

Increasing civic engagement using 140 characters?

An online experiment on the effects of different communication strategies and the use of hashtags

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Public organizations find it difficult to engage citizens for policy dialogue and implementation. Social media enable new forms of civic participation. Citizens can give their opinions on blogs, discussion forums or Twitter and politicians or institutions can engage in direct dialogue with the public. An institution like the police is interested in how social media can be used to stimulate online citizen participation, for example, by contributing their observations to a police website. The present paper focuses on the question how the police can use Twitter to motivate citizens activate their social network, visit the police website and contribute information on the police website.

Research background

Twitter is an ideal medium to reach a large audience within a short time. However, tweets are challenged by the restricted number of characters; appeals have to be short and concise. In this research we focus on two factors that could influence the success of a twitter campaign: the content of the tweet and the use of a hashtag. With regard to the content of the tweet, we examine whether explicitly naming a benefit increases the willingness for participation. According to social psychological expectancy-value models, actors engage in an action when the benefits are higher than the costs. Explicitly naming benefits in tweets should make these benefits more salient and thereby increase participation.

We differentiated further between individual and group benefits. Helping the police in solving crime cases can be considered as a social dilemma. Social dilemmas are situations in which individual and collective interests are in conflict. For the community or society it would be better if everybody reported hints that could help to solve a crime or spread at least the message amongst the social network. However, from an individual perspective it is better to save time and effort and hope that enough others are willing to participate. Within the social dilemma literature, a differentiation between motivational, strategic and structural solutions is made (Kollock, 1998). A motivational solution is to increase the feeling of group identity; this has been shown to influence cooperation. Naming a group benefit should increase the salience of

the group identity and could therefore enhance participation. Strategic solutions offer incentives for cooperation such as building up a reputation. People are still proself, but because they can gain reputation or are not considered as interaction partners anymore if they do not behave in a cooperative way, they start to behave in a prosocial way. Recently, the concept of gamification receives more and more attention (Deterding et al, 2011). By adding game elements for example to virtual communities (e.g. giving people various badges for different forms of contribution) participation can be enhanced. Gaining reputation on the police website is an individual benefit that could increase cooperation rates.

The question is which of these benefits is more successful in increasing participation. According to Whiteley and Seyd (in Pattie et al, 2003): "People who feel attached to a group should be more likely to act on its behalf than those who not share that attachment". So first we expect that citizens who engage for their community will participate more. Moreover, we expect a moderating effect of civic engagement. People who already engage do so because they value the collective good, they can be compared with prosocial individuals. Explicitly naming the group benefit should further increase their participation. People who do not engage for their community can be compared to proselfs. They respond better to strategic solutions such as gaining reputation.

On twitter, hashtags can be used to facilitate searching and creating discussion groups for specific topics. According to Bruns & Burgess (2011) hashtags are used to find tweets about specific issues and twitter users relate with others with the same interest. Hashtags activate a group feeling and therefore should increase participation in case of highly engaged citizens.

Method

To explore the role of message content and hashtag use in tweets on participation an online experiment with a 3 (benefits: none, individual, group) x 2 (hashtag: yes vs. no) design was conducted. The tweet of a policeman "More burglaries in your

neighborhood: Think along on bit.ly/rl46mHa" was complemented with "become the Sherlock Holmes of your neighborhood" in the individual benefit condition and in the group benefit condition with "help to increase the safety in your neighborhood". In the hashtag condition #neighborhoodandpolice was added.

Online participation was measured on three levels: retweeting the tweet, clicking the link to the website and contributing information on the website. For analysis the average civic engagement (measured with six statements on a five point Likert scale) was divided in low and high engagement.

Results & conclusions

A 3 (benefits) x 2 (hashtag) x 2 (civic engagement) ANOVA with "retweeting" as dependent variable showed main effects of benefits and civic engagement. The group benefit lead to more participation than the individual benefit. The no benefit condition did not differ from the individual or group benefit. Highly engaged citizens retweet more than lowly engaged citizens, this is consistent with our expectation that highly engaged citizens would participate more than lowly engaged citizens. ANOVA with "clicking the link" as dependent variable had the same effect of civic engagement.

For "contributing information" ANOVA showed an interaction effect between benefits and civic engagement. In case of none and the individual benefit highly engaged citizens contribute more than lowly engaged citizens, but for the group benefit there was an opposite result: naming a benefit reduces contributing information when citizens are highly engaged compared to lowly engaged.

Results show that online civic participation can be influenced by the content of the tweet. A group benefit leads to more retweeting and contributing information on the website than an individual benefit. For highly engaged citizens a group benefit decreases contributing information, a possible explanation is motivational crowding.

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Over Sowijs

Sowijs is het social media lab van NHL Hogeschool en een initiatief van de opleiding Communicatie. Sowijs bestaat uit een lectoraat Social Media en verschillende docenten en studenten. Samen met de praktijk werken wij aan toegepast onderzoek op het gebied van social media. De kennis en kunde die we daarmee opdoen, delen we via whitepapers en symposia.

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