Decentralization of communication in Social Media. Case Study: Online Communication Strategy of the "Save a Heart" Association

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Abstract: Media communication systems have experienced a radical change in their functional mechanisms, at the same time with the development of the online social networks, where the online public has become an important factor for decentralization and influencing the message in its social groups (strong ties). The aims of this research are analyzing how the online message travels from transmitter to the weak links of the transmitter, by involving the strong links and also analyzing the degree to which the message of the transmitter is discussed in social groups of the strong links compared with the messages debated on the Facebook source-page. Following the analysis, we can clearly observe that the message published by the transmitter on the source-page reach the weak links, due to the strong ties involved. Also, we noticed that the Facebook page of the "Save a Heart" Association is used by strong ties (fans) to a greater extent as a source to disseminate the message to their social groups and less as a space for debating the message of the transmitter.

Keywords: Social Media; Facebook; push-push-pull communication; social groups; strong and weak ties

1. Introduction

Media communication systems have experienced a radical change in their functional mechanisms, at the same time with the development of the online social networks, where the online public has become an important factor for decentralization and influencing the message in its social groups (strong ties).

If in the initial period of the traditional systems of communication, the main actors of the communicational process used the one-way communication and the public had no means of interaction with them - their feedback was delayed or even absent -

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during the Social Media era, the power of influence of journalists, politicians and of the presumed influential persons in offline medium considerably decreased. In the online environment, the communication process is conducted by regular users of Social Media, which customize the online message, they share and discuss it, through interpersonal communication, in their social groups.

The decisive role of SNSs on citizens was proved especially by increasing the proximity and the accessibility to the online public in public life and not only contributed to the expansion of online information (political, entertainment, etc.) in all social network hubs, but especially contributed on citizen involvement in public life.

2. Decentralized communication on Facebook

2.1. The "Push-Push-Pull" Communication Mechanism Empowered the Online Audience

The power of influence of the online audience would not have been substantial if there did not exist a communication mechanism, that two researchers - Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein - called the "push-push-pull" communication (Kaplan, Haelein, 2011, p. 107). Even though its principle of communication was originally proposed for the microblogging network Twitter, it has been demonstrated that it works just as well in almost any Social Media applications, like Facebook for example. By the "push-push-pull" mechanism, the online message reaches a larger and larger readership, because the Facebook fans "push" the message in their social groups (their strong ties) by any type of interaction with the post (likes, comments, shares etc.), and then the members of their social group are "pushing" the message further to their groups of influence and so on, generating a cascading growth of the number of readers.

From this perspective, Philip Seib says that Facebook has become a multiplying force, that "can enhance the influence of a relatively small number of people, allowing them to have access and organizational capacity at a much higher number" (Seib, 2012, pp. 127-128).

At the same time, the multiplying and influencing power of Facebook will be recognized also at the level of weak ties, i.e. among foreigners, not only among close friends (strong ties), which is another trigger for exponential growth in the audience of an online subject. The multiplying force was explained by the author and by his

own theory, which is called "the decentralized communication in social groups" (Tasente, 2014).

2.2. The Strong and the Weak Ties on Facebook

In the context in which the online social networks are becoming increasingly powerful and complex, the classical communication theories have been redesigned and applied to the circumstances of Social Media. Mark Granovetter (1973) proposed a theory of communication, entitled "The Strength of Weak Ties", which other researchers of the Social Media phenomenon can use it to establish connections between types of social ties in the online environment.

Granovetter's theory refers to the relationships between structures, intensities of social ties and dissemination of information in offline social networks. He classified social ties in two ways: by its strength and by its position in social networks. In one direction, the social ties are characterized precisely by their strength, in conjunction with the time spent together, the intimacy and the emotional intensity of a relationship. While the strong ties refer to relationships with friends and relatives, the weak ties refer to foreigners and also to the friends of our friends. On the other hand, a social link can be characterized and by its position it has in social networks. A link can be within a social group, we can see links between groups, intermediate links or there may be situations between entities that are part of a group with entities that are not affiliated with any group, as shown in the chart below.
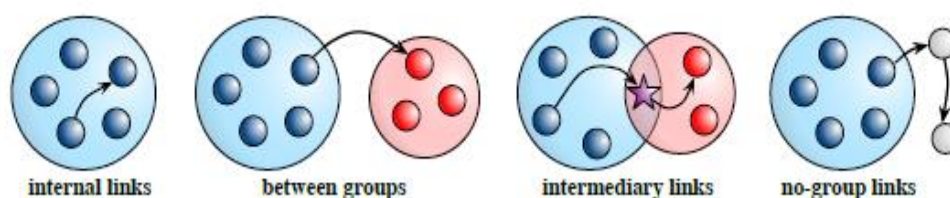

Figure 1. Different types of links classified by their position in the structure of social groups: internal links, links between groups, intermediate links and links without group (Grabowicz, Ramasco & Eguiluz, 2013)

Granovetter's theory is based on the idea that the weak links (foreigners or friends of our friends) act as a bridge between groups and they are very important for the diffusion of new information within the social network. It is presumed that the strong links are located within groups between those who have many friends in common.

Analyzing this theory from the perspective of communication through online social networks, we find that Social Media generated other kind of secondary groups as we know them from the offline social networks, namely groups and virtual communities, aggregated according to individual interests. In comparison, the virtual groups do not take into account indicators such as spatial proximity, the age difference or affiliation to social and professional categories, as we have in offline social networks. In the online environment, as Sebastian Valenzuela, Yonghwan Kim and Homero Gil de Zuniga (2012, pp. 167-168) noted, the strong links refer to discussions that take place between friends and family members, ties characterized by "intimacy, trust and mutual respect" (Kennz, 1994, p. 718) and the weak links are achieved by talking with ephemeral visitors, friends of friends and strangers, namely those individuals that a person does not share that intimacy that we previously referred to.

Several recent studies have shown that the strong links are a key-source for online participation and engagement, but in Social Media a significant role for creating debates on various topics and developing participatory behavior from members, is played by the weak links.

Thus, it becomes very clear that Social Media is a means in which the commitment of users in commenting and sharing any kind of messages is essential and offers, as Marta Marchevici stated, "all that traditional institutions and news channels can not do" (Marchevici, 2013), i.e. to create involvement from the public anymore, involvement that can translate to debates, meetings or civic and political events. Social Media has revitalized the public space and offered the opportunity to debate matters of general interest with traditional opinion leaders (journalists, politicians, civil society). Moreover, the SNSs "have deployed elite domination regarding the production and dissemination of knowledge and expanded the public access to a variety of public sources of information and knowledge" (Coleman, Ross, 2010, p. 94). In other way, because the rise of communication in online environment, the monopoly of opinion offered by a single source, as it was in an early stage of development of the television, has disappeared and, perhaps more importantly, "media networks" as they have been called by Brian and Dan Loader Mercea, "have the potential to reconfigure communicative power relations" (Loader & Mercea 2011, p. 759).

3. Case Study: Online Communication Strategy of the "Save a Heart" Association

3.1. Aims of the Research

O1: Analyzing how the online message flows from transmitter to the weak links of the transmitter, by involving the strong ties.

O2: Analyzing the degree to which the messages of the transmitter are discussed in social groups of the strong ties compared with the messages debated on the Facebook source-page.

3.2. Research Hypotheses

We presume that the "Save a Heart" Association's Facebook page[1] is used by the strong links in a greater degree as source of dissemination to social groups rather than as a space for talking about the message. At the same time, the message of the transmitter is discussed in a greater proportion on the social groups of the strong ties than on the source-page.

3.3. The Research Method

The research method used is quantitative, namely the collection and analysis of statistical data. We have analyzed five posts from the Facebook page of the "Save a Heart" Association, which received the largest audience in 2016. For our research, we have analyzed several indicators, such as: the number of reactions and comments made on the source page and outside the page (in the social groups of the strong ties) and the number of shares that occurred on the source page and on the social groups from outside of the source-page.

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/salveazaoinima/.

3.4. Analyze of the way that message flows on Facebook

Post #1. 11th of February 2016, which was viewed by 2,262,279 people
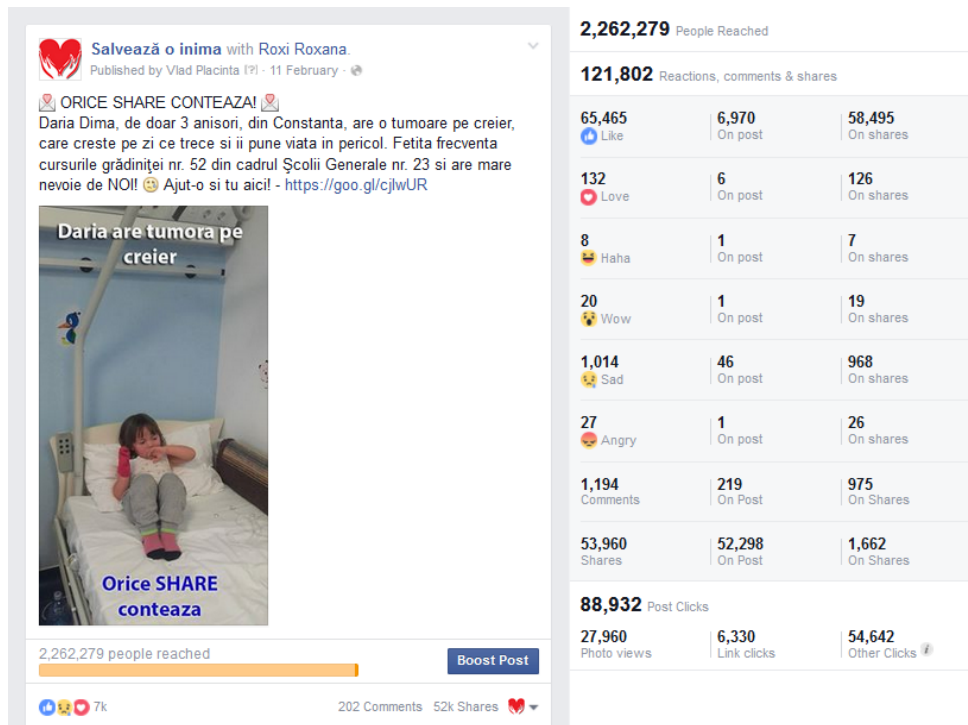
The post from 11th of February, 2016 had an audience of 2,262,279 people and a number of 121,802 of interactions (likes, comments and shares), which shows that a percentage of 5.38% of users became vectors of communication because of their interactions. We can also observe that 7,244 interactions (likes and comments) are performed on the source-page and other 60,616 interactions are conducted in the social groups of those who shared the message further. Thus, a percentage of 10.67% interacts on the source-page and the other 89.33% were talking about the topic in social groups (outside the source-page). The information has arrived in social groups due to 53,960 shares, of which 52,298 shares were made from the source-page. Through to the "push-push-pull" communication mechanism, the post was redeployed also from the secondary node of the network by other 1662 users, helping the message to increase its audience to the weaker ties of the transmitter.

Post #2. 21st of February, 2016, which was viewed by 1,707,839 people

The post from 21st of February, 2016 had an audience of 1,707,839 people and 58,876 interactions (likes, comments and shares), aspect that shows that a percentage of 5.38% of users became vectors of communication because of their interactions. We can also see that 3,747 interactions (likes and comments) are performed on the source-page and other 25,955 interactions are conducted in the social groups of those who shared the message further. Moreover, a percentage of 12.62%% interacts on the source-page and the other 87.38% were talking about the subject in social groups. The information has arrived in social groups because of 29,189 shares, of which 28,060 shares were realized from the source-page. Through to the "push-push-pull" communication mechanism, the post was redeployed also from the secondary node of the network by other 1,129 users, helping the message to increase its audience to the weaker ties of the transmitter.

Post #3. 20th of February, 2016, which was viewed by 1,512,382 people

The post from 20th of February, 2016 had an audience of 1,512,382 people and 76,771 interactions (likes, comments and shares), aspect that shows that a percentage of 5.38% of users became vectors of communication because of their interactions. We can also see that 19.312 interactions (likes and comments) are performed on the source-page and other 28,742 interactions are conducted in the social groups of those who shared the message further. Moreover, a percentage of 40.19%% interacts on the source-page and the other 59.81% were talking about the subject in social groups. The information has arrived in social groups because of 28,721 shares, of which 27,703 shares were realized from the source-page. Through to the "push-push-pull" communication mechanism, the post was redeployed also from the secondary node of the network by other 1,018 users, helping the message to increase its audience to the weaker ties of the transmitter.

Post #4. 14th of February, 2016, which was viewed by 815,245 people

The post from 14th of February, 2016 had an audience of 815,245 people and 39,001 interactions (likes, comments and shares), which shows that a percentage of 4.78% of users were vectors of communication because of their interactions. We can also see that 11,380 interactions (likes and comments) are performed on the source-page and other 13,099 interactions are conducted in the social groups of those who shared the message further. Moreover, a percentage of 46.49%% interacts on the source-page and the other 53.51% were talking about the subject in social groups. The information has arrived in social groups because of 14,520 shares, of which 13,991 shares were realized from the source-page. Through to the "push-push-pull" communication mechanism, the post was redeployed also from the secondary node of the network by other 609 users, helping the message to increase its audience to the weaker ties of the transmitter.

Post #5. 21st of April, 2016, which was viewed by 614,317 people

The post from 21st of April, 2016 had an audience of 614,317 people and 35,721 interactions (likes, comments and shares), which shows that a percentage of 5.81% of users were vectors of communication because of their interactions. We can also see that 10,674 interactions (likes and comments) are performed on the source-page and other 13,208 interactions are conducted in the social groups of those who shared the message further. Moreover, a percentage of 44.69%% interacts on the source-page and the other 55.31% were talking about the subject in social groups. The information has arrived in social groups because of 11,887 shares, of which 11,772 shares were realized from the source-page. Through to the "push-push-pull" communication mechanism, the post was redeployed also from the secondary node of the network by other 115 users, helping the message to increase its audience to the weaker ties of the transmitter.

Conclusions

Analyzing all five posts from the perspective of decentralization of the communication process, operation made by the strong ties in their influence groups, we have observed that, in total, 96.72% of the shares were made by strong ties (fans) and the other distributions were conducted in the secondary node of the network by the weak ties (friends of friends or strangers). Due to the strong decentralization of the message to social groups, we observe that the message is discussed in a much smaller proportion (26.99%) on the source-page and the most interactions (likes and comments) - 73.01% - are realize outside the page, in social groups of the strong ties and further into social groups of friends of the fans (weak ties).
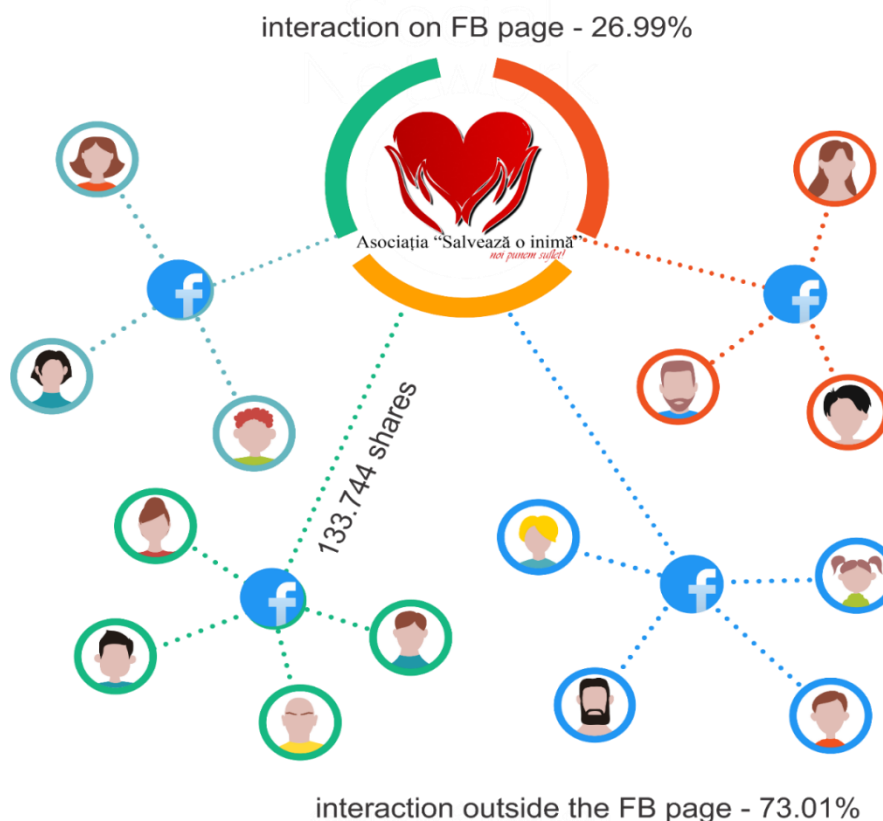
Following the analysis, we can clearly observe that the message published by the transmitter on the source-page reaches the weak links, due to the involving of the

strong ties. Also, we noticed that the Facebook page of the "Save a Heart" Association is used by strong ties (fans) to a greater extent as a source to disseminate the message to their social groups and less as a space for debating the message of the transmitter, and so our hypothesis is confirmed.

4. References

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