An unfulfilled promise: Twitter and the dictatorial past in Brazil

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Resumo:

Espaços mediados são essenciais em sociedades democráticas. Caso os meios de comunicação não cumprem suficientemente a tarefa de disponibilizar uma plataforma para o discurso público, as mídias sociais podem servir como um espaço importante para deliberação. Este artigo pretende pesquisar os desafios que o discurso sobre o passado ditatorial do Brasil está enfrentando nas mídias tradicionais, e também as expectativas a respeito do papel do Twitter. Em seguida, através de uma análise quantitativa é pesquisado até que ponto essas expectativas são realizadas. O discurso no Twitter é mais equilibrado e diversificado do que nas mídias tradicionais e inclui fontes que não são usadas por as mídias tradicionais. Apesar disso, deliberação genuína não acontece.

Palavras-Chave: Twitter, discurso público, ditadura militar, media performance, participação

Abstract

In modern democratic societies, mediated spaces for public discourse are essential. We argue that when mainstream media only partly fulfill their task in providing a platform for public discourse, social media might serve as an important space for deliberation. We explore the challenges the discourse on the dictatorial past in Brazil is facing in traditional media and the expectations that are voiced concerning the role of Twitter. In a second step, we examine quantitatively to which extent these expectations are actually put into practice. While the discourse on Twitter is more balanced and diverse than in traditional media and includes sources that are neglected by the latter, real deliberation does not take place.

Keywords: Twitter, public discourse, military dictatorship, media performance, participation

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Resumen:

Espacios mediados son sustancial para sociedades democráticas. Si los medios de masas no desempeñan la tarea de facilitar una plataforma para el discurso público de manera suficiente, los redes sociales pueden servir como un espacio importante para la deliberación. Este artículo pretende revelar los desafíos que el discurso sobre el pasado dictatorial en Brasil se enfrenta y también las expectativas en cuanto al papel de Twitter. Además, por un análisis cuantitativo se examina hasta qué punto las expectativas son realizadas. El discurso en Twitter es más equilibrado y diversificado de lo que en los medios tradicionales y son incluidos fuentes que no son usados por los medios tradicionales. Sin embargo, deliberación verdadera no tiene lugar.

Palabras-clave: Twitter, discurso público, dictadura militar, media performance, participación

Introduction

Since the advent of the Internet, hopes have been voiced that this medium has the potential to strengthen public discourse: Vanishing spatial and power constraints could make large-scale deliberation possible (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Freelon, 2010; Rasmussen, 2008). Also, the gatekeeping role of traditional media vanishes: Everyone can publish on the web. This might be especially important in defect democracies: If, for instance, the independence of media from the government cannot be guaranteed or if – due to an enormous media concentration – truly independent content do not reach any substantial audience, limiting the diversity of opinions and facts delivered to the public, social media might provide an important space for public discourse.

This paper therefore explores a specific case where this situation applies, the case of Brazil. As Costa (2010) states, in Brazil, like in many other Latin-American countries, there is a gap between what the Constitution says and how reality looks like: Although the constitution from 1988 can be characterized as quite progressive, many of its guidelines are not put into practice. Main problems causing this situation are social inequalities (e.g., poorer people cannot afford making use of their rights), structural shortcomings (e.g., missing presence of the state in various parts of Brazil, abuse of power and corruption), and the handling of the past of the military dictatorship (Costa, 2010). This becomes explicitly clear in the case of the amnesty law which was coming into force during the military dictatorship and which is still in force. Only three years ago, an effort to declare the amnesty law as in conflict with the constitution was

rejected by the Brazilian Surpreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal, 2010). Reviewing a body of literature on the deficits of the Brazilian democracy, Hagopian (2011) points to the hopes that

are voiced about the potential of 'participatory democracy'-projects – and concludes that such efforts have only been successful to a limited extend. Still, it has been argued that democratization and inclusion of the public in political discourse are intertwined (Dantas, 2013).

From a democratic point of view, the Brazilian media landscape suffers from three main problems: (1) concentration of ownership, (2) the closely intertwined role of political actors and the media, and (3) the fact that the media still have not come to terms with their own past and the role they played during the dictatorship (e.g., Moraes, De, 2011; Pieranti and Martins, 2008; Porto, 2010). Although suffering from censorship, today's important media organizations in general have been quite close to the military government, especially the media empire GLOBO. Media that were opposing the regime were shut down at that time; and media companies that supported the regime profited in economic terms (Abreu, De, 2005; Pieranti and Martins, 2008). For instance, *Globo* clearly benefited from the military regime – which is why Guimarães and Amaral shortly after the end of the dictatorship noticed "continuity" in the media system and called the TV station TV Globo "the television version of state-directed capitalism" (1988, p. 127). And even today, the public still is quite skeptical about the *Globo* empire: It is said to heavily interfere with the political system and holds more than 115 companies from the broadcasting, print, and online sector as well as news agencies and book publishing companies, including the important daily *O Globo* (Spranz, 2012). But still, *TV Globo* is the most important player on the Brazilian media market (Porto, 2010).

Based on this conflict, it seems at least possible, but in fact pretty likely, that the discourse in traditional media suffers from systematic deficits. This might especially be the case when the inglorious role of traditional media during the military dictatorship is touched. Consequently, this means that the public discourse might move to other spaces were these limitations do not occur, most notably to social media like Twitter.

To find out whether this is indeed happening, we studied the case of the implementation of a so-called Truth Commission (Comissão da Verdade), which was implemented in May 2012 and whose task it is to come to terms with the past of the country. Although the implementation of the Truth Commission means an important step in strengthening democracy in Brazil, a lot of criticism can be expressed, most notably the long period of examination (crimes committed between 1946 and 1988 shall be examined), the small number of members (seven plus two

assistants for each member), the interference of the military in advance, and the absence of any possibility to impose sanctions.

This study aims to investigate in how far the discourse about the dictatorial regime in the context of the installation of the Truth Commission differs between Twitter and print media. To this end, a multi-method study was carried out. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify expectations concerning the potential of Twitter in this context. In a second step, a quantitative content analysis was conducted to test whether these expectations are legitimate and to what extent Twitter can enrich the discourse.

Twitter as a discourse tool

The core element of deliberative models of democracy is a discourse which is undistorted by power inequalities and in which as many citizens as possible, both from the periphery and the center of the political system should deliberate freely in an aim to achieve consensus (Ferree *et al.*, 2002; Habermas, 1962). Often, it has been argued that the Internet would diminish power and spatial constraints and enable such a discourse – for example by means of citizen journalism, in forums, chats, blogs, wikis and social media (e.g., Dahlberg, 2011; Freelon, 2010; Rasmussen, 2008). And beyond pure discussion and deliberation, Twitter offers the possibility to politically mobilize citizens (Arceneaux and Schmitz Weiss, 2010).

Based on the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere, Gripsrud (2009) theorizes about the 'digitization of the public sphere' and argues that without any doubt, the Internet adds new dimensions to the public discourse – and concedes that at the same time, scholars differ heavily in their evaluations of these changes. And indeed, others have been less optimistic than those who point to the Internet's opportunities: Although barriers to publish vanish, still very few information gets the majority of attention and most information reaches only a limited audience (e.g., Bakker and Paterson, 2011). Even stronger, a lot of this dominating information on social media still originates from traditional media companies (e.g., May, 2010). Nevertheless, traditional media are becoming less powerful in fulfilling their role as gatekeepers; and it becomes possible for the audience to watch the gates themselves (Bruns, 2005). It is this practically infinite amount of primary information available to virtually everyone that makes the Internet a "powerful democratizing agent" (Groshek, 2009, p. 117). The fact that a few-to-many distribution of information is at least technically no longer necessary but can be replaced by many-to-many online communication might bring the ideal of a public sphere in which all citizen gather at one place closer.

It can be argued that Twitter is an ideal candidate for an online environment in which deliberation might occur: It is designed for interaction (re-tweeting, replying) and structuring

conversations (hashtags), has an open set-up that enables contact with strangers, and enjoys a high popularity (see, among others, Larsson and Moe, 2011; Parmelee and Bichard, 2012). Furthermore, writing a political tweet arguably demands less effort than writing a whole blog post or a piece for a citizen-journalism outlet. Nevertheless, as Larsson and Moe (2011) deduce from earlier research, the deliberative potential of Twitter is far from realized yet – an observation they can confirm with a case study of the Swedish elections: They observe that people hardly engage in discussions, as shown by very low percentages of retweets and tweets including a hashtag – and important nodes in discussion networks seem to be the 'old' elites. The Habermasian discourse, however, is very skeptical about elites and rather strives to include actors from the periphery as well. Analyzing another social medium, YouTube, a study found that, while non-elites have entered the discourse, it is still the old elites that dominate much of the selection process (Dylko *et al.*, 2011).

In general, there seems to be a consensus that the Internet has a lot of potential for deliberation, but that this potential is far from realized yet (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). It is especially the low frequency of interaction that has been criticized frequently (e.g., Parmelee and Bichard, 2012) – and at the same time, it can be shown that interactivity is crucial for positive effects on Twitter to occur (Lee and Shin, 2012). Moreover, interactivity seems to stimulate citizens' political involvement (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2012) and even influence vote intentions (Lee and Shin, 2012). Maybe this is why some have criticized forms of online political participation as 'slacktivism' – activism with no or little impact (Christensen, 2011).

Research Questions

The research discussed so far leaves us with a dilemma: In theory, social media and especially Twitter should be great tools for public discourse. But why do many conclude that a deliberative discourse is actually happening only to a limited extend (Hindman, 2009)? In this paper, we argue that one reason why many studies found that the realization of the democratic potential of Twitter falls short of expectations is that in well-functioning democracies, there are less pressing needs for citizens to massively engage in political use of social media. Accordingly, the role of Twitter during uprisings is mentioned frequently as an example for Twitter's political power (e.g., Parmelee and Bichard, 2012). In this study, we are going to focus on a context that

is less radical, but still different from a well-functioning democracy: the Brazilian media landscape. Studying another Latin-American defect democracy, Columbia, a survey found that social media can help to strengthen public discourse by diminishing extremity and polarization (Wojcieszak and Rojas, 2011).

In detail, referring to the case of the implementation of the Truth Commission in Brazil, we explore:

RQ1: Which potential is seen in Twitter as a discourse tool?

RQ2: To which extent are these expectations put into practice?

Method

Research context

To assess the potential of social media in public discourse, some specific characteristics of the Brazilian media landscape have to be taken into account. First of all, Internet penetration differs considerably between different parts of the country. Although the number of Internet users is increasing, Internet access is highly dependent on the financial, technical and educational background of the citizens – which means that participants in an online discourse are probably not representative for the Brazilian society as a whole (Costa and Rial y Costas, 2010). The Brazilian society is still characterized by large social inequalities (e.g., Zilla, 2010), which has direct effects on media use, and, subsequently, the occurrence of media effects: "Processes of exclusion [...] in line with economic factors are especially constitutive for the structure of Latin American media systems" (Massmann, 2007, p. 271).

The use of different media is also highly dependent on education – a factor where again stark contrasts arise within the Brazilian society. Perez, De Melo, and Fichtner (2010) state that although children are obliged to go to school, 90 per cent of children in the rural areas attend school for less than four years, and in the *favelas* of the big cities, a relatively high percentage does not graduate from school. Kohlhepp (2010) estimates the illiteracy rate at about 10 per cent – differing extremely between different regions –, whereas Hart (2010), based on a different set of criteria, states that almost 60 per cent of all Brazilians older than 15 can be considered analphabets. However, although the reported illiteracy rate varies between different sources, it seems certain that it has diminished in the past years.

The strong differentiation of society – e.g., huge parts of the indigenous people live in the tropics in reservations or inaccessible regions (Kohlhepp, 2010) – affects especially the use of electronic media: Because of educational deficits, the influence of electronic media on the

social live of the people even increases (Miguel, 2007). The digital divide is an important aspect which has to be considered when talking about possible participants of media discourses (e.g., Costa and Rial y Costas, 2010; Weiland, 2005). All in all, the Brazilian media landscape has been developed fast and professionally, but suffers still from central deficits. As we outlined above, it still does not comply with important democratic criteria like a diverse media supply and independence of the political system and the media (see also Stevanim and Santos, 2012). This is illustrated by the fact that, Brazil is ranked on the 108th position in the Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Boarders.

Qualitative interviews

To learn about the potentials of Twitter that different actors see, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of experts: Three journalists, one political blogger, one human-rights activist, and two political scientists. While the journalists could especially inform us about the shortcomings of the traditional system and the ways traditional media start using online tools, the blogger knew a lot about realizations of new forms of political communication on the web. The activist, affiliated with an NGO, could provide the bigger picture of the case in question, as did the political scientists, who were also especially knowledgeable about the historical context. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with QDA software. In a last step, selected quotes were translated from Portuguese to English.

Content analysis

The discourse about the Truth Commission and the military dictatorship was analyzed in the time frame between December 15, 2011 and January 15, 2012. A census of articles addressing these topics in six Brazilian print media was conducted. We included the newspapers Folha de S. Paulo, O Globo and Estado de São Paulo as well as the news magazines Veja, Época and Isto É.

Out of 3,581 tweets matching the search string "(comissão AND verdade) OR (ditadura AND militar)", a random sample of 600 tweets was drawn. After removal of 118 invalid cases (mainly tweets referring to non-Brazilian contexts), a final sample of N=482 tweets was coded. All coding was done by one of the authors. The following variables were coded:

Genre: For print articles, seven categories were distinguished, based on the following ideal types: news story, opinion piece/analysis, feature story, interview, column, portrait, other.

Opinionated: For tweets, it was coded whether the content was factual (0) or opinionated (1).

Topic: The following topics were distinguished: military dictatorship, Truth Commission, law & justice, education & culture, single actors during the military dictatorship, comparison dictatorship—today/effects of the dictatorship on today's society, media and the dictatorship, other. Up to two topics per case were coded – in which case we distinguished between main topic and secondary topic.

Actors: For each of the following actors, it was coded whether the actor was not mentioned, mentioned in a minor role, or if he was the main actor: Dilma (Brazilian president), Maria do Rosário (Human Rights Secretary), member(s) of the Truth Commission, military, opponents of the military dictatorship, justice, party: government, party: opposition, expert, victim of the dictatorship, own medium, other medium. For some analyses, the variables Dilma, Maria do Rosário, party: government and party: opposition were combined to the variable political actor, as well as own medium and other medium to the variable medium, and opponents and victims to the variable opponents/victims of the dictatorship.

References. We measured whether the following sources were referenced: professional media offer, Twitter, citizen blog, blog of politician or political party, NGO, official document, internal document, other source.

Results
Challenges and expectations

Based on the qualitative interviews, we identified three major challenges of the discourse on the military dictatorship and the Truth Commission in traditional media, and, related to this, expectations how Twitter might help to deal with them: the balance of the discourse, the availability of information, and the select group of participants in the discourse.

The existence of *balance* in the public discourse about the military dictatorship and the appointment of the Truth Commission is influenced by both the media organizations' role in the past, and by the topic itself, as it is very controversial: Opinions on the Truth Commission are highly polarized because of the opposing interests of reservists on the one hand and victims or other opponents of the regime on the other hand. This polarization is reflected in the media's audience, which makes it even harder for journalists to deal with the topic in terms of a balanced coverage (journalist 1; journalist 2; blogger; political scientist 2). Furthermore, the political orientation of the media organizations and the owners in some cases interfere with a balanced

coverage (political scientist 1; political scientist 2; blogger). The same is true for the personal involvement of journalists, e.g. in the case of journalist 3, whose father is one of the most known victims of the military dictatorship. This "double role" (political scientist 1) can cause conflicting interests in dealing with the subject, as journalist 3 states: "I should [report about it], because it's my dad, my family, because it's unfair and because I have the space. […] This [journalistic] freedom is also difficult. […] Although on the one hand the journalistic freedom is damaged, I have to, I should write, I cannot run away."

When it comes to the strongly differing opinions concerning the creation of the Truth Commission and the military dictatorship in general, social media play an important role. Journalist 3 and political scientist 1 for example state that both right-wing and left-wing people use Twitter, Blogs and Facebook intensively. Political scientist 1 describes this phenomenon as "ideological war […], it's not made with shells, with guns – the weapon is the word."

It's not only the role of the media during the military dictatorship which affects the coverage in the media but also other relicts, as the human-rights activist states: In Brazil exists a "culture of violence, a culture of an violent police, a culture of little respect for human rights, a culture which tolerates torture in the penal system. All of this is an heritage of the dictatorship."

Another expectation concerning Twitter in this context deals with a major problem traditional media faces: The *availability of information*. Journalist 1 identifies as one of the main difficulties for his newspaper "forbidden archives […], hidden archives […], which are not accessible for the public. […] There are still many forbidden, not distributed, hidden, lost documents." He agrees with the human-rights activist and journalist 3 on the fact that important documents were destroyed by the military in the last years, which makes this problem still existent, although the Brazilian government has passed a law, which allows everyone the access to information from the three powers (Lei de Acesso á Informação). This law is not yet consequently put into practice; in many cases, journalists or scientists do not receive access or it takes so much time that, due to journalists' work routines, they can rarely make use of their right (political scientist 1). Nonetheless, the human-rights activist states that the law would contribute to "a culture of transparency of the public power". The variety of information is an important aspect influencing the discourse about a certain topic; transparency of (governmental) actors and institutions and therefore more detailed information that is added to the debate can sustainably improve the discourse.

Concerning social media, the respondents express the expectation that – also because of less-time-affording instruments – the *group of participants will be different*: A higher number of media users will participate more frequently in the public debate, which makes the debate even

more complex and causes a diversification of the discourse (journalist 3; human-rights activist). The gatekeeping role of traditional media will therefore become less important: "The great advantage of social media today is that […] they allow you the access to information which traditional media doesn't want to give you, doesn't have access to or doesn't know how to give. Thus through social media you have access to the world" (blogger). This effect is even increased because of the theoretically unlimited space on the Internet (journalist 1; blogger). Maybe because of the problems traditional media face in achieving a balanced coverage, this diverse group of participants (in the sense of 'everyone can join') is the reason why distrust is less of a problem than in traditional media. It seems that just not originally journalistic platforms like Twitter or Facebook have a very high importance in Brazilian society and are considered as very credible (journalist 3; blogger; political scientist 1).

Comparing the discourse in print media and on Twitter

In our qualitative pre-study, we identified three main topics related to the evaluation of the discourse on Twitter compared to print media: balance, availability of information, and the participants of the discourse. We now proceed to investigate in how far the discourse differs between the media in terms of these three aspects.

Balance

To find out how balanced the discourse is, we examined three different aspects: balance in terms of the variety of *topics*, balance in terms of the variety of *actors mentioned*, and, as an additional indicator for balance, the representation of factual information versus *opinion*.

Analyzing the main topics and secondary topics, the broad diversification of the discourse becomes obvious. The most frequently used topic as well on twitter as in print media was comparison/effect on today (main topic: 20.9%, n=564; secondary topic: 29.4% of all units which have an additional topic, n=245). However, this topic is slightly more frequently used on Twitter (32.5% of all Tweets cover this topic, and 28.4% of all articles), which has an even greater impact considering the fact that because of the possible text length a higher number of articles has an additional topic compared to the tweets. Combining the various diverse topics in wider topic groups leads to the following fragmentation: The military dictatorship in general is covered in 23.9% of all articles, and in 22.4% of all tweets (n.s.), and also the Truth Comission is covered about as frequently in print media (26.1%) as on Twitter (23.4%; n.s.). Significant

differences could be found concerning the topic single actors during the military dictatorship, which is covered in 37.5% of all articles and 16% of all Tweets (p≤.001, χ^2=22.138), and the topic law & justice (print media: 8.0%, Twitter: 1.7%, p≤.001, χ^2=11.508). The topics education & culture (print media: 5.7%, Twitter: 7.7%) and media and the dictatorship (print media: 5.7%, Twitter: 4.8%) do not differ significantly.

Turning to *balance of actors*, we see that, as Figure 1 illustrates, the mentioning of actors differs substantially between Twitter and print media. Obviously, as articles are considerably longer than Tweets, the chances for each actor to appear are higher in Twitter – especially as a secondary actor, which hardly ever occurs on Twitter. Nevertheless, regarding the balance of the discourse, one encounters a remarkable elite centered discourse in print media: President Dilma and government actors dominate the print discourse. On Twitter, no actor has such a clear dominance – in terms of the representation of actors, the Twitter discourse can be called more balanced.
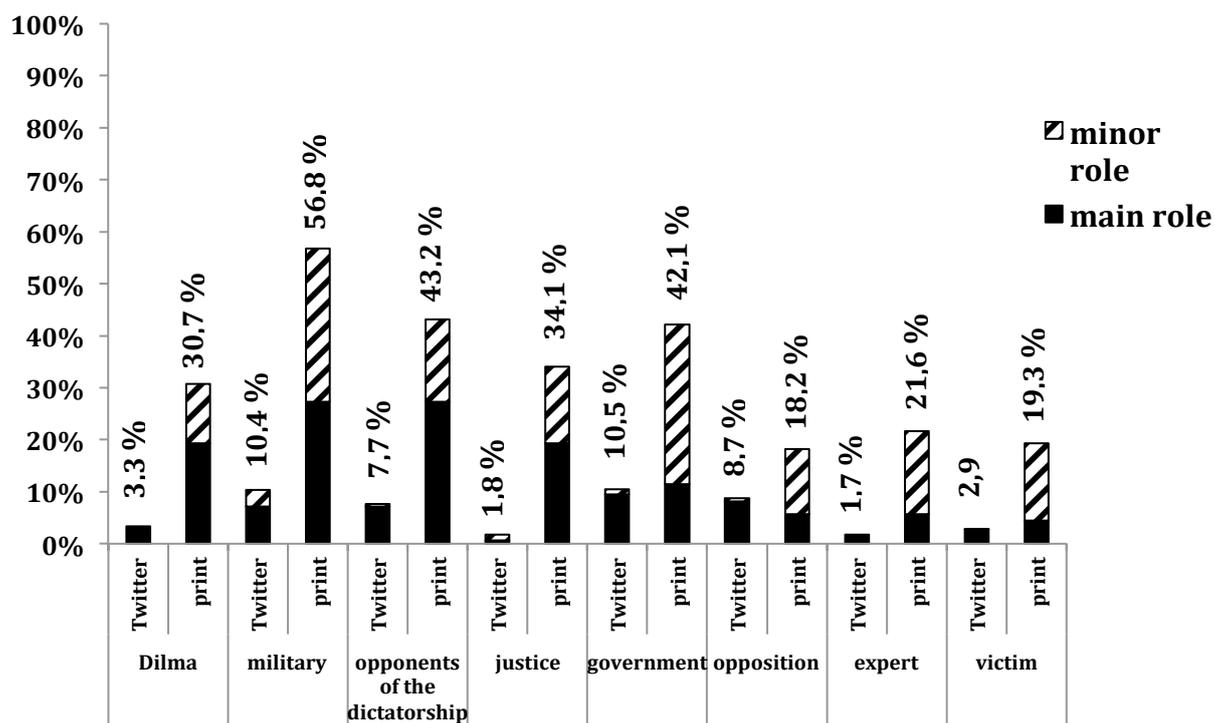

Figure 1: Share of tweets (n=482) and print articles (n=88) mentioning different actors

As to balance, another – less optimistic – expectation of the interviewees was that on Twitter, left- and right-wing 'guerillas' would dominate the discourse by repeating their *opinions*

over and over again. In fact, we found some support for such a dominance of opinions over facts: While in 63.3% of the tweets an opinion or attitude could be identified, 34.1% of the print articles are comments or related genres, and another 15.9% were classified as 'other '(which includes for example letters to the editor). However, the percentage of objective articles like news stories, which are originally fact-orientated and do not allow personal opinions, is also considerably high (29.5%). Only rarely used are columns (12.5%), portraits (4.5%), feature stories (2.3%) and interviews (1.1%).

Availability of information

An frequently mentioned part of the discourse studied is the dissemination of important information – be it official documents, maybe even secret or leaked documents, but also all different other types of primary material. Therefore, we examined in how far external material is referred to in the discourse. One of the main advantages of online media is that it is actually very easy to link to the most diverse range of information. Nevertheless, referring to specific information does not happen more frequently in Tweets (45.5% of all Tweets) than in print media (44.4% of all articles, n.s.).
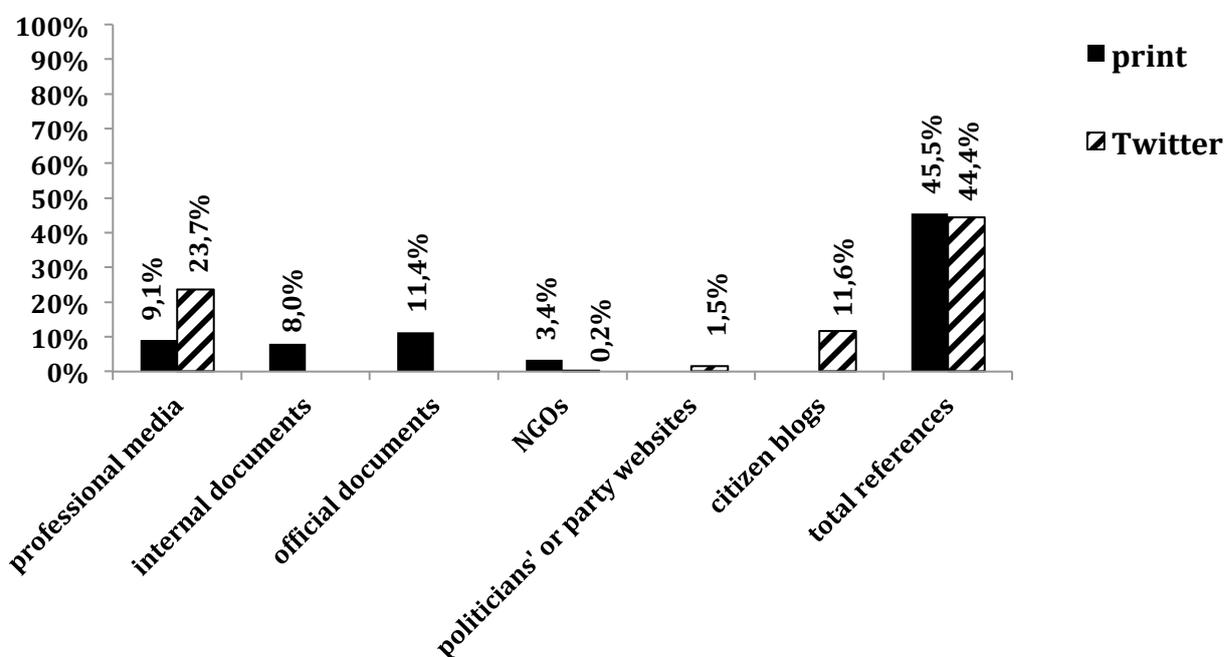

Figure 2: Share of print articles(n=88) and tweets (n=482) referring to additional references

However, as Figure 2 shows, the type of additional information referred to differs strongly: While 11.6% of all Tweets referred to a citizen blog, none of the articles did so (p≤.01, χ^2=11.338). But also professional media organizations were referred to more often in Tweets (23.7%) than in print articles (9,1%, p≤.05, χ^2=9.378). The other way round, not a single Tweet referred to official documents or internal, unpublished documents, while this happened in 11.4% % (p≤.001, χ^2=55.751) and 8% (p≤.001, χ^2=38.818) of all articles.

Participants of the discourse

As we discussed before, one of the main arguments that is voiced to substantiate the notion of Twitter as an enhancement of public discourse is that it enables a wide range of diverse actors to participate and to engage in a discussion that is undisturbed by power relations. Therefore, we tested whether two assumptions are true: first, that the discourse is indeed not dominated by very few elite actors; second, that people actually engage in discussions.

As to the first argument, the analysis indeed shows a broad diversification of the discourse: In our sample, the 482 tweets were produced by 450 different persons. As to the second argument, while 44% of the tweets mention another user, this does usually not result in discussions: 29% of the tweets are retweets, which indicates that a not too small share of people seem to rather re-distribute information than contributing new arguments. Only 15% of the tweets addresses other twitter users directly without only retweeting their content – thus, true discussion seems to be not the prevalent mode of communication.

Conclusions and Discussion

This paper aimed to assess in how far Twitter can enhance public discourse in media landscapes that do not comply with all expectations of a democratic society. The case of the discourse on the military dictatorship in Brazil was studied as an example for such a situation. In detail, freedom of the press is not fully guaranteed; furthermore, mainstream media were involved in the acts of the dictatorial regime as well.

Approaching the topic from an explorative angle, we first assessed how actors see the role of Twitter in the discourse. We found that especially (1) a more balanced representation of topics, actors, and opinions, (2) more available information, and (3) an extended group of interacting participants might improve democratic discourse.

However, as our content analysis shows, this happens only to a limited extent. As to the first point, for instance, the differences between Twitter and print media are very small in terms

of the topics covered. However, tweets are much less elite-centered and thus more balanced in terms of actors. Similarly, those who are participating in the debate – the people writing the tweets – are a diverse group rather than an elitist group, like the authors shaping the discourse in print media. Still, balance might be under pressure as a large share of the Tweets was opinion-focused rather than fact-focused.

As to the second point, too, the additional value of Twitter on the first sight seems limited: Tweets do not refer more often to additional information than articles do. Even stronger, investigative or leaked content was even not mentioned at all on Twitter. But this is only a part of the story: Twitter is capable of including other type of information, like citizen blogs, that are neglected completely by mainstream media. Here, Twitter serves as an important supplement.

As to the third point, one has to conclude that the Habermasian ideal of deliberation is not fully put into practice on Twitter in the case under investigation. Signs of discussion were less prominent than signs of merely disseminating information. Together with the opinion-focused content of the tweets, a picture emerges in which people mainly voice their opinions – which are poorly backed by facts – without being interested in what the other side says.

In the light of the mixed findings of our study, we call for increased research on the role of social media in defect democracies. As the vast majority of research is still conducted in either well-developed democratic societies, mainly the US or some European countries, or focused on the emancipatory possibilities in non-democratic societies. But what about societies, in which citizens do not have to fear for imprisonment or even their lives if they give their opinion, but in which the structure of the traditional media system does not provide them with a platform to do so? As our study showed, public discourse as a whole seems to benefit from the content disseminated on Twitter, as it seems to be more diverse and less elite-centered than reporting in the press is – at least in the case we studies. Future research could test this finding in more countries, with more topics, and within a longer time frame.

Our findings, however, also have less optimistic implications: As we found only few signs for real interaction, or, in the words of Habermas, for deliberation, one can doubt in how far online media are really the place where a deliberative public discourse takes place. One might speculate that Twitter mainly serves as a tool for disseminating information and that deliberation takes place elsewhere. Nevertheless, even this role as an information tool can strengthen public discourse – be it in a less direct way than earlier Internet optimists hoped for.

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