Indra Mar

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"Popular Propaganda": An Examination of the Creation of Filter Bubbles on Reddit

Social media platforms such as Reddit provide the public with the ability to access and distribute information over huge networks, often anonymously, and without, or with rather lenient, levels of moderation (while Reddit and other platforms do have moderation, they are often either a) unable to effectively prosecute misusers or b) only capable of forcing them to less popular, more fringe platforms such as 4chan and 8chan). This power gives average individuals potential sway over massive amounts of people, whereas previously such an audience was only available to a select few. The rise and increased importance of job titles such as 'influencer' and 'social media coordinator', as well as the support gained on platforms such as Twitter by politicians like Donald Trump, only serve to demonstrate this phenomenon. This enhanced individual capacity of expression, and the lack of objective, effectively backed, moderation embroiled with it, creates a potential for mass influence that cannot be ignored, especially when taken into consideration with the declining authority held by traditional sources of information (attacks upon academia, the scientific establishment, and the media/press are all on the rise (Schroeder, 60)).

My project will analyze the subreddit *r/PoliticalHumor* as an examination of the general populaces' ability to influence itself, through the employment of Roland Barthes' concept of the myth, or the repackaging of popular ideas that have changed in meaning, and the social media rejection Susan Sontag's assertion that content is secondary to form within

the field of interpretation, as well as the buildup of a filter bubble through those myths'

and that rejection's enforcement of certain political ideologies. The subreddit is self

described as "A subreddit focused on US politics, and the ridiculousness surrounding

them", and has 744,684 members as of the writing of this paper. Its relevant rules include:

1. Posts must be about U.S. Politics.

2. Try to be funny.

3. Pictures of only text are not allowed.

4. Images only

Two of these are of particular relevance to my study. The first, the "Image only" rule,

concerns my data, as I am unable to analyze the text superimposed over the memes,

cartoons, and other images that make up the content of the subreddit (this is primarily due

to time constraints as well as methodological limitations, though ultimately, the analysis of

meme text does not bring new information to light about the use of the subreddit, more so

the content). Due to this, my data will be comprised of both comment text and submission

statistics (as opposed to actual submissions) from the "Top" filter of *rPoliticalHumor*, as

they cover the topic of the image in their discussions, as well as provide a platform on

which to expand the ideas that are briefly expressed in the image that comprises the post.

The second, the "Try to be funny" rule, is conceptually problematic as both "trying" and

"funny" are completely subjective terms, leaving a large amount of leeway for

misinterpretation. This often manifests as "this isn't funny" (or some variation of it) being

one of the primary complaints seen about posts, leading to defenses claiming the opposite.

Whether these claims are actually true or whether the user simply disagreed

politically/ideologically with the content is one of the primary questions of this study. This subjectivity allows users to post almost anything political while claiming humor, which in turn sets the ground for the usage of memes and cartoons as an informal vehicle for the delivery of popularly created political propaganda, with moderators unable to stop their dissemination.

The progression of my project is as follows: I will first describe my analysis process, including the challenges I ran into, before demonstrating how the application of these concepts as well as the conclusions gleaned from my analysis show the development of a liberal filter bubble within the subreddit *r/PoliticalHumor*, as well the weaponization of irony through the employment of memes as a means of crowdsourced propaganda. I will then examine how the subreddit uses both Barthe's myths as well as Sontag's content based interpretation in order to blur the reality of the information in posts, further entrenching them in the purpose of actual political discourse as opposed to simply 'the ridiculousness surrounding' politics.

To begin my analysis, I first examined the subreddit as I would any other social media platform: by merely browsing in an attempt to find potential patterns that might lead to a research question. I noticed in my skimming, that there appeared to be a leftist or liberal bias within the subreddit, as it appeared as though the vast majority of the users identified with that spectrum of political views. There existed an almost acceptance of this fact, with more conservative or right wing posters often claiming that they were merely "waiting for the downvotes" or wondering "how many libtards are gonna downvote this one?" The prevalence of these sentiments, as well as the relatively obvious higher

proportion of liberal content, help point to the establishment of left-of-center bias within

the subreddit, a somewhat common accusation among social media platforms. Based off of

this hypothesis, I set out looking for a pattern within the subreddit that might act as proof,

or at least further demonstrate the existence of bias. I soon found that there appeared to be

an inverse correlation between the number of upvotes a submission received and the

number of comments posted to it, which seemed to be an indicator of bias, as it gave the

impression of appearing primarily on leftward leaning posts.

The pattern that I perceived I first mistakingly tested on a much smaller subreddit

called *r/Political_Humor* (the difference being in the underscore between the words, and in

hundreds of thousands of users/posters and submissions with the original

r/PoliticalHumor having over 350,000 submissions and over 6 million comments that I was

able to use for my data set, as opposed to the smaller *r/Political_Humor* that contained 74

submissions and approximately five hundred comments). My tests, however, revealed that

the pattern also existed within the smaller subreddit, leading me to believe that it would

also potentially hold for the much larger dataset.

My analysis consisted of first graphing the inverse correlation between upvotes and

comments, in order to ensure that my hypothesis was somewhat accurate. I then

proceeded by building a topic model, similar to the one created in the Evaluating Topic

Models notes (the only difference being that I built the model off of purely comment data,

as opposed to merged comment and submission data, due to the previously stated difficulty

and potential limited usefulness of image analysis, as well as problems with the dropping of

deleted/NaN posts from the submissions dataset) for the purpose of assigning topics to the

submissions based off of the comments. I then created a bias measure based off of the

number of comments divided by the number of upvotes to assign to each submission,

before comparing the bias meters to the topics of the submissions they were assigned to

(the meter consists of a value between 0 and 1, with the closer the value is to 0 the more

leftwardly biased it is). In this way I was able to determine the bias levels of certain liberal

leaning posts.

For example, the bias measure of a post titled 'Laundry Room Treason' (showing a

tweet by public defender Scott Hechinger that read, "For context on Manafort's 47 months

in prison, my client yesterday was offered 36-72 months in prison for stealing $100 worth

of quarters from a residential laundry room") by user Matteoms was 0.028997 (out of

2,090 comments and 72,076 upvotes) with the topic having been read as 'Trump

Campaign." This clearly demonstrates a relationship between upvotes and comments on

certain submissions, which in turn shows the existence of liberal bias.

After completing my analysis, I turned to close readings in order to help determine

the establishment of a filter bubble. The first concept I applied to my subreddit was Roland

Barthes' conception of myths and their development. Barthes' classification of myths as "a

system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot

possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form... since myth

is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse."

(Barthes, 4). By this definition, everything within the subreddit *r/PoliticalHumor* is a myth,

as it a) is conveyed through discourse and b) is a mode of signification of political thought.

The submissions seen (as well as the discussion that takes place in the comments)

represent the morphing of information into purpose driven myths, created for the purpose of influence and as a means of creating a new meaning from an old signifier (the use and reuse of memes under different political contexts, for example, can mean very different things, depending on how the original poster decides to portray them).

This transitions into Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* as it demonstrates the direct rejection of her idea that, "The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art — and, by analogy, our own experience — more, rather than less, real to us*."* (Sontag, 14) through the purposeful distortion of the information present within the memes that make up the majority of the subreddit's submissions. These memes are a representation of publicly sourced art, yet they strive for simplicity and enforcement of the idea they portray, as opposed to making it more 'real' and understandable. It is via the employment of these techniques that the memes of *r/PoliticalHumor* become more than memes: they become purposely distorted examples of people's propaganda, through their attempts at influence as well as their rejection of reality within the post.

The creation of left-leaning biases/filter bubbles on social media platforms is an extremely contentious topic in the contemporary political arena. Reddit and other massive media sharing tech giants such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and even Google have all come under investigation for the supposed favoring of liberal politics over conservative ones (Shepardson, 1), making research into whether this is actually the case extremely relevant. The Natural Language Processing (NLP)/ and Computational Text Analysis (CTA) skills found within the developing field of Digital Humanities/Hermeneutics are in a prime position to a) develop parameters for the definitive establishment of biases and b) test

whether online discourse falls within those parameters (with my liberal bias meter acting as self created parameter for bias). It is only through the continued development of these techniques, in conjunction with the already defined and accepted methods of analysis within the Humanities, that we are able to analyze the development of filter bubbles in online communities, and further explain how the discourse that takes place in these communities can in turn influence/impact contemporary politics.

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