Chapter 8
The Performative Role of Hashtags in the Politicization of Europe: Twitter and European Elections in 2014

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ABSTRACT

The chapter analyses Twitter as one of the several fora where the general public sphere manifests itself. The Twitter debate generated in Italy during the campaign for EP2014 is used as a prism for looking in depth into the mutual shaping between the specific grammar of the micro-blogging platform and the ongoing politicization of the EU within and across national politics. The contribution looks at the ways in which specific socio-communicative features of Twitter have become deeply interlaced with the emergence of Europe-related structure of meanings. Special attention is paid to the performative role of hashtags in summoning publics and in triggering a peculiar kind of ambient affiliation that is more than mere connectivity and rather involves the opening of a discursive space where negotiation of meanings becomes possible.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter analyses Twitter as one of the several fora where the general public sphere manifests itself. The Twitter debate, which was generated in Italy during the campaign for European Parliament elections in 2014 (EP2014), is used as a prism to look into the mutual shaping between the specific grammar of the micro-blogging platform and the ongoing politicization of the EU within and across national politics (Statham & Trenz, 2012). The starting assumption is that the dominant features of political life on Twitter can be efficaciously grasped turning the analytical perspective towards moments of remarkable political unrest. EP2014 represent an exemplary case in point because they were characterized by the exceptional combination of unprecedented dynamics, both on the communicative and the political side.

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Twitter as a communicative phenomenon, which is expected to radically shape rules and stakes of political life, is at the core of an expanding strand of literature on media and communication (for an extensive and interdisciplinary overview, see Jungherr 2014). The scientific interest is paralleled by a growing attention on the part of institutions which ever more consider the popular micro-blogging platform as a unique opportunity to actively involve citizens in the practices and the rituals of democracy. During EP2014, many European institutions arranged ad hoc communication strategies on the popular micro-blogging platforms. The European Parliament launched a special elections night website which promised to release «fact, polls, quotes, trivia, social media buzz, pictures, videos from all 28 member states and the European Parliament» during the four elections days. The special attention that EP paid to social media during the elections is further confirmed by a special twitter tool - the Twitter dashboard2 which collected all the tweets with the official European election hashtag #EP2014 and similar national hashtags. It showed mentions and accounts of the candidates for the Commission Presidency, registering the number of election-related tweets per minute and hour and the most mentioned topics on Twitter. Rather than being just one among other communication tools, Twitter became a communicative event in itself worth being represented through a new form of storytelling made of infographics, visual resources and metrics describing candidates’ popularity and users’ participation rates. Many other European institutions, such as the European Broadcasting Union, the Commission and all the European parties, took part in the Twitter debate, using official hashtags, promoting Twitter accounts and making use of specialized companies that provide analytics of Twitter.

However, all these remarkable investments from both the scientific and institutional side run the risk of appearing paradoxical if we take into account the niche diffusion that this social medium has across the wider population. While social media continue to grow rapidly around the world, with active users accounts that are almost equating 29% of the world’s population (We are social, 2015), Twitter is still behind the top ranking with 284 million of monthly active users against the 1.4 billion of Facebook users and 300 million of Instagram users (Cosenza, 2015). To quote just some data, consider that in 2014 the percentage of Twitter users of the entire population in Italy, Germany and France did not overcome 10%, while a higher diffusion amounting to 19% was registered in the UK (We are social, 2015).

The objective of the chapter is to build a theoretical and empirical route towards the understanding of the social and political value attached to Twitter. Having acknowledged that this value clearly does not coincide with its capillary diffusion, it will be argued that it can be grasped if assessed in the light of the complex processes that sustain the wider public sphere. Consequently, the primary issue to be dealt with is whether Twitter conversations that unfolded during EP2014 hosted processes that can be ascribed to the wider public sphere. If so, it becomes relevant to explore and explain the relationship that connects Twitter to the wide-ranging discursive practices through which topics of common interests are framed and made visible. An issue like this one can be legitimately raised only within a cultural paradigm of the public sphere that considers it in its plural declination, as a multiplicity of public spheres, associations and communities nested within one another and also within a putative larger national sphere (Alexander & Jacobs, 1998). Besides acknowledging both the indisputable empirical existence and the ethical need of a multiplicity of public spheres (Fraser, 1992), this paradigm turns away from the exclusive understanding of public sphere as a place for rational processes of reaching consensus. Rather, it conceives it as «a cultural space in which different individuals and groups jockey to “narrate the social” and where citizens actively construct their own understandings of real and ideal civil society by filtering overarching