Best Selling Nonfiction Books

Textual Analysis for the Social Sciences
by. Alex Chae
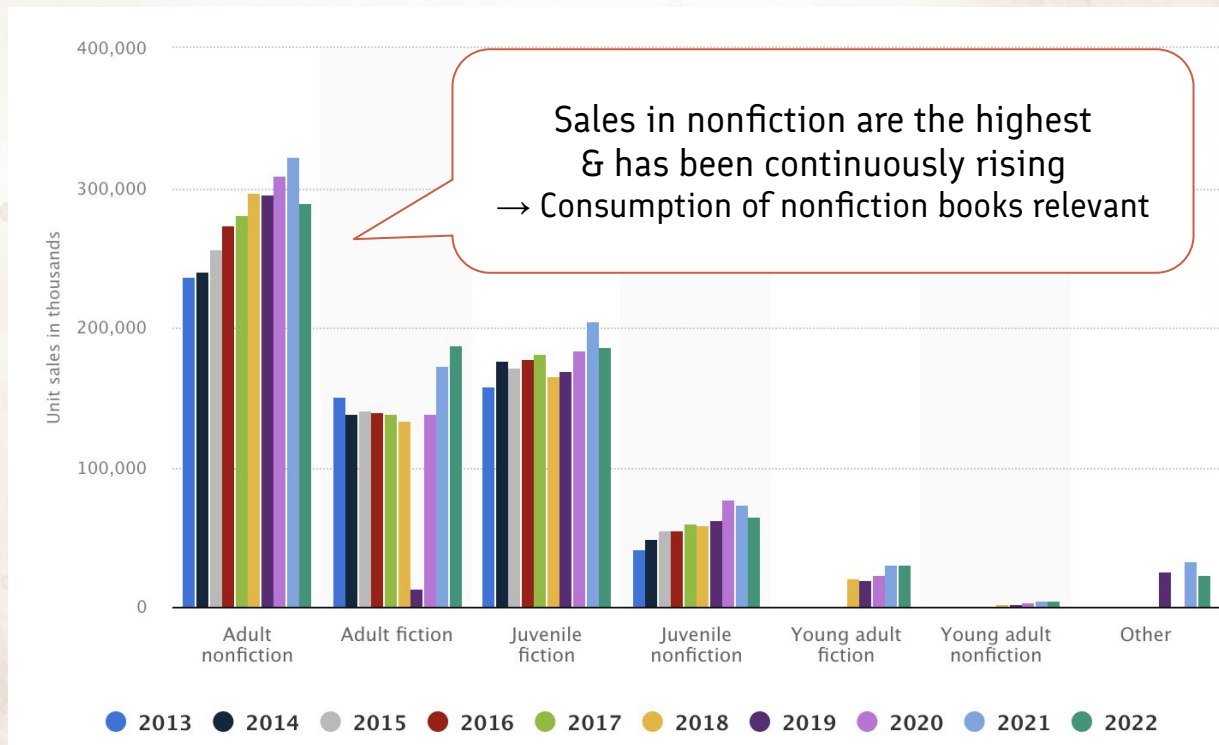
RESEARCH QUESTION

How is people's consumption of nonfiction books related to social issues?

IMPORTANCE

(Statista, 2023)

IMPORTANCE & LITERATURE

- Popular books = commercial interests + cultural forces
  - Reflect **social, cultural preferences** (Smiraglia, 2017)
- Nonfiction best-sellers **in specific areas**
  - Sociology – Jargon-free, about American society, poverty, racial inequality (Gans, 1997)
  - Children's nonfiction books – change with WW2, Civil War, women's liberation (Rahn, 1991)
- Why do people read?
  - Pleasure, **keep up with current events** (78%), research, for work/school (Pew Research Center, 2012)
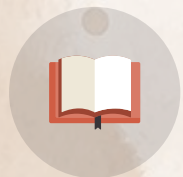
My project:
- ➤ Using a dataset of a **wider time range** (1931-2023)
- ➤ Comparison with what is happening in society at the same time

DATA

New York Times # 1 Best-Selling Nonfiction Books 1931-2023

- **786** Books in total
- Wikipedia & Goodreads summaries
- Title

New York Times Articles 1931-2020

- Headline
- Leading paragraphs
- Proxy for social issues
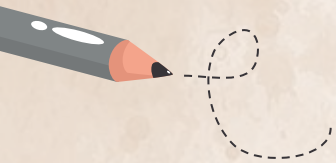
METHODS

Topic Models with publish year as covariates
- Change in topics in best-selling books & NYT articles overtime

Word Count + Sentiment Analysis + Abstractness
- Title length changes in best-selling books & NYT articles
- Abstractness changes in best-selling book titles & NYT article headlines
- Sentiment changes in best-selling book titles & NYT article headlines

TOPIC MODELING

LDA Topic model

For summary/ lead paragraphs of each decade:
(1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s)

- Ran a LDA topic model with k=7, 10, 15
  - k=5 too broad, k=20 too specific

- Found topics that occurred in 2+ models

Preprocessing:

Remove stopwords, numbers, punctuation
Remove words with < 3 letters
All lowercase

Articles:
Remove very common words
(today, yesterday, said, announced, united, states, new, york, mr, mrs, american, made, january… december, one, two, three, last, week, city, year, would, next, first, per, held, city)

Topics in Best-selling Books:

Decade	Topics
1930s	Everyday life, Classics, Death, Family, Literature, Revolutions
1940s	Germans, Military, War, Transportation (planes, boats), Growing up, Travel, Freedom
1950s	Literature, Americans, US history, Academics, Science, Christianity, Growing up
1960s	Literature, Presidents (especially Kennedy), US history (war), Environment
1970s	Sexuality, Health, Diet & Women, Literature, Motherhood
1980s	Physics (particles, gravity, relativity, quantum), Education, Literature
1990s	Literature, Economy, Love, Family, Americans, Public health/ Virus
2000s	US presidents (especially Obama, Bush), Literature, Politics, Conflicts, Family
2010s	"Black" as a race, Politics, Women, Politicians (Obama, Hillary Clinton, Trump), Finance/business

Topics in NYT Articles:

Decade	Topics
1930s	Public policy, Foreign trade, Stocks/ Business, Education
1940s	War & government/ politics, British, Germans, Labor, Business, Trade, Men
1950s	International politics, Communism/ Soviet Union, Government, War, World economy, School
1960s	Education, Vietnam war, War, Soviet Union, Stocks, Labor, Men
1970s	Death, Education, Military, Soviet Union nations, Family (mother, wife, son)
1980s	Sales, Company earnings, Government earnings, Police
1990s	Family, Companies, University, Police
2000s	Family, School/ University, Leisure, Death
2010s	Family (wife, daughter), Education, Friendship, Children, School, Death (of young people), Work

	Books Topics	Articles Topics
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Both, Books only, Articles only

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Books discuss life
Articles discuss politics

Both, Books only, Articles only

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> Books discuss more *personal* topics

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Both, Books only, Articles only

Callouts:
- Books discuss life / Articles discuss politics
- 1940s: Both discuss "war"
- Books focus on *Americans, US* / Articles focus on *other countries*
- *"Motherhood"* appear for the first time in both
- Books discuss more *personal* topics
- Books discuss *academic* topics / Articles discuss *financial* topics
- 1990s~: *Family* is a big topic for both

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Both, Books only, Articles only

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"Motherhood" appear for the first time in both

Books discuss more *personal* topics

Books discuss *academic* topics
Articles discuss *financial* topics

1990s~: *Family* is a big topic for both

Books discuss *political, racial* issues
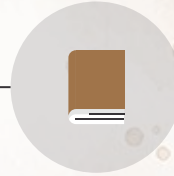Articles report *crime/* death

Comparison of Content:

Books

- Personal, emotional topics
- Academic topics
- US-focus
- Life→ Politics

Common

- Topics around conflicts (war, crime)
- Family

Articles

- Business/ Finance
- Foreign issues
- Politics → Life

TITLE LENGTH

Books:

publish_era	title_length
1930s	3.511364
1940s	3.679245
1950s	3.205128
1960s	3.785714
1970s	3.903846
1980s	3.321429
1990s	3.478723
2000s	3.158273
2010s	2.892377

Articles:

publish_era	title_length
1930s	8.984544
1940s	8.912609
1950s	8.661171
1960s	9.716355
1970s	11.907633
1980s	13.249593
1990s	15.895857
2000s	15.582549
2010s	17.730070

TITLE LENGTH

Title Length of Best-Selling Books
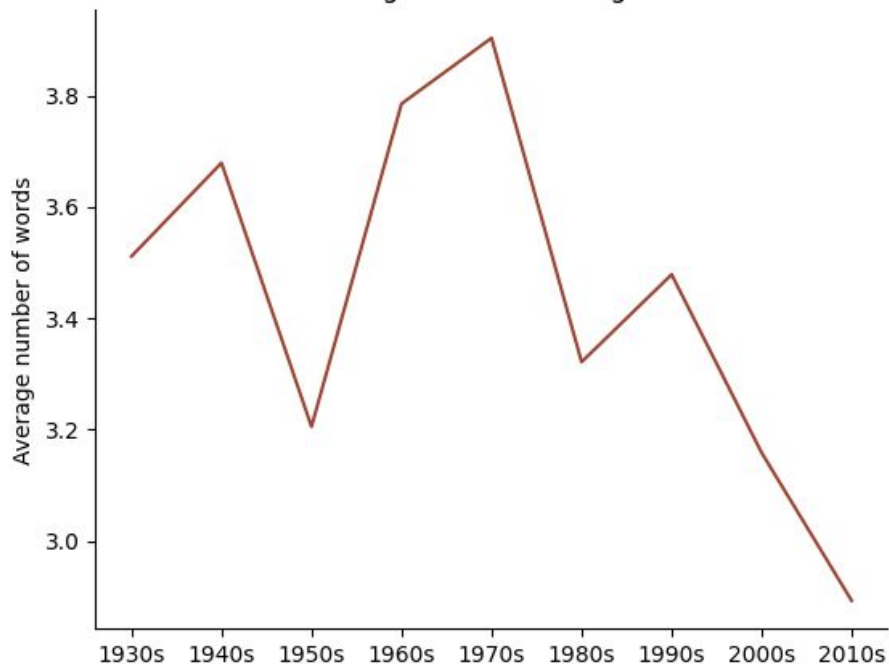
Headline Length of NYT Articles

TITLE LENGTH

Title Length of Best-Selling Books

Shorter book titles overtime

Headline Length of NYT Articles

Longer headlines overtime
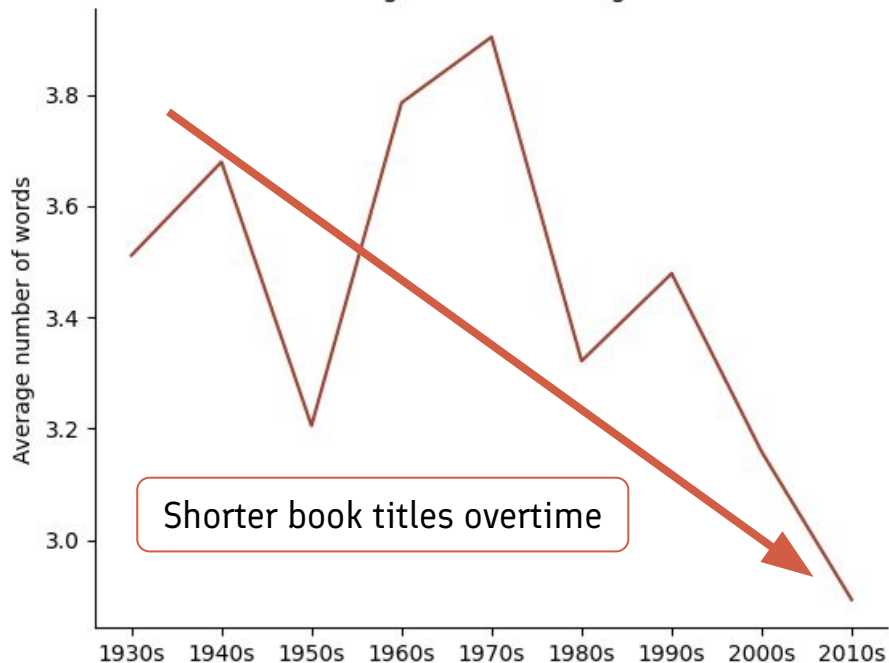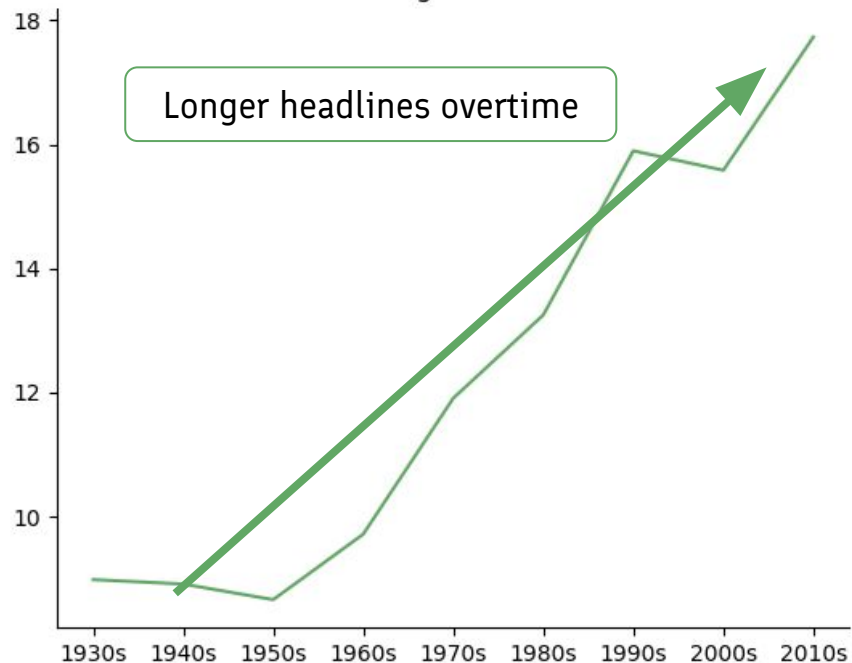
ABSTRACTNESS

Hypernym: a word with a broad meaning that more specific words fall under (ex. Color→ red)
→ Few hypernym = More abstract

Books:

publish_era	hypernym_count
1930s	3.128815
1940s	3.945597
1950s	2.724359
1960s	4.155688
1970s	3.299334
1980s	3.753231
1990s	4.067980
2000s	3.934238
2010s	4.133857

Article:

publish_era	hypernym_count
1930s	4.044540
1940s	4.090253
1950s	3.975163
1960s	3.769702
1947s	2.954698
1980s	3.078738
1990s	3.112456
2000s	3.383220
2010s	3.435756

Preprocessing:

Remove stopwords, numbers, punctuation, words with < 3 letters

All lowercase

ABSTRACTNESS _Mean number of hypernyms

Hypernym Count of Best-Selling Books

ABSTRACTNESS _Mean number of hypernyms
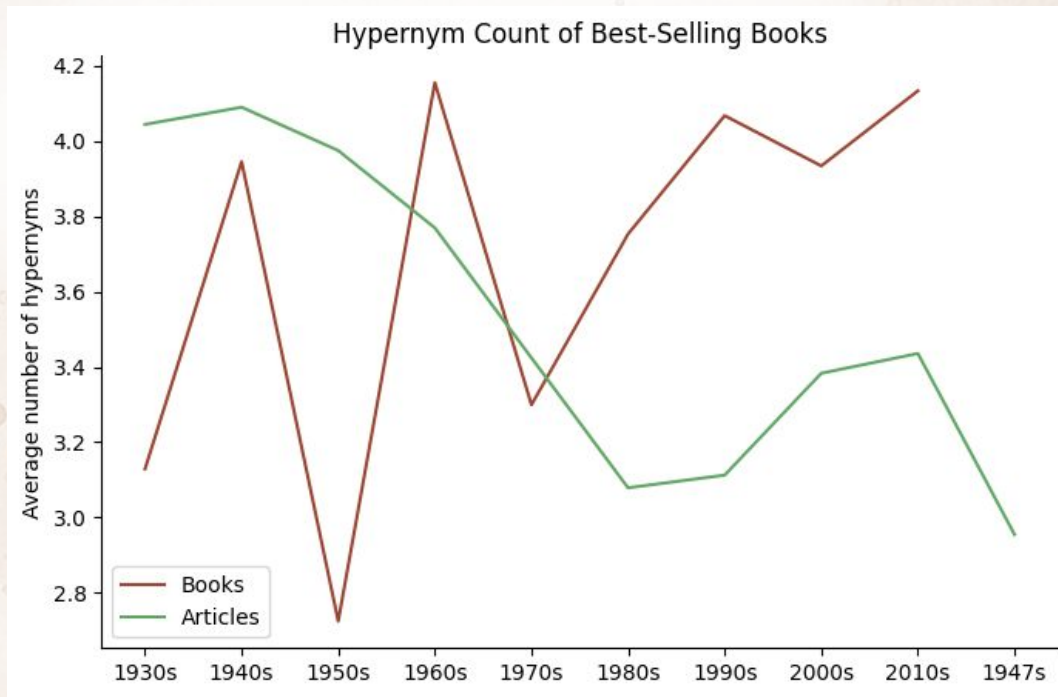
Hypernym Count of Best-Selling Books
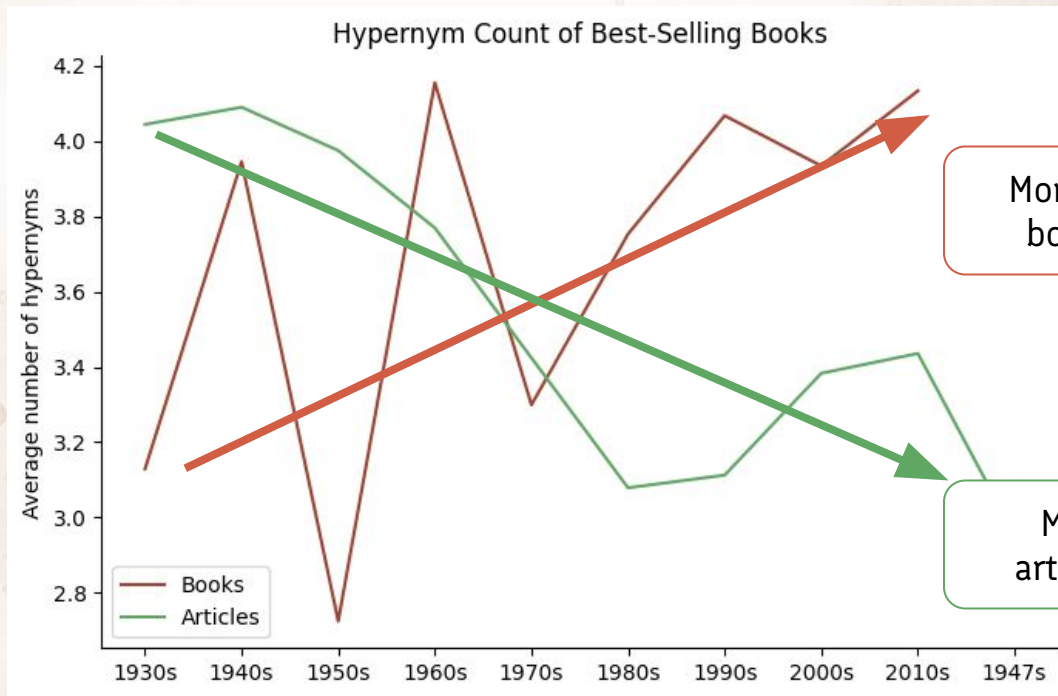
More (?) concrete books overtime

More abstract articles overtime

ABSTRACTNESS _Proportion of words with < 1 hypernym

Books:

	proportion_abs
publish_era	
1930s	0.385227
1940s	0.369811
1950s	0.456410
1960s	0.464059
1970s	0.491107
1980s	0.432653
1990s	0.410279
2000s	0.374229
2010s	0.396978

Article:

publish_era	proportion_abs
1930s	0.401781
1940s	0.395119
1950s	0.416356
1960s	0.427941
1970s	0.502386
1980s	0.513005
1990s	0.503989
2000s	0.470359
2010s	0.478981

Higher proportion
=
More abstract!

ABSTRACTNESS _Proportion of words with < 1 hypernym

Higher proportion
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More abstract!

Proportion of Words with 1 Hypernym of Best-Selling Books

ABSTRACTNESS _Proportion of words with < 1 hypernym

Higher proportion
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More abstract!

Proportion of Words with 1 Hypernym of Best-Selling Books

Both peak in abstractness around 1970s, 1980s

Articles are generally more abstract

ABSTRACTNESS _Proportion of words with < 1 hypernym

Higher proportion
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More abstract!

Proportion of Words with 1 Hypernym of Best-Selling Books

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Legend:
- Books
- Articles

Y-axis: Number of words (0.38, 0.40, 0.42, 0.44, 0.46, 0.48, 0.50, 0.52)

X-axis: 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s

1970s	Sexuality, Health, Diet & Women, Literature, Motherhood	Death, Education, Military, Soviet Union nations, Family (mother, wife, son)
1980s	Physics (particles, gravity, relativity, quantum), Education, Literature	Sales, Company earnings, Government earnings, Police

SENTIMENT (VADER)

Books:

	neg	neu	pos
publish_era			
1930s	0.047977	0.866318	0.085705
1940s	0.071189	0.845415	0.083396
1950s	0.057410	0.880000	0.062590
1960s	0.080000	0.865357	0.054643
1970s	0.047058	0.806538	0.146423
1980s	0.029250	0.824196	0.146571
1990s	0.118404	0.799287	0.082309
2000s	0.104626	0.800576	0.094791
2010s	0.155511	0.736686	0.107798

Article:

publish_era	neg	neu	pos
1930s	0.095908	0.823494	0.080528
1940s	0.080183	0.849685	0.070071
1950s	0.072787	0.857578	0.069611
1960s	0.072861	0.858434	0.068667
1970s	0.055931	0.887939	0.056126
1980s	0.056602	0.873350	0.070032
1990s	0.060672	0.863845	0.075481
2000s	0.069560	0.848695	0.081744
2010s	0.072041	0.844358	0.083591

SENTIMENT _Book vs. Article

Sentiment Analysis of Best-Selling Books
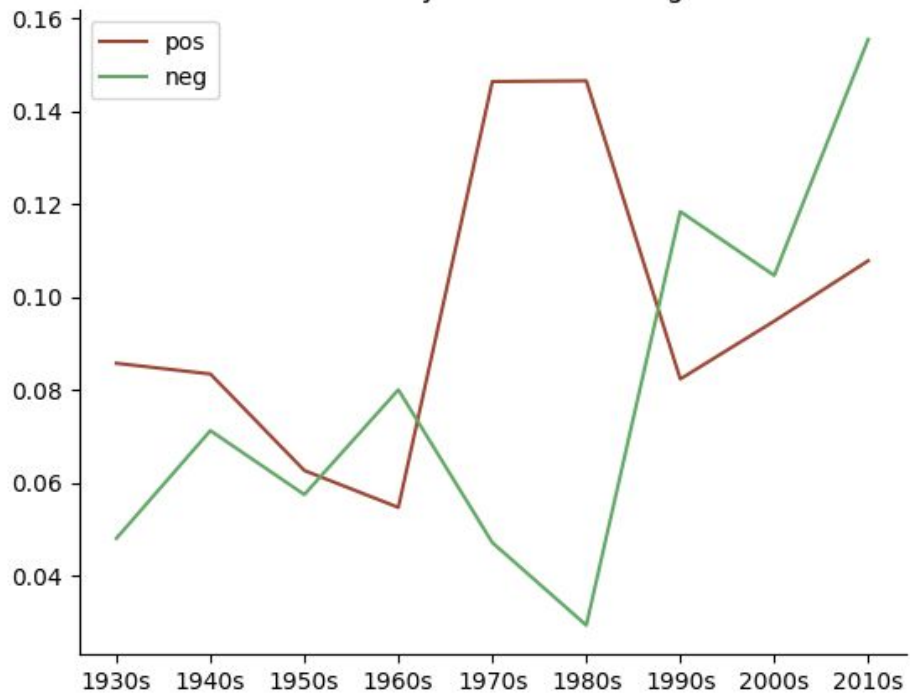
Sentiment Analysis of NYT Articles
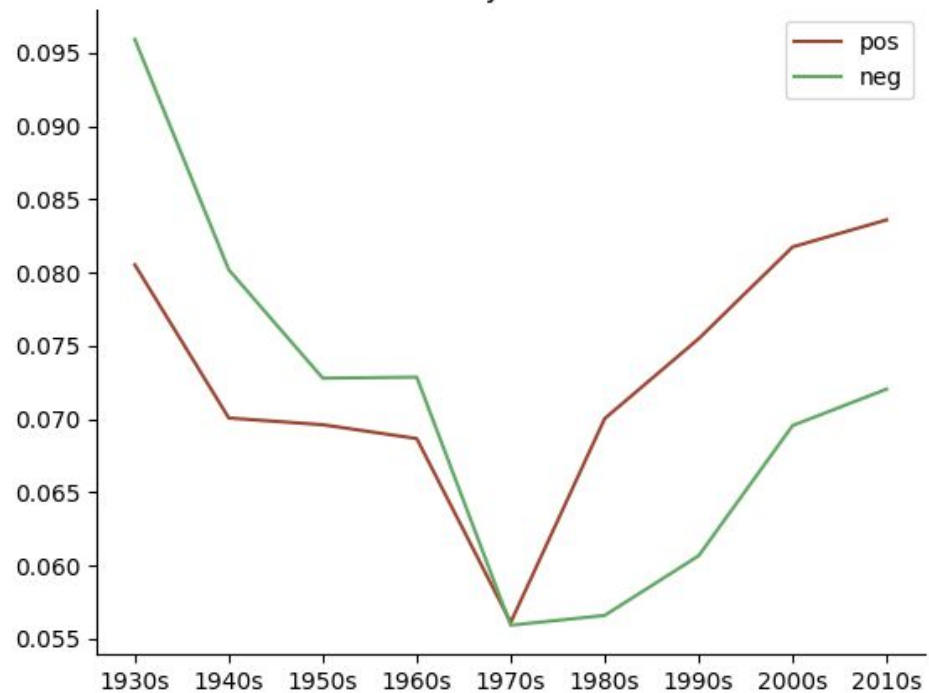
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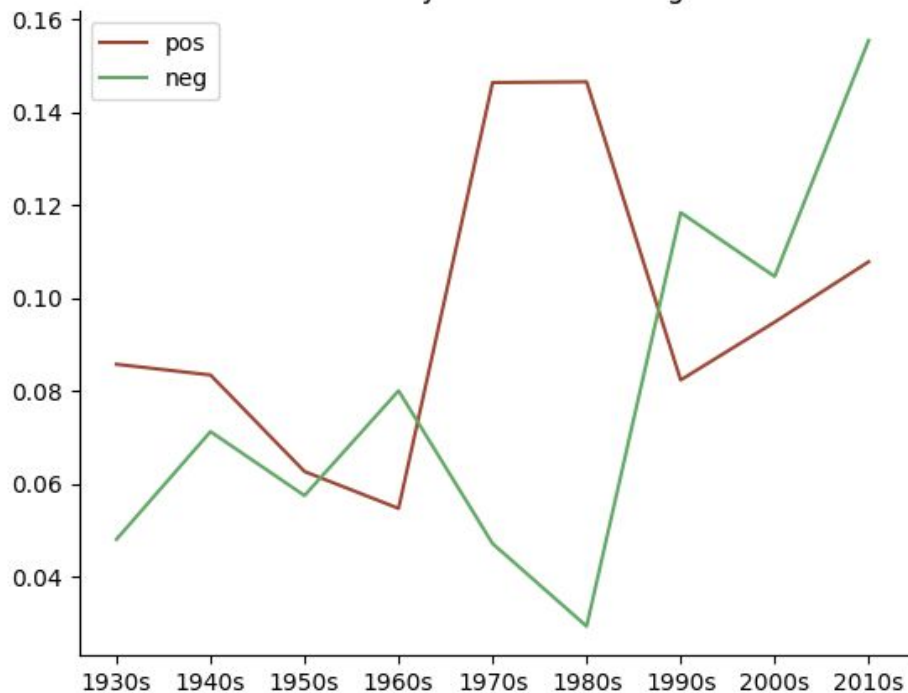
- Positive & negative sentiments are almost opposites
  - i.e. When books have positive sentiments, they don't have negative sentiments

- 1980s:
Most positive & least negative

1980s

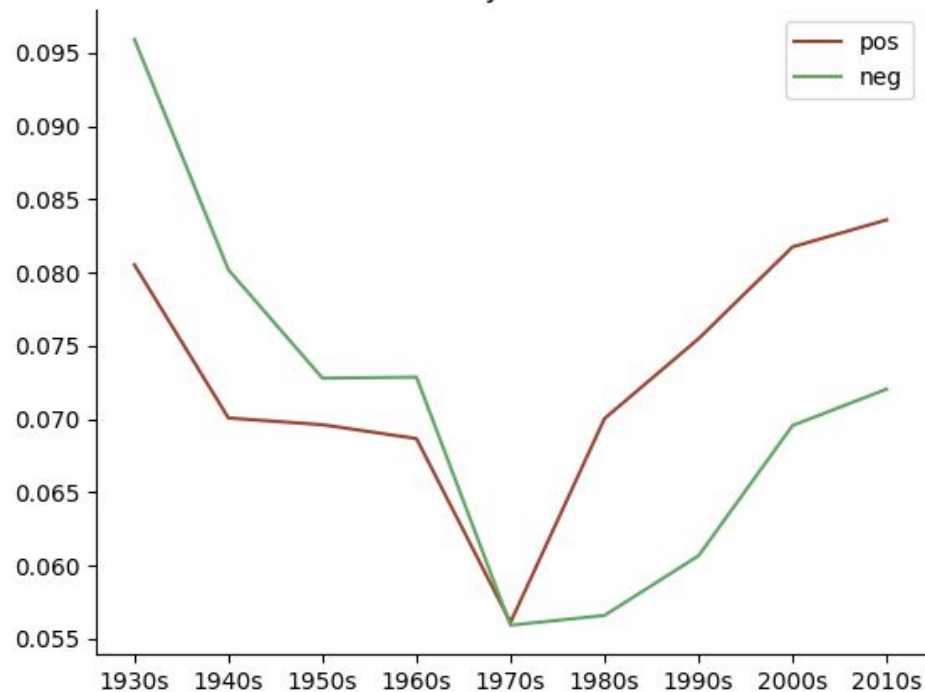Physics (particles, gravity, relativity, quantum), Education, Literature

SENTIMENT _Book vs. Article

- Positive & negative sentiments show similar patterns
  - When books are more positive, they are also more negative
  -
- 1970s:
  Least positive & least negative
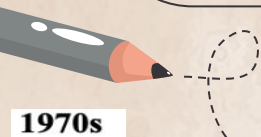
Sentiment Analysis of NYT Articles

1970s

Death, Education, Military, Soviet Union nations, Family (mother, wife, son)

SENTIMENT _Positive sentiment vs. Negative sentiment
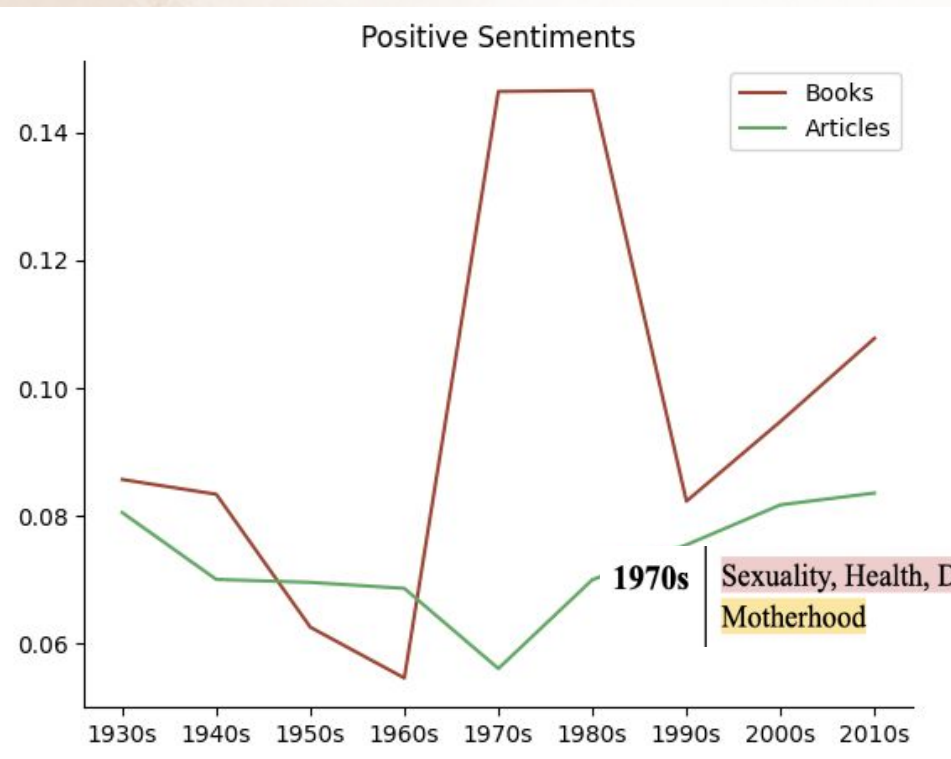
SENTIMENT _Positive sentiment vs. Negative sentiment
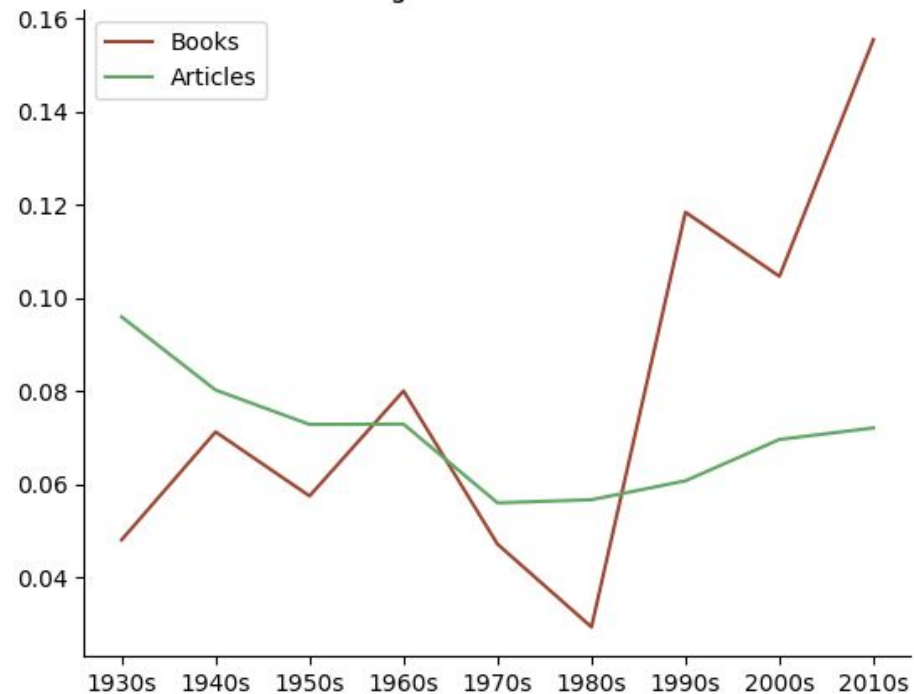
Positive Sentiments

- Patterns in positive sentiments in books & articles are almost the opposite of each other !

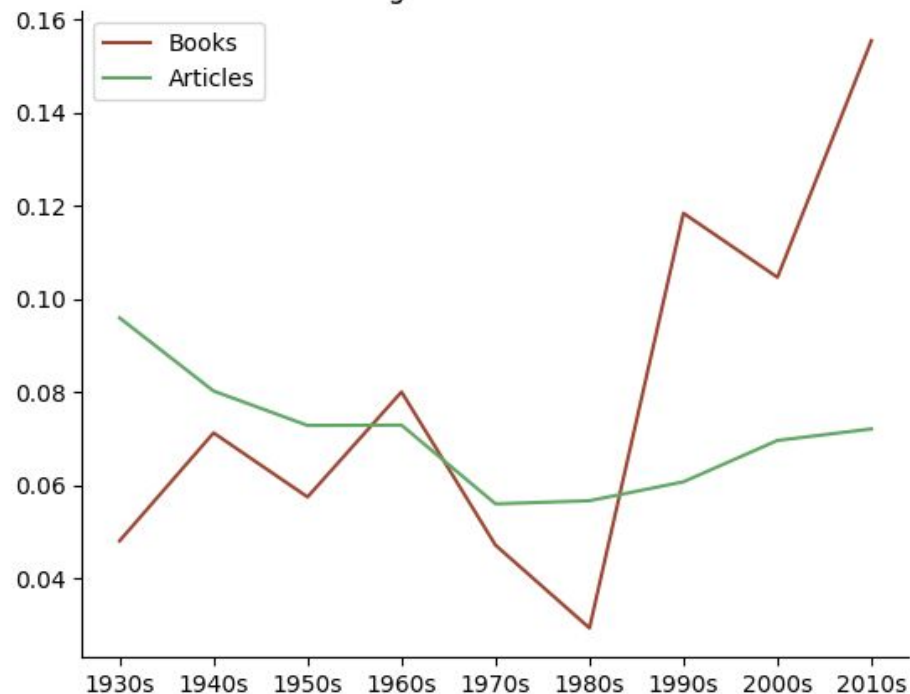- When not-so-happy things happen in the world, people read happier books?

SENTIMENT _Positive sentiment vs. Negative sentiment

Positive Sentiments

- Patterns in positive sentiments in books & articles are almost the opposite of each other !

- When sad things happen in the world, people read happier books?

1970s | Sexuality, Health, Diet & Women, Literature, Motherhood | Death, Education, Military, Soviet Union nations, Family (mother, wife, son)
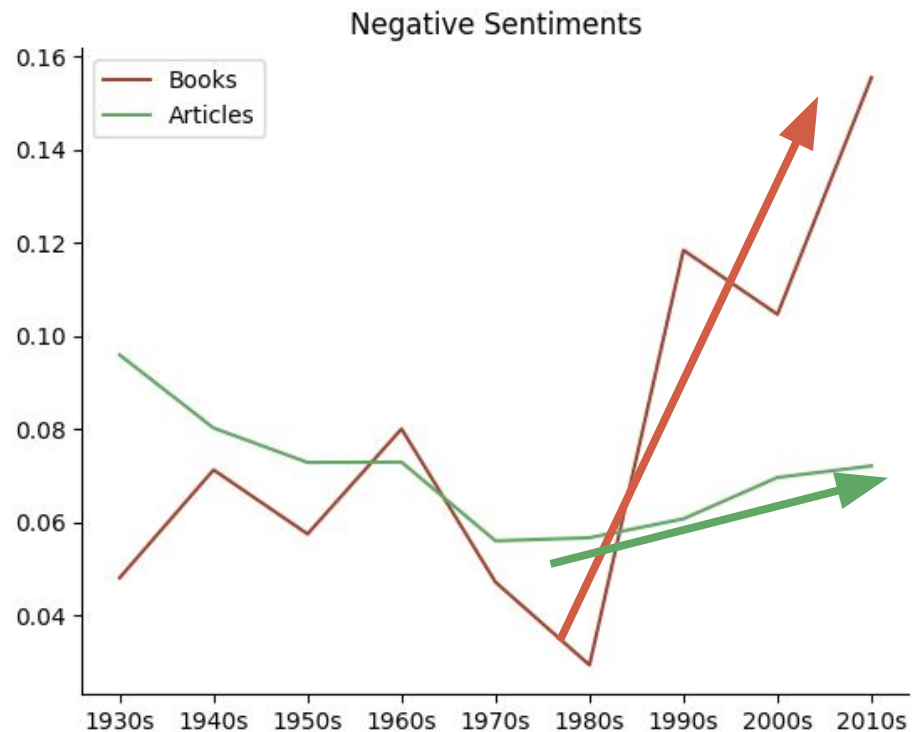
SENTIMENT _Positive sentiment vs. Negative sentiment

- In the beginning, somewhat similar patterns in negative sentiments
  - i.e. When sad things happen, people read sad books

- Then starts to diverge after 1980s
  - Books become more "negative" than articles

Negative Sentiments

SENTIMENT _Positive sentiment vs. Negative sentiment

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  - i.e. When sad things happen, people read sad books

- Then starts to diverge after 1980s
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|		
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Negative Sentiments
- Books
- Articles

Comparison of Titles:

Books

- Become shorter
- More concrete
- Pos & Neg sentiments move opposite
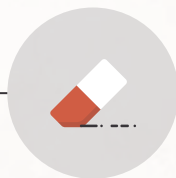
Common

- Decreasing negative sentiments -1980s

Articles

- Become longer
- More abstract
- Pos & Neg sentiment move together

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

- For **specific topics**, books reflect social patterns
  - Wars, international conflicts, Family

- Otherwise, books & social issues tell **different stories in different styles**
  - Abstract vs. Concreteness
  - Positive vs. Negative sentiments

- Reason for reading books is not only to keep up with current events
  - Read about **personal, emotional topics** that are not part of the public discourse
  - Searching for a **different sentiment** than what is prevalent in articles
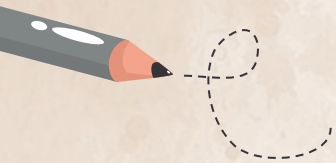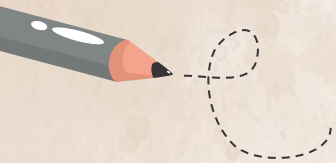
LIMITATIONS

01

Data

More accurate proxy of nonfiction book content & social issues with
- Actual book chapters / Summary by author or publisher
- Most read NYT articles by year

02

Why?

This was an observational study and does not show why books & articles are similar or different
- More expansive data on choice of books based on demographics
- Focusing on each topic (politics, family, international conflicts, education)

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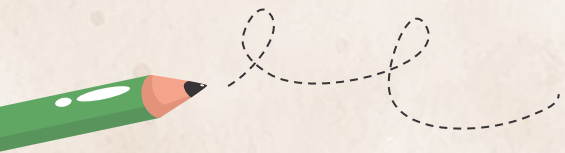
Thank you !

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