

How much conversation is there on Twitter?

Barbara De Cock & Sandrine Roginsky (Université catholique de Louvain)

Barbara.decock@uclouvain.be

Sandrine.roginsky@uclouvain.be

« Join the conversation » was Twitter's pitch line to attract users and/or incite them to tweet. The way in which the platform presents itself then clearly relies on the image of Twitter as a gigantic conversation where anyone can participate. However, various studies on political participation have questioned this idea (a.o. Di Fraia et al. 2016). In this paper, we will analyze whether Twitter can indeed be considered a form of conversation. In order to do so, we will rely on the one hand on a critical study of different approaches to the concept 'conversation'. We will critically compare the concepts of conversation in communication studies (Boyd et al. 2010) with those in linguistics, such as "talk-in-interaction" (Schegloff 2007:xiii), "that familiar predominant kind of talk in which two or more participants freely alternate in speaking (...)" (Levinson 1983: 284) or "the prototypical manifestation of spoken, dialogic language, characterized by communicative proximity, its dynamicity, its cooperative character and non-premeditated turn-taking" (Briz 2000: 225). On the other hand, we will apply this to a case-study of the use of Twitter by French, Spanish and British members of the European Parliament, starting from the May 2014 electoral campaign till May 2015. This case study will adopt an interdisciplinary approach involving methods from linguistics and communication studies, by combining data analysis with ethnographic interviews with the MEPs and/or their communications collaborators.

In the first place, we will analyze the correspondences and differences between the technological possibilities and the affordances emerging through the use of Twitter (Hutchby 2001, 2014), in order to see whether the way users communicate through Twitter privileges features that may be linked to conversation (such as replying to a tweet) or rather disregard these features. We hypothesize that not all Twitter users exploit the conversation-like possibilities of Twitter, but that some use them rather as a tool for self-presentation.

In the second place, we will analyze the tweets themselves with a particular focus on whether they contain elements that suggest a wish to receive reactions or to establish interactions, such as address forms, including address through the use of the addressee's Twitterhandle (e.g. @johndoe), interrogative speech acts,...

In the third place, we will look into reactions to tweets, scrutinizing whether they may be considered forms of conversation. We will show that not all tweets which may elicit a (verbal) reaction actually do so, and that not all reactions are the start of a string of conversation.

By doing so, we will also address methodological problems to analyze Twitter in terms of 'conversation' such as the role of the different participants (e.g. hearer, bystanders and overhearers, in Goffmanian terms) and their capacity to participate in the conversation, as well as the impact of technical features (e.g. the conversational nature of actions that may be considered reactions, such as retweeting or liking, cf. Giles et al. 2015: 49).

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