
FACEBOOK EVENT AS A PLATFORM TO PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THEORY OF PERFORMATIVITY APPLIED TO SOCIAL NETWORKS

*EVENTO DE FACEBOOK COMO PLATAFORMA PARA PROMOVER ENGAJAMENTO EM MOVIMENTOS SOCIAIS:
TEORIA DA PERFORMATIVIDADE APLICADA ÀS REDES SOCIAIS*

*EVENTO EN FACEBOOK COMO PLATAFORMA PARA PROMOVER LA PARTICIPACIÓN EN LOS MOVIMIENTOS
SOCIALES: TEORÍA DE LA PERFORMATIVIDAD APLICADA A LAS REDES SOCIALES*

CAROLINA FIGUEIREDO¹

CAIO DE CASTRO MELLO SANTOS²

¹ Doutora em Comunicação Social pela Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE) e docente no Departamento de Comunicação Social na mesma instituição.
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6611-2038>

² Doutorando em Humanidades Digitais na School of Advanced Study da Universidade de Londres (Early Stage Researcher – ESR).
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7492-7237>

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the application of the Theory of Performativity in complex communication processes as those emerged from the Social Networks. Austin's (1975) theory of Speech Acts and the concept of Performativity stated by Butler (1997) are recovered to find mechanisms of analysis in utterances that are intrinsic to websites tools. In parallel, the Latour Actor-Network Theory (2017) is also used. As a research result we came to the conclusion that the use of Facebook Event tool implies in performativity, once that by pressing the "Going" and "Interested" buttons the user express different meanings. To put it succinctly, performativity allows the production of effects through language (speech acts) on digital Social Networks.

Keywords: Facebook Events. Performativity. Speech Acts.

RESUMO

Este artigo reflete sobre a aplicação da Teoria da Performatividade em processos comunicacionais complexos como os que emergem das redes sociais. A Teoria dos Atos de Fala, de Austin (1975), e o conceito de Performatividade, de Butler (1997), são recuperados para encontrar mecanismos de análise em enunciados que são intrínsecos à estrutura das ferramentas de sites. Em paralelo, usa-se também a Teoria Ator-Rede, de Latour (2017). Como resultado, chegamos à conclusão que o uso da ferramenta Eventos do Facebook implica em performatividade, uma vez que ao pressionar os botões “Ir” ou “Interessado” o usuário expressa diferentes significados. Em termos sucintos, a performatividade permite a produção de efeitos através da linguagem (atos de fala) nas de Redes Sociais digitais.

Palavras-chave: Eventos do Facebook. Performatividade. Atos de Fala.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se reflexiona sobre la aplicación de la Teoría de la Performatividad en los procesos de comunicación complejos como los que surgen de las redes sociales. La Teoría de las leyes del habla de Austin (1975) y el concepto de Performatividad de Butler (1997) se recuperan para encontrar mecanismos de análisis en los enunciados que son intrínsecos a la estructura de las herramientas de la web. Paralelamente, también se utiliza la Teoría del Actor-Red de Latour (2017). Como resultado, llegamos a la conclusión de que el uso de la herramienta de Eventos en Facebook implica performatividad, ya que al pulsar los botones "Ir" o "Interesado" el usuario expresa diferentes significados. En resumen, la performatividad permite la producción de efectos a través del lenguaje (actos de habla) en las redes sociales digitales.

Palabras clave: Eventos en Facebook. Performatividad. Leyes del habla.

INTRODUCTION

Brazil is the country with more users on Social Networks in Latin America, according to eMarketer (BBC, 2019). According to this research, in Brazil, 95% of people that use some Social Network are connected on Facebook.

Facebook is a social network founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, while studying psychology at Harvard (PHILLIPS, 2007). It is the biggest social network in the world, with circa 2,32 billion users (EXAME, 2019). Around the world, Facebook was pointed by many scholars as an important platform to promote engagement among social movements

members (CASTELLS, 2015). Considering the importance of Facebook as a free tool to Social Movements, it is very important to look to its usage and analyze its potential in political contexts.

This paper aims to analyze a specific tool on Facebook: the Facebook Event. Facebook Events are often used by Social Movements to engage people in specific acts, providing structure to spread invitations and information about meetings and demonstrations, for example. Despite the usage of internet for political engagement is accused of “slacktivism”, the potential reach of most of the Occupy movements around the world was clearly boosted by the networks flow. The purpose of this research is to understand the usage of the Facebook Events tool to provoke effective adhesion to the Occupy Estelita movement and to understand how Facebook users interpret and renew the Facebook Event tool by attending or not to the events.

In Recife, one of the biggest capitals in Brazilian northeast, a social movement emerged by the collective involvement around the protection of the Estelita Pier, an historical area placed on the heart of the city, target of gentrification. Engendering both online and offline mobilization, the Occupy Estelita movement has become a wide network of people interested in discuss the future of the city and their right to construct a more inclusive and democratic metropolis. The Occupy Estelita emerged as a movement in 2012 and remained active until 2018. During all the existence of the Occupy Estelita and its activities, the Facebook Events were a central platform to arrange meetings and to stimulate union and engagement of citizens, inviting them to go to the Pier, to share information or even to manifest on Facebook their support to the protection of the area.

Attend to a Facebook Event is taken here as the symbolic action (performative, as is going to be explained further) of pressing the button “Going” on the Facebook page of the event. So, a Facebook Event is a tool that allows users to create and share “events pages”, whose function is, hypothetically, to invite people to go somewhere. By attending to the invitation on Facebook, the user sends notifications to his or hers connections/friends and

also to the manager of the event, which is the person who created the Event Page. It means that the Facebook user can show if he or she will attend the event, if he or she has interest in receive information about it, or if he or she will simply deny the invitation.

All the time, Facebook promotes engagement to content, sending information about the actions or interests of users to their connections. If, by one side, this policy can be inappropriate and indiscreet for some users, it can be used by other users to produce positive or negative meanings. Since 2013, when Brazilians took the streets in a wave of demonstrations named as the “Brazilian Spring” (WILLS, 2013), in a clear reference to the Arabic Spring and its characteristics (SAAD-FILHO, 2014), Facebook became one of the most important platforms of political manifestation and engagement (CASTELLS, 2015).

In February 16th, 2017, Mark Zuckerberg, main founder of Facebook, published a letter on the social network about his intentions and desires for his website. The text reached 109 thousand reactions, 6.8 thousand comments and 14.338 shares until August 2nd, 2017. In a list of 5 goals, one is intrinsically linked to this study: helping people to build a civically-engaged community. For Zuckerberg (2017), the power of tools like Events and Groups to promote civic engagement can be clearly proven.

Sometimes people must speak out and demonstrate for what they believe is right. From Tahrir Square to the Tea Party - our community organizes these demonstrations using our infrastructure for events and groups. On a daily basis, people use their voices to share their views in ways that can spread around the world and grow into movements. The Women's March is an example of this, where a grandmother with an internet connection wrote a post that led her friends to start a Facebook event that eventually turned into millions of people marching in cities around the world. Giving people a voice is a principle our community has been committed to since we began. As we look ahead to building the social infrastructure for a global community, we will work on building new tools that encourage thoughtful civic engagement. Empowering us to use our voices will only become more important (ZUCKERBERG, 2017).

Once that improve these tools became a goal to Facebook, that consider they an important mechanism to empower people by promoting civic engagement, also became

fundamental to investigate how it is working, as well how people use the platform, taking into account that the way users manage the platform is important for extract social benefits from it. This affirmation justifies the existence of the present research.

So, this work uses the Theory of Performativity in a complex communication, such as Facebook Events tool. The study recovers Austin's (1975) theory of Speech Acts and the concept of Performativity stated by Butler (1997), looking for mechanisms of analysis in utterances that are intrinsic to the uses given to Social Networks. Finally, this study offers elements to the usage of these concepts, taking into account Latour's (2007) proposal of an Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

WHEN TO SAY IS TO DO

According to Sibilia (2008), Social Networks are the territory *par excellence* of self-exhibition in post-modern societies. The author stands the hypothesis of a confusion between private and public life as an effect of characteristics of the interactions on Social websites. Following Sibilia (2008) analysis it seems that: it is necessary to delineate the borders between (1) an exhibition of privacy and (2) a narrative of the self through language on the Social Networks.

The activity of building a profile on Social Networks depends on a succession of practices and choices. On Facebook, for instance, the user must define his/her name (or nickname), profile picture, cover picture and answer many questions about personal life and preferences. Also, the possibility of pressing the button "like" on some pages is also an important part of the profile construction because it creates a kind of database about the interests of the user. It is in the possibility of self-construction that performativity becomes a phenomenon that should be investigated.

Austin's theory of performative acts analysis two kinds of utterances: constatives and performatives. For Austin (1975), there is an important difference between saying something that can be simply true or false like "It's raining" and saying something like "I

bet”. In the first example, the person is indicating if raindrops falls from the sky. In the second, the utterance meaning is amplified due to cultural meanings that establishes the act of betting as a kind of agreement. The same happens with statements such as “I promise” or “I swear”. Some performative utterances, according to Austin (1975), only occur when pronounced by an allowed person. That is precisely the case of the sentence “I baptize you”. The act of being baptized only occur if the person responsible for enunciating those words is part of a collective agreement, as happens to a priest, for instance.

However, Austin (1975) latter states that all utterances are performative. If a child is going out to play soccer and hers/his mother says: “it’s raining”, she is not only saying that water is falling from the sky but also that the child should not go out at that moment. It means that it is possible to find performative acts under the intentions when something is said. In addition, the condition of interpreting any utterance depends on traditions and cultural meanings collectively shared.

Austin’s theory evolved to the ideas of “performativity” and “theatrical practices” (SEDGWICK, 1995). It also renews the work of Jacques Derrida (KRISTEVA, 1981) through the development of the concept of *Différance*. Based on Saussure (1967) work, Derrida states that language is primarily about differences. Biesecker (1989) says that when we look up for a word on dictionary, it gives us not the concrete object or feeling that this word refers to, but other words that are used to establish a comparison and then the understanding of the first word. Therefore, meanings exist in comparison, on a system of alterity. If production of meanings is relational, the same occur with performative acts. “[*Différance*] is the structural condition which makes it possible for us to perform any act” (BIESECKER, 1989).

There are three dimensions of performative acts: perlocutionary, locutionary, and illocutionary (AUSTIN, 1975). Some utterances can be categorized in all the three dimensions. Perlocutionary is the intention in provoke certain effects in the audience. Locutionary is the act of saying something. Illocutionary is the act executed through the

speech. We will now analyze aspects of Social Networks that makes possible the construction of an identity online, following how Austin's theory can be exploited aiming to study linguistic interactions into digital media.

OPERATING ANALYSES ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Latour (2007) states the importance of looking to the instances of mediation, not as a passive tool involved in the social process but as being a central actor responsible for construct meanings along interactions. His theory makes possible to call attention for the importance of social codes intrinsically associated with the Social Networks structure that affects the kind of interactions people will develop using those websites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) and devices (computer, smartphone, tablets). There are two points that Latour (2007) highlights as important to any methodology proposal that have the social as object. The first one is that analyzing a social phenomenon is not to delimit a “stabilized state of affairs” (LATOURE, 2007), absolutely everything moves in social sciences. The second considers that it is important to have in mind that the researcher is a part of the phenomena. She/he is not a foreign observer analyzing a transcendental manifestation. Latour's criticize sociologists of the social, because they seem to glide like angels, transporting power and connections almost immaterially. By other hand, ANT-scholar trudge like an ant, carrying the heavy gear in order to generate even the tiniest connection (LATOURE, 2007).

Latour (2007) offers as a method, tools to analyze the ANT through the Cartography of Controversies. According to Venturini (2010), when asked about instructions to his cartography theory, Latour answered: “just look at controversies and tell what you see” (VENTURINI, 2010). Venturini (2010) pointed out three meanings or consequences of this. The first consequence is that social cartography does not require any specific theory or methodology. Scholars must be open when facing the object to its manifestation. The second consequence is that researchers cannot pretend to be impartial. The perspective of

the viewer must be considered. The third consequence is that researchers must reconsider their attitude toward their subjects of study. It means that actors observations must be taken in account, once participants and investigators are immersed in the social phenomena.

From this perspective, the present study offers an application of performative acts theory in social complex phenomena like the interactions on Social Networks websites. To make possible a deeper analysis, we take as example the use of “Facebook Events” as object.

A Facebook Event is a page created on the website by any user with the intention of inviting people to attend to an event anywhere. In this page, invited and non-invited, it depends on the Facebook Event characteristic. The Event can be public (open to anybody) or private (only people invited have access to posts about the event). Users can find information about where the event will occur, what time, who is the person responsible for managing it and also a description about the event purpose.

The user who is surfing on the Facebook platform can interact with the event choosing an option between three buttons: “Going”, “Interested” or “Ignore”. In case of selecting “Ignore” the invitation will disappear. However, in case of selecting “Going” or “Interested” the website reacts with some actions, such as: (1) Informing the event manager about the invitation acceptance or the user’s interest about attending to it. (2) The user’s connections, called as friends by Facebook, receive notifications about her/his interest in attending to the Event. (3) The user become part of a list, available to anybody, with “guests” interested in going to the event. (4) The user becomes connected with the event page and allows Facebook to send to her/him notifications about any changes (such as local or timing) or new posts published about the event. In short, all actions (inputs) on Facebook produces outputs, so the act of pressing a button, is always performative.

In 2013, Facebook changed the Facebook Events tool. The button “Maybe” was created. About the change, the Forbes Magazine website published an article (CHOWDHRY, 2015) where compares the meanings of both of options (“Interested” and

“Maybe”). By selecting the “Interested” option, one is indicating to the organizer that she/he is interested in the event but can't confirm attendance by the invitation time. When someone presses the “Interested” button, she/he is able to receive notifications and updates from the event page anytime. Selecting “Maybe” reveals ambiguity about whether one would actually will show up to the event (CHOWDHRY, 2015).

According to Chowdhry's (2015) argument, the update made available a more suitable option, avoiding imprecise meanings. To Williams (2015) “if you press interested, you'll still get notifications and other updates from events, but none of the guilt of being a flake”. These analyses emphasize the complex dimensions of saying something by pressing a button. It is not merely saying “Interested” or “Maybe” as we do in everyday life. To press one of these buttons is also to do something, for instance to inform about an inclination to people, and to provoke certain effects depending on how they interpret each choice. Precisely for that reason we consider a performative act to press an event confirmation button. Also this act is a social code, part of the complex Social Networks human-things relationships, as TAR advocates.

On Facebook Events, users can press the button “Going” and simply not go to the event. The act of saying “Going” was performed and it not depends on the fact of someone attends or not to the event in person this is in itself an act of “performativity”. It is also an act of self-exhibition (SIBILIA, 2008).

The concept of performativity appears in Butler's (1997) postulations of politics of performative and it was fundamental for the development of the Queer Theory. According to the author, the resignification of the word “queer” is politically adopted just due to the possibility of performative utterances to adapt to circumstances of speech depending on the speaker intentions and the presumed audience. Butler (1997) states that:

The revaluation of terms such as "queer" suggest that speech can be "returned" to its speaker in a different form, that it can be cited against its originary purposes, and perform a reversal of effects. More generally, then, this suggests that the

changeable power of such terms marks a kind of discursive performativity that is not a discrete series of speech acts, but a ritual chain of resignifications whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable (BUTLER, 1997, p. 14).

Hence, it is possible to conclude that the performativity depends on the performative acts and on the effects it produces once uttered. When Goffman et al (1978) analyzed people's interactions face-to-face, they said that once negotiated and comprehended what is involved in a situation, the individuals manage their exhibition of "Self" according to the perceptions previously identified (consciously or not). So, the social interactions occur according to what actors and audience expect from each other.

ANALYZING EVENTS: POLITICAL ACT FOR FREEDOM OF SPEECH

As result of the Occupy Estelita Movement, a group of demonstrators founded a Carnival *Troça* (*Troças* are traditional Carnival groups from the Pernambuco State that go to the streets using the same or similar costumes) named "*Troça* Covering Your View" (*Troça Empatando Tua Vista*). The idea of the *Troça* was to go the streets during Carnival dressing costumes of buildings and using masks with the face of the city's Mayor, Geraldo Júlio, and the Governor, Paulo Câmara as a way to satirize gentrification of the local urban spaces. In February 25th, 2017, a Saturday of Carnival, however the group was not allowed to go the streets. Police officers went to a building where one of the protesters from Occupy Estelita Movement used to live and, without a warrant, seized their costumes.

All the police action was recorded with a mobile device by one member of the *Troça*. The video posted on Facebook was viewed by 369 thousand people. The Police Officers were investigated for abuse of authority. According to a local newspaper investigation (*Jornal do Comercio*), the Governor of Pernambuco (Paulo Câmara), the Social Defense Secretary (Angelo Gioia), the Military Police Commandant (Vanildo Maranhão), the Civil Police Chief (Joselito Kehrlé) and Mayor of Recife (Geraldo Júlio) were together in a monitoring meeting, on that Saturday morning at the Integrated Center of

Command and Control of Pernambuco, local from where the order to seize the costumes away came from.

The newspaper article confirms that the vehicle used by the police in the occasion was under a “special mission” registration. Also, it was proved that the demonstrators were watched by the Integrated Center since they first left the apartment, as the action was watched using cameras localized on the streets. The Order of Attorneys of Brazil (*Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil*) published in its official Facebook page a letter disapproving the police action and considering the act a threat to freedom of speech.

On Facebook, the police action became quickly a big discussion theme, being the center of likes, comments and sharing already during carnival and also for the following weeks. The page of the group, called “Troça Covering Your View”, received around 5.600 reactions and 15.800 shares in a post published in February 25th, 2017. The police action reverberation boosted the group to create a meeting. It was scheduled as a Facebook Event called “Political Act for Freedom of Speech”. This was a call up for people to go downtown during Recife’s anniversary (March 12) to demonstrate against the police action.

To analyze the Facebook Event “Political Act for Freedom of Speech” through the use of the buttons “Going” and “Interested” it was applied a questionnaire by the web platform Survey Monkey. The questionnaire was published in May 1st, 2017, and it was answered by 100 people in one week, term it was available online (convenience sample, not statistically representative).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the results, most of the respondents (95,45%) declared to be aware that contacts and followers are informed about their attendance to Facebook Events once that they press the buttons Going or Interested. In relation to their motivation to press those buttons, 72,41% said to intend to manifest support to the event. Around 45% declared interest in receiving notifications/updates about the event. Only 34% are really interested in

informing the event administrator that they will attend to it in person. 68% of users answered that they are not necessarily informing that they will be in person in any event when they press the buttons Going or Interested on Facebook Events.

When asked about how many events from Occupy Estelita they have attended in person in 2016, 47% answered “none of them”. 86% consider that pressing the buttons Going or Interested is a positive attitude once that shows support to events such as the “Political Act for Freedom of Speech”.

It is possible to say that the idea of “manifesting support to the event” produces effects of exhibition. When someone says that wants to manifest something, she/he is not only saying something, but doing something through language. Then we do have speech acts, something that not only presents information, but performs an action (AUSTIN, 1975). According to Cambridge Dictionary “to manifest” is a verb that means “to show something clearly, through signs or actions” (CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY, 2017). Hence, manifesting is a performative act that is executed when the illocutionary act of saying Interested or Going is performed.

The fact of 68% of people say that the usage of the button Going do not mean necessarily to attend to the event in person, makes possible to build a hypothesis of execution of performative acts (AUSTIN, 1975). 86% of the respondents say that the mere act of pressing the button Going on the Facebook Event Political Act for Freedom of Speech is evaluated positively to them. So, it is also an important hypothesis to be considered by this study that people want to be in connection to values that contribute their performative acts.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN VIRTUAL AND REAL SPACES / FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We followed the Facebook Event “Political Act for Freedom of Speech” since it was created on March 3rd, 2017. That day, around six p.m, the Facebook Event had already 192 Interested users, 126 Going and 1,7 thousand Invited. Seven hours later, the number of Invited users increased to 2,1 thousand.

In March 12th, 2017, the day of the event, the Facebook page showed that 472 users have pressed the button “Going” and 776 the button “Interested”. The local where the event would occur was the *Marco Zero* square, localized downtown. At the same time and place the 480th anniversary of Recife would be celebrated. We arrived at Marco Zero square around four p.m, the time informed on the Facebook Event for the demonstration. However, the group was not there. We were informed by a member of the Facebook Event organization that the meeting would happen in a street next to the square, the *Apolo* Street. Around five p.m time, we went to the new address where we found the group still organizing their march. The empty street made possible for us to count how many people were there at that moment: only twenty. It was done, although initially was not a research goal to count how many people were there, once we believed that it would be very hard, because of the amount of people that used the option “Going” on The Facebook Event page. So, there was more interest in perform acts through a social network than physically.

If we add the 776 users that pressed the button “Interested” on the Facebook Event page with the 472 that pressed the button “Going”, 1.248 users manifested interest to attend the event. This discrepancy found between virtual (Facebook) and the real spaces (demonstration on the street) calls attention to a rupture. Most of the people never really intended to attend the street event, but only to show support to the cause as a performative act, as the survey result indicates. The diversity of meanings involved in the act of click in “Going” or “Interested” buttons makes possible the usage of the Facebook Events page in

many ways by the users, which does not mean that people are actually informing if they will or not attend to an event in person.

Conflicts between real and virtual spaces occur due to the renewing of meanings that the Speech Acts make possible. Also, it promotes different effects according to the emergence of new kinds of interaction. Hence, the potential of new performative acts is determined by the usage of the platform. This discussion is very important to analyze political demonstrations promoted by social movements that use digital media, specially the ones whose demonstrators are constantly accused of slack-activism. But performative acts are all but slack. This is not a discussion about the everlasting controversy between real and virtual spaces, also is not a discussion between passive and active individuals, but it is about the potential of performativity, the production of effects through language (speech acts) by the use of digital media, more specifically Social Networks and its potential impacts on social movements.

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