Narrative

The real theoretical framework through which this election is narrative. Paul Ricouer (2010) is likely the point of first contact for many scholars of narrative, and his concept of narrativity is a relatively simple qualitative metric by which to measure discussions on Twitter. Narrative is simply the connection of two or more events in time, an example is the classic 'story' of a man going to the store. A man puts on his shoes, and then walks out his door and onto the street, then walks the route to the store and finally arrives. There are a number of events isolated here, and it is only when adding the variable of time which connects these events that a story starts to emerge. This example is a massive oversimplification. Narrative study has many nuances which lead to even more developments of this theory, but the theoretical tool used in this project is narrativity, or the degree of connections in time, or how *strong* is the narrative. This need not be a connection of many things, it can be a connection of just two but the strength of these connections is narrativity.

Narrative is an important area of study for the reason that it enables researchers to connect ideas and events over time in a way unlike a lot of other metrics. Many researchers seek to tell a story with their work, and there is no better tool than searching for story than looking through a narrative lens. Despite the form of the analysis in this project, it is important to not try and make quantative arguments based on the narrative data that can be present. Instead, narrative is a means to interpret data. For this reason, it is important to note that all interpretations of data which use the narrative lens are nessecarily qualitative. What this qualitative nature of narrative interpretation means is that researchers have control to 'spin' the message, and while efforts can be taken to minimize this risk it is impossible to be totaly objective while viewing data through a narrative lens.

I want to just make a disclaimer here about the power of narrative, and try to curb some expectations for what it might be able to do for this research. In the end, this project will not be able to claim that it has uncovered some true narrative of the election or even the discussion about the election, that is not the purpose here. Nor is it the purpose to measure the 'narrativity' for that matter, these are just an analytical framework I will be working from. I'm not entirely sure if anything really can be called a true narrative, where the full story is captured using these techniques and offered as fact. Instead, I'm just using it as a way to tell a story about discussion, and furthermore use this analysis as a means to explain the methodology which surrounds digital research. The aim in the end is to attempt to look for some kinds of patterns, make some connections between events and feelings, and try to get an overview of the discussion from above. But as will be discussed in the coming section on methodology, this overview is an interpretation and because of this it will lend importance to the following section on the nature of open source research techniques.

It might be helpful to bridge the gap between narrative and the story I'm trying to uncover by working within a slightly more limited framework of hypertext fiction and the methodological implications therein. Hypertext literature or texts are pieces of writing in a digital context where certain phrases or words can be hyperlinked to other texts which are tangential to the main storyline(Ryan, 2001). A writer may include as many hyperlinks as they want. Recall that Ricouer defines narrative as the connection of two events in time. In traditional literature, the narrative of the story may be either defined as plot narrative which can be separate from the order in which it is presented to the reader, or one could also defined narrative as the order of presentation itself. One benefit of hypertext fiction is that it allows for the expansion of each point, wherein the narrative can diverge from one point to many others. The nature of narrative in traditional literature can change then from a linear fashion into a type of network of narrative. It is this network of narrative that connects both hypertext fiction and the type of narrative found on Twitter.

There are two separate binaries that Ryan describes as part of her exploration of hypertext. This exploration is more within the discipline of game studies, but Ryan does mention quite a lot about narrative and this paper is specifically about the intricacies of dealing with narrative in hypertext. One is the binary of external and internal, being the position of the 'reader' in the context of narrative. In the internal, the reader is a part of the world in which they are consuming a narrative, and in the external they are as Ryan says a kind of 'god' like figure. The other binary that Ryan explores is the exploratory and ontological binary. In the exploratory experience, the reader moves about the narrative without changing it's path. For hypertext novels this might mean changing perspectives of characters or locations, but the overall path that the narrative takes is the same. In the ontological side of the binary, the readers decisions change the narrative itself. This doesn't necessarily mean they can't change perspective, but their interactions with the narrative can change it.

The narrative of the 2015 Canadian Federal Election as seen through Twitter is much like that of a hypertext fiction – before any researcher looks at it the narrative represents the potential to be any permutation of the classification scheme that Ryan sets out. It is through the interaction or absence of interaction that the user classifies their own experience of narrative on Twitter. It starts with the bounds between internal and external not being made explicitly clear. In one sense, the user who explores Twitter can either choose to embed themselves directly into the narrative by tweeting about the election, who they might vote for and why, and in that the narrative would be internal. This user who chooses to participate in the narrative in such a way also is transforming that potential narrative into real – in this case moving from the potential of either binary towards the ontological. By tweeting, the user not only embeds themselves into the narrative but they also change that narrative. If the user chooses not to tweet and limit themselves only to the observation of tweets, then their experience of the narrative changes into something which is more external and exploratory. This is the classic 'lurking' experience, wherein the user is much more like a ghost invisible to the real interactions.

Another way that the Twitter experience is a lot like the reading of a hypertext fiction is in the actual links themselves, of which there are a few varieties. There are classic hyper-links, not at all unlike those found all over the web. These links can represent tangents to the narrative, or by their very inclusion they can be thought of as artifacts of the narrative itself. The experience is that a user clicks on these hyper-links and can explore this new line of thought, often this artifact contains links to other areas of the web, sometimes tangential to the main story of the narrative. Other times these artifacts are left as symbols for larger thoughts, where the hyperlink may just be a placeholder.

Narrative analysis isn't nessecarily important for elections in the sense that it is a very good predictor of winners or losers of the election, but rather it can be thought of as an important thing because it contributes to the chroniciling of history. Again, this work isn't going to replace the polls and it isn't going to predict a winner, but it will attempt to do is tell a story about how people were feeling about general election topics during the campaign. While this is a broadly scoped work, the election is not the only concern of this project itself. Another major concern of this project is to document the challenges and charm of digital methodology when doing this kind of work from a very limited time and funding window.