"Watch out, organize, inform yourself!": Tracing the Dynamics of Twitter Discourse on Anti-Nazi Street Protests

Dang-Anh, Mark; Eble, Michael

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

"Watch out, organize, inform yourself!": Tracing the Dynamics of Twitter Discourse on Anti-Nazi Street Protests

Mark Dang-Anh
University of Siegen
Germany
mark@dang-anh.de

Dr. Michael Eble
Fraunhofer Institute for
Intelligent Analysis and
Information Systems IAIS
Germany
michael.eble@iais.fraunhofer.de

Abstract

With the advent of mobile devices, mediatized political discourse became more dynamic. We assume that the microblog Twitter can be considered as a medium for spatial coordination during protests. The analyzed case is that of neo-Nazi demonstrations and counter-protests in the city of Dresden that occurred in February 2012. Data consists of microposts that occurred at the day of the event. Quantitative analysis of hashtag and retweet frequencies was performed as well as qualitative speech act pattern analysis and a tempo-spatial discourse analysis on selected subsets of microposts. Results show that a common discursive practice is linguistic locational referencing (LLR) and by that constructing space. Empirical analysis indicates a strong relation between communicational online space and physical offline place: Protest participants permanently reconfigure spatial context discursively and thus the contested protest area becomes a temporarily meaningful place.

Keywords

twitter; protest; discourse analysis; linguistic locational reference

Introduction

Every year the city of Dresden is the scene for neo-Nazis who hold a commemoration march for those who died in the WW2 bombing that started at February 13th, 1945. The city then becomes a hotspot for neo-Nazis as well as democratic and anti-fascist protestors. The involved groups struggle for public space: the neo-Nazis aim at marching a preferably long route. They (try to) rally at a fixed meeting point and stay together as a group during the protests. The counter protestors intend to actively preventing neo-Nazis from marching by blocking the streets. Blockades are planned beforehand but do also emerge spontaneously due to the route marched by the neo-Nazis, which might change short. The police usually don't expose the designated route officially. In such a highly dynamic setting the mobile use of digital media, mainly social media, becomes crucial for distributing information, organizing collective action and otherwise discursive participation.

Theoretical Background

It is claimed that "social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a *choreography of assembly* as a process of symbolic construction of public space" (Gerbaudo 2012, 5, original emphasis). Focusing on the spatial coordination of protest in Twitter thus means highlighting a constructivist relation between 'space' and 'place': "Space becomes place when it acquires symbolic meaning and a concrete definition, marking the whole spectrum of identity and sense of belonging" (Tsatsou 2009, 12). From this perspective, the constructions of space and place can be regarded as discursive practices.

On Twitter, the discursive dynamics of the protests are mapped illustratively. Locative aspects of Twitter use during events have been analyzed recently from various perspectives. By applying a social network analysis focusing on geographic proximity, Yardi and boyd (2010) show that "central individuals in the Twitter network are also located centrally in the physical world" (Yardi and boyd

2010, 7). Geographic and locational references are analyzed by Vieweg et al. (2010) who look at the use of Twitter in emergency situations. They show that the more dynamic the setting is (i.e. dynamic grassfires vs. static river floods) the more people verbally express spatial references.

The medial organization and mobilization for protest has been widely discussed (van de Donk et al. 2004, Kahn and Kellner 2004, Lievrouw 2011). Tufekci and Wilson (2012) found that interpersonal communication, especially in social media, was crucial to peoples' decision on joining the protests. Wilson and Dunn (2011) also analyze the use of social media in the 2011 Egyptian protests at Tahrir Square. Social media use, they sum up, was not predominant in demonstrations. However, it is suggested that they were crucial for connecting participants and motivating for participation.

Data Collection

The protests took place on February 13th, 2012. Twitter's search API was used for collecting data on 24 hours that day. From observing pre-event discourse on Twitter, on blogs and websites set up by activists, a set of twelve related hashtags and four key words could be identified as marking the protest discourse. Microposts that contained these words were scraped. After removing duplicates, a total of 6.318 microposts were collected.

Method

A mix of quantitative and qualitative methods is used on selective samples of the data set to sequentially answer the research questions:

- RQ1: Which hashtag(s) contextualize the event in Twitter?

Frequency analysis is performed on a subset of microposts from February 13th that contained the key word "Dresden" (N=2.048) as it is not directly related to the protest events and allows for analysis of posts that refer to the city in general.

- RQ2: Who are the main agents in the event-related Twitter discourse?

Drawing on the assumption that the most retweeted accounts represent key agents of the protest discourse (cf. Wilson and Dunn, 2011) a quantitative analysis on all microposts from February 13th is conducted (N=6.318).

- RQ3: What are people posting within the event-related Twitter discourse?

In order to identify different types of linguistic practices, a speech act pattern analysis is performed on the hashtag datasets (cf. Hindelang, 2010). Microposts are also coded whether they contain linguistic locational references or not without further differentiation. A total of 559 microposts tagged with "#13feb" or "13februar", which are political neutral hashtags used by both protest groups, was coded for a timeframe shortly before, during and after the march (5-9 p.m.). Intercoder reliability testing resulted in an acceptable value (Krippendorf α: 0.688; cf. Krippendorf 2004).

- RQ4: By which discursive practices do participants construct space within the event-related Twitter discourse?

A qualitative discourse analysis is performed on a subset of the most retweeted account that contained linguistic locational reference. Combining the spatial with the temporal dimension and mapping it, the dynamics of the protests can be revealed.

Results

- RQ1: The two most used hashtags are „#blockdresden" and „#nazifrei" (Figure 1). These tags derive from the alliance „Nazifrei! Dresden stellt sich quer" (*"Free of Nazis! Dresden puts its foot down"*) which has organized counter-protests against the neo-Nazi marches in Dresden since 2010 and dedicates itself to blocking the neo-Nazis. While „nazifrei" is part of the initiative's name, „Block Dresden" was the 2012 protests' slogan. The usage of these hashtags does not only contextualize microposts with the protest event but also infer means of political identification as well as the speakers' intention.

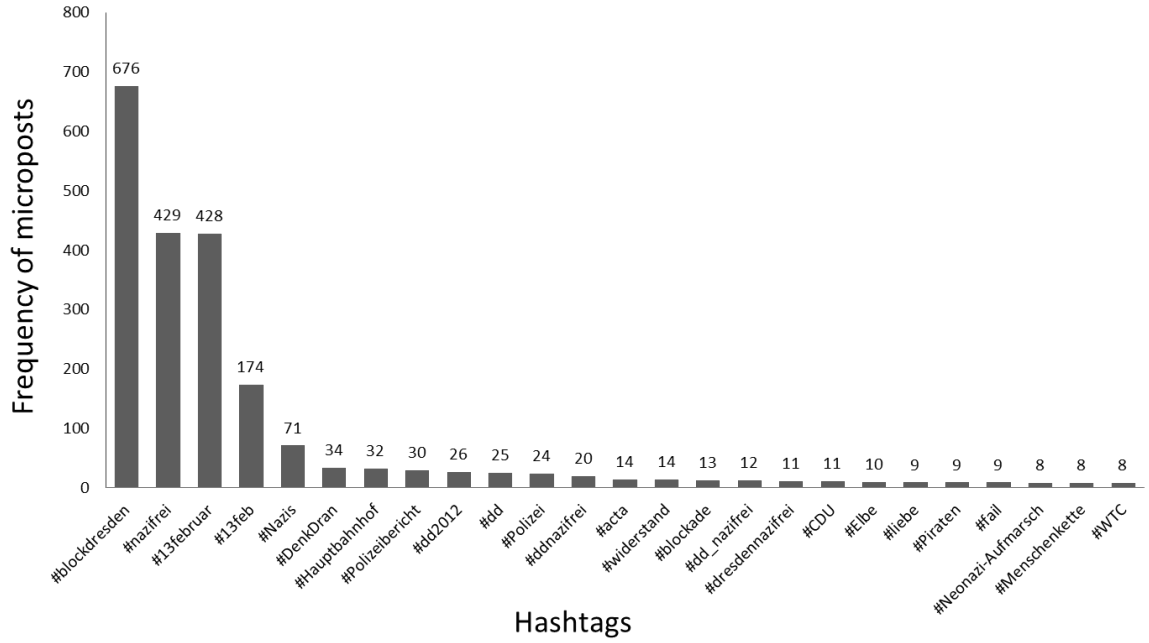

Figure 1: Frequency analysis of a subset of microposts that contained the keyword "Dresden" (N=2.048)

- RQ2: The most retweeted account is the account "@dd_nazifrei" which is the account of the activist's organization "Nazifrei! Dresden stellt sich quer". It was retweeted more than four times more often (277) than the second most retweeted account (61). As the unequaled proportioned power law distribution reveals, "@dd_nazifrei" seems to be the key agent in protest discourse.

- RQ3: More than half of the coded microposts contained linguistic locational references, i.e. explications of city, site or street names and local deictics and indexicals. Speech act analysis reveals that "Informing" is by far the most uttered speech act whereas "insulting", "judging" or "warning" were uttered less frequently in protest discourse (Figure 2).

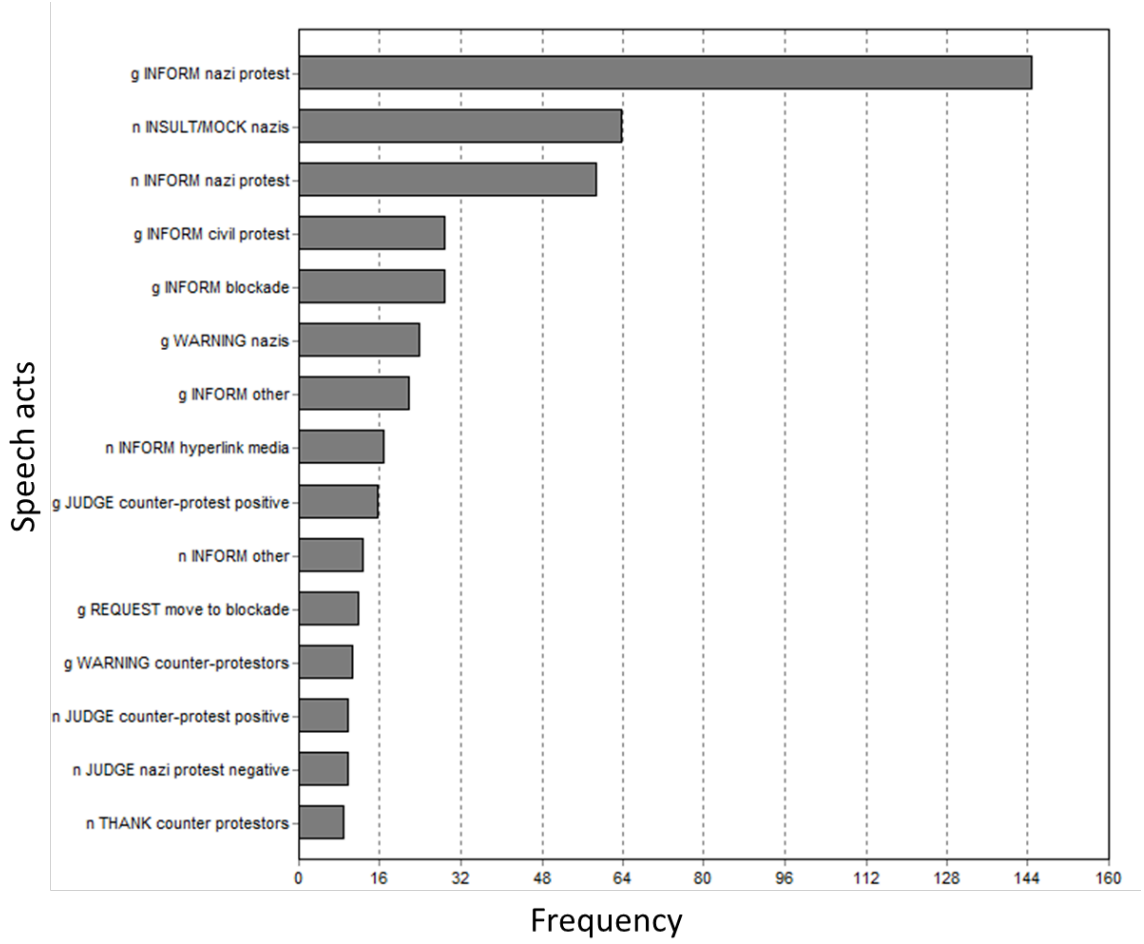

Figure 2: Speech acts performed by discourse participants. "g" indicates microposts with linguistic locational reference, "n" without linguistic locational reference. Capitalized words indicate speech acts, uncapitalized words indicate objects of reference.

- RQ4: As the analyzed case indicates, linguistic locational references correspond to the physical setting of protests. Regarding the temporal dimension, microposting frequency corresponds with offline activity, i.e. the beginning and end of the neo-Nazi march and blockades. Taking into consideration that more than half of the microposts sent at the peak of activities (5-9 p.m.; cf. RQ3) contained linguistic locational references, it can be stated that spatial coordination is particularly important in mobile protest communication.

Conclusion

In the dynamic event of the Dresden demonstrations Twitter is used for spatial coordination of protest. Linguistic locational referencing (LLR) is a central discursive practice performed, mainly combined with the distribution of protest-relevant information. By such location-aware discursive processes, the embattled public space gains symbolic meaning. Thus, the protest location as the setting of discursively negotiated political conflict becomes a temporary meaningful place concerning the specific event. However, further research needs to put emphasis on the investigation of the online-offline-relationships in the context of mobile media usage in protests by combining textual analysis with ethnographic-styled fieldwork such as interviews and participant observation.

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