

Curating the Public Sphere — An Online Ethnographic Study of How Op-eds Initiate Discourse on Twitter

Joyce Wang

Advised by Kathleen M. Carley

Introduction

This study examines Twitter users' response to op-eds shared by established news agencies on the platform.

Purpose:

- Understand how op-eds influence discourse on social media today
- Inspire new ways of curating opinion content and improving the op-ed template to more effectively facilitate civil discourse in the evolving technological and ideological landscape

Online Ethnographic Methods

- **contextualize** analysis by juxtaposing the past and present of the op-ed page
- **High-level observations** (quantitative, sentiment analysis, social network analysis)
- **Case studies** (qualitative, complement high-level)

Background: The past and present of op-eds

"A page of clashing opinions, however, was the aim from the beginning."—*The New York Times*, 2004

"We like controversy."—*The Los Angeles Times*, 1967

Past:

- invented as an embodiment of public forum
- Included voices across the political spectrum
- carried the mission of democratizing civil discourse



Present:

- Continued commitment to including diverse voices and promoting discourse
- The affordances of social media provide new challenges as well as new opportunities

Data Collection

Dataset 1: for high-level analysis

The retweet/quote/reply network around op-eds by six established English-language news agencies

Time period: one month (1/18/2019 to 2/18/2019)

Collection method: Twitter Standard API & Tweepy library

Dataset 2: for case studies

Tweets with >50 replies posted by @nytopinion and @postopinions and a sample of 20 replies for each tweet

Time period: 11 days (3/3/2019 to 3/13/2019.)

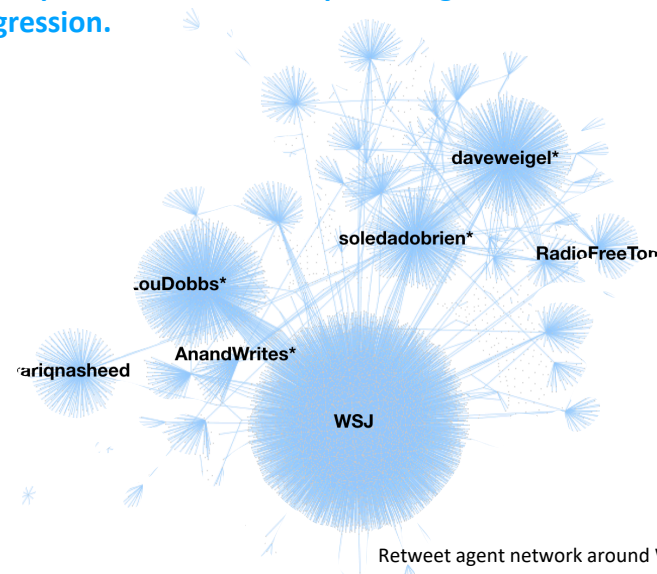
Collection method: author's manual collection

Observation 1 (high-level): The general sentiment towards op-eds is negative.

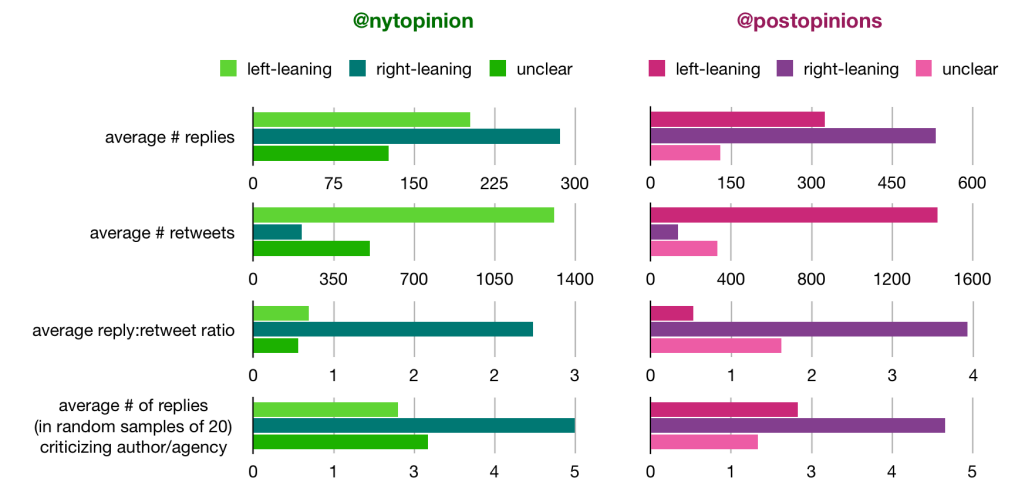
	# of quotes to op-ed tweets	with cuss words	with emoticons	with all-caps words	with first-person pronouns	with second-person pronouns	average sentiment scores
@AJEnglish	1408	9.38%	2.49%	67.61%	41.97%	14.63%	0.0376
@washingtonpost	28439	9.27%	1.78%	83.04%	21.99%	13.14%	0.0151
@ChinaDaily	54	11.11%	1.85%	51.85%	33.33%	1.85%	-0.0072
@nytimes	4945	16.12%	2.91%	82.12%	19.68%	6.21%	-0.3452
@NBCNews	2322	18.91%	1.98%	72.78%	19.85%	13.82%	-0.0323
@WSJ	5071	12.60%	1.12%	79.55%	23.27%	11.12%	-0.0755
average		12.90%	2.02%	72.83%	26.68%	10.13%	-0.0679

Neuroticism is positively correlated with use of negative emotion words and the frequent use of first person pronouns.

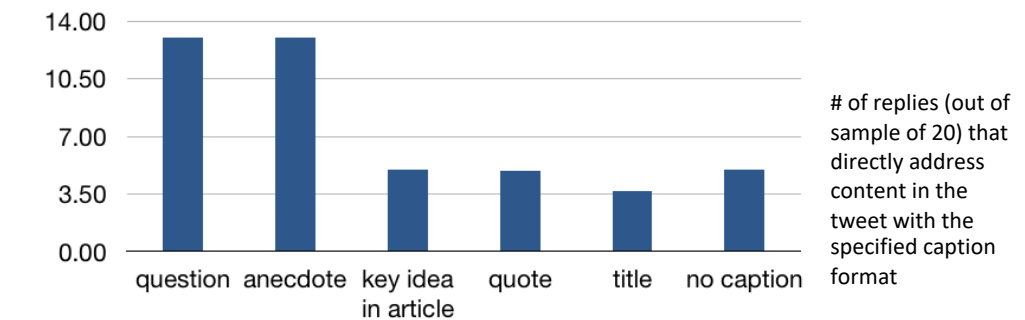
Observation 2 (high-level): News agencies and journalists are top influencers and frequent targets of criticisms and aggression.



Observation 3 (case studies): When a tweet does not represent the outlet's perceived political leaning, it generates more reactions as well as criticisms towards the author and the agency.



Observation 4 (case studies): Users' replies are influenced by the style of the caption (e.g. questions and anecdotes).



Discussion

- Social media offers less social control around response → greater use of abusive and emotional language
- Social media form topic-groups/echo-chambers → faster escalation of emotions around op-ed
- Increased response to caption only (sound bite)
- Negative responses towards 'unusual' stance expose modern readers' disconnect with the intent of the op-ed format

Future works

- This is a **hypothesis-generating** study that invite future works to take deeper dives
- Larger datasets
- Interview social media strategists at news agencies
- Experiment with curation techniques