



Twitter-based Discourse on Migrants in Russia: The Case of 2013 Bashings in Biryulyovo

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ABSTRACT

According to a number of scholars, Twitter possesses big potential to become a “crossroads of discourses” due to its openness, de-hierarchization, and spontaneity (Miller, 2010; Shirky, 2008). At the same time, substantial criticism has risen towards political and deliberative efficacy of Twitter (Fuchs, 2014). The authors aim at analyzing the features of the Twitter-based agenda setting within the hybrid media system in Russia (Chadwick, 2013; Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013a). The research question is whether the use of Twitter in the Russian socio-political context potentially leads to the formation of the “crossroads of opinions” or, in contrast, to closing-up of political discussion and to further fragmentation of public discourse. The research focuses on structural and content aspects of discussion on anti-migrant bashings in Biryulyovo (Moscow) that happened in October 2013. Our research methods include automated vocabulary-based web crawling, word frequency analysis, manual coding of tweets, and interpretation of statistical data. Preliminary results suggest an unexpectedly high level of mediatization of the discussion; the hypothesis about the “crossroads” nature of the discussion on the Russian Twitter seems to be proven, which makes this platform differ from the Russian Facebook where, according to another recent study (Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013b), political discussions are held mostly in closed-up communicative milieus, or “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2007).

Keywords: Twitter, Russia, Web Crawling, Social Media, Migrants, Echo Chambers

JEL Classifications: O32, Z13

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Literature Review

With the growth of Internet penetration in the world, media systems have been undergoing qualitative shifts in their shape, borders, and relations with outer society, including the political sphere. Among many conceptualizations of this process, one of the recently developed concepts is the concept of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) where technological changes are causally related to the reshaping of socio-political cleavages in the societies. Under hybridization of a media system, we understand the two trends: (1) Growing transformation of offline media into the so-called “convergent” media characterized by multiplatform production and multichannel delivery of content; (2) growth of the

new segment of the media sphere, namely online-only professional media outlets and web 2.0 aggregated individual media (Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013b). Understood this way, media hybridization framework allows for posing questions on the quality of online public discussion with high efficacy. Parameters that may show whether an online networking/communication platform, is, indeed, a place where competing or even hostile discourses meet are better developed as media hybridization parameters, as the concept unites traditional media research areas such as, e.g., agenda setting research, with political Internet studies. Media hybridization research today focuses on several important issues. Among those, one of the most important questions is what factors – national-bound or universal/global – influence online discussions more within the language-/nation-bound public spheres (Adam

and Pfetsch, 2011). Under national-bound factors, scholars usually mean national context, including both technological factors (like Internet penetration or the structure of online/offline parallelism) and public sphere factors (deliberative traditions, representation of conflict sides, local issues etc.). Cross-national or global factors are often bound to platform features: Presumably, Facebook, Twitter and other globally popular platform organize the online discussions in their own ways, thus influencing the deliberative quality of the online discourse. In particular, it is interesting to know what media today play the leading roles in formation of agendas (Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013a; Mancini and Mazzoni, 2013) and how intermedia agendas work (McCombs, 2005) – e.g. how the agenda flows are directed (from/to online media), whether there are boundaries for agenda spill-overs, and how coherent the agenda formation in different media is. Despite early studies showed no difference in online agenda setting with “old” media (Rogers et al., 1991; Lee, 2007), today is research brought a revival to long-established research on two-step flow of political information (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1957) and “spiral of silence” in political discussions (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

But, being rooted in media and political research, media hybridization studies are still poorly connected to internet studies that perceive media in a more technical way (as platforms). In our research, we try to look at Twitter as a part of a hybrid media system but also address previous findings of political research on Twitter as a communicative milieu.

As it is widely known, in 1990s and early 2000s, many authors claimed that Internet penetration would lead to democratization via bigger citizen involvement and horizontalization of communication. This was believed to be especially true for transitive democracies, including Russia (Rohozinski, 2009; Kuchins, 2007). With the rise of micro blogging since 2006 (predominantly on Twitter), this democratization potential of Internet, in theory, was expected to increase even more: First, because of the growing informational openness in social networks, as Twitted had no options of closing posts from other users (Miller, 2010); second, due to the nature of the 140-digit-limited posts that seemed more engaging than on other, more monologue-oriented, social platforms. But recently optimism gave place to demarcation of optimists and pessimists, where the former still perceive Twitter as a capable catalyst of political discussion while the latter consider Twitter a noisy dump of de-politicized content oriented to sex, pop music, gaming, spam, and trivia (Fuchs, 2014).

Research on online deliberative publics (Grönlund et al., 2014), as well as media exposure studies, have both shown significant criticism towards political efficacy of Twitter. Within these studies, there may be traced a critical line that tells of fragmentation of the audiences via encapsulation of online mini-discussions (Tewksbury, 2005), which clearly has political implications, as the discussions become less involving and representative. These closed-up online milieus are described as “public sphericules” (Gitlin, 1998), “echo chambers” or “enclaves” (Sunstein, 2007), or “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011); their formation prevents communication platforms from becoming “virtual fireplaces” or “crossroads of opinions.” Despite all existing criticism, Twitter

is still perceived as more capable of forming the “crossroads of opinions” than longer-text-based platforms. It is particularly important whether Twitter-based discussions, presumably the most involving ones, are still inclined to form encapsulated “clouds.”

Thus, the research that we present today has three parts. First, we look at the structure of the Twitter-based discussion in terms of its representative quality: Who takes part in the discussion, how the conflict sides are represented, who are the “discussion influencers” (Vaccari, 2013) and to what extent they are institutionalized, and whether there are “echo chambers” that lower the potential of deliberative “opinion crossroads.” As to the influencers, according to American and Swedish studies, the biggest influencers are experts, professionals and established organizations (Ruthl 2012); but this may vary depending upon the national context (Vaccari et al. 2013).

Second, we look (and partly present the results in this article) at the role of Twitter in intermedia agenda setting – that is, what media work better as news alert providers on Twitter and beyond, what directions (traditional to web 2.0 media or vice versa) agenda spill-overs take, and what relations media accounts in social networks form with other influencers. Here, one needs to add that, in the West, Twitter has been described as an “alert system,” a “springboard for news stories,” and a tool for reporting (Hermida, 2010; Mancini and Mazzoni, 2013; Vis, 2013).

The third part of the research is dedicated to frame analysis of the discussion (De Vreesel 2005; Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012), which in future will allow us, among other, to describe the patterns of distribution of guilt, responsibility, and solidarity, as well as to compare the levels of hate speech, call for action, and presence of nationalist discourse in the discussions.

1.2. Russian Hybrid Media System as a Research Object

Today, Russia constitutes a nearly perfect object for research upon political implications of media hybridization – due to at least four reasons.

1. Today, Russia is described as a fundamentally fragmented society (Zubarevich, 2011), with cosmopolitan post-industrial, town-based post-soviet, rural, and Caucasian/migrant “Russias” co-existing but not fully merged. The Russian media system seems to reflect these divisions to a great extent, with post-Soviet media still occupying a big share in newspaper, TV, and radio markets (Vartanova, 2013). This implies that we need to assess how the media spheres of the “four Russias” are represented and interact in online discussions.
2. Russia has low online/offline media parallelism (Toepfl, 2011): In early 2000s, a big number of online-only media formed an alternative news arena. This implies we need to assess how the online/offline parallelism is effectively represented on Twitter.
3. Russia has already experienced formation of “echo chambers” in blogs, first and foremost on Livejournal (Gorny, 2009). Thus, we expect Twitter sphere to have similar tendency.
4. In 2009-2013, Russia repeatedly became “the most socially networked country in the world” in terms of user engagement

(Synthesio, 2013). This means that the role of social networking platforms in Russia is high and grows higher (but perhaps depends upon the “four Russias”).

Thus, partial political modernization is complemented by an online-only-oriented media hybridization trajectory; the country is very likely to provoke closing-up of online communicative milieus on competing platforms. Our own earlier research findings (Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013b) suggest that, in 2010s, online media, especially Facebook and media of specialized and alternative agenda, have played a “cultivational” role in forming a negative political consensus within the community of the “For fair elections” protesters of 2011-2012. We also tracked evidence of platform dependence in political engagement, as Facebook became an attraction for the ex-Livejournal community, the “meeting point” for the “creative class” and a clearly identifiable political community while, e.g., its Russian counterpart Vkontakte did not. What we observed was a platform-dependent and online-media-based formation of a post-industrial urban “public counter-sphere;” its divergence from the mainstream still deepens.

By far, we had mixed data on the “crossroads” nature of the Russian Twitter. One research group (Greene, 2012) showed that, indeed, the Russian Twitter of 2012 could be perceived as “crossroads” in terms of presence of pro-establishment and oppositional clusters; pro-establishment networks, though, were better organized and more active. This finding was only partly supported by Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard (Kelly et al., 2012) which, for 2010-2011, identified topic-oriented clusters in the Russian Twitter. Thus, the questions on the “crossroads” stance of the Russian Twitter remain unanswered, while the relevance of Twitter in Russia grows, with rough estimation of usage as 5 million out of circa 78 million of monthly internet users aged over 12 (data by TNS).

1.3. The Biryulyovo Bashings Case in the Context of Ethnic Relations in Russia

In the post-Soviet times, Russia has witnessed huge migration flows from the ex-Soviet states, including South ones with dominant Muslim population (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan), directed to urban areas in European Russia. It coincided with a comparable wave of resettling of North Caucasian people (that is, Russian citizens) to urban centers up north (Moscow, St. Petersburg, and others). This has created a distorted public perception of both streams as one, both immigrants from CIS countries and North Caucasus being labeled as “migrants” in media discourse and everyday speech.

This inflow has already provoked several major anti-migrant bashings like in Kondopoga (near St. Petersburg) in 2006 or in Moscow of 2010 and 2013. The latest one took place in the Moscow district of Biryulyovo in October 2013, being provoked by an alleged killing of a Russian youngster Egor Scherbakov by an immigrant Orkhan Zeinalov. Within several days, local dwellers partly destroyed a local warehouse where mostly migrants worked and called for a “popular gathering” to attract authorities’ attention.

This case is ideal for our purposes, as it represents an “active” period of the (anti-) migrant discourse in the Russian Twitter. It

combines a line of events (alleged Egor Scherbakov’s killing, Orkhan Zeinalov’s arrest, warehouse bashings, the people’s gathering, urged retirement of Moscow civil servants etc.) and the issues surrounding migrant life in Moscow (migrant crime, non-licensed trade, undercover dwelling, and lack of assimilation of the incoming migrant population). Thus, the case, in theory, may create a reference discussion point for further framing of migrant discourse on the Russian Twitter.

1.4. The Research Hypotheses

As stated above, our research aims at describing structural features of the discussion, some aspects of intermedia agenda setting, and content features based on issue-oriented framing (De Vreese, 2005). For the first stage of the project, we have developed four hypotheses on the structural and agenda-setting aspects. The general idea is to test whether the Russian Twitter replicates the trajectory of formation of an anti-establishment “echo chamber” analogue to Russian Facebook; this would mean that national context is more powerful than platform features.

H1: Character of the discussion. The discussion will have an “explosive” character with a peak at the beginning and micro-peaks as the discussion developed. The discussion will be robust, as large number of users not connected otherwise would participate in it.

H2: Presence of “opinion crossroads” and the role of media in it. Divergent opinions will be, indeed, found in the discussion on the whole, but the “crossroads” nature won’t show up, as the discussion will be polarized to the extent that clear “echo chambers” will be visible; these may be based upon political views, institutional or group belonging. The visible clusters will form around in-platform non-institutional influencers (who mostly organize the discussion by frequent tweeting and are the key reference authors for less active tweeters). Media accounts will play a big role in posting information but will not be themselves actively engaged into the discussion.

H3: Replication of fragmentation of the media-based public sphere in Twitter. Online-only media will cast more impact than the hybrid media; among the former, anti-establishment and alternative-agenda media (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2013b) will gain the most attention.

H4: Involved media content. Linking to media content by the users will be online-centered, with web 2.0 media being most quoted, online-only media in the middle, and hybrid media least quoted.

The data collected to test H4 also allows for meaningful interpretation of the discussion, that is, for exploring issue-oriented discussion frames. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present the results of this analysis; we would just note that the discussion was quite heated. Violent topics (the alleged murder, the bashings and police actions) were discussed 1, 2 times more than non-violent ones, negative emotional discourse dominated over rational commenting (but not over the tweets containing news, facts, and details); 15% of tweets put blame on someone; 10% contained nationalist speech; 11% had hate speech.

2. METHODS

2.1. Mixed Methodology of the Project

To map the discussion on Biryulyovo bashings in October 2013, we used vocabulary-guided web crawling (Blekanov et al., 2012) and subsequent analysis of the obtained tweets, word frequency-based vocabularies, and web graphs. Hashtag collections selected by manual reading of over 1000 tweets have constituted the vocabularies for a specially designed web crawler robot. As the results of the crawling, the following items were received:

- (1) A web graph reconstructing the hashtag-based discussion;
- (2) lists of the most active users (who tweet and comment) and the most influential users (who get retweeted and commented);
- (3) a discussion vocabulary of high relevance and clarity;
- (4) collections of tweets for manual coding (analysis in progress).

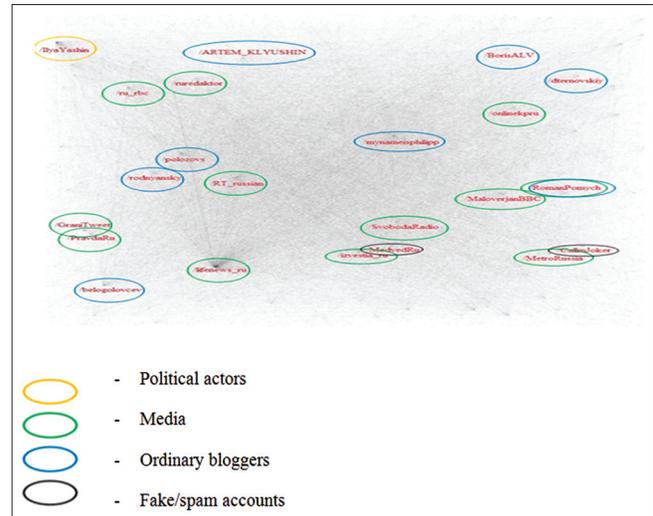
To assess the “crossroads” nature of the discussion, we looked at two data pieces – namely, the web graphs and the lists of active users; we were mostly looking for mediatization parameters. These data can show us: (1) Whether there is a real “crossroads of opinions” of various stakeholders in the Russian Twitter; (2) whether the existing cleavage between media of the “first” and “second” Russias (mainstream/counter-sphere) is repeated.

2.2. The Work-in-progress Report

The works of the project so far have included several steps.

1. We analyzed the Russian Twitter trending topics at Trendinalia.com to select the research period (October 1 to 31, 2013) and the relevant hashtags. The search for hashtags started on Trendinalia.com and was finalized via manual reading of over 1000 tweets per each period. 6 hashtags were selected for the first-step crawling: #Biryulyovo (in Russian), #Biryulyovo (in English, with variations), #Zeinalov, #warehouse, #migrants, and #populargathering (all in Russian). The selection was later cross-validated by co-hashtagging analysis.
2. With the help of a specially developed web crawling robot, we have run primary hashtag-based web crawling and received the collection of tweets for the designated data (dates and hashtag). As a result of crawling, 3734 users were found to be tweeting under the hashtags in October 2013; 10715 tweets were downloaded.
3. The web graph of the discussion was created (Figure 1). The graphs included not only the users who were discovered via hashtagging but also the users connected via reposting or commenting to each primary tweet collection. Thus, for Biryulyovo, the final number of graph nodes (users) was 12040, over 3, 2 times more than initially. To our viewpoint, this reconstructs the discussion in a more accurate way, without losing meaningful inter-user connection. As our programming capacities allow for vocabulary-based web crawling, another option to create a more precise web graph is collecting data on tweets based on the discussion vocabulary. We have created such a vocabulary by gathering all tweets on Biryulyovo in a “bag of words,” stemming them, cleaning the stem dataset, ranging the stems by frequency, and manual clearing out the first 6000 stems to get the list of the most relevant stems. After several stages of cleaning, 443 stems remained. In future, we will compare the hashtag-based and

Figure 1: The web graph representing 20 key “junction” user



stem-based web graphs. We also used the vocabulary for semantic grouping of stems to see which lexical strings were especially relevant.

4. We visually analyzed the web graph and its 20 key nodes. The graph on Biryulyovo was analyzed for users' classic betweenness, input capacity (the number of comments and reposts by the user), output capacity (the number of comments and reposts the user received), and overall capacity (input+output capacity).
5. We ranged users who posted for Biryulyovo to create 3 lists: By frequency of posts – “active users,” by received comments – “authoritative users,” and the combined list – “junction users.”
6. We assessed media accounts among the 72 most active users who tweeted on Biryulyovo 20 or more times in October 2013 to see who the most active users actually are, whether media are present in this list, and what media are winning the battle.
7. Selection of tweets for manual coding was performed. As we were interested first of all in the active creators of the discussion and their discourse, the 3734 users of the initial Biryulyovo dataset were ranged according to quantity of their posts. To define the threshold for sampling, we introduced the measure $K = 20$ tweets per user. K was defined as the mean for the “noisy” section of the graph (marked with a red dot with coordinates [20; 6]).
8. The 72 most active users altogether posted 2800 tweets. 1120 tweets were selected for further manual analysis by random choice of 40% of tweets from each of the 72 users to preserve their respective weight in the discussion; after cleaning this dataset from fully irrelevant, non-Russian (English-and Ukrainian-language) tweets, self-reposts, and spam, there remained 1014 tweets, a feasible dataset at the same time representing almost 10% of the full primary collection. Over 90.5% of the automatically formed dataset proved to be unique and relevant, and the number of irrelevant tweets was less than 3%.
9. The codebook was created and tested via Kappa measurement to analyze the final dataset (all parameters finally showed Kappa over 0.6, mostly close to or higher than 0.7). We (with the help of 24 coders) manually triple-coded the 1014

Biryulyovo tweets of the 72 most active users. Manual coding of tweets included 25 parameters, of which 6 are metadata, 5 discuss the status of author of the tweet, 3 are communicative features of the tweet (like presence of quotes or news/comment content), 2 on the topic and mentioned actors, 4 on discursive features (like hate speech), 4 on frames (guilt, responsibility, comparison to other conflicts, and spatial dimension of the conflict), and the last one on media content links in a tweet. All non-agreed coding units were discussed within the working group and re-coded. By today, we have analyzed data for 673 tweets of the 1014; full results will be available by June 2015.

3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

H1: Character of the discussion. The discussion on Biryulyovo was, as expected, a sustainable research object. There were enough users who participated in at least one dialogue (tweeted 4-6 times); it is over 120 users who tweeted 10 times or more, presumably following the case for days. It was not a short few-actor discussion; it did not stop after the bashings and created a reference point on the discussions on migrants. Being quite intense for 120 users or so, the discussion also had the “buzz” component, with over 3200 users involved within 20 days (October 11-31, as first news on the case arrived on October 11); this was enough to bring the case to the trending topics.

The discussion had a character of an explosion. This, first of all, tells us again that the discussion chosen was robust enough for studying. Second, the Biryulyovo discussion did not fade rapidly but lasted for 2 weeks, as expected. But, contrary to expectations, the line of events did not influence its intensity in any visible manner: There were no micro-peaks on the time-series graph.

This was also a focused discussion. This may be concluded out of the assessment of the automated vocabulary. Its configuration shows that the 443 stems that may be considered discussion descriptors are situated not in the middle of the vocabulary after general lexicon of high frequency but in the upper part of the list. Other sources of texts concerning Biryulyovo could not produce ontology of such a high relevance; on Twitter, we have received a practically full semantic list describing the discussion. Probably, it is the format of Twitter as a platform (the 140 symbols limit) that makes users select the most relevant words for expression.

If we look at the structure of the web graph of the discussion, we will see that it is characterized by weak connectedness and high evenness; that is, we see an even conglomerate of non-connected users with no “clouds” in it. This is contrary to what was expected, and this supports the vision that the “crossroads” potential of the Russian Twitter is higher than expected (we emphasize “potential,” as we still do not know whether we are seeing an “opinion crossroads” or one big “echo chamber”). Another side of the “crossroads” potential is the users with high betweenness centrality. Only 46 of the 12040 users had centrality of ≥ 0.001 (and two – of > 0.12); thus, the “clouds” could have been interconnected

did they appear, but the majority of discussants were just individual contributors.

H2: Presence of “opinion crossroads” and the role of media in it. As stated above, there are no identifiable “clouds” in the discussion. The hypothesis of internal discussion milieu is, thus, wrong, and, as stated above, we witness either “one big cloud” where all the space is occupied by one echo chamber – or a real crossroads of opinions where any user can freely participate in any part of the discussion. It is hard to support either of the two explanations before we look at who the influencers are and what their positions are.

To see which tweeters have a potential to become “junction users,” we have looked at their input/output capacity. The lists of most active users (with the highest number of tweets per user) and the most influential ones (with the highest overall capacity) do not fully correspond. Of top20 most influential users, only 5 (25%) are those who are within top20 tweeters. Thus, it is in rare cases only that a user can gain influence just by frequent tweeting, though this may be one of the key elements of the popularity-rising strategy. The overall user capacity depends to a much higher extent on output (on the user is commented and retweeted) than on frequency of their tweeting. This may be a sign that Twitter discussions can be more rational and content-oriented than expected. Also, there is a cleavage between those who tweet and those who retweet and comment without producing content themselves. On the whole, there is just one user (@BorisALV) who is the only real influencer who possesses all the necessary features (high input, output, and betweenness centrality). Second, in our dataset of 1014 tweets for coding, there were only 5 retweets found (cf. to 51 self-retweets), which tells that those who actively tweet do not retweet from other active users. Twitter in Russia may become not only “opinion crossroads” but also an “echo chamber;” but in this particular case the “crossroads” potential seems to outweigh the “echo chamber” one. A possible explanation may be quite simple. As the “bridging” users are not homogeneous, it could be that, on the Russian Twitter, there is not yet any stratum of “influencer commentators” through whom discussion clouds are connected; their place is partly occupied by media and trash accounts.

As to the role of media in forming the “opinion crossroads,” we first of all need to underline the unexpectedly high mediatization of the whole discussion. It shows in the structure of discussion vocabulary, hashtagging, and the lists of the most active and most influential users. News-related hashtags were very popular (#breakingnews, #news, #it is reported, #Russian Information Agency, #media, #lifenews [a publishing house], #Russia Today). Semantic analysis of stem has shown the stem group dedicated to media to be the 5th in size, being comparable to city descriptors, migrant-related lexicon, and descriptors of police activities, which is also surprising and proves that not only activities of the media themselves helped mediatize the discussion but the role of users in it was also high.

But the most striking is that, of 72 most active tweeters, 27 are media or journalists (and 27 are ordinary users); of the top72 most influential ones, there are 21 media/journalist’s accounts; of the

top20 in each case, 7 most active and 9 most influential accounts belong to media (with 8 in each case belonging to ordinary users). Obviously, media are both very active and influential in this Twitter-based discussion. And, of the top72 most active users, it is only media (6 accounts, of both pro- and anti-establishment media outlets) that made their way into top20 influential users. Beside the conclusion on mediatization, this also disproves the hypothesis of power of non-institutional influencers. This, though, may be explained via the fact that our data collection was hashtag-based, which might have distorted the picture, especially for the “active” time when Biryulyovo provided news. And if media’s active tweeting is very understandable as a strategy, their unexpectedly high role as influencers cannot yet be explained in full. But the other part of our hypothesizing on media strategies on Twitter proves right: Media accounts do not engage in intense discussion, they tend just to tweet and self-retweet. Only 2 in top72 users with high input (that is, who are engaged into discussions) are media, and they are not the leading influencers.

Thus, the results on media accounts seem to support the notion of “real opinion crossroads.” But the Russian Twitter in the case of Biryulyovo appears to be a definitive echo chamber in terms of representation of the conflict sides. Migrants are practically absent from the discussion as well as NGOs. Just five tweets of over 670 (less than 0.8%) were marked by the coders as belonging to a pro-migrant author. In most active tweeting, 7 nationalist accounts outperform 2 pro-migrant ones 2, 6 times (236 vs. 90 tweets). Perhaps this is why the blame was put to migrants and local and federal authorities, not to the local majority or business.

H3: Replication of fragmentation of the media-based public sphere on Twitter. So far, analysis of pro-/anti-establishment supports the “real crossroads” version. Twitter represents a picture quite different from, e.g., the Russian Facebook where oppositional, anti-establishment (including business newspapers), and alternative-agenda media dominate. On Twitter, pro-government media outperform anti-establishment and independent news media in activity nearly 3 times, but independent media also have significant presence and are able to form audiences without putting into Twitter the efforts comparable to those by pro-establishment media entities like Lifenews or Voice of Russia. Thus, Twitter, unlike Facebook, effectively gives voice to pro- and anti-establishment media. This may be explained by the fact that the average user profile of the Russian Facebook user would differ from that on Twitter (though there is no available statistics on that): If Facebook has become an enclave for the Russian cultural and business elite, other social networks have the public with the features of mass audience, and Twitter is closer to this stratum. Media that are most active in case of Biryulyovo are mid- and low-market (Lifenews), state-funded (Voice of Russia), or depoliticized (Metro); oppositional Grani.ru or business paper Kommersant, both being leaders in their audience segments, were almost 7 times less active than Lifenews; the same goes for Radio Liberty and even both Moscow News outlets – they should have been most interested in the case being local media but neither of them is low-market-oriented. Thus, Twitter is, indeed, a crossroads for media representation, but by far pro-establishment and low-market media win the battle in the aspect of presence

in the issue-oriented content, providing Twitter users with views not deprived of political slant.

H4: Involved media content. These results for H2 and H3 are cross-validated if we take a look at what media content users link to. We expected dominance of web 2.0 content in linking, but the first 673 tweets show that hybrid and online media are represented absolutely equally. It is also evident that the discussion is not encapsulated within Twitter, as references to it are rare. As to the “crossroads” thesis, the pro-/anti-establishment representation basically repeats the one in supporting our opinion on the alleged user profile and media use patterns.

4. CONCLUSION

In general, we had like to say that Twitter in Russia shows more potential to become a real “crossroads of opinions” than the Russian Facebook dominated by anti-establishment discourse or Vkontakte where political discussions are much less visible and, even when do exist, are community-oriented. The discussion on Biryulyovo became highly mediatized and politicized, which shows that media and political actors may find an interested audience on the Russian Twitter. But by far pro-establishment media of mid- and low-market nature dominate this communicative milieu in terms of influence as well as in frequency of tweeting and linking, though independent media are also represented among the most active and most influential accounts. Hybrid media easily compete in Twitter with online-only media, outperforming them in all positions. Visualization of the web graph has demonstrated that media of various nature have really become central nodes of the discussion, and the mainstream part of the fragmented public sphere is winning the game.

Our results combined with previous research (Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2013b) show that, contrary to today is dominant opinion that the social context is the primary definer for how the online discussions develop in different countries, online communicative milieus in the same country may differ significantly in how political cleavages are reconstructed, as well as in the level of involvement and representativeness of social groups. Our research adds to the evidence that platform features and especially the mean user profile play an important role in the development of online discussions.

The current article presents only partial results on structural and agenda-setting aspects of Twitter-based discussions in Russia; full results on these aspects will also be complemented by the results on framing of the issue, and we will get the full picture of how the influencers shape the discussion and who they are.

Our research on mediatization aspects and agenda setting on Twitter within migrant-/racial-oriented discussions has already been expanded within the next research project at SPbU, “The role of Twitter in agenda formation in various socio-political contexts” (2014-2015). Within it, Twitter-based discussions in four countries (Russia, Germany, France, and the USA) will be studied in “conflict” and “calm” month-long periods. As the “conflict” cases, the Biryulyovo bashings, the killing and violence at

Ferguson, USA, the killings at the editorial office of Charlie Hebdo magazine, and the PEGIDA rallies in Germany were chosen. This research will allow for comparative assessment of both media and sociological features of the Twitter-based discussions and will provide evidence on whether national-bound or platform-oriented factors play a bigger role in formation of the discussion structures and in agenda setting on Twitter.

Another extension of the current research is involvement of texts of hybrid (“offline-first”) mainstream media in assessing whether explosive discussions on Twitter play a role in setting the agenda in mainstream media. This is planned for the years 2016-2017 for all the four countries.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, SPbU, for a research grant “Hybrid media systems and political agendas” (2013-2014, grant #4.23.2203.2013). The authors also express gratitude to Dr. Ivan S. Blekanov and Alexey I. Maximov for developing the web crawling software and conducting of the crawling procedures. The authors acknowledge the big role of student participants of the project as raters (coders) of the tweet samples and are grateful for their contribution to the overall outcomes of the research. The authors contributed equally to the study.

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