

Political Communication in Twitter Interactions between Government, News Media and Citizens in Mexico

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Abstract : The presence of government, news media, and general citizenry in social media allows considering interactions between them as a form of political communication (i.e. the public exchange of contradictory discourses about politics). Twitter's asymmetrical following model (users can follow, mention or reply to other users that do not follow them) could foster alternative democratic practices and have an impact on Mexican political culture, which has been marked by a lack of direct communication channels between these actors. The research aim is to assess Twitter's role in political communication practices through the analysis of interaction dynamics between government, news media, and citizens by extracting and visualizing data from Twitter's API to observe general behavior patterns. The hypothesis is that regardless the fact that Twitter's features enable direct and horizontal interactions between actors, users repeat traditional dynamics of interaction, without taking full advantage of the possibilities of this medium. Through an interdisciplinary team including Communication Strategies, Information Design, and Interaction Systems, the activity on Twitter generated by the controversy over the presence of Uber in Mexico City was analysed; an issue of public interest, involving aspects such as public opinion, economic interests and a legal dimension. This research includes techniques from social network analysis (SNA), a methodological approach focused on the comprehension of the relationships between actors through the visual representation and measurement of network characteristics. The analysis of the Uber event comprised data extraction, data categorization, corpus construction, corpus visualization and analysis. On the recovery stage TAGS, a Google Sheet template, was used to extract tweets that included the hashtags #UberSeQueda and #UberSeVa, posts containing the string Uber and tweets directed to @uber_mx. Using scripts written in Python, the data was filtered, discarding tweets with no interaction (replies, retweets or mentions) and locations outside of México. Considerations regarding bots and the omission of anecdotal posts were also taken into account. The utility of graphs to observe interactions of political communication in general was confirmed by the analysis of visualizations generated with programs such as Gephi and NodeXL. However, some aspects require improvements to obtain more useful visual representations for this type of research. For example, link-crossings complicates following the direction of an interaction forcing users to manipulate the graph to see it clearly. It was concluded that some practices prevalent in political communication in Mexico are replicated in Twitter. Media actors tend to group together instead of interact with others. The political system tends to tweet as an advertising strategy rather than to generate dialogue. However, some actors were identified as bridges establishing communication between the three spheres, generating a more democratic exercise and taking advantage of Twitter's possibilities. Although interactions in Twitter could become an alternative to political communication, this potential depends on the intentions of the participants and to what extent they are aiming for collaborative and direct communications. Further research is needed to get a deeper understanding on the political behavior of Twitter users and the possibilities of SNA for its analysis.

Keywords : interaction, political communication, social network analysis, Twitter

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