Nature at Issue: A Study of Comments on Facebook about a Brazilian Environmental Movement

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This paper should be cited as follows:

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Abstract

The most famous online social network, Facebook, can enable Brazilian environmental movements to publicize their causes more easily. In this space, such movements, in need of resources and willing to obtain greater autonomy in opposition to traditional media, can achieve a wider space to express and interact with activists. However, in order to mobilize citizens and get public visibility they need to ensure that the issues raised on the Social Network are legitimized by society, these movements need to interact with the discourses produced by Internet-readers, who comment and participate in the construction of information in the digital space. For the digital atmosphere, new content is created by organizations and Internet-readers with different discursive strategies produced to digitally move on platforms that have specific rules for virtual writing and reading. In this new context, this paper presents a preliminary analysis of some comments posted on the Facebook fanpage of a Brazilian environmental movement: The SOS Mata Atlântica Foundation. The comments were posted as discursive reactions to a post from June 16, 2014 and analyzed based on the theory of discourse by Charaudeau and on the sociological studies by Bauman and Wolton.

Keywords: Facebook, Environmental Movement, Comments, Discursive reactions, Social Network.
Introduction

From the end of the famous Greek agoras, no society has experienced the democratic political process in the same way. The agoras were an ideal public space which allowed free political participation for the citizens of that time. Not just with simple votes or automatic clicks in an Internet digital system, but as legitimate debates in which the citizens had voice and interacted towards a collective accomplishment.

In the current era of the Internet’s websites and social networks, such as Facebook, it can be noticed that most of the public discussions go through these virtual media. More than expression places, these tools have communicative potential that can encourage interactive exchanges and digital conversations among their users. These interactions are common of this environment, and they are built after the interactive subjects appropriation, which modifies Facebook’s media space and becomes a conversation environment. That is what Recuero explains (2014: 121):

*Each day, people from all over the world connect in the Internet and engage themselves in interactions with other people. Through these interactions, each of these people are exposed to new ideas, different points of view and new information. With the advent of these social network sites, these online conversations have created new impacts, spreading throughout the establish connections in these tools and thru them being amplified to other groups. There are hundreds, thousands of social exchanges, new forms that build public conversations, collectives, synchronous and asynchronous that surface among groups and different systems, they migrate, spread and seed new behaviors. They are Networked conversations."

It is necessary to know whether the discourses disseminate on these Facebook built conversations could mobilize subjects to participate in social and political causes. Such a question is a research study topic all over the world and in Brazil these researches grow proportionally to the political movements effervesce on Facebook since 2013, when the intense conversation on the Social Network contributed to reinforce the riot wave in almost all Brazilian capitals, in June. At the time, the manifestation calling was mostly made in the site’s online communities, where also occurred interactions and dissemination about this thematic.

Alongside the riots cases, a range of numberless other political, social and environmental Brazilian subjects that have ignited debates in the last few years

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1 Recuero et al. (2011: 102) defines social network websites as "a category from the group social software, that would be direct application software for computer mediate communication". However digital social network, Recuero (2009: 24) says that "one social network is defined as a group of two elements: actors (people, institutions, or groups; the network us) and its connections (interactions or social ties)".
in this social network can also be mentioned (Castells 2013). The environmental defense matter is among the most polemical Facebook conversations. Themes associated with environment are moral issues, and as such, should be discussed by everyone, demanding intense argumentative and point of views exchanges, without final consensus being achieved, but as solutions that could be temporary and capable to ensure outcomes considered fair for most.

Facebook seems to be, such as so, a place to express these causes, allowing certain political participation. It should be noted, however, that it’s not technology by itself that will modify behaviors and create habits, but its uses and appropriations. That is what Wolton (2012: 187) uphold when he says that "capability to solve a political or social problem" should not be bestowed into a technique as some particular media and economics discourses replicate.

The technology provided by the website of Facebook allows a discursive space of communicative exchange for debates that could prompt some kind of change. 11 years ago, when Facebook was introduced, the discovery of such transformation capability from the communicative appropriation and the virtual beings motivated the enthusiastic theorists to publish about the advent of a new democratic virtual public domain, that would foster a contemporary technological revolution as salvation from a variety of civil society deficits.

The website would be, for these triumphalist theorists, in the technological tools list that allows an ideal public domain\(^1\), in accordance with Habermas (1984) historical designation, the main theorist of the public domain notion, since it would allow the public, rational, egalitarian and with deliberative potential debate.

In fact, Facebook, with more than one billion active users in the world, holds a freer appeal compared to other websites, allowing to the user the manufacturing and diffusion of personal and institutional materials by anyone subscribed on the Social Network.

Nevertheless, through the course of time, the website has been restraining the \(\textit{posts}\)\(^2\) dissemination and sharing, narrowing the news visualization by the users and coercing companies and brands to financially invest if they need to expand their releases visualization reach. What was considered a possible democratic phenomenon became, as such, a technological tool programmed to the media role of mediating connections, attentions and popularity. Therefore,

\(^1\) Gomes (2008: 33), considering Habermas as theoretical base, explain what is public domain: “The political domain, or what affects and concerns everyone, is the public domain, a part of human life that differs itself from the private domain, that is the domain of personal ownership of people and goods, of the family unit who is ruled by the head of the house. The men, sustained in their private autonomy, could emerge to the business domain related to the political community, visibility domain, the scope of the decisions of what is mutual, conversation domain. In this public dimension, a equality situation is always considered as starting point, since the citizens should necessarily move as equals, for, in a later situation, according to their shown abilities in the argumentative disputes, established the social recognize rifts.

\(^2\) According to Costa (2009), post is a narrative text, descriptive and opinionated. The name was originated in blogs and it is now also used on Social Networks.
there is discussion about a private domain, or many, mediated by Facebook and not the collective and democratic public domain theorized by Habermas (1984), as it is accorded by Van Djick (2012: 162) “The scene epitomizes a transforming social realm, a realm that thrives on the exchange of tastes, feelings, and preferences”.

Prompted by the complex context of Facebook usage as a virtual tool of political communication, this piece aims to reflect upon two questions that focus on the environmental issues on the social network website: How Facebook discourses mobilize people? How the environmental movements project their discourses and which rhetorical, linguistics, emotional, politic and communicational strategies are actuated by these movements and their internet users’ readers?

To envisage such questions, we will analyze the comments posted as a discursive reaction to a Facebook post from the Brazilian environmental movement Fundação SOS Mata Atlântica on June 16th from 2014, as well as this post, using as theoretical basis Charaudeau discursive theory and the sociological studies from Bauman & Wolton (Facebook 2014).

We discuss in this text the discursive reactions on Facebook. We used the expression discursive reactions to diverge the passive and unconcerned receiver to the discursive strategies used in the environmental movement post. They are, as such, discursive reactions from the Internet users to the theme and discourses intended or other reactions from the website users.

**Environmental Movements on Facebook**

The environmental movements found on Facebook are a mean to directly disseminate the environmental causes to the society. A mean that presents itself freer than other media, such as traditional press and TV stations, places that have had none or almost no publicity autonomy from the thematic that is relevant to these movements. On Facebook, they can build their dissemination pages, with contents that interest them and still get the chance to interact with new and old publics, achieving the so desired commitment that they need.

However, the movement needs to go through a virtual legitimize process of its causes before obtaining a considerable mobilization and commitment level on Facebook. Such a process firstly consists on their discourses visibility building from the posts dissemination, which should be produced to be a digital spread through a virtual platform, with discursive strategies capable of filling the specific rules of writing and reading composition in this virtual environment.

According to Costa (2009: 152), hypermedia is a synonym of multimedia, a term used "to define a document from a computer composed by elements of a variety of media, such as audio, video, illustrations and text, because it allows the users involvement". Besides, it is much closer from having highly staged publicity and being mostly liquid, volatile, malleable, numerous, as Santaella (2007) indicates:
There is no place, no gravity center guarantee before handed by any language, because they all play in the instability dance. Text, sound and image are not what they used to be. They slide between one another, overlapping, complementing, fraternizing, uniting, separating and crossing among themselves. They become lighter, wandering around. They have lost their stability that the standard physical support, which was their gravity force, lent them. They have become apparitions, unknown presences that emerge and disappear by the delicate touch from the fingertip on the keyboard. Flying away, racing against light speed. They are so volatile that one of the biggest contemporary problems is to find yourself in the new archiving strategies that should be found when the storage means became obsoletes in an even shorter time. (Santaella 2007: 24-25).

The liquidity metaphor is pointed by Bauman (2001) and appropriated by Santaella (2007) to study the language used in the digital environment in our present modern society. To this author, liquidity is present in all dimensions of our society, which became, by all means, a "liquid society", fluid, not structured and light, different from the well know "solidity" from the pre-modern times, and that now finds itself melted.

The features from the virtual language indicated here, could be easily seen in the SOS Mata Atlântica\(^1\) (Figure 1), chosen among the ones that had commitment during the month of May and June from 2014.

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\(^1\) A SOS is a non-governmental organization created in 1986 in Brazil to act in defense of the Mata Atlântica. Their mission is to defend the remaining parts of mata atlântica, prizing the physical and cultural identity from the human’s communities that inhabited these areas.
Figure 1. Post from SOS Mata Atlântica day 6/16

The environmental movement chose to use hypermedia elements as spreading tools that grant a more interactive feature to the post. These are resources such as images and hyperlinks that complement the available information and contribute in the understanding of the Internet user-reader.

In the text, SOS Mata Atlântica uses linguistic and rhetoric resources to restate their pedagogic features, replicating a highly educative content. It can be noticed that some words distinguish and heckle the Internet user to follow the movement instructions, and they are: "Don't throw", "Store", "Deliver", "Access". These elocutive choices are always followed by a rational allegation used by the movement to substantiate the proposed interpellation, as seen in "Don't throw cooking oil remains in the kitchen sink", the allegation is that "The remains are disposed in the sewers and this harms the environment". However, the movement doesn’t show an expert reference for these allegations

1 Translation of the post: "Do not throw away oil or kitchen oil residues through the sink hole. These residues are discarded in the sewers and damage the environment. Keep the used products inside pet cans and deliver them to a recycle company, where it will be transformed into soap, detergent or biodiesel. For further information and to find the nearest collect post, access.”
or a source of the data published, fact that implies that they ensure themselves as a legitimate and trustworthy source of their publications.

By the image that the post analyzes, it can be also seen that the movement states another argument, with no reference, in a graphic form, which could be more attractive and even more pedagogic, because it represents explicitly the action that they fight against.

These choices from the movement come from the argumentation, the old persuasion art studied by Aristotle, in Classic Rhetoric, that proposed thematic to analyze the oratory. According to the author, one speech can always be analyzed from the *logos*, which refers to the argumentation or the discourse by itself; from the *pathos*, that contemplate the reception instance; or from the *ethos*, that constitutes the speaker and his influence in the audience.

The three categories can be seen in the studied post. The movement invests on the *logos* when it shows the presented data, even without indicating the reference, as seen in the image posted, which shows the action of the contamination of the water by kitchen oil.

The *pathos* on the other hand can be noticed in the use of the allocutive forms, that have an influence relation, set by the statements "Don’t throw", "Store", "Deliver", "Access". Reinforced by the alarming arguments that follow each interpellation, it justifies the reader’s call to engage in the cause presented by the movement.

By the action of putting themselves in a hierarchy structure, commanding the reader to act as it’s indicated in the text, the movement, seems to appeal to the moral discourse, the one described in the beginning of this article, as it is usual in environmental and collective issues. They present themselves, as mediators of such issues, trusting their evident pedagogic and dominant *ethos*. And just as that the *ethos*, or "image of self" (Charaudeau 2013) is built, through strategic selected enunciates to be seen, they are built in a way that the movement could reach legitimacy before its imaginary interlocutors.

These interlocutors are the Internet users/readers that should be gained by virtually visible posts, so they could legitimize the movement and their causes on the social network. This is the second step that the movement has to go through to achieve the necessary legitimization. The movement needs to interact with the produced discourses by the internet users-readers, who comment and participate in the information, build in the digital space. This is what is going to be exposed in the net topic of this article.

**Analysis of Discursive Reactions in a Post**

There are expression spaces on Facebook, for the environment movements and not just them alone, to introduce and discuss the causes that they defend. The environmental movement shares this virtual environment with the Internet users-readers that built in this same space to enunciate and spread their discourses and to interact in a positive or negative way with the movement.
SOS Mata Atlântica published their posts in a fan-page¹ on Facebook. The moment that they spread their discourse via post, the virtual space is open to the Internet users-readers to post their comments as discursive reactions to the post. There are Internet users who stage a committed argumentation accepting the movement status, creating a pro allegation, as can be seen in the comments on Figure 2.

Figure 2. Comments "Positive Activist" on Facebook SOS Mata Atlântica²

| ATIVISTA 1 | Na minha casa juntamos todo resto de óleo de cozinha e fazemos sabão. | Curtir · Responder : 7 · 16 de junho às 16:22 |
| ATIVISTA 2 | Faz uns 5 anos que produzo o meu próprio sabão de óleo usado. Faço detergente, na net está cheio de receitas é fácil e barato e legal fazer. Siga as instruções dadas. Vamos fazer nossa parte. | Curtir · Responder : 2 · 16 de junho às 16:51 |
| ATIVISTA 3 | é isso fundação to e vcs, pois e meu esposo guardamos restos de óleo para produzimos o próprio sabão!!!!!!! | Curtir · Responder : 2 · 16 de junho às 19:19 |
| ATIVISTA 4 | Combatamos esse absurdo, com conscientização! | Curtir · Responder : 1 · 9 h |

Source: https://www.facebook.com/SOSMataAtlantic.

In the comments above, it can be noticed that there is an agreement with the argument presented by SOS Mata Atlântica in the studied post. They are categorized as "positive activists", the Internet users-readers who built a pro discourse favoring the movement and it seems, by this, to present by language markers a certain level of participation and mobilization to the cause. An argumentative stage (Charaudeau 2012) of such action, is seen, based on these statements: "we collect", "we make", "we produce", "we keep" and "we fight"; that denote a positive action from the internet users, showing their rally role in the movement.

As virtual beings in a digital environment, these pro activists have the chance to promote their argumentation reinforcing their adoption of the movement’s ideas. The discourse is mostly argumentative in its organization structure, as it is stated by Charaudeau, and proven by the "pro-activists". They commit themselves in a linguistic persuasion movement by the argumentative staging that consists according to Charaudeau (2012: 231):

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¹ According to Facebook: "A fan page is the only way for entities like businesses, organizations, celebrities, and political figures to represent themselves on Facebook. Unlike a personal Facebook profile, fan pages are visible to everybody on the Internet".

² Translation: ACTIVIST 1: In my house we collect all oil residue and make soap out of it.
ACTIVIST 2: Its been 5 years that I produce my own soap from used oil. I make detergent, its full of recipes in the internet, it’s easy, nice and cheap to produce. Follow the given instructions. Let’s do our part.
ACTIVIST 3: count me in foundation, because my husband and I keep oil residue to make our own soap.
ACTIVIST 4: Let’s fight this absurd, let’s all be aware of this situation.
The argumentative staging consists, for the subject that wants to argument, in using procedures, which are based in a variety of components in the argumentative organization way, they should serve their own communication purpose depending on the situation and the manner which it’s realized by the interlocutor (or their receiver).

In the argumentative scene created by activists in their discursive reactions, there are two kinds of discursive strategies to reinforce the position taken and the argument created by them: The exhibition of an explanatory ethos and the pathetic construction through interpellation. Charaudeau (2012, p. 225) states that these tactics are to be "established evidence of the adopted posture".

For the activists to build the exemplary ethos, they use the semantic procedure in the argumentative staging that, according to Charaudeau (2012: 232): "[...] is an argument that is based on a social consensus [...]". According to Charaudeau’s (2012) categorization, it can be verified that such semantic procedure acts in Truths domain when, for instance, Activist 1 says "In my house we collect all kitchen oil residue and make soap". It seems like a real experience in the physical world, a shared testimony to reinforce the exemplary character of the activists behavior. The interlocutor can assimilate as an authentic assertive and only that, because it belongs exclusively to the knowledge scope of the writer, leaving no room for any doubt.

To be able to build a pathetic effect in their arguments, the activists use the discursive "procedure" (Charaudeau 2012) in their argumentative staging. Such a procedure aims to persuade the interlocutor. In the comments, there are assertives that appeal emotionally using the inherent activity of the discursive procedure called by Charaudeau (2012) as "behavior definition". With the phrases "Let’s fight this preposterous action, making everyone aware of that!" and "Let’s do our part", the internet user-reader defends implicitly a type of conduct defined as environmentally proper related to the dumping of the kitchen oil idea. Considering "preposterous" the incorrect discard, in first phase, the internet user/reader states that the correct behavior would be the opposite. In the second phase, it is clear the interpellation to the commitment regarding an attitude considered positive by him: the environmentally proper action.

In the four cases of discursive reactions presented in Figure 2 an argumentation tendency towards the positive reinforcement of the movement’s post can be noticed. However, in the collective production space that Facebook is, there are also comments opposing the movement. There are some "against" comments from Brazilians internet user/readers (Figure 3).
Even though they are opposites, the internet users-readers from Figure 3 interacted with the movements post, mobilizing negatively against it, arguing against the legitimacy of the published content and also about the movements behavior. Both of them build up a polemic argumentation from discursive and semantic procedures that clash with the movement’s post, considering it a lie. "Against 1" presents an explanation with no reference to refute the movement, supported by the semantic procedure of the "Truth domain" (Charaudeau 2012). He mocks the movement by saying that the publication is just "bla, bla, bla" and states what he believes to be true. The irony is a textual resource that has a defensive attribute, according to Charaudeau and Maingueneau (2006: 291). The author mentioned that irony is an effect which indirectly showed disagreement of the locator and no assumption of the enunciation.

Contrary 2 presents, an authority argument "Sabesp itself". Charaudeau (2012: 240) classifies this kind of discursive scope procedure as "quotes of knowledge". Such a referenced argument may influence the reader by the testimony of the third quoted, leaving no room for doubt.

Such level of opposition and provocative mobilization from the internet users/readers may initiate rational debates and discussions toward a possible deliberation about the matter. However, the participation stops in the comments, with no answer from the environmental movement after the against activists posts and there is no more conversation among the other users. This could be a specificity bounded to the widespread topic of the post, but the acknowledgement of the political conversation continuity lack created by the post is already negative evidence to the communication movement and its legitimacy maintenance.

Another category of comments found in the discursive reactions regarding the movements post is the one of the people who only want visibility and avoid a positive or negative answer to the movements post. In this case, there may be a mobilization, but about other topics and movements that have nothing to do with SOS Mata Atlântica, as seen in Figure 4.
The "undermined" comments do not take a pro or against stand about the argument from the movement, and also do not interact with the Internet users-readers, minimizing the political conversation in the post. They promote opinionated, that aim just to reinforce their visibility, making them public their own causes or spreading nonsense texts, as seen in Coment 2. This kind of visibility strategy developed much more with the Internet advent, as said by Sibilia (2008: 242):

The new channels unveiled by the internet also put themselves at service for the same end: the construction of self image. As they are allowed to be seen by anyone, and to be heard and read by millions of people, even without anything specific to say, also allows placement as their own brand as a visible personality.

The "undermined" Internet users-readers build arguments afar from the movement’s discourse, especially with the intention of achieving online visibility. The comments space is used only as a place of virtual performance of independent individuals.

The desire for visibility, at all costs is a phenomenon that can be observed not only in the "undermined" commentary, but also in the pro and against activists, that shared the same visibility space provided by Facebook to become visible, and spread their arguments and achieve a certain level of legitimacy. A legitimation process that was initiated by the environmental movement, but echoes and heckles, sometimes unconsciously, to other beings to also initiate such a discursive procedure, establishing a retro feed phenomenon of persuasion, argumentation, visibility and legitimacy.
Some Transitory Conclusions

On Facebook’s interconnected environment, environmental movements and internet users-readers build and spread their discourses strategically, as it was presented by the analyses shown in this article. They use the expression space available on the site to achieve visibility and legitimate their causes.

Environmental issues such as the ones defended by the SOS Mata Atlantica are important in the handling of nowadays political debates. To be legitimated, these debates need to obtain society’s commitment and be known by them. On Facebook, the possibility of increasing the environmental causes’ popularity is enhanced by the visibility space offered by this tool and it is used politically by the users. Such appropriation could create an online mobilization.

Through analysis of internet-readers’ comments in the SOS Mata Atlantica’s webpage, distinct levels and types of mobilization were identified. A considerable part of the comments show a positive commitment towards the defended cause in the movements post, this reveals the possibility that SOS Mata Atlanticas discourses are able to gather people to help proper environmental causes, at least in the virtual scene. In other comment groups, the negative discursive reactions seem to harm the movements discourse, even urging conflicts. Such comments, however, could also present a possibility to achieve a wider range debate about this subject, because they demand from the movement a conversation about the opposing statements of the movement’s post. However such dialogue does not get consolidated in the case studied and there is not a deep political debate about the subject that could contribute to the construction of democratic consensus or dissents on the matter.

On this complex Facebook environment, it can be said that the visibility yearning is predominant among movements and also internet users. Perhaps it is because of the high visibility rate from the comments section, what makes that participation is self-censored and the occurrence of more intense debates damaged, predominating only the internet users-readers’ tastes and preferences expressions. The authors will yet study this hypothesis found in the research from this article.

The data analyzed in this article presents primary evidence of the complexity that the environmental movements have to face on the social networks to achieve the needed visibility and legitimacy, which are crucial to the public recognition of these causes. On their fan page, SOS Mata Atlantica share their enunciate space with complex, volatile and virtual Internet users-readers, that also use this space to express their own enunciates, by adopting the movements ideas or just to amplify their visibility range in the website, promoting a kind of visibility retro feed in between. In previous research conducted by the authors, the profiles of the types of subjects that perform these comments in the digital social network site were studied, as well as which statements are disclosed in more fan page movements. These studies helped to understand a little of the discursive functioning of digital space.

This paper aimed to show, some challenges, like dialogue and persuasion with digital and multiples profiles, and possibilities, like engagement and
visibility, that a Brazilian environmental movement such as SOS Mata Atlântica needs to face in a pervasive environment, where discourses and masks are created and recreated all the time. Such space can serve only as a stage place and as pure identification, eliminating the commitment sought by the movement. These are also some of the challenges of the researchers who may be limitations to further discoveries.

This study was only a small part of a more extent corpus, which was transitorily collected and analyzed for a master degrees research on going by the authors; any deeper conclusion drawn here requires deeper insight that will happen by the end of the master degree research.

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