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The Gift of the Gab: Retweet cartels and gift economies on Twitter

Johannes Paßmann, Thomas Boeschoten, and Mirko Tobias Schäfer

In *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, anthropologist David Graeber explains that the commercial exchange of goods is different from the exchange of gifts because trading partners have the opportunity to even things out by paying their debts and parting ways (cf. Graeber 2011, 105). However, in the case of neighbourly relationships, not paying back 'debts' can actually create and consolidate relationships. On this point, Graeber refers to Laura Bohannan's anthropological novel *Return to Laughter*, where she explains how the Tiv people in rural Nigeria base their communities on a perpetual circulation of *gifts* (cf. ibid.). Tiv customs require the receiver of the present, the presentee, to eventually return the favour – not immediately, but after a while. And the value of the reciprocated gift must never match exactly that of the previously received gift, as this would imply a wish to end the relationship. A person who gives nothing in return is branded a parasite. This therefore gives rise to a perpetual circulation of gifts and reciprocal presents that fosters a sense of community and belonging. Graeber's distinction between a commercial exchange and a gift exchange is derived from Bronislaw Malinowski, who describes the differences between the system of gift exchange (*kula*) and commercial trading (*gimwali*) in South Pacific communities at the beginning of the 20th century (cf. Malinowski 1932). Anthropologist C.A. Gregory also distinguishes between goods and prestigious items to explain the different circulation of liabilities: Goods are exchanged to maximize profits while prestigious items are exchanged to maximize the number of debtors (cf. Gregory 1982).

Whether Twitter is viewed as a platform for narcissistic self-representation or a catalyst of political change, the bottom line is that Twitter provides for the circulation of brief messages among connected users.These users participate actively in this circulation by retweeting, favouring (or 'faving') and replying to messages and drawing additional attention to them, stimulating even more

circulation through other users ' retweets and favourites of the initial message. This chapter looks at the modes of circulation of Twitter messages and will reveal user practices for retweeting. It shows that users make pragmatic choices when retweeting or faving messages and illustrates how these choices are embedded in a socio-cultural context.

The support of other users and their willingness to share a message with their range of followers is crucial for distributing tweets successfully. Can we argue – keeping in mind the protocol behind the exchange of gifts in Tiv communities in Nigeria described by Graeber – that the successful circulation of communication on Twitter relies heavily on pervasive mutual indebtedness?

The philosopher and ethnologist Marcel Hénaff argues that in the past the ceremonial, mutual exchange of gifts was limited to segmentary societies and was the common way to publicly acknowledge and show respect to a presentee. According to Hénaff, this way of demonstrating recognition has become obsolete in today's political societies because social status is regulated by law. The gift has become a purely private matter (Hénaff 2008:237). If social media revive gift exchanging as a popular form of public appreciation – whether by retweeting or faving on Twitter or by liking on Facebook – the concept of the gift would reveal a new perspective on social interaction in social media.

In order to understand circulation via social media, Henry Jenkins, Xiaochang Li, Ana Domb Krauskopf and Joshua Green, fellows of Futures of Entertainment, make the same distinction between the circulation of commerce and gifts that many other scholars have made before them,[1] and which is most famously explored by Graeber, Malinowski and Gregory. Specifically, the authors distinguish in cultural production in social media – alluding to the novelist Lewis Hyde – between a 'commodity culture' and a 'gift economy' (Jenkins et al. 2009:45).[2] This distinction enables them to 'develop a better model' (ibid:46) than does the concept of viral distribution, which degrades users to 'involuntary "hosts"' (ibid:8) of a virus.

[1] See, for example, Marcel Mauss (1990), Georges Bataille (1988), Claude Levi-Strauss (1971), Michel Serres (1982) and Jacques Derrida (1995), but also Alain Caillé (2007) and Maurice Godelier (1999).

[2] Contrary to various more fundamental works about the gift (see footnote 1), we use the term 'gift economy' to indicate the systemic and value-like aspects of the exchange we are describing. For Hénaff (2008) f.e. gift economies cannot exist as gifts are neither economic nor moral. From his perspective, attributing value to the gift would mean to misunderstand it (cf. Hénaff 2006:236).

Different models for the dissemination of communication in online media have been proposed, such as the above-mentioned viral distribution, a term coined by author Chris Anderson (2004) and further elaborated by Charles Leadbeater (2008) and writer Clay Shirky (2008).

This chapter does not propose a superior model for the circulation of messages on Twitter, but rather tries to map the practices users actively employ for spreading their messages. We essentially assume that the hybrid infrastructure of Twitter, since it consists of a software design and user activities, will remain dynamic and subject to design and appropriation processes that significantly affect the modes of circulation. For example, retweeting used to be a user-initiated practice, a form of citing, in which 'RT @username' was manually added to the written text. Later the retweet button was introduced, one of many changes in Twitter's software design that altered its modes of circulation.

With reference to Malinowski's maxim, we 'follow the natives' (cf. Schüttpelz 2008) in order to reveal their models of communication circulation on Twitter. In a qualitative analysis we map user perceptions of how to successfully use Twitter and how users think Twitter communication works, and we elaborate on these findings with a quantitative analysis of two different examples of highly active Twitter users.

Follow the natives

We will refer to two cases that empirically show how circulation is conducted on Twitter. They also show how sample messages are distributed. Because of Twitter's social network infrastructures and hierarchies, anyone attempting to explain how circulation is conducted cannot only focus on content. We also reject the notion of a stable distribution model as we view Twitter as a socio-technological setting, where users appropriate technology and media practices while the platform provider also constantly readjusts the platform's information management and the distribution mechanism.

In case 1, a mapping of the Dutch parliamentary Twitter sphere reveals functional interactions between professional elites. Case 2 is an analysis of German Twitter users, which reveals two loosely connected networks with quite different core interests: net politics and fun. Both networks are dominated by retweet cartels that are crucial for pushing messages beyond the attention threshold of a wide audience. Our quantitative approach was able to retrieve the actual flow of messages through a network and can trace in detail when which

topic was raised by whom and to what effect. Our qualitative research, meanwhile, was able to reveal the factors that this communication thrived on: social interaction, face-to-face communication, mutual respect and the individual standing of a sender within the network.

Political parties as retweet cartels

Mapping the activity of Dutch politicians on Twitter shows that the party affiliation of the initial sender and those who subsequently retweet the message is crucial for the circulation. The Dutch parliament has a multi-party system based on proportional representation. From 2010–2012 there were 150 members of parliament representing 10 parties, roughly divided into left-wing, right-wing and centre parties. Precisely this multi-party system is reproduced in the scene's Twitter communication.

We gathered all the tweets sent by members of the Dutch parliament between 1 February 2012 and 31 August 2012. Two datasets were prepared: one with all replies by politicians, and another consisting solely of retweets. For Figure 1 and Figure 2 we filtered both datasets in order to show only the mutual relationships between members of parliament.[3]

The reply network (Figure 1) shows that many members of parliament communicate frequently with each other and reciprocate regardless of their party affiliation. Their communication on Twitter is essentially not affected by party affiliation. Therefore, the graph has an almost perfect round shape, with many users connected to a wide variety of colleagues from different parties. Some members of the same parties flock close together forming a cluster (especially the Dutch liberal party, VVD), but in general party membership hardly affects with whom they communicate via Twitter. The clusters of parties are well connected to other parties. Some of them, like the socialist party SP, the Christian democrats CDA and the labour party PvdA, do not form clear clusters at all.

[3] We used Gephi, an interactive visualisation platform, to visualize the data by applying the ForceAtlas2 algorithm to it (with the same settings for both datasets).

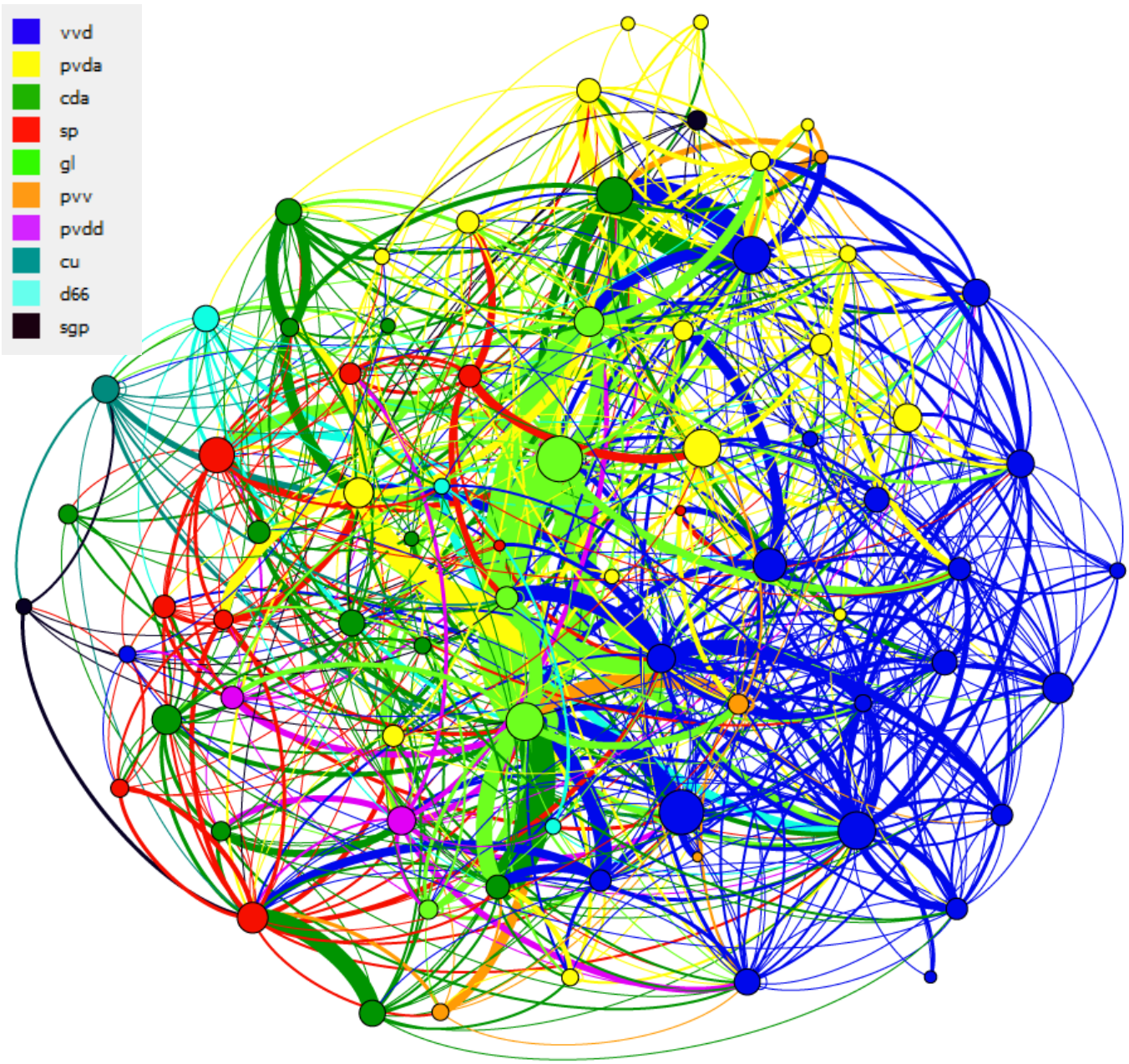

Figure 1: Twitter reply network of MPs in the Netherlands

While replying is widely unaffected by party affiliation, retweeting is very much structured by it. Dutch politicians tend to prefer retweeting their own party members' messages than retweeting messages by members from opposition parties. That is why, instead of a highly intertwined network, the retweet network shows almost isolated clusters of parties. On the right we see the VVD, closest to the parties they formed a government with in the previous cabinet (CDA and the Party for Freedom, PVV). On the left we see the opposition, the

left-wing parties, with the nodes forming clusters and some weak ties between the clusters.

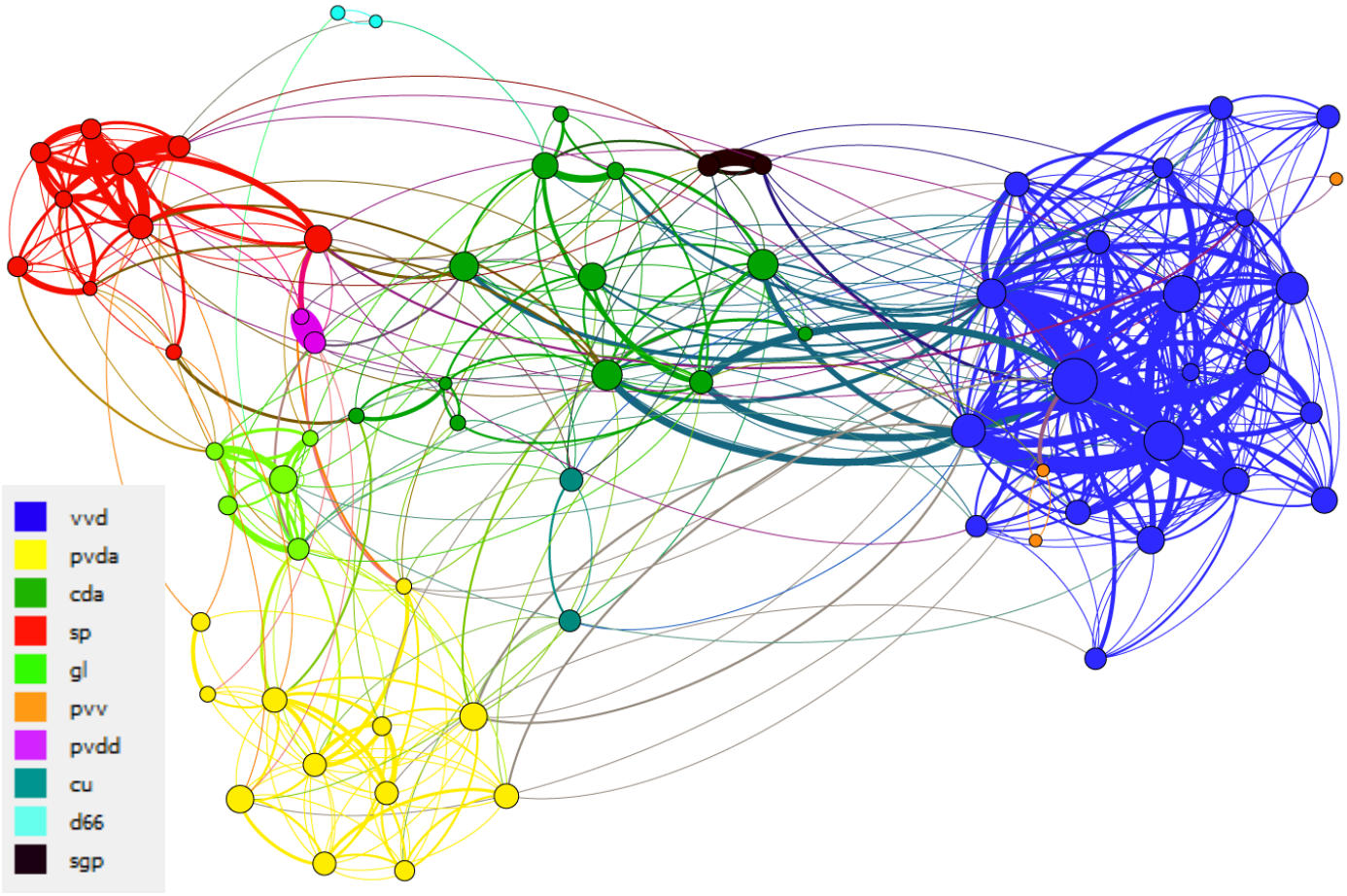

Figure 2: Twitter retweet network of MPs in the Netherlands

The difference between Figure 1 and Figure 2 suggests that retweeting and replying are treated as different media practices: retweets are often seen as a form of endorsement while replies appear to be a mode of communication among colleagues. So the retweet network resembles the political organisation with the different parties clustering together next to their political kin. MPs' tendency to prefer their own MPs for retweeting above others is a form of homophily:

'Similarity breeds connection. This principle – the homophily principle – structures network ties of every type [...] The result is that people's personal networks are homogeneous with regard to many sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics. Homophily limits people's social worlds in a

way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience' (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001:415).

Earlier research also found several forms of homophily on Twitter (see Java et al. 2007, Weng et al. 2010 and Wu et al. 2011). This suggests that users tend to flock in homogeneous networks in terms of values or social status. Even though MPs' behaviour demonstrates homophily, it should be noted that it is a very specific form of homophily. It refers to a specific legal form of organisation, namely the political parties representing their shared values. Politicians do not just retweet people who are similar to them or share their values. They retweet people from their own party, and this behaviour evokes Durkheim's concept of 'mechanical solidarity' (Durkheim 1984, Chapter 2). This mechanical solidarity is what is behind this specific brand of homophily, which can be called, with slight irony, a retweet cartel. Here, the practice of retweeting takes place in the context of membership in a political organisation, whereas its gifting character apparently does not initially generate relationships. The choice to retweet their fellow party members over other politicians is an affirmation of offline affiliations and reproduces as such social structures existing also 'outside' of Twitter.

Opening gifts in the German Favstar scene

The Favstar scene is a huge network among German Twitter users. Favstar is a web application that tracks retweets and favourites (called Favs).[4] Favstar generates rankings of users and awards them for particular achievements, such as having received 50 or more Favs. Users ranking high on Favstar are (mostly ironically) referred to as 'Twitter Elite' by other users. When mainstream media refer to Tweets that report current events in Germany, they usually refer to accounts held by 'elite' members. One of the authors of this chapter, Johannes Paßmann, is a participatory observer in this scene. He has an account ranked among the top 100 German Twitter accounts, according to the number of 'toptweets' (see footnote 11) written from this account.[5] Members try to write tweets that receive a maximum of retweets and Favs. Status in this group is gained by the number of followers and the number of received Favs, retweets and Favstar awards users accumulate. While the politicians mentioned above

[4] See www.favstar.fm.

[5] For his PhD dissertation, Paßmann is observing the German Favstar scene. He describes the Favstar scene as a platform where Twitter users write tweets in order to receive as many Favs and retweets as possible. He opened his own pseudonymous Twitter account for research purposes, and is an active member of this scene. He is able to conduct field research on meetings organised by and for the Favstar scene.

have the advantage of being known to a large audience through their mainstream media appearances, Favstar members often have to build up their audience from scratch after setting up what are often pseudonymous accounts.

Apart from the skill it takes to write witty messages, there are other practices that help users to establish an audience of followers. Paßmann experimented by searching the activity sub-site of the Twitter application for tweets that have received Favs from the popular accounts he is following. For three days he randomly awarded Favs to as many tweets as possible. The result was a sharp increase in the Favs he received of approximately 200 new followers. Some users who had received Favs from him returned the favour by sending out recommendations to follow him. This is a well-known strategy among heavy users and the Favstar scene, but anyone who employs this strategy repeatedly risks being labelled an 'Allesfaver' (an everything faver).

This practice of awarding Favs evokes the 'opening of gifts' as described in Malinowski's work about the Kula ring[6]: at the beginning of an exchange ceremony potential partners are lured with an opening gift. If one of the participants accepts it he or she has to reciprocate with a 'clinching gift' that establishes a relationship with certain obligations. The actual exchange takes place after this initial opening ritual (cf. Malinowski 1932:98, 352ff, 472f, 487f).

Awarding Favs to other Twitter users is similar to an opening gift. However, Twitter is not coercive about the clinching gift in the case of Favs and Retweets. The circulation of these gifts is not necessarily mutual.[7] While Malinowski's account of the gift exchange appears to be shaped by tradition and thrives on rather explicit social coercion, gifts in Twitter thrive on the expectation that some Twitter users will return the gesture.

After accepting the opening gift the future relationship between two users on Twitter can evolve into an alliance where both pragmatically retweet each other's

[6] Daniel Miller (2011:205-215) compares Facebook to Malinowskis Kula ring. He does it on a way more fundamental level, taking the Kula ring as an example for culture as such. For this chapter, we only address the example of opening gifts in the Kula ring and do not refer to such more fundamental questions.

[7] There are other gifts in the Favstar scene leading to stronger obligations which cannot be mentioned in this chapter. Here we can only discuss the in terms of obligation rather weak gifts of Retweets and Favs. Stronger forms of obligation can f.e. be observed when a large Favstar account follows another one. For the emergence of cartels, these latter gifts appear to be more important.

tweets in order to have access to each other's audience.[8] The gift in the digital realm is not pricy, which is why some successful members of Favstar give away opening gifts in large numbers. Some users award up to 200,000 Favs per year, and this strategy rewards them with many followers.[9] The inflated number of Favs in question here sheds doubt on their value as a gift. Some Favstar scene members award up to 4,000 Favs per day.[10] We might almost speak of a gift simulation here, an ephemeral gesture of endorsement; the presentee is not required to reply in kind and the donor has an abundance of Favs to distribute.

Quantitative analysis also sheds light on the practice of ritual faving. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show networks of about 350 popular Twitter accounts in the German Twitter sphere.[11] Linking these 350 accounts to their Favstar records, we built a database consisting of the 100 most popular tweets sent by each of these accounts and traced all the users who retweeted or faved them. We used that database to make two visualisations, filtering the Favs (Figure 3) and retweets (Figure 4) that only had been exchanged between the 350 accounts.[12] In both cases, this maps out a part of at least two German gift economies on Twitter.

The dark and thick lines in Figure 3 show at least five mutual Favs out of 100 Tweets. The thin lines show one-way Favs. The size of the nodes corresponds to the number of toptweets (see footnote 11) that each account has written. Some large nodes in the diagram have no connection to others, as they use Favs much like bookmarks. Others, gathered in the dark cluster of accounts, use the favourite function excessively. Here we see a specific scene emerging with a specific gifting practice: the Favstar scene. Almost half are involved in the mutual exchange of Favs.

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[8] We are aware that the majority of Twitter users retweet or favour messages from large accounts, who rarely reciprocate. We are referring here, however, to the practices of users who are deliberately attempting to improve their visibility and increase the circulation of their own messages. However, we assume that what can be said about gifts in the Favstar scene also occurs, albeit less visibly, on every web platform.

[9] Examples of these accounts are @regendelfin, @__ole__ or @ritakasino.

[10] See the Twitter statistics website at Tweetster.de.

[11] The sample consists of Twitter accounts that have been retweeted by the account @toptweets_de (which belongs to the Twitter corporation) at least three times between 9 September 2011 and 9 March 2012. The toptweets account uses an algorithm to define a range of accounts and a range of tweets. Messages that receive the status of toptweet as defined by Twitter are retweeted through the various language-based toptweets accounts. Here we focused on the German edition of toptweets. Other publications refer also to @toptweets_de retweets or mention a criterion for the range of accounts (see Neuberger, vom Hofe and Nuernbergk 2009).

[12] We would like to thank Martijn Weghorst for retrieving the data. He was most helpful visualising data and commenting on the findings.

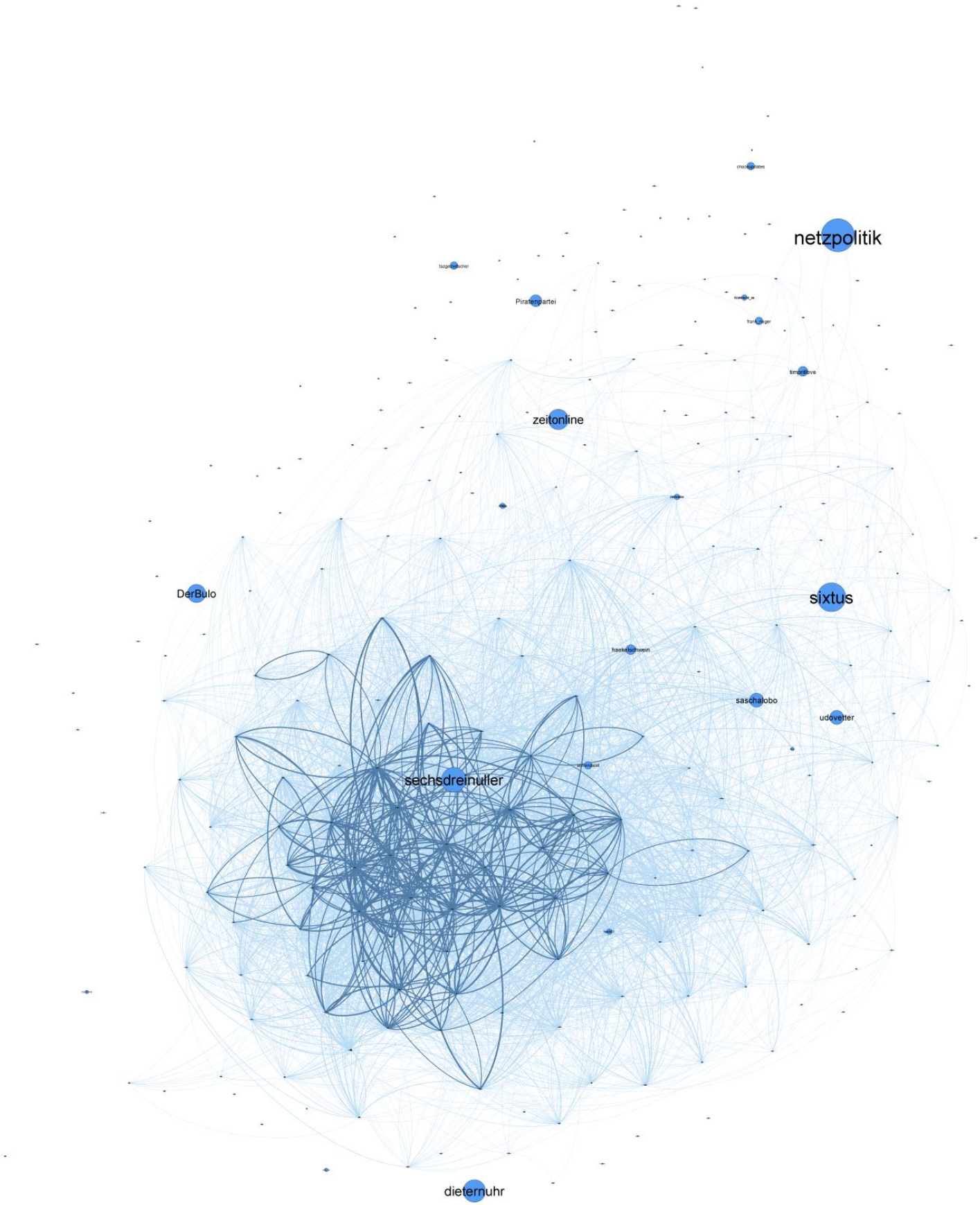

Figure 3: Frequent distribution of Favs among 350 popular German accounts.

In this scene, Favs are awarded much more often than retweets. As was the case with the politicians in the example above, retweets indicate a stronger commitment. Taken together, these quantitative findings and Paßmann's participant observations reveal an economy of gift exchanging that stabilizes and maintains the popularity of the accounts in question through Favs.

We also analysed another gifting practice that contributes more obviously to the circulation of tweets. We mapped the retweets of the 350 popular German accounts in Figure 4, which enables us to show the circulation of tweets on German Twitter.

Two clusters are discernible in Figure 4: the left one represents the Favstar scene discussed above, while the right one consists of accounts mainly involved in net politics. The right cluster resembles use similar to what we found with Dutch politicians because the retweet also serves to promote shared objectives and values as well as an effective form of information distribution.

Looking at the two clusters we notice that the practice of retweeting is different. We found that the Favstar accounts retweet each other much more frequently than the accounts in the right cluster. We interpret this to be the result of a stronger social cohesiveness consolidated by the practice of gifting.

The gift economy is most distinctive in the cluster where the circulation of messages is perceived as a desirable end in itself and is therefore much more present in the Favstar scene. This leads to a more homogeneous cluster of accounts that are exclusively concerned with the distinct memes, habits and communication patterns of this same scene. The accounts related to net politics show a more heterogeneous mix of participants ranging from activists to mainstream media accounts. The Favstar scene has been facilitated by a form of technology appropriation that one of the authors of this chapter, Mirko Tobias Schäfer, described when discussing other digitally engaged communities in a previous work (see Schäfer 2011): originally created as a way of bookmarking, the Fav button is now fundamental to the gift economy of the Favstar scene. The accounts displayed in the other cluster have not developed such a salient form of technology appropriation.

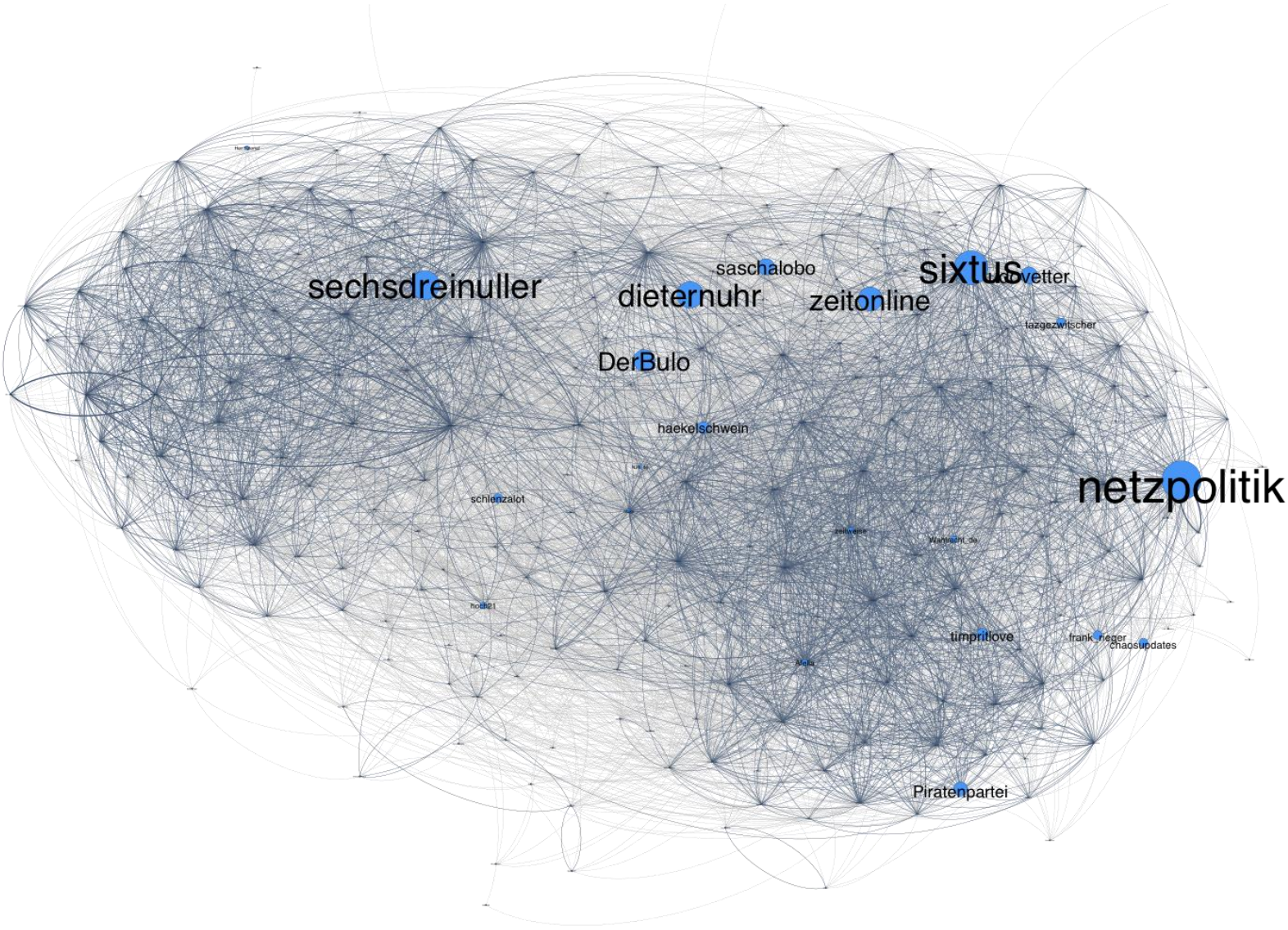

Figure 4: Retweets in the Favstar scene (left) and other accounts, often affiliated to net politics (right).

Contrary to the Fav, the retweet is a demonstration of public commitment and is therefore used less frequently, especially in the Favstar scene, but also among the politicians who are very selective about whose messages they are willing to multiply. Retweets are common among people in the Favstar scene who already have an established relationship in mutual exchange, while in the political sphere people mainly stick to retweeting members of their own party. Unlike the politicians, people in the Favstar scene are not burdened with many formal or professional obligations and have relatively little in common outside their Twitter activities. Members of the Favstar scene rely heavily on other people's support for the circulation of their messages, while for the politicians Twitter is only marginally important – 'just another' channel to promote their agendas and a means to communicate (Schäfer, Overheul and Boeschoten 2012).

The quantitative description and our interpretation are supported by Paßmann's interviews. By confronting members in the Favstar retweet clusters depicted in Figure 4 with the findings he tried to retrieve their personal view of their practice of awarding Favs and retweets. At the end of an almost four-hour-long conversation with @sechsdreinuller, the most retweeted account of the Favstar scene, he said:

'Of course there are cartels, and of course we invest in them and use them. Why should I retweet someone who will never retweet me back or promote something that is already on the mass-media anyway?'[13]

When asked if he has ever retweeted a tweet from an non-governmental organisation or other charitable organisation, he answered: 'I did that once because that was extremely important to me. But, you know, things like that cost me a massive amount of followers. My followers follow me for the punch lines, not for what I want them to do.'[14]

The Twitter users we have described above are aware of the fact that they depend on others to maximize the distribution of their messages and form useful alliances. While the politicians reproduce their political alliances on Twitter, the Favstar members initiate them implicitly through their gifts. Making these alliances explicit is – at least among Favstar members – objectionable. In an interview, user @goganzeli calls it a 'form of cheating'. The user @sechsdreinuller was only willing to speak about the retweet cartels after Paßmann could show that his pseudonymous account appeared in the same retweet cartel. This reveals two sides to the alliances Favstar users forge: on the one hand, mutual support is necessary for distributing messages successfully, and on the other hand, the alliance must remain latent.

Conclusion

We have shown that the circulation of messages on Twitter is co-shaped by consolidation of relationships through mutual gift exchanging and the reproduction of existing social relationships. A quantitative analysis of Favs and retweets revealed distinct clusters of users who prefer to circulate messages by members of the same cluster. This circulation might be based on shared values, a political affiliation or other things people have in common outside the world of Twitter, as the example of the politicians indicated, but it could also be the result

[13] Personal notes of conversation with @sechsdreinuller on 27 July 2012 in Frankfurt.
[14] Ibid.

of a common practice of using retweets, Favs and replies and other gifts to establish mutual relations that extend beyond the existing range of potential circulation. Employing Malinowski's (1932) term gift economy has made it possible to explain the patterns of message circulation revealed by our quantitative analysis and back them up with qualitative findings.

We observed that the gift in the Favstar scene resembles a revived form of public recognition. This is useful for analysing interaction on social media in general. The term gift economy has been repeatedly used to describe forms of 'immaterial' exchange in online networks (see, for example, Rheingold 2000:49).[15] Investigating how content spreads online, Jenkins and colleagues have revived the notion of gift economy in their book 'Spreadable Media': 'As a rule, we are misled when we focus on what media does to people rather than trying to understand what people are doing with media and why. We start from the premise that consumers only help facilitate the circulation of media content when it is personally and socially meaningful to them, when it enables them to express some aspect of their own self-perception or enables valued transactions that strengthen their social ties with others' (Jenkins et al. 2009:43).

Our analysis elaborates on this argument and provides empirical data to support the notion of gift economies as a modus operandi on social media platforms. We could show a difference between gift economies as Malinowski described them and those on social media platforms. Gifts are available and distributed in abundance; contrary to 'material' gift economies their pecuniary value is insignificant. As such, the exchange of gifts described in our research corresponds with the notion of information gift economies. Here, sharing information is considered an inexpensive 'gift' with the added benefit that one receives information in return (Mackaay 1990).

The opening gift provides a strong incentive to distribute content, and this is even encouraged by the interface design of social media platforms, such as the retweet and favourite buttons, though factually appropriated by the users. These buttons lower the threshold to distribute an opening gifts and establish contact. The design features for ephemeral communication provided by the platform providers fuel the user interaction and communication. These features facilitate gift-giving, which initiates social interaction and the collaborative use of the networked infrastructure in order to circulate content.

[15] We want to emphasize that our understanding of the immaterial is only related to the non-haptic nature of commodities online. Like Van den Boomen et al. (2009) we recognize the material nature of digital artefacts and online practices in their economic, social and political relations and effects.

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Johannes Paßmann is a PhD candidate at the DFG *Locating Media* graduate school at the University of Siegen in Germany. His PhD thesis is an ethnography about the Favstar scene of German-speaking Twitter, which he conceptualizes as a gift economy. From that perspective, the history of the social web is described as a history of the accountability of gifts. Johannes has worked as a lecturer in the New Media and Digital Culture Master's programme at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. His most recent publication is 'Beinahe Medien: Die medialen Grenzen der Geomedien, tog. w. Tristan Thielmann. In: Buschauer, R., Willis, K.S. (eds.): *Locative Media. Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Media and Locality*. Bielefeld 2012.

Thomas Boeschoten is Master's student at the New Media and Digital Culture programme at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. He specializes in Twitter and other new media that use big data. After focusing on the use of Twitter by politicians and the Occupy movements he is now a member of the 'Project X' research committee that is investigating the 2012 'Facebook' riots in the small northern village of Haren in the Netherlands.

www.boeschoten.eu
@boeschoten

Mirko Tobias Schäfer is assistant professor of New Media and Digital Culture at Utrecht University, the Netherlands and Research Fellow at Vienna University of Applied Arts, Austria.
Mirko studied theatre, film and media studies and communication studies at Vienna University and digital culture at Utrecht University. He obtained a Master's degree in theatre, film and media studies from the University of Vienna in 2002, and a PhD from Utrecht University in 2008. Mirko's research interest revolves around the socio- political impact of media technology. His publications cover user participation in cultural production, hacking communities, the politics of software design and communication in social media. He is co-editor and co-author of the volume *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology* (published by Amsterdam University in 2009) and author of the recently published book *Bastard Culture! How User participation Transforms Cultural Production* (published by Amsterdam University Press in 2011).

www.mtschaefer.net
@mirkoschaefer