

Headlines as networked language

A study of content and audience across 73 million links on Twitter

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Abstract

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1 Introduction

Imagine that someone showed you a headline from a news article, but in complete isolation, stripped of all context – just a sequence of words. All you were told is that the headline came from either the New York Times or Fox, and you were asked to guess which one. In some cases, this might be fairly easy. For example, if it’s a recipe – we might remember that The New York Times has a large cooking section:

- Chicken Thighs With Cumin, Cayenne and Citrus

Or, if it’s about (both) New York baseball teams:

- In Early Going, the Yankees Steal the Mets’ Thunder

(Though, of course, Fox also does plenty of sports reporting.) Meanwhile, we might associate a story about MS 13 with Fox, to the extent that right-leaning outlets have focused attention on immigration and crime:

- East Coast MS 13 gang leader admits racketeering conspiracy

But, other things might be significantly harder. For example – one of these headlines came from Fox, the other from The New York Times:

- Zambia’s 1st female fighter pilot says she “doesn’t feel like a woman” in her job
- 4 freed from Thailand cave, but rescuers face “war with water and time” to get to others

Here, to my eye, there aren’t any obvious “tells” – there are certainly things that might seem to tip the scaled one direction or the other, but it’s not clear.¹ In trying to guess where the headline came from, we’d have to bring to bear a wide set of intuitions about what might be thought of as the “voice” of the outlet – the set of issues, locations, people that the outlet tends to focus on. And, beyond the raw content of what’s being – *how* it’s being covered, the style, intonation, attitude, affect. Trying to guess the outlet, in other words, would force us to formalize a kind of mental model about precisely how the two outlets are similar or different.

It also, indirectly, gives a way to reason about the degree to which they’re similar or different. Now, imagine that instead of just doing this once, we did it for 100 headlines, and counted up the number

¹The answer – NYT, Fox.

of correct guesses. We'd likely do better than random – but how much better? 60%, 70%, 95%? How differentiable are NYT and Fox, at a purely linguistic level? And, how does this compare to other pairs of outlets? What if we took headlines from NYT and CNN, instead of NYT and Fox, for example, and repeated the experiment. We might guess that NYT and CNN are more similar, and thus harder to tell apart. But, how true is this, exactly? Say we got 80 headlines right when guessing between NYT and Fox comparison – would we get, perhaps, 70 right for NYT and CNN? Or 60, 55? In a rough sense, we could start to reason about the relative proximities between different pairs of outlets.

Of course, doing this manually, it would be hard to scale beyond a few outlets and a couple hundred headlines. But – what if we could do this at a much larger scale, across dozens of different media organizations and millions of headlines? This thesis explores this question as a *language engineering task*, working with a corpus of 73,198,274 tweets harvested from the Decahose over an 18 month period – to what degree is it possible to train machine learning models to differentiate between headlines produced by different news outlets? Unlike other studies that have explored the tractability of language inference tasks on news data, though, goal here isn't to solve an applied engineering task (flagging “clickbait” headlines, optimizing click-through rates) – instead, we use the predictive models as a descriptive and interpretive tool. By training models to differentiate between content from different sources, we can then examine the representations that are induced by the models, making it possible to “map” headlines as a kind of conceptual space.

Most fundamentally, beyond this ability to “read” headlines at a scale that would otherwise be impossible – these models make it possible to start filling in a kind of ground-truthed understanding of the degree to which different outlets are similar and different, where we might otherwise have to rely on intuition and anecdote. Modeling a complete matrix of pairwise similarities across 15 major media organizations, we can construct a kind of “content graph,” a fully-connected representation how, and to what degree, outlets produce (dis)similar headlines:

Once we have this empirical view of the linguistic proximities among the outlets, though, there's a way in which this immediately generates a new set of questions. Most of which, really, are some version of just one – where is this graph *not what we would expect*? To return to the analogy of voice – are there outlets that are “speaking” in ways that don't map onto assumptions about the role that they play in a broader political, commercial, or historical context?

The second half of the thesis takes up this question, and explores the degree to which these linguistic relationships correspond (and don't correspond) to two different backdrops. First – we explore the degree to which these similarities at the level of content align with similarities at the level of audience. Parallel to the “content graph” defined by the headline similarities, can imagine an “audience graph” that represents similarities at the level of the people who read and distribute content from each pair of outlets.

This question of the interaction between content and audience cuts to the core of a wide range of recent discussions about processes of fragmentation and polarization in the news ecosystem. For example, the widely popularized notions of “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers,” where the concern is that these two graphs are tightly connected in a self-reinforcing (and socially problematic) way – media sources that are highly differentiated at the level of content allow people with different perspectives to self-select into highly differentiated information ecosystems, which, in a vicious circle, then aggravates the underlying social and ideological fragmentation. Stark divisions at the level of content get mirrored by stark differences in audience, which in turn incentivize even more differentiated content, etc.

The graph above, though, suggests there might be places where this alignment between content and audience breaks down. For example, it looks like headlines from Fox are about as similar to

headlines from AP as from Breitbart; whereas, we might guess that the audience overlap between Fox and Breitbart would be significantly higher. This suggests a rich set of questions – are there outlets that “sound” similar to one another, but that have highly non-overlapping audiences? Or, zooming back to the complete ecosystem of media organizations, can we identify outlets that act as “mediators” or “bridges” between different subsets of audiences? For example – are there outlets that produce content that “sounds like” content produced by left-leaning outlets, but that have relatively high audience overlap with right-leaning outlets – that is, outlets that produce content that has the effect of exposing right-leaning readers to content that’s more typical of left-leaning news feeds? Or vice versa?

These incongruities, misalignments, places where the language graph doesn’t map easily onto the underlying social graph – do they exist at all? If so – what do they look like? What kind of content does this? Looking beyond this study, which is fundamentally descriptive – if we’re interested in exploring the degree to which different topics, styles, idioms, and ways of speaking might have the effect of working against patterns of fragmentation in media consumption habits, these sites of mismatch could be of particular interest. They would represent, in a sense, naturally-occurring short-circuits between otherwise entrenched associations between particular audiences and particular types of content, places where audiences move (or get moved) out of their typical “lanes.”

Second, and last – building on this question of movement or change, we explore the degree to which the matrix of linguistic similarities has evolved over historical time – the degree to which it does and doesn’t correspond to previous versions of itself. Instead of rolling up the entire 18-month window of data into a single, synchronic unit, we analyze the set of 73 million links as a chronological sequence, covering roughly the first two years of the Trump presidency. Are the linguistic similarities between outlets basically stable, or have there been significant changes over this period? Do outlets drift away from each other, towards each other, back and forth? How fixed or flexible are the major organizations in the media landscape, both in terms of the type of content that they produce and the audiences that read it? And, in the same way that we could explore the overall correlation (and lack thereof) between content and audience – to what extent do changes in content correspond to changes in audience, when spooled out over historical time? If Huffington Post starts producing headlines that sound more like The Hill – do the audiences also start to converge?

In summary – first we quantify the level of similarity between headlines produced by different outlets, and then attempt to contextualize these differences by exploring (1) the degree to which they have evolved over time and (2) the degree to which they align with the composition of the audiences that interact with the content. We find:

1. Modeled as a text classification task, headlines from 15 major US media sources highly differentiable, even after an aggressive cleaning process that strips out any kind of “paratext” in the headline that directly or indirectly reveals the source. (For example, “... – CNN Video” or “AP Breaking News: ...”) The strongest model is a bidirectional LSTM, which gets to 41% accuracy in a 15-label model, where random would be 7%. Though, standard non-neural baselines also perform very well – SVM and logistic regression models over ngram count features are competitive at 36-38% accuracy (and beat the weaker neural models), suggesting that a majority of the differentiability among outlets comes from which words and phrases are being used – roughly, what might be thought of as “topic” or “content” – and less from the composition or sequencing of words, which can be modeled with more power by the recurrent models.
2. Pulling sentence embeddings out of the top layer of the LSTM, we can explore the structure of the linguistic space in terms of the high-dimensional representations learned by the model, both in terms of the relationships among different outlets are the internal structure

of the headlines within the outlets themselves. This reveals significant differences in what might be thought of as the “shape” of different outlets in the high-dimensional space. Specifically, we focus on what we call the “diameter” of the embedding family for each outlet – the average cosine distance between randomly sampled pairs of headlines – which, we argue, roughly captures the degree to which outlets are narrowly focused (low diameter) or more broad and varied (high diameter). Second, we also explore the clustering structure of headlines within outlets, the degree to which content from an outlet can be cleanly decomposed into a set of categories, verticals, or “desks.” On both metrics, we find significant variation, with BuzzFeed, Bloomberg, and Daily Kos registering the lowest “diameters” and smallest cluster counts (most focused), and CNN, The Washington Post, and Fox showing the highest diameters / largest cluster counts (most broad, varied, diverse).

3. Aggregating over the full set of individual articles in each outlet, we can use the classifiers to model a complete “content graph” among the 15 organizations, a fully-connected graph of pairwise similarity scores, which are extracted from the behavior of the classifiers in a collection of different ways – pairwise accuracy scores, probability mass correlations in multi-label models, and confusion counts. With this content graph in hand, we then compare to the underlying “audience graph,” derived from correlations in the users who tweet links from each pair of outlets. From these two graphs, for each outlet we can construct two normalized rankings of similarity with all other outlets, one based on headline similarity, and the other based on audience similarity. We then explore the correlation of these two rankings on a per-outlet level – that is, the degree to which an outlets edge weights in the “content graph” are similar to its edge weights in the “audience graph.”

In general, we find that these two sets of weights tend to be positively correlated, often highly so – in general, outlet A “sounds like” outlet B, it also has a high level of audience overlap. But, there is a wide range in the strength of this correlation, and there are some strong exceptions – namely The Associated Press and The Hill, both of which show a significant level of misalignment between their content and audience graphs, with correlations of roughly 0. For AP, this is driven by Fox, which both syndicates a sizable number of articles from AP and also produces in-house content that closely resembles AP. But, by and large, this AP-style content is dramatically different from the rest of the coverage produced by Fox, and represents arguably the most significant content-audience mismatch in the dataset. After the AP (which is anomalous in that it’s a wire service, and AP content gets literally “duplicated” by other outlets), The Hill seems to be the closest thing to a naturally “bridging” or “bipartisan” outlet – it has high audience overlap with left-leaning outlets, but high headline similarity with the right-leaning Daily Caller and Breitbart; but also with the left-leaning MSNBC.

4. We then explore the evolution of these relationships over historical time – instead of treating the corpora as a monolithic bundle of data, the 2-year data window is broken into 100 temporal bins, and a 10-bin rolling window is moved across this space, producing 91 10-bin windows. In each of these windows, we train fully independent A-versus-B models on each unique pair of outlets, and then track changes in these accuracies over time. This reveals significant changes in the structure of the content graph in the last two years. First, The Huffington Post and BuzzFeed have moved away from each other, due to mirror-image changes – HuffPo has moved away from “clickbait” content (advice columns, diet recommendations) and towards more narrowly-focused political reporting, similar to The Hill, DailyKos, and CNN; whereas BuzzFeed doubled down on clickbait content (specifically, a certain type of “quiz” article), pushing down the proportion of content from BuzzFeed that consists of serious political and investigative reporting. Second, a cohort of politically-focused outlets have become more similar – The Hill, The Daily Kos, CNN, AP, NYT, WaPo, NPR – suggesting

a tendency towards convergence in political coverage since a high-water mark of differentiability in the spring of 2017, in the first months of the Trump administration. Last – Fox has consistently moved away from almost all other outlets, including other right-leaning outlets like Breitbart and The Daily Caller; it has become much more highly differentiated *individually*, compared to everything else. By examining headlines that typify the overall movement of Fox in the high-dimensional linguistic space modeled by the neural classifier, it appears that this shift is driven by a move in the direction of a highly sensationalized, tabloid style of headline, many of which involve violent crime and socially-charged political issues.

2 Headlines on Twitter

To explore this interaction between content and audience, we need what might be thought of as a “networked” corpus – a collection of individual pieces of content that can be linked directly to specific patterns of engagement and distribution. With this goal in mind, this study built around a very particular data set – posts on Twitter that contain links to news articles, which we extract from the Decahose, a 10% sample of all activity on Twitter. For example, if someone posts a tweet with a link to a New York Times article, Twitter identifies the link and provides structured information about it in the JSON payload that appears in the Decahose:

```
"urls": [
  {
    "url": "https://t.co/MOZgWRzhRK",
    "expanded_url": "https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/27/us/politics/navy-
      orders-safety-operational-standards.html",
    "display_url": "nytimes.com/2017/09/27/us.../",
    "indices": [66, 89]
  }
],
```

We can then parse the raw URL string and extract the registered domain – here, `nytimes.com` – which makes it possible to associated URLs with different media organizations.

Critically, though, our lab also has access to the “Enhanced URLs” add-on product available through Gnip, the vendor that distributes data from Twitter. The “Enhanced URLs” metadata provides two pieces of information that are essential to this study – first, the “expanded” URL, which is formed by following redirects from the raw URL that appears on Twitter. This valuable here because a sizable percentage of links on Twitter are shortened by services like `bit.ly`, meaning that they have to be “unrolled” in order to identify out the real domain – for example, `nytimes.com` instead of `bit.ly`. In theory, we could do this ourselves; but, especially when working with data that’s more than a few weeks old, this can be difficult. Many shorteners like `bit.ly` automatically expire the links, meaning that, for example, if we tried to expand a link from spring of 2017, it would likely fail.

Second, and most important, “Enhanced URLs” also provides scraped copies of the [Open Graph title](#) and [description](#) tags of the page that the link points to. At a product level, Twitter uses the title and description in the link “preview boxes” for the article that automatically get displayed with tweets that contain links.

```
"gnip": {
  "urls": [
    {
      "url": "https://t.co/MOZgWRzhRK",
      "expanded_url": "https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/27/us/politics/navy-
        orders-safety-operational-standards.html",
```

```

    "expanded_status": 200,
    "expanded_url_title": "Navy Returns to Compasses and Pencils to Help
        Avoid Collisions at Sea",
    "expanded_url_description": "A top officer issued new orders to sailors
        worldwide as the Navy scrambled to make priorities of safety and
        maintenance after two deadly collisions in recent months."
  }
]
},

```

In a sense, the headlines themselves aren’t terribly hard to come by – Twitter is just scraping them off the public web, and there’s nothing to stop anyone from doing this independently. But, beyond just the convenience of it having them pre-scraped for tens of millions of pages, there are actually a number of interesting advantages to collecting this corpus “through” the Decahose, as it were, instead of trying to harvest it independently.

First, Twitter provides an automatic signal for the “footprint” of the article. In the most minimal sense, just the fact that the article appears in the 10% sample from the Decahose is evidence that it got some minimal level of circulation; and, we can also precisely measure the size of this circulation by counting the number of times it was tweeted, or, better, adding up the follower counts of all the users who tweeted the link – the “impressions” count. This makes it possible to consistently model a sort of “effective footprint” of a media outlet, the body of content that is actually getting meaningful circulation. Second – historical archives of Twitter data make it possible to collect consistent data at the scale of years, without having to maintain labor-intensive scrapers. And, last but not least – headlines on Twitter are directly associated with unique user identifiers, which makes it possible to directly associate individual pieces of content at specific moments in time with specific audiences. This type of data would be almost impossible to assemble from the open web.

Of course, there are also some downsides to the filter provided by Twitter, which, in a number of well-documented ways, is idiosyncratic and non-representative of broader patterns of media consumption. There’s a tradeoff – from Twitter we get a very consistent and very “deep” sample of news production and consumption; but at the cost of it being fairly “narrow.”

3 5.65 billion links

So – tweets with links, and links that point to headlines. Before diving into the headlines themselves – what does that data look like in its native environment on Twitter? In this study, we work with an archive of the Decahose that was collected by Cortico, a non-profit organization affiliated with the Laboratory for Social Machines. Specifically, we focus on a 625-day window of data running from January 1, 2017 through September 17, 2018. Over that period, the Decahose emitted 21,219,935,342 total tweets. Of these, 5,243,960,217 (24.7%) include at least one link.

Though, interestingly, this ratio has actually fallen over time – breaking out just the links, we can see that the volume has actually declined by 40% over this time period, falling from 10M per day at the beginning of 2017 to 6M in fall of 2018, even while the overall tweet volume has stayed mostly stable:

Where do these links point? As an first step, we can parse the raw URL strings into component parts (protocol, subdomain, registered domain, path, etc.) and then count the total number of links to each registered domain. These are the 100 most frequently-occurring domains, before any filtering is applied:

twitter.com, youtube.com, du3a.org, facebook.com, instagram.com, d3waapp.org, google.com, curiouscat.me, tistory.com, ghared.com, naver.com, zad-muslim.com, showroom-live.com, twittascope.com, ebay.com, flwrs.com, vine.co, amazon.com, 7asnat.com, apple.com, channel.or.jp, blogspot.com, twitcom.com.br, soundcloud.com, nytimes.com, yahoo.co.jp, cnn.com, nicovideo.jp, pscp.tv, swarmapp.com, spotify.com, ameblo.jp, 7asnh.com, tumblr.com, line.me, wordpress.com, daum.net, washingtonpost.com, twitch.tv, twitcasting.tv, insurancepremium-wd.com, seesaa.net, shindanmaker.com, amazon.co.jp, dmm.co.jp, thehill.com, theguardian.com, etsy.com, ingur.com, bbc.co.uk, paper.li, foxnews.com, fc2.com, rakuten.co.jp, careerarc.com, gleam.io, reddit.com, ask.fm, monster-strike.com, quran.to, lawson.co.jp, reuters.com, staticflickr.com, globo.com, peing.net, billboard.com, soompi.com, grandesmedios.com, medium.com, hotpepper.jp, crowdfireapp.com, nhk.or.jp, twimg.com, vlive.tv, Breitbart.com, alathkar.org, tuitutil.net, sinaimg.cn, huffingtonpost.com, go.com, buzzfeed.com, dailymail.co.uk, elpais.com, livedoor.com, change.org, utabami.com, livedoor.jp, vonvon.me, pixiv.net, rt.com, bbc.com, politico.com, daumcdn.net, yahoo.com, independent.co.uk, asahi.com, linkedin.com, naver.jp, nbcnews.com

A majority of these, of course, don't represent "news" sources in a meaningful sense. Though, this isn't always clear-cut – for example, links to Facebook might often point to content from news organizations that has been shared on Facebook. But, bracketing this, and just operating at the level of individual media brands – if we take the 2,000 domains with overall largest link counts and then manually filter this list, we can pull out a long list of 87 major media organizations. Of course, "major" is somewhat subjective; here, we took all outlets that meet a minimum standard of name recognition and produce either "general-interest" news or political reporting / commentary; but not specialized outlets that focus on topics other than politics – ESPN, TechCrunch, Rolling Stone, etc. Here are these 87, ordered here by the total number of links:

nytimes.com, cnn.com, washingtonpost.com, thehill.com, theguardian.com, foxnews.com, bbc.co.uk, reuters.com, Breitbart.com, huffingtonpost.com, buzzfeed.com, politico.com, rt.com, independent.co.uk, yahoo.com, nbcnews.com, bloomberg.com, forbes.com, wsj.com, thegatewaypundit.com, businessinsider.com, usatoday.com, cbsnews.com, apnews.com, dailycaller.com, rawstory.com, vice.com, npr.org, truepundit.com, thedailybeast.com, time.com, cnbc.com, telegraph.co.uk, newsweek.com, nypost.com, sputniknews.com, nydailynews.com, washingtonexaminer.com, cbc.ca, vox.com, thinkprogress.org, theatlantic.com, newyorker.com, msn.com, ft.com, slate.com, theroot.com, variety.com, inc.com, dailykos.com, judicialwatch.org, msnbc.com, motherjones.com, aljazeera.com, economist.com, washingtontimes.com, dailywire.com, infowars.com, theintercept.com, axios.com, theonion.com, politicususa.com, thetimes.co.uk, nymag.com, salon.com, qz.com, nationalreview.com, palmerreport.com, townhall.com, thefederalist.com, hbr.org, hannity.com, talkingpointsmemo.com, fortune.com, thenation.com, propublica.org, foreignpolicy.com, theblaze.com, pbs.org, foxbusiness.com, theconversation.com, conservativereview.com, fivethirtyeight.com, crooksandliars.com, jezebel.com, newrepublic.com, realclearpolitics.com

Which, collectively, account for 73,198,274 million individual links in the data. The total number of links, though, is very different from the number of *unique articles* – a single article might produce tens or hundreds of thousands of individual tweets linking to the same piece of content, each of which are counted separately here. One simple way to roll up the individual occurrences of the domains by article is just to group on the exact text of the URL. But, this is somewhat brittle, since it's not uncommon for links to get passed around with superfluous GET parameters added onto them (eg, trackers that flag the source of a click). This can cause the same "base" URL to appear in many different configurations, if just treated as a raw string, all of which in fact point to the same article.

Instead, we group links into articles by combining three pieces of information – the registered domain, the "path" component of the URL, and the cleaned tokens in the Open Graph title, as provided by Gnip. (This cleaning process is somewhat intricate, detailed below.) The URL path is taken into consideration since there are times when the same outlet will produce multiple articles with identical titles. For example, if The New York Times produces an article every week called "Your Monday morning roundup" – by including the URL path as part of the grouping key, we can correctly identify these as legitimately separate pieces of content.

Grouping links on these three pieces of information, we can count the number of unique articles (and, by extension, headlines) associated with each domain. Which, in this context, is the more salient number, since the headline is the basic unit of analysis. The largest outlets have produced

many hundreds of thousands of individual articles in the last two years, though the volume falls off fairly quickly outside the top 20:

Beyond these rolled-up link and article counts, we can also easily get a high-level sense of how the footprint of different outlets on Twitter has evolved over the 2-year data window. Using the `postedTime` timestamps on each tweet, we can group links from an outlet by day, for instance, and look at the historical volume trend. For The New York Times:

Or, rollup up links by article, the total number of unique NYT articles that appeared by day:

Finally, digging deeper into the metadata provided by Twitter – for each tweet, we also have information about the user account that posted the tweet, including the follower count of the user at the time the tweet was posted. This is very useful information, since follower counts vary significantly – a link posted from an account with 1M followers will have vastly more reach than a link posted from an account with 100 followers. In a crude sense, we can use the follower count of the user account as a proxy for “impressions,” the total number of times that the tweet was seen by individual twitter users. (Of course, this isn’t literally true – when a user posts a tweet, the percentage of her followers who actually see it is probably fairly low, since many of them won’t be logged on, etc. But, if we assume that this percentage is roughly similar across the platform, the follower count can give a (relative) signal of the real-world “reach” of the tweet.)

Taking the total impressions produced by all tweets with links to The New York Times, and grouping by day:

Some of which, interestingly, show very significant changes over the 2-year data window. Modeling this as a linear trend, here are the 10 domains with the most significant decreases, in terms of links, articles, and impressions:

So, the number of unique articles from Huffington Post, on a per-day basis, has fallen by more than 50%. In the other direction, domains with the strongest increases in volume:

Which has a striking partisan tilt: all of the four domains at the top of the three lists – `hannity.com`, `truepundit.com`, `judicialwatch.com`, `thefederalist.com` – represent (far) right-leaning political perspectives.

Of course, we don’t really care about the “performance” of the headlines per-se – our focus here is on the structure of the linguistic relationships among outlets. But, these overall volume trends have important methodological implications, especially for the historical questions that emerge in the second half of the project. Namely, if we’re interested in exploring changes in relative similarity between outlets over time, it’s clear that we need to explicitly standardize for these changes in volume, to prevent them from getting artificially proxied by other measurements. For example, if we use classification accuracy as a measurement for similarity, a model trained on HuffPo data from 2018 will almost certainly be lower-performing than a model trained on 2017 data, just because the 2018 model will see far less evidence – even though the actual coverage might not have changed in any meaningful way, just the quantity of coverage.

But, there’s only so much we can learn by just counting links, articles, users, impressions; what we really want is a meaningful understanding of the relationships among the outlets – how similar are the headlines? How similar are the audiences? Where they differ – how, exactly?

4 Modeling textual distance with classification

From the Decahose, then, we can extract a set of unique article headlines that have appeared in the Decahose over a 2-year period from a set of 87 major US media brands, aggregated from a

complete set of 73 million individual links posted on Twitter.

Given just the raw headline strings pulled from the `og:title` tags – how can we reason about the relative similarities and differences between the headlines from different outlets? For example, say we have 300k unique headlines from NYT, 200k from CNN, 50k from Daily Caller – how similar or different, in a precise sense, is each pair of outlets? Or, considered as a group – what does the overall matrix of similarities look like? What clusters with what? Which topics, styles, entities, textual features drive these similarities and differences? If we think of the full set of 1.1 million unique headlines as representing a kind of linguistically-instantiated landscape – what’s the shape of this space, what’s the linguistic “topography” of headlines on Twitter?

There are various we could model this. Here, though, we follow Underwood et al. in framing the question as a *predictive* task – we explore the structure of the data by studying the degree to which we can train models to learn accurate mappings between headlines and outlets. That is – if we have headlines from outlets A and B, we can train a lexical classifier to predict whether a given headline was produced by A or B? If the model achieves a high accuracy on test data – if it is able to learn significant structure across the two classes and perform well on unseen data – then this can be interpreted as a signal that the two sets of headlines are highly “separable” or “distinctive,” given the representational capability of the model. And, conversely, if the model achieves poor accuracy – if it has a hard time telling the difference between A and B – then we can interpret this as a signal that the headlines are relatively similar. At the extreme edges – if the model achieves 100% accuracy, then we can interpret this as being the maximum possible “distance” between outlets – they are completely differentiable. And, if the model achieves 50% accuracy, no better than random, then we can interpret this as the smallest possible distance between outlets, a distance of 0 – they are effectively indistinguishable.

(To the model at least; with interpretive projects like this, where we’re trying to model “meaning” in text, in some way, we always have to keep in mind that there’s a mismatch between what a machine learning model sees in a piece of text and what a real person would see. Sometimes the model will fail to pick up on something that would be obvious to a real reader; other times the model will latch onto details that might seem insignificant to us. But, if we’re willing to accept this quotient of interpretive slippage – computation makes it possible to “read” these kinds of large corpora with a level of scale and comprehensiveness that would otherwise be impossible.)

There are various other ways we could go about this, but, there two big advantages to formulating the question as a predictive task. First, it provides a number of natural ways to extract a very simple and interpretable *metric* that captures relative differences in similarity. For example, when predicting whether a headline comes from AP News or BuzzFeed, the model might get to 85% accuracy; but just 60% accuracy when comparing Bloomberg and WSJ.

Second, in the context of modern neural architectures, the classification task provides a natural training objective for learning high-quality, corpus-specific *representations* of the headlines. If we train custom deep learning models to predict an outlet given a headline, it’s easy to then extract the underlying sentence embeddings that are induced by the model – high dimensional vectors that represent the “meaning” of the headline, as operationalized by the classifier.

These embeddings give a remarkable interpretive power – they can be treated, essentially, as a set of coordinates that position each headline in a high dimensional space, and we can then study the “shape” of the linguistic landscape defined the headlines, both within individual outlets and among them. And, at a more pragmatic level – the embeddings also make it possible to systematically find individual examples that are typical, in various ways, of salient changes that are observed at the level of corpus averages. For example – if we identify some kind of smooth, gradual change in the similarity between two outlets over time, we can query the individual headline embeddings in var-

ious way to try to find examples that “mark” or “define” the conceptual essence of this movement. The embeddings open the door to a very rich mode of “distant reading,” to borrow from Franco Moretti – the ability to reason in nuanced ways about the meanings contained in very large corpora of text.

5 Headline differentiability

We take classification, then, as a modeling paradigm; to understand the headlines, we explore the degree to which we train models that map from headline to outlet. Which, in turn, provides a natural way to precisely measure the similarity between outlets, as well as a training objective that we can use to induce high-quality representations of the headlines.

So – how differentiable are headlines? Through a lens of statistical inference – how “learnable” is the relationship between a news organization and the headlines it produces? Ideally, we could explore this question across the full set of 87 media organizations that were culled from the list of the 2,000 most frequently-appearing domains on Twitter. But, because of the fast falloff in the total number of articles associated with each outlet, it’s not feasible to analyze all of them. Especially since, in this context, we generally have to downsample everything to the size of the *smallest* outlet – eg, if we want to compare the accuracy of a model on headlines from outlet A vs outlet B, we have to make sure that the model sees exactly the same amount of “evidence” for each, or otherwise the comparison is unfair. So, if we have 300,000 headlines from NYT, but only 3,000 from Judicial Watch, we’d have to downsample NYT by two orders of magnitude – which seems like a waste, and also starts to feel like something of an apples-to-oranges comparison.

Instead, we pull out a hand-picked set of 15 major outlets, which were selected in an effort to get broad coverage across the largest US media brands and also diversity at the level of political orientation (left-leaning, right-leaning, centrist) and business model (cable news networks, print-and-web newspapers, web-only publications):

1. AP News
2. Bloomberg
3. Breitbart
4. BuzzFeed
5. CNN
6. The Daily Caller
7. The Daily Kos
8. Fox News
9. The Hill
10. The Huffington Post
11. MSNBC
12. The New York Times
13. NPR
14. The Wall Street Journal
15. The Washington Post

Second, after filtering on these outlets, we also just take articles that received at least 10,000 “impressions,” as measured by the sum of the follower counts of the users who posted links to the article. (As mentioned before, this ensures a certain minimum “footprint” for the article, and protects from certain types of sample imbalance that could arise from automated activity on Twitter.) After filtering by domain and applying this minimum impressions threshold, this gives a working corpus of 1,081,790 unique articles, where the largest outlet in terms of volume is The Washington Post, with 122,197 articles, and smallest is MSNBC, with 18,808.

As a first step, we train a series of multiclass models, in which the classifier is presented with headlines drawn from all 15 outlets and trained to predict which outlet produced the headline. To ensure exact comparability across the different architectures, for these benchmarks we freeze off a single downsampled training corpus that is used for all training runs – 18,808 headlines are sampled from each outlet at the start, and then each model is trained on this frozen sub-corpus of 282,120 headlines.

We compare seven models. First, two non-neural baselines, using standard implementations from the `sklearn` Python package:

- **Logistic regression** – Standard logistic regression under L2 regularization, fit on TFIDF-scaled ngram count features (order 1-3). In the multiclass case, we use the `sag` solver.
- **Linear SVC** – A standard SVM, fit on the same features.

Then, we explore five different neural architectures. All of these models share a common token embedding pipeline, and then implement different line encoders on top of the token embeddings. Tokens are encoded first with a CNN over individual characters – characters are mapped to 15d embeddings, and then encoded with a CNN with six filter maps of widths 1-6, each with 25 units per character of width and with max-pooling over the feature maps, which produces a 525d embedding for each individual token. This character-level representation is then concatenated with a standard 300d pre-trained GloVe embedding for the token, where one is available, resulting in a composite 825d embedding for each token. then, these token sequences are handed to one of five different line encoders, with increasing levels of complexity:

- **CBOW** - Simply the unweighted, dimension-wise mean of all token embeddings in the headline.
- **CNN** - A standard CNN for sentence classification as described by Kim et al. Though, we use a larger set of filter widths (1-5), each with 500-unit feature maps.
- **LSTM** - A standard bidirectional LSTM, using a single 512-unit hidden layer for each direction. The top layers of the forward and backward pass are concatenated together to form a single 1024-unit embedding for the line.
- **LSTM + Attention** - Standard attention over the LSTM states, using a separate, two-hidden-layer FFNN to produce scores over the states. As described by Banadhu et al, these weights are interpreted as a probability distribution, which is then use to produce a weighted linear combination across the states, which is then concatenated with the final LSTM output to form a combined 2048-unit encoding.
- **LSTM + CNN** - Similar to attention, but instead of using a linear combination over the states, the states are instead treated as higher-order token embeddings and passed through the same convolutional layers used in the standard CNN encoder. Like with the attention network, the output of the CNN is concatenated with the regular LSTM output.

All models are all trained under a standard cross-entropy loss, using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of $1e-4$ and a batch size of 50. The implementation is in Pytorch, and models are trained on a single NVIDIA V100 GPU, running on a `p3.2xlarge` node on EC2.

6 Headline cleaning

Before comparing across the full set of seven models, though – how difficult is the task? What kind of performance should we expect? As an initial smoke test – if we apply a standard tokenization to the raw headline strings that come through the Decahose, and then fit the vanilla logistic regression, we get 50% accuracy on the full 15-class model:

| | precision | recall | f1-score | support |
|--------------------|-----------|--------|----------|---------|
| apnews.com | 0.47 | 0.48 | 0.47 | 1909 |
| bloomberg.com | 0.51 | 0.58 | 0.54 | 1942 |
| breitbart.com | 0.77 | 0.75 | 0.76 | 1910 |
| buzzfeed.com | 0.57 | 0.79 | 0.67 | 1949 |
| cnn.com | 0.69 | 0.26 | 0.37 | 1854 |
| dailycaller.com | 1.00 | 0.86 | 0.92 | 1959 |
| dailykos.com | 0.47 | 0.69 | 0.56 | 1990 |
| foxnews.com | 0.35 | 0.37 | 0.36 | 1822 |
| huffingtonpost.com | 0.35 | 0.30 | 0.32 | 1802 |
| msnbc.com | 0.46 | 0.57 | 0.51 | 1833 |
| npr.org | 0.38 | 0.37 | 0.37 | 1874 |
| nytimes.com | 0.45 | 0.34 | 0.39 | 1923 |
| thehill.com | 0.42 | 0.56 | 0.48 | 1884 |
| washingtonpost.com | 0.59 | 0.45 | 0.51 | 1835 |
| wsj.com | 0.44 | 0.33 | 0.37 | 1879 |
| micro avg | 0.52 | 0.52 | 0.52 | 28365 |
| macro avg | 0.53 | 0.51 | 0.51 | 28365 |
| weighted avg | 0.53 | 0.52 | 0.51 | 28365 |

Where, for a some outlets, the model is almost perfect – 100% precision for The Daily Caller. Which, in a sense, almost seems *too* good. It could be that The Daily Caller is just that distinctive, but, more likely, this suggests that there is some kind of unambiguous lexical signal in the headlines that’s making the task trivial in some cases.

To get a sense of which features are doing the heavy lifting, we can skim off ngrams with strongest chi-squared statistic for each outlet:

- **cnn.com** – the bell, know before the, : live, before the bell, premarket :, premarket, : live updates, fast facts, trump - cnn, - cnn.com, cnn.com, ? -, ’ - cnn, ? - cnn, -, video, cnn, cnn video, - cnn video, - cnn
- **dailycaller.com** – ? via dailycaller, - the daily, ’ [video, caller, ’ [the daily caller, daily caller, ’ via, ’ via dailycaller, video] via, [video, video], [video],] via,] via dailycaller,], [via, dailycaller, via dailycaller
- **breitbart.com** – illegal, - ’, nolte, illegal aliens, delingpole :, amnesty, delingpole, report :, : ’, cartel, |, ’, ’ |, ’ | breitbart, ’ -, ’ - breitbart, -, | breitbart, - breitbart, breitbart
- **dailykos.com** – for night, round up :, night owls, for night owls, open thread for, thread for night, thread for, daily kos elections, kos elections, pundit, thread, cartoon :, abbreviated pundit, open thread, abbreviated, trumpcare, digest :, daily kos, kos, digest

- **npr.org** – top stories, top stories :, on mountain, on mountain stage, mountain stage, listen :, first listen :, first listen, npr, on world, cafe, on world cafe, world cafe, listen, now :, listen now, listen now, listen, listen now :
- **msnbc.com** – rep., ..., round up ,, 's campaign round, campaign round, campaign round up, report ,, joe :, lawrence, 's mini, 's mini report, mini report ,, mini report, lawrence :, mueller, matthews, matthews :, trump, fmr ,, fmr
- **bloomberg.com** – start your, bloomberg, know to, to know to, oil, five things you, to start your, know to start, start your day, stocks, billion, markets, wrap, said to, , : markets, markets wrap, : markets wrap, brexit, u.k.
- **nytimes.com** – in nyc this, nyc this, g.o.p., new york today, york today, york today :, california today, california today :, , dies at, , dies, evening briefing, review : ', recipe, opinion | the, briefing, today :, review :, : your, opinion, opinion |
- **washingtonpost.com** – review |, opinion | the, | trump 's, | why, opinion | trump, d.c., 202 :, 202, analysis | trump, | trump, analysis | the, | the, ., perspective, opinion, perspective |, opinion |, analysis, |, analysis |
- **wsj.com** – download :, the morning download, china, the morning risk, morning risk, morning risk report, risk report :, risk report, fed 's, ecb, opinion journal, opinion journal :, ', eurozone, ' review, ' review :, the morning, investors, fed, u.s.
- **buzzfeed.com** – that will, make you, your, we 'll reveal, 'll reveal, 19, you ?, tell you, are you ?, 'll tell you, 'll tell, are you, we 'll tell, which, we 'll, 'll, and we, and we 'll, you
- **apnews.com** – 1st, check : trump, us, things to know, for today, apnewsbreak :, apnewsbreak, know for today, ap fact, ap fact check, 10 things, latest : trump, 10 things to, know for, to know for, ap, latest, the latest, the latest :, latest :
- **huffingtonpost.com** – via dailycaller, marketing, from women this, tweets from women, 20 funniest tweets, 20 funniest, the 20 funniest, funniest, from parents this, parents this week, parents this, tweets from, tweets from parents, email :, 's morning email, morning email, morning email :, lgbtq, funniest tweets, funniest tweets from
- **thehill.com** – dem :, dem senator :, memo :, : trump, ', :, dem lawmaker, gop senator, trump, healthcare, poll, the memo :, senator :, dem senator, gop, poll :, dems, report, dem, : report
- **foxnews.com** – eric shawn, , reports say, via, dailycaller, via dailycaller, police, napolitano :, tucker, gingrich, report says, gutfeld :, , report says, gutfeld on, gingrich :, tucker :, , police, police say, , police say, gutfeld, hannity :

Which clearly shows the problem – many headlines include “paratext,” of different types, that correlates very strongly with a particular outlet, but doesn’t have any meaningful connection to the substance of the headline, in the sense that we care about. For example, in the most clear-cut case – some outlets add “call signs” to the outlets that literally just identify the outlet:

- Cost of war on Syrian children 's mental health - **CNN Video**
- **APNewsBreak** : US yanks funds from unbuilt windmill farm
- Trump Just Named Five New Possible Supreme Court Nominees **Via dailycaller**
- **WSJ** : Trump ignored advice to confront Putin over indictments

Or, more indirect – some outlets add prefixes or suffixes to headlines that mark the “category” or “vertical” that the article belongs to:

- **OPINION** | Trump ’s strategic incoherence is a recipe for war
- **ANALYSIS** : Michael Wolff Makes the Argument for Removing Trump Under 25th Amendment

Or, similarly, a number of outlets have independently named “blogs” or “series.” Eg, the “Perspective” from The Washington Post, the “Morning Risk Report” from WSJ:

- **Perspective** | What Google and Facebook must do about one of their biggest problems
- **The Morning Risk Report** : Huawei Looks to Avoid ZTE ’s Fate

Author names can also an issue, if they get systematically included with headlines. Eg, Breitbart has a habit of writing headlines of the format “[NAME] : . . .”. For example, James Delingpole shows up in about 100 headlines:

- **Delingpole** : Trump Pulls out of Paris; Internet Shrieks that End Is Nigh
- **Delingpole** : When Comedians Stop Being Funny

With these, the outlet isn’t directly identified, but, if the bigram **Perspective** appears in hundreds of WaPo headlines and nowhere else, then the model is able to make a classification decision just on the basis of what is essentially a formatting decision. Of course – the classifier can’t be blamed for this. Its only objective is to minimize the cross-entropy loss over the output distribution. But from an interpretive standpoint, to the extent that we want to use the classifier as a modeling paradigm, as a means to the end of inducing intellectually useful representations of the content – this is bad, since it essentially lets the model off the hook from having to produce a good representation of the “meaning” of the headline.

We’re in the funny position, then, of essentially wanting to make the model less accurate but more interesting – we need to snip out these “giveaway” features, and force the model to only operate on the substance of the headline.

It’s worth noting, though, that beyond clear-cut cases like **CNN Video**, there’s also a longer tail of more subtle textual features that might be thought of as elements of “house style,” for lack of a better phrase – a set of stylistic “ticks” that tend to mark particular outlets, but (debatably) don’t really contribute in a meaningful way to the substance of the headline. For example, some outlets produce a number of headlines that include very short quotes – often just a single word – wrapped inside of quotation marks and inlined directly into the middle of an otherwise normal headline. For example, from Fox:

- Police say remains are “**consistent**” with missing Iowa boy
- Pakistani airline investigates “**extra passengers**” flown on fully booked plane
- “**Lost**” asteroid the size of the Statue of Liberty to buzz by Earth Tuesday

(This kind of pattern, incidentally, is precisely the kind of pattern that a strong, character-level neural model is very good at learning, which in turn can have a strong effect on the final representation produced by the encoder.)

Are the quotes meaningful? Arguably not really, since they’re generally being used as a functional part of an otherwise regular headline written by a reporter or editor at Fox. But, this is debatable. For example – an argument could be made that the presence of the quotes changes the “positioning” of the headline – by including the quote, the journalist somewhat disassociates herself from the phrasing of the quote. The quote holds the headline at arms length, in a sense; ownership is shifted away from the headline writer and towards the person being quoted.

Another interesting case: a handful of outlets sometimes use a distinctive lexicon of slang words – for example, The Hill, which often uses “dem” instead of “democrat.”

- GOP sees omens of a **Dem** wave in Wisconsin
- House **Dem** calls for bipartisan talks to fund children’s health care

In theory we could hide this from the model by unrolling “dem” into “democrat.” But, this feels iffy; “dem,” arguably, has a meaning that’s distinct from “democrat” in a substantive way – it implies a kind of professional perspective on politics, and inside-the-beltway sophistication.

So – how to clean the headlines, how to cut out the “paratext” without dipping too far into the meaningful “text” that we care about? For the purposes of this study, we take a simple, hands-off approach that errs in the direction of removing too much information instead of too little. First, tokens are cleaned to standardize over formatting differences at the level of capitalization and punctuation. Then, lines are split into segments marked by any kind of “break” character – periods, semicolons, colons, question marks, exclamation marks, and things like | or . Then, we identify segments that have very strong statistical associations with one or more outlets – pieces of headlines like CNN Video and via @dailycaller that are exactly repeated across thousands of headlines for a subset of outlets. These segments are removed, and the classifiers are just shown the (cleaned) tokens that remain. In detail:

1. Standardize non-ASCII characters like curly quotes and em-dashes, to ensure consistent tokenization.
2. Clean the tokens - downcase, strip punctuation. Keep \$ and %, but replace [0-9]+ digits with a single # character, since different outlets have different conventions for how numbers are reported and formatted.
3. Break on any kind “separator” character that could mark a logical break between sections of a headline – :, |, -, , etc. As a special case, also break on the word “via,” which is used by some outlets to identify the source (“... via @dailycaller”). This breaks each headline into a set of cleaned segments – for example,

`'Catching waves with top-ranked African surfer - CNN Video'`

gets split into

`('catching waves with top ranked african surfer', 'cnn video')`

4. Treating these segments as higher-order “tokens,” in effect – take the chi-squared statistic between each segment and the response variable defined by the outlet labels. This makes it possible to identify the segments that have the strongest associations with some subset of outlets. For example, the 50 segments with the highest scores:

dailycaller, breitbart, cnn video, the daily caller, listen now, analysis, video, opinion, perspective, the latest, report, ap news, cnn, cnncom, cartoon, the huffington post, d, markets wrap, exclusive, open thread for night owls, morning digest, matthews, abbreviated pundit round up, midday open thread, watch, review, joe, poll, cnnpolitics, lawrence, first listen, episode #, delingpole, bloomberg, trump, bloomberg professional services, r, sign the petition, breaking, tiny desk concert, the morning download, top stories, chart, slideshow, police, the morning risk report, abbreviated pundit roundup, paid program, add your name, ap fact check

5. Skim off segments where the p-value under the chi-squared test is under 0.0001, which gives set of 1,719 segments with (very) strong associations with one or more outlets. Remove these from all headlines.

This produces a highly standardized representation of each headline that basically consists of a stream of ASCII lexemes. For example, using some examples from before, with the original headline first, cleaned tokens second:

- Cost of war on Syrian children 's mental health - CNN Video
cost of war on syrian children s mental health
- Delingpole : Trump Pulls out of Paris ; Internet Shrieks that End Is Nigh
trump pulls out of paris internet shrieks that end is nigh
- Police say remains are “ consistent ” with missing Iowa boy
police say remains are consistent with missing iowa boy
- Perspective | What Google and Facebook must do about one of their biggest problems
what google and facebook must do about one of their biggest problems

7 (Cleaned) differentiability

Now that we’ve scrubbed out these “giveaway” features, which would otherwise give a distorted sense of the distinctiveness of the headlines – let’s return to the basic question of how “learnable” the relationship is between headlines and outlets.

As a first experiment, we train each of the seven architectures on the same class-balanced subset of headlines, breaking the corpus into 80/10/10% train/dev/test splits. For the logistic regression and SVC, the dev set is ignored, and the model is simply fit on the training split and evaluated on test. For the neural models, we evaluate the performance on the dev set after every 100,000 training pairs, and implement an early-stopping rule that stops the training run when the loss on the dev set fails to improve over a 5-step window. The models achieve these accuracies, over 15 classes:

| Model | Accuracy |
|---------------------|----------|
| LSTM + Attention | 41.35 |
| LSTM + CNN | 40.95 |
| LSTM | 40.35 |
| Linear SVC | 38.60 |
| Logistic Regression | 36.58 |
| CNN | 34.85 |
| CBOW | 33.59 |