an addition to the February 13 event. The different groups that form the counter protests against the marches have different political affiliations. The actors consisted of activists from anti-fascist and anarchist groups that engage in civil disobedience, including property damage; civil society groups and citizens who exclusively engage in non-violent civil disobedience; politicians from across the political spectrum who engage in symbolic action; the city of Dresden, which organised a human chain to symbolically protect the city; and the Church, which organised silent vigils. These actors can be divided into two larger groups: those who only engage in symbolic action and those who are prepared to act in violent and non-violent civil disobedience to form blockades against the nationalist demonstrations. The groups that form alliances on Twitter against the nationalist demonstrations are all represented by one hashtag. Despite the diversity of groups involved in the counter protests, the hashtag they recommend following on their mobilisation websites and blogs is the same. The networked publics that are composed surrounding the events are thus connected. Their tweets on the events are filtered along a certain hashtag, which constitutes the networked publics.

The data used here is part of a larger dataset of qualitative case studies (Creswell, 1998) that is composed of different forms of online communication surrounding the events, including Facebook groups, YouTube videos and comments, blogs and websites for mobilisation, online coverage by institutionalised mass media and comments on this coverage, and memos written by one of the authors concerning observation of and informal interviews in the counter protests. The dataset used here includes a collection of Tweets with

the respective protest hashtags # before, during, and after the protest took place: Tweets with #19februar (4161); #13februar (1688); #l1610; and/or #RaZ10 (413). A total of 6262 public Tweets, were collected, including login name and date. To present the results of the analysis, items were singled out for in-depth analysis and discussion. The open source content analysis tool Yoshikoder was used to count word frequencies, which helped generate an overview of the data. The most frequently appearing words in the tweets (once articles and personal pronouns are excluded) are 'dresden', followed by 'nazis', 'police', 'Leipzig', and 'antifa'. The word frequencies, together with the combinations of the most-frequent words, identify the main opponents in the anti-fascist protests. The frequency of the names of cities where the protests took place relates to the centrality of place and time and thus the immediacy and mobility of Twitter.

In the following, we examine Twitter's role in the reproduction and renegotiation of power based on functionalities relative to textual representations of activist groups involved in protest and tactics they use to appropriate these functionalities for their struggle. The struggle that becomes apparent in the Twitter stream is, in this case, a struggle for visibility in the institutionalised media as well as a struggle between the nationalist demonstration and its opponents. The groups on both radical ends of the political spectrum in the conflict regard themselves as marginalised and underrepresented in the mainstream media (Neumayer, 2013). Twitter's functionalities are appropriated to challenge the power relations between activists and institutionalised media, yet they also reproduce these power relations. The functionalities are understood with reference to the affordances of technological artefacts. According to Hutchby (2001), affordances are entwined with a set of social or technical rules governing their use. The affordances of technical artefacts thus do not "impose themselves upon humans' actions" but, rather, set "limits on what is possible" in terms of their use. At the same time, there is a variety of possible responses to the "affordances for action and interaction that a technology presents" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 453). In other words, the technology can be appropriated in specific situations, which we discuss as certain media practices and tactics in the protest events. These processes form on Twitter via use of the hashtag as a sorting device, publicly available direct messages, dissemination and sharing of values through retweets, and contestation and reproduction of power. Twitter and its specific technical affordances are, however, embedded within a larger media environment, as becomes apparent in the data studied here. Our discussion of the use of Twitter as part of the contemporary media environment in anti-fascist protests to challenge as well as to maintain power is framed by the concept of power in networked publics.

Power in networked publics

Discourse in contentious politics is, according to Foucault (1978; 2003), related to the struggle over truth. As a result, counter-discourses challenge the legitimacy or truth of dominant discourses. The construction of these different perspectives on truth is based on the politi-

cal belief systems of groups that act in civil disobedience to challenge power and domination. Twitter is one platform on which these counter-discourses can be articulated in protest. The technical functionalities of Twitter, in common with those of other social web platforms, include a network structure that can provide space for expression of political opinion within *networked publics*. Ito (2008, p. 2) describes *networked publics* as “social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media.” The emphasis is on publics that emerge and increasingly communicate through networks provided by different media platforms, such as Twitter. Similarly, boyd (2011, p. 39) describes networked publics as “publics that are restructured by networked technologies,” simultaneously as a “space constructed through networked technologies” and as an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.” In our case, Twitter constitutes this space and at the same time entails and limits the communicative potentials of the people and its practice – thereby structuring and restructuring specific forms for public spheres.

The relationship between *publics* operating within a *public sphere* (Habermas, 1989) is not necessarily new but includes new forms of expression due to the networked structure of digital media technologies. As Splichal (2010, p. 28) remarks, “the public is a social category, whose members (discursively) act, form, and express opinions.” A public is therefore marked by a social category that provides the context for self-definition and sense of belonging. The public sphere, on the other hand, “is only its infrastructure” (Splichal, 2010, p. 28). This infrastructure is more than just technical since all such frameworks are enmeshed in the political, cultural, and economic surroundings in which they operate. The spaces that facilitate the communication streams have functionalities that affect the agency or user manoeuvrability of the public in question. Coffee houses and salons have different functionalities than do social web platforms such as Twitter and can consequently encourage different interactions and forms of expression of political beliefs. The functionalities compose certain media environments as communicative spaces that allow for certain forms of communication, codes, and use behaviour. Although the media environment of Twitter and the set of rules on which it is based differ from those of coffee houses, they can be appropriated in a similar way, for instance for the articulation of oppositionality. The important question is not whether such networked publics and digital public spheres represent *the public sphere* in an idealised sense but rather how different publics “can be reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception” (Ito, 2008, p. 3).

Habermas further implements the metaphor of the network into his theorisation of multiple publics and public spheres, mainly because of the complexities of modern societies. Although mass media remain the main frame of reference in the public sphere, Habermas (1996, p. 373) accounts for different kinds and levels of public spheres, i.e. the “network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arenas.” The network structure that Habermas describes is based on socio-

cultural linkages rather than the technical media environment in more contemporary concepts of networked publics. The publics within the public sphere can, according to Habermas (1996), take the form of “episodic publics” in public places such as coffee houses or in the streets; “occasional” or “arranged” publics represented in events such as congresses or theatre performances; and “the abstract public sphere,” consisting of dispersed recipients of media content, i.e. readers, viewers, and listeners across the world.

In a digital media environment such as Twitter, episodic, occasional, and abstract publics appear simultaneously since the environment allows for mass mobilisation and coordination and gives geographically distant people the feeling of presence and being involved in political action, i.e. abstract publics. At the same time, activists are engaged in arranged and occasional actions and use Twitter to coordinate. Consequently, in line with boyd (2011), the networked publics we analyse operate within the functionalities provided by Twitter, and Twitter influences the nature of the emerging imagined collective. However, as our case demonstrates, it is not just the technological infrastructure or architecture of the public sphere in question that decides the nature of the interactions taking place. This is instead determined by the cultural and political beliefs that members of the public already had prior to constructing themselves as networked publics.

Discursive contestation from a radical democracy perspective (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005; Dahlberg, 2007) includes the communication of like-minded radical groups online before and when they enter public discourse. The tweets analysed in this article show not only discourse within the groups but also how such discourse is shaped by communication with established media institutions, i.e. mass media. These are, however, not proletarian counter publics in the sense of Negt and Kluge (1972), with potential for revolution from below as organisations that are independent from and critical of capitalist ideology. The counter publics in question are more in line with contemporary perspectives such as Fraser’s (1992) *subaltern* view, which emphasises oppositional interpretations of identities, interests, and needs among members of subordinated groups.

The discourses of the groups studied in this article are based on representations that can contribute to power and domination (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9). In the anti-fascist protests, these representations are driven by publics composed of anti-fascist groups and nationalist demonstrations, which create a seemingly straightforward polarisation of two political positions. However, the unity that forms an opposition against the neo-Nazis consists of different subgroups with different agendas. Within the concept of “democratic pluralism” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005), these differences are accepted within this specific event to achieve a political goal, i.e. the formation of blockades against the Nazis. The manifestation of anti-fascist discourses on Twitter therefore constitute networked publics defined by oppositionality, underlining the interactions between dominant and subordinate (Brouwer, 2006; Warner, 2002). Because of the ‘fluid nature’ of networked publics, our data shows that it is the context that defines the contours of such oppositionality.

This involves not only Twitter's technological functionalities but also its role in the communication spiral on a macro socio-cultural level. In this context, the neo-Nazi and anti-fascist discourses produced within Twitter flow from one communicative space to the next, allowing for the emergence of new forms of imagined collectives. In our case, this is due to mediating technological convergence and social web and network convergence (Dwyer, 2010) in which the communication initiated on Twitter flows from one platform to the next in a multichannel and multimodal form (Castells, 2009). In the communication flows analysed here, the interaction thus does not stop on Twitter but is picked up by other media as a cross-media coverage flow in which temporalities of online media such as Twitter are hybridised (Chadwick, 2011) with those of the mass media.

This flow of communication and its creation of different forms for networked publics, depending on the multimodal and multichannel contexts in which they appear, is encapsulated in complex power relations in which it is indeed the context that decides the oppositionality in question. Our data therefore shows that oppositionality not only emerges between the two groups (anti-fascists against neo-Nazis) but also how the groups are represented in the mass media. It is, however, important to note that these power relations are not stable but are constructed and reconstructed in discourse. In other words, power is a creative, playful, and productive generator that influences representation on Twitter as well as between Twitter and the large-scale multimodal and multichannel hybridisation of contemporary media in general.

In Foucault's (2002) terms, productive resistance is a precondition for the emergence of power relations. Furthermore, power relations are based on two indispensable elements: "the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) is recognised and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of 'responses, reactions, results, and possible interventions may open up'" (Foucault, 2002, p. 340). Even though processes of macro power mould publics according to ruling discursive formations, power is always a set of actions upon other actions and is reconstructed and challenged in discourse.

As will be demonstrated in our analysis, this is also the case between the emerging networked publics of the apparently straightforward alliance of a set of publics under the common term *anti-fascist* (activists, civil society groups, citizens, politicians, city of Dresden, the Church) against the *neo-Nazis*. It furthermore influences how these are constituted and widened out in the hybridisation processes of the communication spiral. In other words, we focus on how the *inherent functionalities* of Twitter shape the communications (hashtags, direct messages, and retweets in particular), the *context* in which the communication appears, and how these shape the *power relations* within and between these different forms of *networked publics*. The presentation of the analysis is structured by these functionalities.

Political positioning by hashtags

The hashtag in the anti-fascist protests is primarily a technical filtering tool for a Twitter stream but also carries meaning as a “social marker” (Zappavigna, 2011) to identify with a group in contestation and to develop a sense of imagined community (Gruzd et al., 2011) of individuals who support a cause but are not necessarily physically connected. The Twitter stream as a filter that produced a chronological and immediate narrative of the events was, however, used by journalists, activists, citizens, and organisers of both the counter protests and the nationalist demonstrations. The segregation of two Twitter streams identified by the hashtag was particularly obvious at the Leipzig site, where the counter protests used a different hashtag than did the nationalist demonstrations. This becomes apparent from the following tweets:

Anti-fascists tweet with #L1610! Nazis tweet with #RaZ10! (15/10/2010)

RaZ seems to be the right-wing #hash, #L1610 the one of the democrats. Please correct me if this is wrong. (16/10/2010)

The question about the correct hashtag was essential and associated with a certain group as ‘Nazis’ or ‘right-wing’ versus ‘anti-fascists’ or ‘democrats’. The filtering function of the hashtag was used to separate the Twitter stream of the organisers of the nationalist demonstrations from that of the activists and civil society networks involved in blockades. This symbolic division of the two opposing groups formed two different but interrelated narratives of the events. The segregation was, however, bipolar and did not differentiate between publics that formed alliances in the counter protests. Although the civil society network Leipzig Takes a Seat mobilised separately from the anti-fascist group Red October, they used the same hashtag since they supported the same cause, i.e. blocking the nationalist demonstrations. The hashtag represented the immediate single-issue cause of blocking the Nazis rather than the different political positions of the publics that formed the alliance against the nationalist demonstrations. Using the hashtag as a filtering and sorting tool assembles the implied functionality of the technology. An additional social – and in this case, political – component was included by groups or individuals identifying with the cause by tweets using the respective hashtag. The social meaning of the hashtag as a form of political identification in the conflict became visible by its absence, as this tweet shows:

Nazis use #13februar as hashtag. Something is going wrong (13/02/2011).

Although the hashtag was used to filter the Twitter stream concerning the events on February 13 in Dresden, it included perspectives across the political spectrum and separated neither the specific groups nor their different perspectives on the events. The critique of the lack of a different hashtag for the enemy in the conflict implies that the hashtag is also

used to identify with a specific cause that goes beyond solely producing a stream concerning the events.

The identification with one side in the conflict also becomes apparent when users referred to the Other's hashtag to strategically confuse, intervene in, or criticise the Other in playful and humorous way:

#RaZ10 #L1610 they probably need all 35 people in the streets, nobody left for tweeting
(16/10/2010)

Spam the Nazi Twitter tags #GeMa, #DenkDran! (13/02/2011)

The fact that the hashtag is used to filter information on one side of the conflict was used strategically if the opponents were also meant to receive the message. If this was the case, both hashtags were used. Although the tweets can potentially reach a large audience, users are aware of the filtering components and the messages are thus produced for specific networked publics depending on the implied recipients. 'Spamming' the hashtag of the opponents was tactically used to symbolically carry out the physical blockades online by blocking the Twitter stream filtered by the hashtag. These elements of using Twitter are playful and performative, using humour as a primary component but not referring to a larger political message than that of blocking the common enemy, i.e. the neo-Nazis, in favour of the broad alliance necessary in contestation.

Awareness of the hashtag as a filtering tool for the different groups involved in the conflict was also used tactically to confuse and mislead activists by deliberately giving wrong information, using the opponents' hashtag to enter their Twitter stream. Especially in Leipzig, the hashtag of the opponent was used tactically to implement wrong information such as fake *ad hoc* demonstrations and gatherings. This tactic plays on the fluid nature of networked publics constituted by the functionalities of Twitter. However, the fake information and mobilisation tweets were soon revealed by identification of the user profile, which also revealed the political position within the event, which could have negative consequences for the author of a tweet. This underlines the circular power at play on Twitter in the events. The quantity of tweets is important for strengthening the political cause of the counter protests but can also be counterproductive if identification of people behind Twitter profiles is used against them by authorities regarding acts of civil disobedience. Power is thus reconstructed and challenged on Twitter by a set of actions upon other actions of the different networked publics in the events.

The hashtag was used not only to follow actions within the groups but also to observe actions of the conflicting party, to monitor, interfere, and show belonging to a political position within the events. Consequently, despite the hashtag's functionality as a filter for different streams of information, it also symbolically represented a political position in conflict. Use of the respective hashtag in the events was used to publicly show affiliation with one side in the conflict. Through this identification, the two sides in the conflict interacted

with one another and symbolically reproduced the street actions via textual representations on Twitter. These representations are, however, part of a larger media environment, as is, for example, evident in the institutionalised mass media's observation of the stream of information created by the Twitter hashtag as well as the occurrence of tweets referring to mass media reports, YouTube videos, or mobilisation websites.

Direct messages to the Other

Messages directed to a specific person by @username are close to interpersonal communication despite being publicly available and included in the information stream through use of the respective hashtag. Most of the direct messages were directed to members within groups, mainly to core tweeters, to keep people informed of current events in the streets. These core tweeters were activist groups as well as media institutions or alternative media. The Twitter hashtag and Twitter profiles of certain groups such as Nazi-free Dresden were announced on the mobilisation websites and blogs of groups on both sides in the conflict but especially in the counter protests as reliable and immediate sources of information. They served as central distributors of information on the events, having large numbers of followers as well as acting as sources of reliable and immediate information on the protest. This tweet was directed to the profile of Nazi-free Dresden:

@[username] RT: #Nazis are not on their way to [name of station] but to the central station!
#19februar (19/02/2011)

The sending of information to the usernames of central activist profiles for redistribution and in order to inform participants in the streets was a common tactic in all of the events. This represents the centrality of some users for disseminating information despite the apparently flat hierarchies on Twitter and in the organisation of the counter protests. Interaction with journalists by addressing them directly gives the activists the opportunity to immediately react to media coverage as well as to provide information:

@[journalist]: we just received pics of the damage at the [place]: [link to pics] #19februar #fb
(19/02/2011)

Activists used the immediacy of Twitter and the possibility of directly contacting journalists and interacting with media institutions to present their perspectives on the events. These forms of tweets show that reporting in the mainstream media plays an important role for the activists, especially in the counter protests, which use mass mobilisation as a key strategy in the blockades. Twitter was, however, also used to criticise reports in the mainstream media. The centrality of institutionalised mass media thus underlines the role of Twitter as part of a larger media environment with power relations in place. The institutionalised media have a central place in the communication spiral concerning the events,

with the networked publics taking advantage of the functionalities of Twitter for nurturing this centrality as well as challenging it.

Humour and playful rhetoric are tactics on Twitter for challenging power. This becomes obvious in the addressing of the opposite side in the conflict, which was already visible through use of the hashtag but also visible in tweets directed to the Twitter profiles of the organisers of the nationalist demonstrations:

@[username] Nazis also have mobile phones. Are they allowed to? Did The Fuehrer approve that? #13Februar (13/02/2011)

The anti-fascists depict the Other (the neo-Nazis) as fundamentally centralised and driven by leadership. Direct messages do not usually lead to real discussion or argumentation but rather to reactions to comments, which underlines the immediacy of the platform for expressing an opinion in a given moment related to current action:

User 2: @[username 1] sure they have the right to demonstrate... and they also have the right to an (even bigger) #counterprotest! #13februar (13/02/2011)

User 1: @[username 2] There is no right to freedom of speech. Then the right wing would have it too. #13februar (13/02/2011)

These direct messages are part of a discussion between two individual users, carried out publicly. Freedom of speech as a fundamental right was claimed by both the right-wing groups as a reaction to the massive blockades of the anti-fascists and civil society but also anti-fascists since they did not have legal permission to protest close to the marches of neo-Nazis. In direct messages, these issues are addressed and discussed within groups but also across the political spectrum, again pointing towards the fluid nature of networked publics. The context dictates the contours of the imagined collectives and the relationships between them in conflict and contestation, and the different publics reacting, redistributing but also renegotiating power.

Sharing values with retweets

The retweet's main functionality is for multiplying information through the technical network infrastructure of Twitter. However, the retweet was also appropriated to express oppositionality in the counter protests. The retweet was thus used to symbolically reproduce on Twitter the blockades on the streets:

Done. RT @[username]: blocking Nazis – also on Twitter: @[username 1] @[username 2] @[username 3] @[username 4] #13februar (13/02/2011)

Blockades on Twitter by retweeting to spam specific user accounts of the organisers of the nationalist demonstrations are a symbolic act for sharing the values of the protesters in

the streets as well as for reproducing the street blockades. At the same time, they express the low effort that the action takes compared to the protests in the streets. Generally, the retweet was used to multiply information and values but not always to challenge the mainstream and to produce counter-discourse. Sometimes, it was also a multiplier of articles in news media:

RT @[username]: The LKA Saxony stormed the office of Nazi-free Dresden this evening [link to media coverage] #19februar #dd_nazifrei (19/02/2011)

This report took up the information by the activists and reported accordingly and was thus retweeted to distribute the information. Especially in the case of links to videos, blog posts, or IndyMedia articles, Twitter was used as a multiplier for spreading information produced by both the activists and mass media in order to show their perspective on the events. Use of retweets as a multiplier of information supports the implied values in a message and the respective political position. Multiplying information through retweets can strengthen existing power as well as challenge it, depending on the tweet that is multiplied and whether it expresses oppositionality or supports power. Playfulness and humour can be used tactically to trigger the multiplication of a message in the form of retweets and to foster its dissemination within a networked public as well as in the larger communication spiral concerning the events.

Contesting power on Twitter

Interaction with the news media plays an important role in challenging the mainstream discourse in contestation. Activists try to challenge their portrayal in the news media and to communicate their political cause in contrast with the violent, chaotic picture that is often created (Juris, 2005). One of the most frequently retweeted messages in the #19februar stream is a YouTube video recorded on a mobile phone that shows activists' perspective on violent action. The power relations between mainstream and alternative media can potentially be challenged since Twitter can be used to multiply information to challenge dominant discourse. Twitter was used strategically to disseminate 'true' information through links to videos, pictures, blog posts, and articles in alternative media concerning incidents in which activists are solely presented as violent in mass media. The general distrust towards the media and its reporting is expressed several times:

Dear Aljazeera, please send us reporters, our media are either censored by the state or pimp their ratings #19februar #policeviolence (19/02/2011)

Although the protest was covered in foreign news media such as *DerStandard.at* and live reporting by *Aljazeera*, the national public broadcaster was criticised for insufficient coverage. At the same time, a local alternative radio station in Dresden used Twitter to distribute

information especially to journalists from centre-left newspapers for direct dialogue with the activists:

RT @[journalist]: did a pepper ball hit anyone? #19februar (I am writing an article about it, right now) (19/02/2011)

The communication triggered by Twitter is not limited to alternative media, counter publics, or the mass media but takes on specific roles in the communication spiral depending on the context. Twitter is thus used as a multiplier of articles in the news media as well as in alternative media. Twitter is therefore also capitalised on by the macro media, either in the form of information seeking by individual journalists or in general representation of the events taking place. It is used both as a specific representation of the truth and as an element of seeking that truth.

Consequently, Twitter can be appropriated to produce oppositionality, depending on the context. Participants in the counter protest reflect on the role of the technology in the protest events, with trust as a major component. A participant in the counter protests in Leipzig concludes with the following tweet:

I have never been a friend of Twitter, but today it was very useful (16/10/2010)

There is, however, also distrust of Twitter due to its corporate and legal influence:

#Twitter seems to have disabled many Twitter clients. Just in time for #19februar. Is this what capitalist democracy looks like? #linke (19/02/2011)

Twitter was developed within a capitalist environment and thus bears limitations for groups that try to fight this system. This entails another consequence that can be a challenge when people act in civil disobedience but use Twitter. In other words, the corporate influence that Habermas (1989) anticipates in the mass media as a challenge to the public sphere also challenges equal distribution of power in platforms based on user-generated content such as Twitter. The publicity of the information, which certainly has a positive effect for mobilisation and dissemination of information, can be restricted due to intervention by the corporation that provides the infrastructure of the microblogging platform. Although Twitter is used successfully for the mobilisation and coordination of mass action across political positions, it is criticised for being corporate, and more radical groups of the alliance criticise its visibility because it exposes them to a high level of risk when acting in civil disobedience (see Askanius & Gustafsson, 2010 for similar results).

In mass mobilisation, the functionalities enable the emergence of imagined collectives not only for the counter protest in the streets but also for supporters of the actions who are not physically present. Tweets can thus express solidarity with the cause supported by the protesters in the streets:

I can't be there today, but I'm thinking of you #L1610 (16/10/2010).

The Twitter stream is thus an opportunity to create awareness about the events through the network. In this case, it is not necessarily the Twitter stream itself but rather followers of a profile who become aware of the events by reading the tweets of a person who they follow. By showing solidarity with the actions, the users become part of the networked publics by supporting the cause without being physically present. Although this only includes a very low level of actual engagement, their tweets are an important part of the communication spiral created concerning the events. In the Dresden events, the hashtag #19februar became a trending topic worldwide, and the political single-issue cause of blocking the nationalist demonstrations (though decontextualised from the broader political projects of the subgroups united in the counter protests) temporarily became an important topic in the twittersphere. However, the unity of civil society, anti-fascist groups, politicians, NGOs, and citizens of Dresden in the blockades dispersed again after the events.

Furthermore, as an example of the fluid nature of networked publics and how context dependent they are, a bridge to another networked public emerged because of a misunderstanding. #19februar on Twitter became a trending topic worldwide and was mistaken for the date of Justin Bieber's birthday in the international Twitter community, which judged the "missing y" in the German spelling of "February" (*Februar*) to be a spelling mistake. This not only points to the fragility of the communication conducted through the Twitter hashtag but also to the social cultural context. The celebrity effect replaces the actual political cause by decontextualisation from a specific language and social context, underlining the fluidity of the networked publics on Twitter.

In another characteristic of networked publics and the different imagined collectives that emerge from Twitter as a communicative space, we detect a faction that criticises the methods used by more radical groups:

RT @[username]: nice that you prevent the Nazi march. But can you ever do it without violence? Too bad. (19/02/2011)

Some participants in the blockades differentiate themselves from more radical activists, not due to the political cause they are pursuing but to the methods used in contestation. Although supporting the political cause of the anti-fascists, they do not accept the methods that they use, as is expressed after the protest events. The different political positions become apparent on Twitter but are less obvious than on other platforms that rather foster communication, discussion, and interaction instead of Twitter's fostering of immediacy and mobility. The alliances that form in the protest events are thus temporary, directed against the common enemy, and disperse again after the events. In the communication spiral produced across different networked publics that form alliances in the protest, Twitter and its functionalities are part of a larger media environment.

Tactics of contestation by networked publics on Twitter

By analysing the Twitter stream concerning physical protest events, we identify the following tactics for reproducing and challenging power:

Sharing values: In the anti-fascist protests, many different groups with different political beliefs unite behind a common cause. This becomes especially obvious from the hashtag, which works as a filtering tool for the Twitter stream concerning the event but also carries political meaning by representing a political position within the protest. However, political values and belonging to a certain group can also be observed in the textual representations through wording and rhetoric. Sharing values, for example by solidarity tweets, without being physically present in the conflict supports the cause by strengthening the Twitter stream, i.e. creates symbolic value by the frequency of tweets within a specific hashtag.

Online blockades: One of the most obvious tactics for symbolically reproducing physical blockades in the streets on Twitter is using the hashtag or direct messages to block the Twitter stream or profiles of the Other as well as to tactically confuse participants of the conflicting group in street action. The symbolic blockades that do not include acts of civil disobedience as their counterparts in the streets support the political cause associated with the action but only have symbolic meaning. However, on this symbolic level, they can be supportive in challenging power and domination by networked publics on Twitter and the hierarchies and power relations that constitute this public.

Mutual monitoring: The hashtag is used as a filtering device for a political cause but also as a means of constructing political identity relative to the Other. Mutual monitoring between the participants in nationalist demonstrations and the counter protests is one of the tactics for knowing about the actions of the opposing groups in the streets. At the same time, observation of the Other's Twitter stream leads to reaction and activists commenting on the Other and judging their actions. Activists, journalists, and authorities all strategically use these streams of information on Twitter to observe these emerging counter publics. Monitoring can thus also be an expression of existing power relations when used by authorities or mainstream media to inform their own actions and reporting.

Dissemination: Links to additional media content or user-generated content on platforms such as YouTube or blogs play an important role in disseminating information on Twitter. The strategic use of core profiles such as those of journalists or core activist groups that can redistribute information to a wider public due to a higher number of followers reflects the centrality of a few users. Despite the apparent openness of Twitter (since anyone can publish), activists strategically interact within traditional hierarchies that are transferred to the network structure on Twitter.

Challenging domination: The protest hashtag #19februar was a trending topic worldwide even though activists criticised the public broadcaster for insufficiently reporting the events. Twitter can be used strategically to challenge domination by disseminating information to offer a different perspective on protest. It can also be used to interact with journalists, for example via direct messages, in order to influence the dominant discourse

in the mass media: This is especially used in events that have already gained attention in the media discourse. At the same time, traditional power structures are reproduced by core profiles that dominate the networked publics on Twitter as well as symbolically in the textual representations on Twitter.

Spectacle, play, humour, and performativity: Playfulness and humour are important elements of the Twitter stream in the anti-fascist protests. The centrality of celebrities and the performative and playful character of the Tweets can be considered a symbolic reproduction of the physical events in the streets. This, however, also underlines the perception of the Tweets as 'noise' or 'spam' without any clear political message. The almost apolitical character of the events in favour of a clear cause and common enemy in form of the 'neo-Nazis' is a tactic for mass mobilisation that is reproduced on Twitter. The humorous and performative character of the tweets is thus a tactic that results from the broader political context of the events.

Conclusion

As a communicative space, Twitter allows certain imagined collectives to emerge as networked publics. Through the functionalities of Twitter, existing imagined collectives become constituted as networked publics when they engage in the specific form of digital communication for which Twitter allows. The publics that are constituted on Twitter unite groups with different political positions for a specific cause, i.e. they overcome differences within "democratic pluralism" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) to form a collective against a "common enemy" (Mouffe in: Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). These heterogeneous collectives are, however, unsustainable and disperse again after the event. The publics that are constructed on Twitter within these events are in Habermas' (1996) terms, "abstract" or "occasional" publics, arranged around a specific event, in this case a political event that bears elements of a performance. These micropublics are in constant interaction with the macropublics that are constituted by the mass media, which we have described as a communication spiral. The publics that become visible on Twitter thus do not exist or emerge on the microblogging platform but are interwoven into an existing network of power. The networked publics on Twitter in contestation are thus instead networks among networks, enmeshed in a complex power game. The functionalities of Twitter enable certain forms of communication within and between the different networked publics and add to the larger spiral of communications concerning the events rather than enabling a new form of political resistance.

Notes

- 1 All quotes from the data are German in original and translated by one of the authors.

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