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THE ROLE OF TWITTER IN ACCELERATING ENGAGEMENT IN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATIVE SPACES

Abstract. *The newly emerging communicative spaces on the Internet are vital to the research of power relations in society. The present text discovers how these relations are being challenged by engagement in alternative communicative spaces. More specifically, how Twitter is being used for accelerating this engagement. It highlights the activities of the Internet users who have been confronted with borders, limitations and even repressive and undemocratic environment. With the mixed method approach, we have gathered the quali- and quantitative data which uncovered the four dimensions of their engagement in alternative communicative spaces: 1) representation of opinions and information, 2) acquiring attention and consideration, 3) finding allies and engaging with influencers, 4) activation of community.*
Keywords: *twitter, alternative communicative space, empowerment, online activism, mixed-method*

Introduction

The present text advises that the alternative spaces are created, settled by, and being used by the individuals who are questing communicative freedom and require more democracy in their milieu, for themselves or the society. The initial argument for the endorsement of the spatial dimension of social interactions is adopted from Manuel Castells (2007), who differentiates the horizontal networks of online communication to be able to reflect the power relations and negotiations. For him, the newly emerging communicative spaces on the Internet are critical for research and understanding of the *new* public space (Castells, 2007: 258).

The analyzed data in this predominantly interpretative study of engagement in online spaces revealed how the obstruction of civil engagement and freedom in environment (authoritative politics, repression against

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minorities, lack of democracy) initiates users' engagement in communicative spaces. Users are bypassing these limitations, generating the communicative freedom and facilitate discourse of the members of the induced communicative space. Besides the engagement for greater communicative freedom, the analyzed data indicate *"transformation of communicative freedom into communicative power"* (Bohman, 2010: 431; see Bohman, 2004). The research uncovers Twitter[1] and its role in enhancing alternative communication spaces – stemming from network's general accessibility, great reach of the broadcasted contents and fast communicative interactions. Twitter proves to be an extension of operational field of activists and artists, and a promotional channel for critical engagement in public matters. Tweeting encourages the information circulation, planning, organizing, and the implementation of communication activities online, as well as offline activities outside the Internet (i.e. meetings or music events). Therefore, Twitter can be understood as an accelerator of engagement in alternative communication spaces.

Focus lies on the agency of Twitter users, who perform various communicative functions on the social network: representation of ideas, information seeking and sharing, networking, consolidating goals and causes, creating awareness, exceeding geographical and cultural limits, and the transcultural framing of the online alternative communication space. In contrast to autocratic milieus, the alternative communication space presents the observed users with communicative freedom to speak up, declare their own thoughts, connect with the like-minded and act accordingly to their represented values. Hand in hand with the promotion of engagement in alternative communicative spaces goes the users' foreseeing and support of missions and goals – for example, a release of imprisoned blogger or ecological impact. The analysis incorporates four promotional and formative dimensions of the contribution of the Twitter users to the alternative communication spaces: 1) representation of opinions and information; 2) acquiring attention and consideration; 3) finding allies and engaging with influencers; 4) activation of community.

This introduction is followed by an explanation of the *alternative communicative space* concept, its relation to *heterotopia* (De Cauter, 2004; 2007/1984a) and a discussion about changes in postindustrial societies (Tönnies, 1935/1999; Durkheim, 1933 in Bahovec, 2004: 46; Cooley, 1902/1956; Max Weber in Saco, 2002). The third section presents the methodological steps and sampling. Practices of the communicative engagement

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[1] *Twitter is an online platform for "social networking" or "microblogging". The users communicate through short messages, i.e. tweets that are predominantly public. Users also "follow" other users and respond to their contents. Since its launch in 2006, the number of users on Twitter climbed over a billion in 2013 and has not changed a lot in 2014. The recent numbers are available here: http://twopcharts.com/ twitteractivitymonitor (accessed on 16. June 2014).*

on Twitter related to alternative communicative spaces highlight the fourth section. Last part concludes the discussion and introduces some other researches of alternative communicative spaces for the sake of comparison.

The assumption that the concept of space is closely linked to the social connections, and that sociability is a dimension of any space is vital for the research of information and communication technologies (ICT). Especially when it comes to the immaterial online communicative situations, the construction of space through social interactions seems inevitable for the research. Even though the social interactions on the Internet differentiate from offline interactions, they are still social interactions among people, in which people, communities and society are re-constructed.

Alternative communication spaces and their users

This section unfolds characteristics of alternative communicative spaces and examines the relevance of this theoretical concept for the present study. The four types of communicative activities – 1. representation of opinions and information, 2. echo-framing and retrieving consideration, 3. finding allies and engaging with influencers and 4. activation for a common action – are presented in the context of these alternative communicative spaces, i.e. *other* spaces (De Cauter, 2004) that offer themselves as platforms for social engagement where repressive conditions disable free public engagement.

The observed situation of some users and respondents from the researched sample is labeled as difficult due to the extremely undemocratic socio-political circumstances: their immediate public environment is closed for citizens and their communicative rights restricted. Based on their explanations, the potential of the Internet and its communicative platforms (i.e. social networks) are acknowledged as empowering tools for enabling alternative communicative conditions and accessible communication channels (see also Schachtner & Duller, 2013). The emerging communicative platforms seem to serve as fall-back options in inconvenient communicative structures, as *capsules* (De Cauter, 2004), in which citizens strive to overcome repressive and undemocratic circumstances (Boyd, 2003; Stein, 2011), or manage more personally related inconveniences, such as unemployment and economic situation. Those *capsules* are the "other" places between private-public, local-global and transcultural at the same time.

Heterotopia as alternative communicative space

With increasing possibilities for omnipresence – due to the ICT that additionally encourages simultaneous social engagement at various places – the processes of social *delocalization* (De Cauter, 2004: 22) takes place. One is

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even less bound to geographical space and can be present and represented by communication and transport facilities at many locations. De Cauter's thought clearly advises against the possible destructive outcomes of delocalized social structure for the urban areas, such as incarceration, ghettoization, exclusion, xenophobia and other negative social consequences (ibid.: 36). And his negative understanding of distant socializing undermines the commonly positively addressed characteristics (ibid.: 36) of the network's vitality and flexibility. Anyhow, *"the celebration of the distant sociability"* and the idea that *"one can live anywhere, as long as one is connected to the networks"* (ibid.: 43) encourage networking and networked communities and promote understanding of the Internet and the online communicative platforms as places (Saco, 1991; Christensen et al., 2011).

Platform's architecture, interactive construction, and structure of communicated contents build communicative spaces which attract special attention in the fields of many disciplines. Because they are neither completely here nor they are completely somewhere else or unexisting, they function as *heterotopias*, which denote the spaces between spaces (De Cauter, 2004: 55–70; Foucault, 1984/2007). Online communities are typically considered differently than neighborhoods, families or school classes, and symbolically speaking, they truly are located somewhere else, even though the social interactions in them are a part of users' reality.

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Speaking from the perspective of social psychology, *heterotopias* are contradictory – they mirror and reflect one's view in one's own view and through that open a field for self-formation (Foucault, 1984/2007: 216–7). Social diversity and collisions, i.e. contrasts such as public-private, family-society, cultural-applicative or entertainment-work, are unresolved and are being regularly transposed to the *spaces between*, the *heterotopias*, and negotiated. Managing divergence through heterotopias is one's entry to a usually inaccessible sphere, where perverse and conflict conditions can be resolved. Defined precisely and systematically, the *heterotopias* as *other spaces* are *"spaces of alternate ordering [... that ...] organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them"* (Hetherington, 1997: viii), therefore *heterotopias* are *"seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things"* (ibid). And this is the agency that was clearly extracted by coding the interviews and Twitter contents. Multiple statements of the interviewees explicitly relate the engagement and ability for doing things differently through the participation at the online communicative platforms.

Capsular engagement

The last decades of the postindustrial society are marked by accessible means of transportation and popular engagement in the means of

communication. The geographical position and the physical location are becoming less critical for numerous social interactions. Changes like *delocalization* concern De Cauter, who believes they lead to hyper-individualism and temporary sociability forms, and life organized in the individualized environments called *capsules* (De Cauter, 2004: 66). He explains *capsules* as spaces and situations where people exist together, but not necessarily interact with each other (ibid.). As he suggests, the places of *semi-social* (i.e. potentially social) coexistence are airport lounges, airplane cabins, train coaches, subway stations or hospitals' waiting rooms, and – in relation to the topic of the present text – the Internet and online spaces (ibid.). De Cauter's observation is related to the classical works of Ferdinand Tönnies, Emil Durkheim or Charles H. Cooley, in which they reflect changes in the postindustrial society and exemplify the divergence in the quality of interpersonal relations and social ties. Tönnies associates community (*Gemeinschaft*) with strong interpersonal, even intuitive ties between members of a community (Tönnies, 1935/1999: 59/83). Due to the individualism in the modern times, the ties between community members were weakened, which resulted in the shift of community and its change into society (Gesellschaft) in which rationalized and formal structures exchange the once *intuitive* community ties (ibid.: 84–116). Durkheim's observation follows similar argument. He relates individualization to modern industrial societies where collective consciousness has evaporated due to the exercised functional differentiation (Durkheim, 1933: 38 in Bahovec, 2004: 46; see also Cooley, 1902/1956; Saco, 1991: 1–35).

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The transformation from the networks of the community-oriented society to the more individualized social forms is associated with the conversion of social ties towards the networks of less firm *weak ties* (Granovetter, 1973). In contrast to De Cauter's dystopian view, this text quests for the empowering indices of the online worlds and entitles users as agents of communicative power for *"navigation of complex and changing social and political landscapes"* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 744). Anyhow, the idea of networks, online accounts and user profiles which function as protection in a form of cocoons is built on De Cauter's concept of *capsules*; they offer security of familiar context and at the same time, transform the social context (Christensen et al., 2011: 4). Networks lead users in the cycle of dependence and introduce mobile devices simultaneously as a solution and a problem for this solution, states Morley: *"Mobile phone is […] a device for dealing with our anxieties about the problems of distance created by our newly mobile lifestyles"* (Morley, 2007: 223). Still, the platforms and artifacts of such digital life are also offering a bypass for bridging the unwanted social realities. Even if the assumptions regarding the dispersion of capsular society which is leading to individualistic society were true, the *capsular function* seems to enable (more) powerful social interactions.

Be it the therapeutic function of digital media (see also Bublitz, 2010) for social convalescence or aspiration for democracy, the communicative platforms on the Internet are used to manage and change the unpleasant and unwanted social conditions. Sometimes, in order to be able to place the foundations of alternative opinions, a new communicative platform has to be built or the conditions and politics of an existing platform have to be challenged and managed. Twitter is sometimes understood as an environment in which alternative communicative reality can emerge. But as the following section suggests, Twitter is more often used as a channel for information, promotion and engagement building for the alternative communicative spaces emerging elsewhere.

Methodological notes

The data for the analysis is drawn from two sources One is from the research project of "Subject formation and digital culture" SKUDI,[2] on which author worked 2009–2012 as a research fellow, and the second one is from her postgraduate research[3] of "Tweeting in everyday life". Even though both research projects (SKUDI and PhD-project) fundamentally endeavor to broader fields, this text percepts and focuses on the agency of investigated Twitter users, who either form or promote the alternative communication spaces, in which opinion engagement exceeds system, cultural and geographical limitations, or bypasses repression. Outcomes of the *grounded theory* (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) approach from the SKUDI-study, which suggest that users confronted to impedance seek communication freedom by inducing parallel communication spaces on the Internet, initiated the research and data triangulation presented here. The collective empirical steps have been sequentially developed over the period of more than the five years, throughout which time multiple methods have been used. With a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach, a deep insight in the relations and interactions of the online communicative spaces has been developed. Last but not least, the multiple researched angles and triangulation of the sampled data enlisted a greater awareness of the research limits.

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[2] *Interviews and analyses of online content have been carried out within the framework of the Austrian-German research project Subject Formation and Digital Culture 2009–2012 (Subjektkonstruktion und digitale Kultur, SKUDI). The research project SKUDI saw the collaboration cooperation of four universities: the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, and University of Bremen, Technical University Hamburg-Harburg and the University of Münster, Germany).*

[3] *Tweeting in everyday life is author's research project that discovers subject formations of Twitter users and their motivation for online engagement in various socio-cultural situations.*

The mixed methods

Qualitative research employs data to be able to perceive the point of view of the researched subjects (Kvale, 1996), and quantitative research is encouraged to generalize the measured phenomena (Jick, 1979). This research engages both paradigms and uses the *between-method-triangulation* predominantly (ibid.: 602; Denzin, 1978: 301 in Jick, 1979: 602–3), in which the data sampled during content analysis, observation, interviews and survey are compared and discussed.

First empirical step is problem discovery phase and can be described as a method of semi-structured *(auto-)ethnographic* observation (Ellis et al., 2011; Kozinets, 2010) of tweeting and users' behavior. Topics of conversations, characteristics of interactions and tone of users' communication have been noted, the length of conversations has been measured with the count of the posted messages. The early research phase has been followed by four divergent qualitative and quantitative methodological steps: 1) quantitative analysis of the tweeted content (tweeting frequency, message type identification and frequency, count of users engaged in thread) and 2) qualitative analysis of the tweeted content (open and structured coding of topics, users communicative motivation, their communicative goals and the role of Twitter and Twitter audience in their life); 3) qualitative interviews with Internet users (open and axial coding of topics, sentiments, interaction types and communicative tone, relations to the Internet, online spaces and other Internet users); and 4) online survey of convenience sample of Twitter users.

To combine these diverse methods, the *mixed methods* (Denzin, 2010) approach and *between-method-triangulation* (Jick, 602–3) have been adopted. Whenever a new data set has been available, the results have been compared to the outcomes of previous sampling stage(-s) and the interpretation reviewed.

The *open coding* (Ballenthien et al., 2013: 286; Strauss & Corbin, 1996: 43–55; Krotz, 2005) has been used for the analysis of Twitter content, and interview transcripts enabled abstraction of categories of communicative activities on Twitter. Structured analysis of the abstracted categories and *axial coding* (ibid.) of both the Twitter contents and interviews has been focused on discovering the users' agency regarding alternative communication spaces. The analysis of the online survey, which followed as the final methodological step of the research, points to a type of Twitter users, the "reactionists". They expressed similar tweeting patterns. According to their estimation, when tweeting, they are predominantly responding to the external events, like "shocking news", for example. They view Twitter as a tool for a change or achieving goals, similar to what the activists of alternative communicative spaces, who were uncovered in the interviews and content analysis, do.

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Sampling

In 2012 and 2013, 30 streams on Twitter have been analyzed altogether: each incorporates at least 30 most recent tweet messages from selected Twitter account at the moment of sampling. Usually, the individuals behind the analyzed accounts have been successfully identified. Under the same conditions, at least 30 most recent tweets on a selected topic have been analyzed. The topics have been picked on the basis of the observed greater activity of a topic (numerous and frequent tweets with the same hash-tag-topic included). Furthermore, 19 interviews from the SKUDI project conducted between 2010 and 2011 were appointed to the sample because the interviewees delivered the in-depth reports on alternative communicative spaces and their engagement on Twitter regarding these spaces. In the online survey Tweeting in everyday life, 507 Twitter users responded and 392 of them answered enough questions to become part of the analyzed convenience sample (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The criterion for including respondents in the sample was their response to the questions in the two main sections: 1) about the perceived role of Twitter for the social engagement and 2) users' estimations of how likely they would tweet in hypothetical circumstances. The survey data additionally highlights settings, which encourage users to publish on Twitter, and also displays some additional characteristics of Twitter users engaging in the alternative communicative spaces.

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Formation and promotion of engagement in alternative communicative spaces

Responses from the users interviewed in the SKUDI-research reveal that the restrictions of freedom and authoritative socio-political conditions advance the emergence of the alternative communicative spaces or induce restructuring and co-management of the already existing online communicative spaces. To promote the goals, engage more users and broadcast the newly emerged ideas, these users often include Twitter audiences and thereby implement efforts like: 1. retweeting, 2. using hash-tags and 3. "getting trending". The social action in which digital media and communication of the networked users cooperate in a *digitally networked action* or DNA is also called the *connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Following the analysis of Twitter contents and interviews with the Internet users, the responses from the survey add some more tweeting variations to the list of the *digitally networked actions* (ibid.): 4. favouriting tweets, 5. mentioning other users and 6. including users with recognized prominence into communication. Altogether, these types of interactions (i.e. the *networked*

actions) are presented in four parts of this section that differentiate among the four dimensions of the formational and supportive opinion engagement on Twitter in relation to the alternative communication spaces.

The users' participation in formation and promotion of engagement in alternative communicative spaces are comparable on a range spreading from initiative formative engagement, to promotional engagement with lesser accreditation of users' initiative. Representing one's opinion and sharing information has the least user initiative and is predominantly connected to *reactive* behavior in which users' interactions are direct (instant) responses to the events. *Retrieving resonance and consideration* has slightly higher initiative and users' interactions. This is followed by the already very cognizant dimension of *finding allies and engaging influencers* and *activation* in forming new communicative spaces and activities connected with the highest degree of users' initiative.

Representation of opinions and information

For expressing opinions, demonstrating valuable ideas or endorsing recognized causes, Internet platforms are graspable as communicative spaces offering themselves to users who quest for a more favorable communicative position.

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> *I founded MideastYouth four years ago in 2006 and the reason I did it was because there was a lack of freedom of speech in the Middle East [...] So I wanted to do MideastYouth in order to give minorities in the region a voice [...] [W]e use new media in order to fight against oppression – oppression against ourselves, you know, oppression against minorities.* (Interview, 6. 7. 2010)

The section from the interview with the young founder of the Internet platform highlights the potential of the Internet for the formation of alternative communicative space as the newly emerged *other space* that bypasses restrictions and opens the platform, where first of all issues can be articulated and secondly, discussed and managed.

The Twitter platform is also recognized among its users as a channel for the representation of opinions and information which enables the communication of topics and interactions that are limited or even restricted in the communicative situation in the more traditional communicative spaces. In comparison to the alternative communicative spaces like the MideastYouth, Twitter features access to numerous influential persons, which the interviewees point out. Twitter users can access broader audiences and interact with prominent persons (Marwick & Boyd, 2011: 148). Bigger audience

potentially has more social capital (Bourdieu, 1994/1998; Putnam, 2000) and can therefore broadcast messages more prosperously. This seems to be in the awareness of Twitter users. They recognize and reflect high level of platform's accessibility and communicative conditions, which are freed from repressive restrictions. This enables the use of communicative space 1. for expressing opinions and values and 2. for placement of alternative views to discussions.

Content analysis of users' profiles and threads of their tweets exposed re-tweeting behavior as a very common way of restating messages shared by others. That is also partially being revealed by the survey data. Two identified groups of Twitter users, *enthusiasts* and *reactivists*, are very likely tweeting as a response to external events such as somebody else's tweet or events in the news.

It should not be assumed that users predominantly having re-tweets in their Twitter threads are lacking their personal opinions and thoughts worth sharing. They might not be articulating their original ideas in words because of a shortfall of some resources (i.e. time, writing skills, concentration). Anyhow, they do select ideas, originating from somewhere or by someone else, and spread them among their audiences because they find them valuable, intriguing, or they assume their Twitter audience will find them interesting. For example, an observed university professor and researcher posts two to three tweets per day during the period of observation of two weeks and communicates exclusively news from others. He is sharing information about media, digital technology, research and education, which, according to his publicly available self-description, are all the topics of his interests. The characteristics of his tweeting strategy are interpreted as the *news desk management*, wherein the Twitter users share and represent to their audiences what they find important. In that manner, an environmental activist explains that the interests she pursues by tweeting are ecology, environmental activism and regional news and politics. She is determined to produce and spread the environmental topics among her followers. Besides that, she is gladly receiving the information about the Arab Spring events, which is very valuable to her. The description of Twitter as *important news source* is very common among the interviewed users and also recognizable by majority of the survey respondents. The responses show that users would most likely tweet in the three situations: finding an interesting piece of information, web content or project (altogether we have been asking about 39 potential tweeting occasions, where users were estimating, how likely they would tweet in each of them).

A blogger and activist explicates that Twitter is a convenient means of communication which enables quick finding and fast spreading of shared information: *"[I]t's much easier to devour information and examinate*

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information that way even though it might be contradiction in the sense that Twitter is only 140 characters but at least I can give out my message much quicker than writing a full-fledged blog post". (Interview, 15. 10. 2010)

Data from the online survey again highlights a common characteristic, similar to the behavior described in interviews of Twitter users and excerpted from the content analysis of their tweets – they all engage in tweeting activity, which is predominantly reactive. *Reactive users* are explicit about the circumstances in which they would most likely engage on Twitter For example responding to events and signals around them and placing them to discussion through their Twitter streams. *Reactive* is a profile of Twitter users who predominantly and most likely tweet in the case of intriguing events, and also in the situations in which they would engage the audience for a cause or support of an idea they find important.

Lebanese journalist and photographer who lives in Saudi Arabia illustrates his motivation to tell foreigners a relevant story about the country and how this drives his engagement online:

But I'm talking about from the standpoint of someone who doesn't know the country, that's why I set up the political blog [...] That's an idea of the blog towards a Western audience that has very little contact or very little ability to see what Saudi Arabia is really alike. And it's, because it's generally a different country from what you see in the news to what you actually see in real life. (Interview, 11. 4. 2011)

This blogger also wanted to engage his Twitter audience into a further discussion, in a way similar to the aforementioned blogger and environmental activist (Interview, 15. 10. 2010). But according to his statement he failed, since his Twitter audience is predominantly made of photographers with less interest in politics. He realizes that photographers, representing the majority of his Twitter followers, do not respond on political issues at all. Therefore he excluded the non-engaging content from his Twitter communication.

Retrieving resonance and consideration

The opposite example to the experience of the photographer and political blogger from the previous section is successful content management in which tweets are well accepted by their audience, replied, re-tweeted or favourited. A Yemeni journalist and blogger explains how she successfully uses Twitter as an echo-framing platform through which her voice and political critique resonate: *"[I]f I do one post in my blog, I usually distribute it in my Twitter right away and I know that it's like a square, the Twitter is*

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like a square and everybody will share it and retweet it back" (Interview, 30. 5. 2011). Whenever she publishes a new blog post on her blog, she introduces it to her Twitter audience and they respond to the content and share it among their audiences. This is a very present case of multiplying the message via Twitter platform and expanding it to a broader audience. In that way, the quantity of message repetitions, rephrasings and responds adds on to the intensity of the shared message. Similarly, the initiator of a group of environmental activists explained how they use Twitter for *spreading awareness* about the environmental issues in the Middle East region: *"What we do is, we just spread awareness about the importance of litter and recycling".* (Interview, 25. 2. 2011)

Getting trending by sharing repetitions and responses regarding a certain topic is another action of the *digitally networked* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) individuals on Twitter, whereby users engage in multiplying posts with the same hash-tag-category. When users would create enough messages with the selected hash-tag-category – the number has to be bigger than the number of tweets with the competitive hash-tags – their hash-tag-category and consequently all their tweets would be featured in the prominent trending topics' section. Getting one topic trending is a quantitative sign of the recognition of a topic, which expectedly leads to even greater audience engagement that has a potential to exceed the Twitter platform. Dubai blogger and activist describes how she engaged on Twitter to spread the critique of unjust police repression under Egyptian president Mubarak using the *getting trending* strategy:

> *And there was this whole uproar on the Internet talking about what the police, how they were unjust, they killed the man because the man was doing something truthful and honest. [... T]hey tried to make his name a trending topics, so the world [...] would know the brutality of the two policemen in the regime under Mubarak. So even if there is a cause that's going on, if we are trying to make a topic trend on Twitter, I'm much more active then.* (Interview, 15. 10. 2010)

The retweeting, rephrasing, favouriting, replying and *getting trending* by expansively sharing messages are the *connective acts* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) of users, retrieving consideration and awareness about the certain issues. One of the analyzed threads from the earlier period of violence and the mass civilian killings in Syria (thread #syria, 7. 6. 2012) is very rich with the messages arranged to gain the resonance and to attract the attention of a broader political and international audience. Compared to that, the Twitter users who responded the survey do not show any outstanding impulse on tweeting the shocking news,. But on the other hand, their answers display

that they would tweet with high probability to support an issue they find very important. The same is very likely the case of the Twitter users sharing the analyzed messages from the thread #syria.

Finding allies and engaging influencers

Finding users who share the interests, winning supporters for an idea and building alliances with public figures (i.e. politicians, reporters, citizen journalists or influential bloggers) is sometimes a reason for strategic communicative activities on Twitter. Additionally, but no less importantly, as the digital activist explains, backers encourage activists to be more outspoken: *"So when you have more supporters on your side it becomes easier to be more outspoken because you have more people who can back you up"* (Interview, 6. 7. 2010). Interviewees describe quest for allies, people with interests in similar activities who might support spreading their messages and set themselves on the same mission as the author of initial post.

In the quotation, young blogger and activist explains how Twitter is an important link to resourceful and informative contents and influential users: *"But with Twitter you can follow several news pipes and as it happens and then you can use that, you get the chance to interact with communities, reporters, community bloggers, for example, or citizen journalists"* (Interview, 15. 10. 2010). By targeting the messages to the specific audiences recognized as competent or responsible for a discussed issue, a greater potential or influence are applied to interactions for the recognition of an issue as an important topic, winning the attention of the international community, political subjects, media and journalists at the same time.

When the estimated input or feedback of one's audience on a certain topic is low, user might change the editorial policy of the Twitter account and supplement the low performing topic with other contents. That happened in the example of the young photographer (Interview, 11. 4. 2011), who abandoned his initiative to discuss politics with his followers because they were obviously not interested to discuss it with him on Twitter. Instead, he decided to communicate with them about the photography related topics and, according to his description, succeeded to involve them in the discussions.

From the analyzed thread of tweets about the killings of Syrian civilians in 2012 (thread #syria, 7. 6. 2012), a great dissatisfaction of the Twitter users with the international community (i.e. UN) can be abstracted. Their discouragement is interpreted as resignation regarding the efficiency of the UN. They do not try to directly involve the UN in interactions, but criticize the futile intervention politics of the organization instead, and rather spread the messages to those who might help them resonate the message. Some of

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their criticism also points to a journalist of renowned international broadcasting service. Some users disagree with the art of reporting about the Syrian events and are thereby engaged into a meta-communication about the crisis. The users engaging in this thread are responding to the negative events, whereby it seems that the bad news and content they disagree with initiate their tweeting. That conclusion diverges from the typical responses of the surveyed Twitter users. Compared to other potential situations, the estimated probability for tweeting as a response on shocking news and negative information or events is not outstanding in positive or negative way.

Activation

Twitter thread with hash-tag #syria signals activation on Twitter which happened in the case of violent events in the Middle East. Users who recognized the issue as important were most likely engaged in interactions and were sharing the information with their Twitter audiences. The interactions, categorized as activation by the content analysis, are displayed through the four dimensions: 1) spreading the news through shares and retweets of the article of an established news source; 2) attaching emotions and expresses of upset and empathy to the messages; 3) endorsing the meta-level discussion about the quality of journalism reporting; and 4) criticizing responsible political subjects for not solving the bad situation. These interactions are comprehensive in the stream of messages that users are stringing together by using the same hash-tagged-topic. Since hash-tagging is a figure of speech on Twitter, which structures communication by user-defined topic and qualifies one's message, its added value in the observed interactions has been displayed. Very often, the hash-tag remarks users' emotional comments, determination, or the declared communicative goal. The most often used hash-tags are becoming Twitter trends and are dynamically lined up and prominently exhibited. Because it typically helps users to recognize the more relevant discussions and topics, they value the list of trending topics for personal orientation and navigation in this very diverse and *horizontally structured* (Castells, 2007) communicative space.

As blogger and activist reveals in the quote below, the trending topics stimulate her participation in online activities: *"the things, I think, that would catch my attention are topics that are either trendy on Twitter or things that are very regional"* (Interview, 15. 10. 2010). She acknowledges that the hash-tagging helps her finding the like-minded and new interaction partners. When she recognizes that many other strive for the same cause and are open for joint planning and performance, she feels encouraged: *"So even if there is a cause that's going on, if we are trying to make a topic trend on Twitter, I'm much more active then"* (Interview, 15. 10. 2010).

Besides the exclusively online engagement and promotion of engagement in the online alternative communicative spaces, some interview responses and the analyzed tweets also reveal an incentive that transfers the engagement to the offline venues. Users plan offline meetings, concerts, conferences and various other assemblies in their interactions on Twitter or the MideastYouth platform. Reasoning behind the trans-localization of their activities to the spaces beyond the Internet is stronger impact and – as is explicitly highlighted by the interviewed blogger – the improvement of the cohesion and coherence of the community:

"We have a lot of tweet-ups that are there for causes or for enlightenment, you know. We have a book club that we organize every month, you know, I love the fact that you can share ideas with the community both at a regional local level and also at a very international level as well." (Interview, 6. 7. 2010)

Conclusions

The four dimensions of engagement in alternative communicative spaces disclose how online users seek the opportunity and space for expression and communicative freedom and aspire for the position of communicative power. The interactions of the observed individuals in this study are focused towards achieving goals which would better the life and society. For example, users are determined to give voice to ignored minorities, spread the awareness about imprisoned activists or civilian killings that the autocratic regimes are covering up They promote ecological values and perform activities that would eventually change the environmental policy. The engagement of Twitter users and the potential of the platform to support and promote engagement in alternative communicative spaces is in the spotlight. However, due to available data, the text also reflects the formation of these spaces from a broader angle, and reveals communication empowerment of the online users.

Twitter proves to be an extension of the operational field of environmental and political activists, artists, and journalists and also of numerous others who acknowledged certain issues as important. They cooperate accordingly and get involved by supporting an initiated cause or to reach a goal set by other users on Twitter. In that sense, the role of Twitter can be described as an *accelerator of engagement* in alternative communication spaces. It bypasses some political and social limitations and enables the formation of communicative spaces that provide more freedom than the initial social environment. Hand in hand with the conversion towards

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the communicative freedom goes the empowerment of the engaged and affected individuals – the analyzed data indicate that the achieved freedom in the alternative communicative spaces indeed resulted in the greater *communicative power* of the users engaged (Bohman, 2010: 431).

The *connective* or *digitally networked action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) of Twitter users has four dimensions. It can be be 1) reactive, where users *express their opinions* and values that are an alternative to those represented in their initial environments. When users recognize that it is important to place and support the alternative voices, they 2) engage in *spreading the awareness* about certain issues, cooperate in promoting the message and enhancing the resonance of the message. In the More structured approach to the tweeting community, activists 3) *attentively search for allies* and engage influencers for a greater contribution to a goal. The final dimension of the observed communicative actions on Twitter requires the most advanced organization and is the least reactive in that sense. It enables to 4) *activate the community and users* for common action, such as achieving the status of trending topics on Twitter, attracting greater or international awareness of the problem and influencing the preferred solution for an issue.

Online users interact within the limited environments, but they can also act beyond the limitations to bypass the unwanted social realities, to bridge the cultural gaps and better the cohesion of the community. The online spaces, such as the regularly visited social networks, are comforting and provide the familiar social setting that, first, encourages the expression of the opinions and, second, serves the agency directing the social and political change with the help of these expressed opinions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 744; De Cauter, 2004). – This also seems to be a relevant empowerment moment of the engagement in the alternative communicative spaces on the Internet in some related studies (AlSayyad et al., 2013; Fahmi, 2010; Kahn & Kellner, 2009).

However, this article does not try to generalize the highlighted online communicative activities, or the characteristics of interactions on Twitter. Nor it suggests that the alternative communicative spaces are the new and exclusively Internet related phenomena would fundamentally change the politics or society, or dramatically shift the cultural milieus of the users. The text rather interprets processes related to the communicative empowerment in the digitalized spaces, especially on Twitter, and describes the types of communicative actions of Internet users which were discovered during the data sampling and analysis. Any generalization towards a greater social impact of the alternative communicative space or of Twitter communication would demand further detailed research and most likely the deductive research approach.

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Some other authors are also highlighting connection between the emergence of alternative communicative spaces and the online engagement of bloggers or social media users. Recent case studies of activism in the Middle East present the relations among the spatial and temporal aspects of the Arab Spring movement; concluding that the combination of social media engagement, traditional media and urban milieu changes the relations among the actors of the three sectors (AlSayyad et al., 2013), and that the Internet activists are among the highly involved in the grass root street activism and protests (Fahmi, 2010; Kahn & Kellner, 2009). In contrast to that, another study of the media landscapes rejects the connotation of weblogs as alternative communicative spaces due to their lack of independence and weblogs' observed mirroring of the contents of the mainstream media (Kenix, 2009).

According to Castells (2007), "communication and information have been fundamental sources of power and counter-power, of domination and social change" (ibid.: 238). People's minds, their norms and opinions are shaping the social environment. This text uncovers prospects of online engagement that is overcoming the borders and limitations of a social milieu. With participation in alternative communicative spaces, users demand communicative freedom and empower themselves, whereby Twitter, just as the Internet in general, play considerable role. But still, one should be careful about generalizing the impact of these empowerment moments in the *alternative communicative spaces*.

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