Television experience and political discussion on Twitter: Exploring online conversations during the 2014 Brazilian presidential elections

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study of cross-media usage aims to investigate the characteristics of the conversation and political discussion on Twitter during the last televised presidential debate in the first round of the Brazilian general elections in 2014. Globo TV, the largest TV station in Latin America, aired the debate. In this study, television experience, political participation, and Twitter dynamics were considered for the examination of the 100,000 messages collected through keywords and hashtags. Data analysis shows different kinds of engagement: 57.7% of the users commented once; among those commenting more than once, only 11% commented more than five times; 56.7% (n=56,721) of the messages, with mentions to others’ Twitter’ profile (of those, 91% (n=51,565) were retweets and 5.1% had dialogical potential). The majority of the messages (670 units, 61.02%) were satirical or commented on the candidates’ or moderator’s performance, to either being fun (entertaining) or mention neglected themes, even if only ironically.

Keywords: Twitter; television; television experience; Brazilian presidential election; social networking sites.
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Discussions about digital media technologies often refer to the contribution of communication resources to the transformation of audiences/users into producers and disseminators of their content, specifically suggesting that the enhancement of citizens’ agency is related to digital media as facilitators of participation and engagement in democratic dynamics (Carey & Elton, 2010; Livingstone, 2004; Nielsen 2012). Social networking sites and their functions make the concept of audience more complex and blurry, requiring new perspectives of analysis and interpretations of the term.

The multitude of audience identities (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011) might be considered as an element of complexity in a society like Brazil which, since the popularization of television in the 1970s, has considered this medium a key element in keeping society informed. Television has a central position in Brazilian media history and has perpetuated a solid and oligarchical media organization model. The media logic mirrors the media organizations’ own agendas. Political parties are competent at studying media logics and work intensively on their candidate or representative’s image, using these media vehicles. Thus, political marketing strategies for news management represent an important component of the functioning model; media organizations, political parties, and the media agenda interplay for dominance on the news scene.

The Brazilian media context is rich in examples of shifts between media organizations’ partial political engagement and party interests (Porto, 2012). The audience/voters in democratic processes (local, state, or presidential elections), however, were seen with less complexity and through a transmission perspective of communication. Unidirectional discursive strategies were aimed at audiences; their voices were taken into consideration by the media and political actors through the results of polls and for marketing purposes.
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Since the 1990s, however, we have been witnessing transformations of both the media landscape and society with drastic implications for the interpretations of *audiences* as a concept (Carey & Elton, 2010; Sullivan, 2013). Several scholars emphasize that the digital era has contributed to the rise of the audience as an active agent, users as producers, generating and disseminating content through social networking sites, blogging and creating their own independent news agency independently of media organizations.

Claims of the contributions of the Internet and social networking sites (SNS) on democracy based on accessibility are limited insofar as those being represented through these media are a very small portion of the population. For instance, there is a vocal minority of citizens using Twitter during television events, which seems to undermine the democratic affordances of Internet and SNS (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). However, this minority might be relevant since it has the capability of forming pluralistic and varied networks (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). The groups commenting on Twitter have different motivations, associations, and identities. They are posting and interacting on Twitter to persuade others with their knowledge, values, beliefs, and interpretations of facts in order to be entertaining and/or influence other people (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). The authors stated that it would be incorrect to consider content produced online and in real time as banal, coarse, or ill-informed. They further said that diverse activities of the “viewertariat” (viewers who use online publishing platforms and social media to externalize their interpretations) can be applied to improve democratic deliberation. Twitter use makes essential changes in the nature of media consumption because it can engage viewers in sharing comments on events and also add information to explain the broadcast (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011).

In another perspective, viewers commenting on Twitter and other SNSs are reaching such a level of public prominence that TV news are giving answers and making amendments in their stories in real time based on what their audience is saying on SNSs. Recently, the
most popular TV news program in Brazil, Jornal Nacional, displayed two instances of this phenomenon. First, five minutes after making some negative comments about a hacker’s visual style, the anchor apologized to the audience, most likely because a lot of viewers condemned his comments on Twitter during the commercial break. The same happened when the Jornal Nacional aired a story concerning a plane accident involving a TV celebrity couple. The narrative mentioned the name of every single person on the plane except for the two babysitters. Many viewers accused the station of discrimination on SNSs and, for no apparent reason other than these audience manifestations, a reporter came back on air in order to name the two babysitters. We thus realize that this kind of connection can open a new perspective, including the audience in a multilinear communication model. Online comments and engagement can act as a new pattern of deontology including neglected themes and correcting distortions. By considering the importance of discussing questions of public interest, one can understand the functioning of the ideal model of communication in a deliberative way.

Considering the convergence perspective (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013), marked by a participatory culture and its best expression, a new flux of multilinear communication in opposition to the traditional one, we can (or must?) look at the medium of television with new expectations. Today, thinking about television and its cultural/historical centrality from the second part of the twentieth century to now, we can consider two main perspectives: firstly, instead of simple consumption, we can talk about the television experience as being the result of a connection among different kinds of media, mixing languages and circulating on lots of platforms and gadgets, i.e., a spreadable media (Jenkins et al., 2013), and secondly, and probably more importantly, as a result of a ‘television experience’, citizenship can be expanded if considered across the current media stage.

If television is technically closed on itself, like newspapers are, for example, as argued by Strömbäck (2008), it cannot contribute to public participation on political debates because,
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as a result of this closure, it cannot allow such conversations around it. However, in the current stage of experiencing television through the Twitter context, this scenario has been changed and the detection of these changes is the main objective of this article. As shown by the data, the majority of comments on Twitter during televised electoral debates have satirical connotations, but rather than drawing negative conclusions, we can consider this kind of participation as including neglected themes and reinforcing topics.

Twitter and Users’ Political Engagement

The claim that Twitter is an instrument enhancing democratic principles has scholars intrigued because its contribution has been not played out with clarity. Even when viewed with great skepticism, social media are known to give a favorable perspective to the citizens’ role as active agents in a democratic process (Coleman & Blumler, 2012; Larsson & Moe, 2011) transforming audiences into users/producers of information and as independent disseminators of content. The claim against the potential of the Internet for participation and engagement of citizens highlights the fact/notion that the Internet is not able to provide an instrument that can determine effective decisions and deliberations, and that the engagement is individual rather than collective (Coleman & Blumler, 2012).

Regarding online electoral campaigning, studies suggest that social media use has a small impact on participation (Boulianne, 2015). Further, studies have indicated that politicians and parties have not learned to take advantage of the interactional nature of social media. These agents have failed to interact with citizens, and insist on using one-way communication that does not favor engagement (Hosch-Daycan, Amrit, Aarts, & Dassen, 2014). These agents – both the media and political parties -- are more active than citizens on online domains. Citizen participation in online campaigning is classified as negative or persuasive, depending on the type of participation in SNSs. Negative messages are shared
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more frequently among users and can also be interpreted as acts of expression, and might not be a campaign at all (Hosch-Daycan et al., 2014). However, social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) presume to give advantages to citizens and the democratic process because they facilitate the participation and engagement of ‘old audiences’, granting more access to governments, and participation in public speeches which might increase citizens’ opportunities to undertake collective actions (Shirky, 2011). In addition, new technologies and social media attract a whole new order of participants to the political discourse and promote the professionalization of campaigns by influencing prevalent media logics (Hosch-Daycan et al., 2014). Social media have a remarkable ability to forecast electoral results, and a noteworthy correlation is found between social media and poll results (Ceron, Curini, Iacus, & Porro, 2014).

Twitter has been eagerly studied as the social medium which provides a public space for discussions of controversial topics, affecting other media logics and, consequently, agendas. Twitter does not compete with other traditional media. Scholars suggest that the ‘second screen’ phenomenon reinforces the interrelation between these two media devices. A recent study (Giglietto & Selva, 2014) was interested in this interface, analyzing 2.5 million tweets collected during a television season on 11 political talk shows. Some of the findings confirm the coexistence of different and interlinked forms of participation during peaks of Twitter activity during the broadcasts. Even though television is still central, social media, and especially Twitter, contribute to other medial evolution because of the possibility of including other agents’ voices. Citizens can express their interpretations of TV content in real time and influence the selective process of what is broadcast. Audiences have the capacity to share their views, discussing with other users or even with television producers in real time during the airing of any TV show. These viewers can be frequent or sporadic users of online
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publishing platforms and use them to achieve different goals: to interpret, to comment and to discuss a diversity of elements with other users of media while the broadcast is playing.

The viewertariat is an outcome of the blending of old and new processes to form new systems and practices. It appears that one of the contributions of social media is that they can bolster mobilization by engaging with viewer responses to events on screen and adding new information to annotate the broadcast; the use of Twitter suggests a substantive change in the nature of media consumption (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011). It has characteristics that enhance interactions of the public or different sectors of the public across media platforms. Anstead and O’Loughlin (2011) used a case study of one episode of BBC’s Question Time from October 2009 -- where Nick Griffin (leader of the controversial British National Party) appeared as a panelist -- to investigate how one high profile broadcast acted as a stimulus to real-time commentary from viewers on Twitter. The episode was examined employing an analysis of the interactions on Twitter, the network frames in the program, and how those that used Twitter argued about the episode. Discourse analysis was also used to examine and understand attributions of social identities among the ‘viewertariat’, exploring how individuals understand their relationship with the group and the activity they are engaged in. The authors concluded that the forms of engagement triggered by Griffin’s appearance on Question Time are likely to be a recurring element of political communication in Britain as in other parts of the world. Their findings also indicated how changing audience practices can still generate dynamics that pull otherwise distanced individuals into a mainstream political event. In this case, Twitter somehow added value to television as a medium, and to its language, in addition to the hard discussion about its functionality, of participation and engagement. The televised experience was a trigger to reactions and these reactions added value to the program and to its central figure. Similar results were found by Trilling (2015) analyzing 120,557 tweets during a televised debate in the German election campaign of 2013,
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where the candidates barely managed to take the discussion of main topics to Twitter and the discourse on Twitter was sarcastic or funny.

Another study about live-tweeting during political debates has found that citizens did not take full advantage of Twitter when it came to directing online conversations; citizens’ deliberations were not a feature of social media dialogue in live-tweeting (Hawthorne, Houston, & McKinney, 2013). In addition, the findings showed very few differences between tweets of the media, political elites, and non-elite (public sources) during conversations, although the views of elite users spread further than those of non-elite at times.

**Conversation patterns**

Conversations on Twitter can be simplified using hashtags that gather topics or network topics. Discourses, patterns, and trends are formed depending on the followership, presence, and participation of individual and group networks during these debates and discussions. D’heer and Verdegem (2014) investigated the interrelationships between the media, political actors, and citizens, analyzing conversation patterns on Twitter during the Belgian election period. They suggested that one’s presence in the conversation network is unrelated to one’s position in the media or in the political field; citizens are present as much as other agents. Further, their findings indicated that there was little interaction between different agents in the networks, where one agent was usually connected to just one other one agent and the networks were dispersed. Agents did not interact directly with others’ timelines during conversations on Twitter, even though the hashtags make the task possible in practice. A priori, the distribution of comments on Twitter is unequal among commentators since entry often happens only once. What this means may be that they do not follow up on ideas and comments for or against their own opinions, which makes problematic the notion that what they do on Twitter is indeed a debate or a discussion or even a dialogue (Isaacs, 1999).
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Anstead and ‘O’Loughlin’s study (2011) revealed that 20% of those commenting a TV program on Twitter were responsible for more than half of the content.

Maireder and Schlögl (2014) reconstructed the dynamics of a debate about sexism in Germany, examining the hashtag #aufschrei (#outcry) to visualize networked publics, mapping the diffusion of the conversation and which discourses came up. The #aufschrei discourse was first developed and shared by a homogeneous cluster which later created adverse discourses over a number of hours. Conversations about sexism were primarily tweets of personal experiences which evolved into broader debates about the topic by the ‘pirate cluster’ (pirate party affiliates and their followers). Regardless of size, the clusters were able to spread the discourses to other communities. The authors did not see significant changes in participation related to media reports on the discourses. However, blog articles written by certain representatives of the ‘feminism cluster’ played a role in the discussion. As a consequence of contributions from the feminist blogosphere, other members wrote other blog articles including citations from the Twitter discussion, contributing to diversity in the debate.

**HYPOTHESES**

In this paper, we analyzed the use of Twitter by Brazilian viewers during the broadcast of a televised political debate. We started from the understanding that television provides context for political discussion in the online environment and, at the same time, that the conversation can modify the construction of meaning regarding the television product. This empirical study of cross-media usage thus aimed to investigate the characteristics of the conversation and political discussion on Twitter during the broadcast debate, considering the television experience, political participation, and Twitter dynamics. From this perspective, the aim was to evaluate how the characteristics of the communicative environment, in our case Twitter, may affect the discourses built around the debate as a television product.
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First, it is necessary to understand who the participants were in the discussion. In general, previous studies have found that few users are really active. In other words, very few users comment frequently, while the majority makes only a few comments. By analyzing the impact of so-called ‘super-participants’ in online discussion forums, Graham and Wright (2013) found that a small number of people dominated the discussions, accounting for almost 50% of messages within a thread. In the case of Twitter, specifically, Anstead and O’Loughlin (2011) also found that only a minority of users are active participants in communication. Our goal, therefore, was to examine a sample of 100,000 tweets published during the Brazilian presidential debate aired on October 2nd, 2014. We analyzed the characteristics of users who published/posted content while watching the debate and identified the most engaged. As such, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Following the tendency registered in the literature, the tweets related to the debate will be disproportionately distributed among users. Only a few individuals will comment frequently while most will comment only once.

Our second hypothesis aimed to identify peaks of user engagement, linking these moments to the events which occurred during the debate. Our goal was to understand whether the issues discussed by the candidates generated a parallel discussion on Twitter, or if the online conversation revolved around specific events occurring while the debate aired on television. We therefore posited the following:

Hypothesis 2: The moments of greater engagement of users will be related to unexpected events during the debate. They will have little or no relation to the issues discussed between candidates.
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Once the moments of greater engagement had been identified, our goal was to try to understand what motivated this engagement: the television experience or the political participation. In a study of comments on Twitter during a set of political talk shows, Giglietto and Selva (2014) found a prevalence of political participation and audience participation was seen almost only in cases of satirical content and external intervention in the talk show. On this basis, and considering the results of previous studies that indicate a great number of tweets with satirical content related to television content in Brazil (Ortiz, 2013), we hypothesized the opposite our case. Therefore, the following was proposed:

*Hypothesis 3*: The engagement over the Brazilian Twitter during the broadcast of the presidential debate will be more motivated by television experience. During times with a greater volume of messages, more comments will be identified as demonstrating audience engagement than political engagement.

**METHOD**

Data for this study came from monitoring the conversation on Twitter during the last televised debate before the first round of presidential elections in Brazil. Using the DiscoverText software, we collected 100,000 messages during the first hour of the broadcast through keywords: the candidates’ names and possible variations (Aécio Neves, Dilma Rousseff, Eduardo Jorge, Levy Fidelix, Luciana Genro, Marina Silva, Pastor Everaldo); the words ‘debate’ and ‘Globo’; the official hashtags created by the candidates for their campaigns (#Marina40, #EuVotoMarina40, #Aécio45, #45AécioConfirma, #Dilma13, #Dilma13MudaMais); others created by users (#CalabocaLevy, #LucianaNaGlobo); and general hashtags about the debate (#DebateNaGlobo, #G1, #Eleições2014).
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The debate was aired on October 2nd 2014 by Globo TV and was the most important debate between the candidates before the first round of elections. Globo TV is the largest TV station in Latin America, reaching close to the entire Brazilian population (99.5% of potential viewers). The debate was attended by all seven candidates whose parties had representation in the House of Deputies (the Brazilian Lower House) and lasted two hours. Each candidate faced and debated with another one in rotation. In each ‘confrontation’, the candidates had the right to direct a question to one opponent. For two blocks, the themes for the questions were the candidates’ free choice while for the other two blocks themes were drawn by the moderator.

In order to study the captured messages in detail and test our research hypotheses, we analyzed the content of comments for three main variables: topic, message function, and type of engagement.

Six categories were used to classify the topic of messages: campaign for posts created by the official profiles of a campaign or showing support for a candidate; performance, referring to the specific behavior of a candidate in the debate; clash, about a confrontation between two candidates; situation, discussion of issues related to the current Brazilian social-political-economic context; debate, about the debate in general; and other, any messages that did not fit into any of the other categories.

The following categories were used to classify the message function: opinion, information, action/check-in, satire, quote, rhetorical questioning, and interjection.

We based our assessment of the type of engagement of the messages on the study by Giglietto and Selva (2014), in which the authors classified messages into two categories: audience participation versus political participation. We decided to replace the term ‘participation’ with ‘engagement’, since our goal was to try to understand what motivated people to join the conversation flow rather than the effective participation related to the
television product or to a real conversation. Thus, although we considered every tweet had political content as a backdrop, audience ‘engagement’ referred to messages that commented on the televisual structures, the debate within the television product logic, and observance of performances, technical errors, and confrontations as true frames in a series. Political engagement was observed when the message showed political motivation in itself and used the debate as a springboard to confirm political beliefs -- which were mostly explanations about the way the tweeter thought she or he might vote in the upcoming election and, opinions, favorable or unfavorable, regarding a candidate and/or her/his positions on a certain topic discussed in the debate. All analyses were quantified and electronically processed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

**RESULTS**

In general, the tweets were distributed disproportionately among users, confirming the ‘one-timer’ tendency in online conversation: 57.7% of users commented only once. Among users who commented more than once, only 11% commented five or more times, which is an extremely low value compared to the total number of messages. Hypothesis 1 was therefore confirmed (see Chart 1).
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Chart 1. Number of messages per user

In order to understand the dialogical dimension of these messages, we took into account the use of the interaction tools offered by Twitter. Public messages can be sent as original tweets (140–character-long message written by a user without using interaction tools and available in the timeline of any person who follows that user); replies (replies or direct questions to someone, starting with the username of the person for whom it is intended); retweets or RTs (replications of messages from other users); and mentions (actual mentions of usernames, of others which can be considered a direct interaction in certain cases, as when aimed at triggering a response from someone). Both replies and RTs use ‘mentions’ to indicate the party for whom the message is intended or whose message is replicated.
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Of the total collected tweets, 56.7% (n=56,721) had mentions, of which 91% (n=51,565) were RTs. Therefore, only 5,156 were purely mentions, in that they used the feature to question, answer, or just name another user in the message body. This means that only 5.1% of the messages had dialogical potential.

An observation of the users mentioned can help us better understand these numbers. The three most mentioned users were: @dilmabr, with 5,609 entries; @jeanwyllys_real with 3,360; and @jooseanee with 1,473. The incumbent presidential candidate, Dilma Rousseff, owns the profile @dilmabr. However, no comment was made using this account on Twitter during our monitoring, i.e., no messages mentioning the profile @dilmabr were RTs, thus they were mentions or replies. Messages mentioning the other two profiles, on the other hand, were mostly RTs. Congressman Jean Wyllys used @jeanwyllys_real. An Internet celebrity identifying herself as Joseane Silva, @jooseanee, is known for her tweets about the content of Brazilian television. Here are some examples to make this distinction clear:

#DebateNaGlobo is eye to eye. Tense. @dilmabr spoke of proposals to combat corruption and that it was she who resigned Costa. #Di

RT @jeanwyllys_real: Although I agree with criticism made by Luciana, Dilma did well in responding to corruption! #DebateNaGlobo

RT @jooseanee: My dream is a round just with questions from Twitter. #DebateNaGlobo

The number of tweets posted per user and how the platform features were used could be partially attributed to different social roles played by individuals in the conversational flow. Several studies have built typologies in order to identify and classify the roles of participants in online discussions. Golder (2003), for instance, identified seven different types
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of individuals: newbie, celebrity, elder, lurker, flamer, troll, and ranter. Specifically about Twitter, Zhao, Wang, Nie & Li (2013) considered two broad categories of users participating in a conversation: the originators, who publish original tweets and propagators, who retweet and spread others’ messages.

Although our goal was not to conduct a thorough analysis of the social role of Twitter users who commented on the debate between the presidential candidates, the terminologies cited above give us clues as to how to think about the importance of the three profiles mentioned. The large volume of references to @dilmabr can be easily explained by the fact that President Dilma Rousseff was running for re-election, making her the center of attention. Rousseff is therefore simultaneously an object of communication, an interlocutor, and an issue. Jean Wyllys and Joseane Silva, on the other hand, are both the originators and facilitators of the flow.

To test the second hypothesis, we averaged tweets based on the posting time per second and identified the upper outliers through the statistical calculation of the median and quartiles. As a result, there were nine moments when the number of messages per second was abnormally high, with 1,098 tweets in total. These were the times when more engagement occurred in the conversational flow. We then performed a content analysis seeking to understand which events during the debate these messages were related to.

As seen in Table 1, most of the messages were satirical or comments on the performances of the candidates or the moderator. The most commented episode was when Levy Fidelix chose Luciana Genro for a confrontation. In the previous debate where they had challenged each other, aired by Record TV four days earlier, Fidelix had made a strong statement against same-sex marriage, which caused extensive negative responses on SNSs. This time, calling Genro to the center, Fidelix had stated authoritatively: “Come here. Come here. I’m going to put you on the spot”. Fidelix’s caricatural performance was the event
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receiving the most attention on Twitter during the debate. Along with his controversial statements, his manner itself was odd and exaggerated, which triggered satirical comments, several followed by memes and/or hashtags as #CalaBocaLevy (#ShutUpLevy), which became trending topics.

During peaks, comments were not necessarily connected to the political issues being discussed by the candidates, rather, most of them were satirical messages on the performance of the candidates in questioning or replying to a question, on the reaction of the audience in the studio, and on the moderator’s performance. This confirms our second hypothesis.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation between topic and message function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Message function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clash</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazilian current situation</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As expected, users appeared to be more engaged in the television experience, with 65.4% of the messages categorized as showing audience engagement, as opposed to 36.6% showing political engagement, which confirms Hypothesis 3. A variable that proved to be important in determining the engagement type of a message was the candidate’s position in the electoral race. In general, comments about the candidates with the highest polling numbers (Dilma Rousseff, Aécio Neves, and Marina Silva) demonstrated political engagement (71.9%). In contrast, most of the messages related to minority candidates (Pastor
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Everaldo, Luciana Genro, Eduardo Jorge, Levy Fidelix) demonstrated audience engagement (72.4%). From the comments that did not refer to any candidate, 89.6% showed audience engagement (see Table 2).

The large number of candidates may have generated a certain dispersion among users, who seemed to alternate between times when it was important to pay attention to the political issues being discussed, and times when it was possible to relax and have fun with situations not related to political themes during the debate. The so-called ‘minority candidates’ had on average 1% of the votes according to polls, which meant that their chances of winning the elections were very low. The impression was that the minority candidates’ government plans and positioning on political issues did not attract Twitter users’ attention or were not worth tweeting about, although the statements of minority candidates were important for scenery and the political discussion as a whole. It seems that these Twitter users considered the candidates’ position in the electoral race as a variable to determine what was worth tweeting about during the debate. At the same time, certain candidates, such as Luciana Genro and Eduardo Jorge, could gain empathy from some groups, even those who did not plan to vote for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Type of engagement</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Engagement</td>
<td>Audience Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>Count: 133% 52% 185%</td>
<td>% within candidate: 71.9% 28.1% 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>Count: 111% 291% 402%</td>
<td>% within candidate: 27.6% 72.4% 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority vs. minority</td>
<td>Count: 96% 29% 125%</td>
<td>% within candidate: 76.8% 23.2% 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No candidate</td>
<td>Count: 40% 346% 386%</td>
<td>% within candidate: 10.4% 89.6% 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>Count: 380% 718% 1098%</td>
<td>% within candidate: 34.6% 65.4% 100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSIONS

In terms of online campaigning, the 2010 Brazilian elections were the first electoral contest in which parties and candidates were able to use social media, including Twitter, to provide information and interact with voters. Before 2010, the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court restricted online campaigns to the use of candidates’ websites with the argument that the use of SNSs would make guaranteeing isonomy between parties and candidates with different budgets and resources difficult. Notwithstanding, the public debate concerning this issue forced the Brazilian congress to allow the use of SNSs for campaigning in 2010 with the justification that those sites are similar to any public space, such as public squares, where any citizen or group is free to publicize their intentions and proposals as electoral options and to discuss them in public.

This political decision reflected the undeniable fact that Twitter had become an important social platform for public institutions, media, social organizations, NGOs, political parties and leaders, and diverse political and social agents to provide information and discuss public issues. As Marques, Aquino & Miola (2013) have shown, 458 out of 513 Brazilian deputies maintained Twitter profiles. Hundreds of candidates running for different elective offices do not disregard Twitter as an electoral communication tool. According to the analyst group Semiocast, Brazil is the second largest country in terms of profiles, however it is the most engaged, representing 10.6% of all tweets worldwide.

The numbers do not lie. Twitter has become an important platform for social and public debate, assembling different social and political agents, groups, and institutions who share information and discuss political issues in Brazil, especially during episodic political events, such as electoral races. The empirical evidence presented in this paper reinforces this assumption: Twitter and other social networking sites play an important and growing role in public sphere dynamics, in Brazil as elsewhere. The cross media usage phenomenon has
brought new forms of social and political comments and debates about entertainment and public issues over a range of television broadcasting. In electoral contests, Twitter has become a public space where social and political agents exchange political information, apply strategies to mobilize voters, and -- most important for our proposal in this paper -- functions as a ‘public arena’ for real-time commenting on televised political debates.

The use of Twitter for comments and debate during televised political debates requires further scientific investigation to fully comprehend its nuances. For example, some argue that most people tweeting during a televised debate are looking to discuss candidates’ government plans and their positions on public issues, as well as exchange information to enlighten other people concerning political issues. That, however, appears not to be the case considering the findings in this paper.

The Twitter flow indicates that most people tweeting during the first hour of the debate were not using their Twitter profiles to comment on political issues, but to have fun commenting on some extraordinary exchange between candidates during the debate. The same results were presented by Trilling (2015) on what German Twitter users published while watching a televised debate between candidates for chancellor in 2013. So, as a public space, Twitter became an arena where certain Brazilians were more interested in making fun of or commenting on the performances of the candidates and the moderator during different debate situations than in posting information or engaging in discussions. These findings supported Hypothesis 2. As Trilling (2015) pointed out, an optimistic view suggests that Twitter can serve as a “complement to draw attention to topics neglected in the official debate”, (p. 19) even in a comic fashion.

Considering Twitter’s potential for bringing people together for debates, our findings showed that Brazilian users did not use the interactive features, such as mentions and retweets, to interact directly with other users in order to discuss political issues related to the
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debate. Almost 60% of the 100,000 tweets collected and analyzed contained a mention of other Twitter profiles. 91% of those tweets were retweets, which means that the interactive features were used mostly to replicate and endorse someone else’s comment than to engage in direct dialogical interaction with other users. The evidence that supported Hypothesis 1 also pointed to the same scenario: almost 60% of debate commentators on Twitter were ‘one timers’ and only 11% tweeted five or more times.

These findings showed how important opinion leaders are on Twitter as well. Congressman Jean Wyllys and Twitter celebrity Joseane Silva were the most mentioned profiles after President Dilma Rousseff. Jean Wyllys was one of the most active Brazilian politicians on Twitter and other social networking sites. He had been building a large and consistent network of followers over the years, which explains why he was such an important political figure as well as an intellectual reference for so many on Twitter during the given debate – once he collected a significant number of endorsements translated by retweets.

The fact that Dilma Rousseff’s account was the most mentioned during the first hour of the debate demonstrated, once more, that Twitter is not a forum for social and political discussion during a televised debate, but a channel for people to make unidirectional comments and to reproduce and endorse their opinion or leaders’ viewpoints.

Last but not least, we found that candidates’ position in electoral polls determined the type of engagement of Twitter debate commentators. Political engagement was more prevalent on tweets mentioning Dilma Rousseff, Aécio Neves, and Marina Silva (71.9%). In contrast, most of the messages related to minority candidates (Pastor Everaldo, Luciana Genro, Eduardo Jorge, Levy Fidelix) demonstrated audience engagement (72.4%). Of those comments that did not refer to any candidate, 89.6% showed audience engagement as well. This distribution demonstrated that people’s social and political behavior on Twitter was not
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detached from social and political reality. Media and public agenda still played an important role in influencing some part of the engagement process.

This paper aimed at contributing to studies concerning the relationship between elections, political participation, and the contribution of the public in social media through a Brazilian case study. In general, we expect to contribute with future cross-national research concerning public opinion, SNSs, and political engagement. Specifically, we hope the data collected for this research as well as its analysis will help to shed light on how Twitter has been and is being used as a platform for social commentary and discussion on television debates as well as how our findings could be useful in explaining how the process works in different countries.

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