

Influencers on the Russian Twitter: Institutions vs. people in the discussion on migrants

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of discussion platforms like Twitter, the hopes rose that computer-mediated public sphere would become more even in access to discussion than mass-mediated public sphere of the late 20th century. Scholars have argued that it will eventually form an ‘opinion crossroads’ where conflicts would be discussed by all the parties involved. But today, existing research provides mixed evidence on whether ordinary users, rather than mainstream media and institutional actors, can become influencers in discussions on current issues, e.g. relations between host and migrant communities. We focus on the Twitter discussion about an inter-ethnic conflict in Moscow’s Biryuliovo district in 2013 and aim at defining who were its real influencers by reconstructing the discussion’s web graph, as well as analyzing and juxtaposing its metrics to figures indicating user activity. Our results show that, despite hyperactivity of media accounts, they were largely absent as deliberative influencers, but the place of influencers was occupied by politicized (nationalist and liberal) accounts, rather by eyewitness reporters or public figures.

CCS Concepts

• Information systems~Social networks • Applied computing~Sociology

Keywords

Influencer; Twitter; inter-ethnic conflict; webcrawling; web graph

1. INTRODUCTION

Public discussions as a tool of formation of public opinion and of casting impact upon resolution of social unease have long been studied and theorized. By 1990s, it was established that mediated public sphere where traditional media played the role of information hubs was highly uneven in terms of access to opinion expression; among other features, it was privileging

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institutional players, including political elites and corporations. Media themselves became privileged as well, as agenda setting, framing of issues and other media effects bringing significant distortions and biases to public discussions [1] became a factor in public decision making.

With the emergence of Internet, hopes arose that networked communicative spaces would provide better access of citizens to public discussions [2], which would equalize them, at least to some extent, to the existing institutional opinion leaders selected by media who serve as gateways and gatekeepers of public agenda [3]. But this optimism soon changed to a more realistic (or, rather, pessimistic) view [4], as the growing body of research shows that the disparities detected before tend to be reproduced, rather than smoothed, in online communicative milieu; moreover, new lines of societal cleavages are drawn in hybrid media environments [5] due to digital divide, diversification of media diets of social groups, and growing fragmentation of communication arenas.

A substantial part of the discussion on democratization of online public spheres has been centered around a figure of *influencer* [6] – the platform user with several crucial capacities in information dissemination and impact upon other users’ opinions. Influencers are viewed as key structural elements of power and impact distribution in networked discussions [7; 8; 9] as they may either preserve or shift the pre-existing disparities in opinion leadership.

Due to several platform features like short posting, available API data and absence of friend-only modes of publication, Twitter has become a major focus of media researchers who checked hypotheses relevant to media & public sphere studies with the help of social network analysis (SNA). Among these papers, detection and prediction of influencers and their discursive nature has grown into a major field; more recently, aspects like dynamics of influencer status and its linkage to user trust [10], discussion topicality [11], and nature of the publics [12; 13; 14; 15; 16] have gained substantial space. But it is still unclear whether Twitter as a communicative platform provides for democratization of the influencer status, especially within discussions on social issues with high polarization potential.

Twitter studies of influencers may, largely, be clustered in sub-areas based on understanding of who the influencers are and how to detect them. Thus, we may trace a division between two understandings of influencers (based on user activity and user connectivity), as well as a methodological division between the works that measure the power of influencers in absolute figures of tweets, followers, retweets, comments and likes, and those using network metrics as tools for detection of opinion leaders. But practically no attempts have been made to juxtapose these ways

forces actively taking part in the discussion, and only the latter got followed.

H4, by our results, is formally supported: there are no political (institutional or ‘utility’) accounts on top of the discussion. But at the same time, half of the top users (as measured by BCPRating) were highly politicized and belonged to either nationalist or liberal-oppositional camp. The former are the biggest discussion centers, but the latter form a bigger group of such centers. Thus, usual institutional influencers changed to politicized citizens.

H5 is, again, not fully supported. We expected media to dominate all the lists of top users – those marking activity and those showing deliberative quality. With great reserve, we can tell that they dominate in the number of tweets and, more surely, in the number of accounts that retweet or comment them; that is, media do perform the role of informers of ‘mass Twitter audience’. But only few of them make it to the deliberative centers of the discussion. At the same time, both pro- and anti-establishment media are present and active, which adds to the ‘crossroads’ potential of the discussion.

5. CONCLUSION

What we have found in this paper goes a bit beyond our direct hypotheses but clearly reflects our initial notion of two approaches to who may be called an influencer on Twitter.

First, we have spotted two types of influencers in the discussion on the Biryuliovo bashings. The first comprised mostly media and was clearly ‘marketing’, as it was based on frequent posting (and low commenting&retweeting) and getting retweeted a lot. But ‘political’, or ‘deliberative’, influencers formed circles of influential users who inter-linked micro-zones of discussion and were cited by the same highly-ranked users. The latter effect reminds us of the one discovered in previous research where journalists retweeted by other journalists became a circle of influencers, but in our case no user linked to an institution was actually involved. Our results also adds to the evidence that we need to use SNA metrics, not just simple number of retweets, to detect real influencers.

Second, we have discovered high politicization of the discussion, contrary to expectations; moreover, we have shown that, among the top users by centrality metrics, there were two camps represented, namely the nationalist camp and the one that may be called liberal-critical. It includes users from persons with high level of criticism towards the system to oppositional activists, and this circle seems to be bigger than the nationalist one. This division, on one hand, replicates the overall post-Soviet/cosmopolitan division in the Russian media system [90; 91], but on the other hand it clearly demonstrates that Twitter has a much bigger ‘crossroads’ potential than other media platforms including social networks like Facebook. We also cannot help stating that traditional media on Twitter do not perform the ‘crossroads’ function, as they have low Betweenness centrality and, thus, do not gather users around them. But at the same time, on Twitter, unlike in offline world, pro- and anti-establishment media have practically equal following and exposure, which, in a way, adds to the ‘crossroads’ nature of Russian Twitter. At the same time, we have discovered only one account openly supporting the position of migrant population; this means that the discussion had low deliberative potential in terms of representation of the sides of the conflict.

Third, we definitely need more research on why, despite Dmitry Medvedev’s account is followed by nearly a half of all the users in Russian Twitter and other politicians are active there, too, in the case of a resonant inter-ethnic crisis, political and municipal accounts had no place in the discussion. Of course the simplest explanation would be that local administrations do not tweet; but one more explanatory factor may be the traditional low trust to institutions in Russia.

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7. REFERENCES

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