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POLITICAL FANDOMS AND SUPERPARTICIPANTS IN POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS ON TWITTER

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Introduction

In this proposal, we discuss the role of superparticipants in political conversations on Twitter. According to Graham and Wright (2013), a superparticipant is an actor that participates more than average. In the discussion forums analyzed by the authors, superparticipants helped other users by summarizing contents or setting the agenda for the debate. We believe these participants are also important in social media discussions because they give visibility to specific topics, sometimes influencing the debate. We are especially interested in users with a higher outdegree count in Twitter conversations related to the Brazilian political scenario, and how they affect the political debate and the information diffusion. Our study aims to understand who these superparticipants are and how they influence Twitter networks. We believe that these highly active users show a clear political position and intentionally act to give visibility to some topics and to reduce the visibility of others, practices that are similar to those observed among fans in popular culture. Thus, we ask: who are the superparticipants? How can they influence the political conversation and information diffusion? Do their activities result in the formation of political fandoms?

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Theoretical background

Regarding theoretical background, we use concepts related to political polarization. Sunstein (2001) calls echo chambers the like-minded political groups that have low or no contact with other views. These echo chambers might create individuals with more radicalized views and with a high difficulty in understanding other views. A similar context is described by Pariser (2011), when the author analyzed the social filtering and the algorithm actions on social media. This combination might isolate users inside the filter bubbles, where they only receive like-minded information. The echo chambers and filter bubbles may cause fragmentation in political discussion. It is a threaten for the public sphere formation in these spaces since the contact with the contradictory is essential for deliberation (Papacharissi, 2009; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Fuchs, 2015). These structures tend to form what Smith et al (2014) call "polarized crowds," a social network structure based on two polarized groups with low contact between them.

When the superparticipants are inside polarized groups, they tend to reinforce their thoughts, by only retweeting like-minded messages. This same pattern of behavior can be observed among fans. In this context, the superparticipant behavior is similar to fans within a fandom. Several authors discuss the role of fans, anti-fans, and fandoms (Jenkins, 1992, Gray, 2003, Fiske, 1992), and, mainly, political fandoms (Erikson, 2008, Sandvoss, 2013, Parikh, 2012). While a fan is someone that engages deeply with a specific cultural product, fandom is a group of individuals that share the same interests, "forming a sense of collective or subcultural identity around shared tastes" (Brough and Shesthova, 2011, p.2). A political fandom, in this sense, would be a group of people that vehemently defend a particular political view - in this case, the political enthusiasm can be seen as a form of media fandom (Sandvoss, 2013).

Methods

We use social network analysis (Wasserman and Faust, 1994, Degenne and Forse, 1999) metrics to identify: (1) modularity of the network - and, thus, determine groups that lead the conversation - and (2) users that receive more attention than others (higher indegree) or mention more other users (higher outdegree). While influence is mostly associated with a higher indegree, users with a higher outdegree also influence the discussion, because, as superparticipants, they can help individual ideas to gain visibility and have an influence on the information spread within networks. We also used qualitative observation to examine these accounts and their tweets.

We collected tweets related to the impeachment of the Brazilian ex-president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 using NodeXL. We selected three critical dates of the process to analyze the superparticipants and their actions. In those datasets, we identified the top 12 users with the higher outdegree, which means users that mentioned other users more frequently within each dataset. We then qualitatively analyzed the characteristics of each of those users, such as user bio, average tweets/day, amplification (how many of the recent tweets were retweets) and which types of accounts they retweeted.

Results

By observing the top 12 users with higher outdegree in each network, we noticed some patterns and behaviors that can characterize those users as political fans. Many state their political position in their profile description, while others even use a partisan image as a profile picture. Most of the users have a high average of tweets (up to more than 300 tweets a day) and post mostly or exclusively retweets to other accounts with similar political views. In fact, in some cases these accounts seem automated, considering the volume of tweets and the persistence with retweeting messages with the same political views.

In all the networks we analyzed, we found the formation of polarized crowds. The superparticipants with higher outdegree were always inside one of the two groups of the network, and the messages they retweeted were from users with political views similar to theirs that were also within the same group.

Our main finding is that these superparticipants with higher outdegree helped to shape the polarized networks by retweeting like-minded accounts, and thus are important and influence the study of polarized political networks on Twitter. They act as political fans, actively engaged in giving visibility to the ideas they agree.

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