

# How Op-Eds Influence Discourse on Twitter: An Online Ethnographic Study

## Introduction

This study examines discourse patterns around opinion articles shared by major news agencies on the platform of Twitter.

**Purpose:** to help news professionals become more informed in their creation and curation of content for social media platforms, which have very different affordances from print, websites, news letters, and other channels of news dissemination.

Taking a mixed-methods approach, this work in progress

- traces the history of op-eds in print
- makes online observations
- performs social network analysis

## Op-Eds: Past and Present

"A page of clashing opinions, however, was the aim from the beginning."<sup>1</sup>

—The New York Times, 2004

"We like controversy."<sup>2</sup>

—The Los Angeles Times, 1967

In the early 1900s, major newspapers across the United States experimented with op-eds as an innovative public forum for commentary<sup>3</sup>.

Designed to democratize social and political discourse, the op-ed section includes diverse voices and opinions from a variety of professions, identities, backgrounds, and across the political spectrum.

Bassett ... Conservative: Buckley, Goldwater, Hazlitt, Kilpatrick, Moley, Taylor.  
Moderate: Alsop, Barlett, Lewis, Evans-Novak.  
Liberal: Pearson, Lerner, Kraft, Rowan, Wilkins.

The Los Angeles Times included contributors across the political spectrum (1967)

The OpEd Project

NYT Opinion @nytopinion  
This reader is right: We need more women on our letters page. We're committing ourselves to work toward fixing that problem, and we'll report back on our progress in one year.

The commitment to include diverse opinions and voices in the op-ed section is being continued today.

Nowadays, many news agencies regularly share opinion pieces on social media. The social affordances of platforms such as Twitter offer the potential of amplifying influence of op-eds. However, discourse on social media are challenged by the proliferation of online trolls and disinformation. This work aims to explore whether op-eds are able to continue serving its purpose of facilitating informed public discourse when they are shared on Twitter.

## Data Collection

**Content:** all news tweets posted by six major English-language news agencies and their retweets, replies, and quotes

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

**Tool:** Twitter Standard API and the Tweepy python library

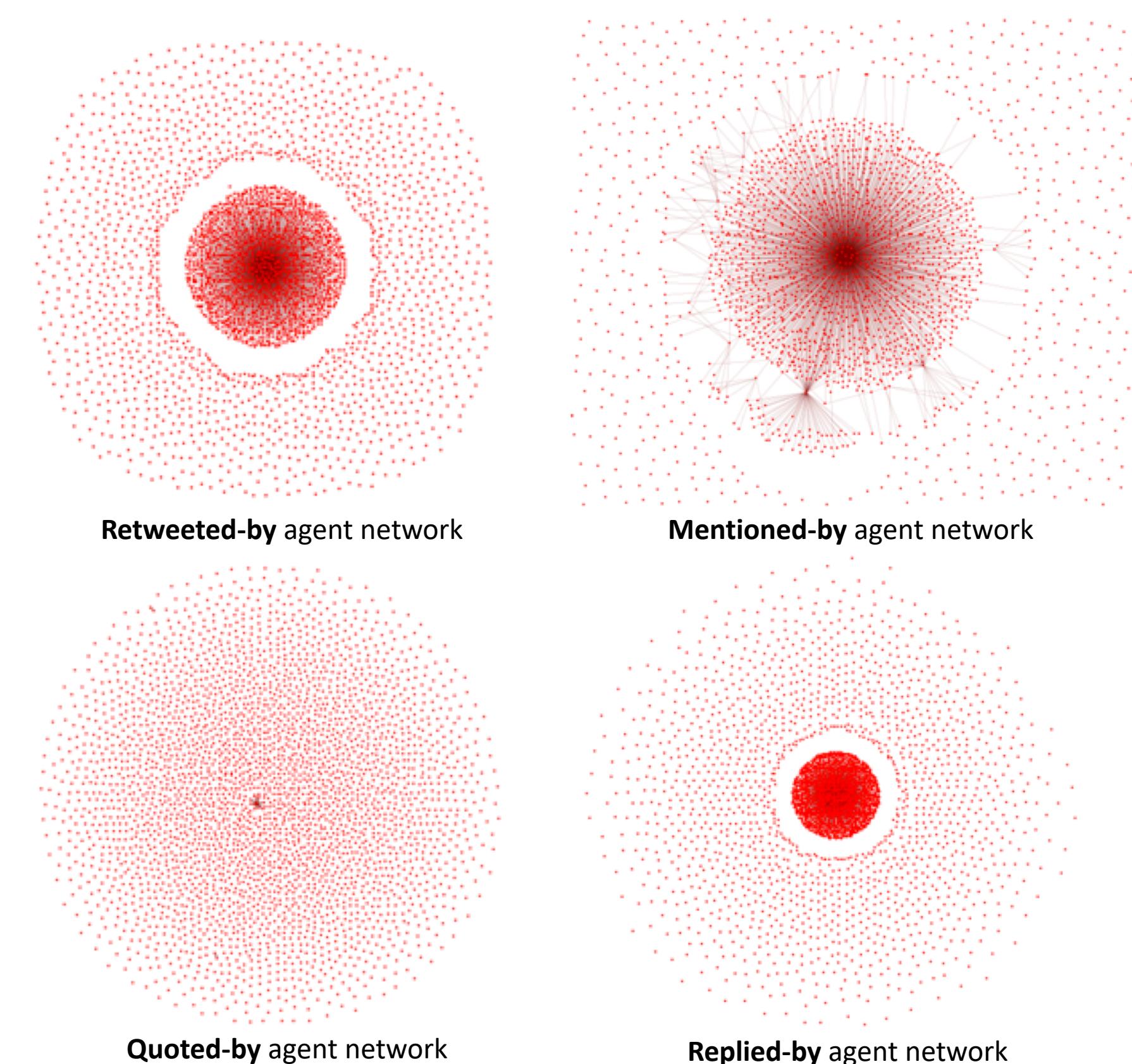
**Categorization:** Each tweet is categorized either in the "opinion network" or the "non-opinion network," based on whether it is connected to a news tweet that links to an opinion article.



	#tweets	#agents
@AJEnglish	10127	7532
@washingtonpost	64276	40958
@ChinaDaily	680	516
@nytimes	15683	13133
@NBCNews	18687	11921
@WSJ	13754	10369

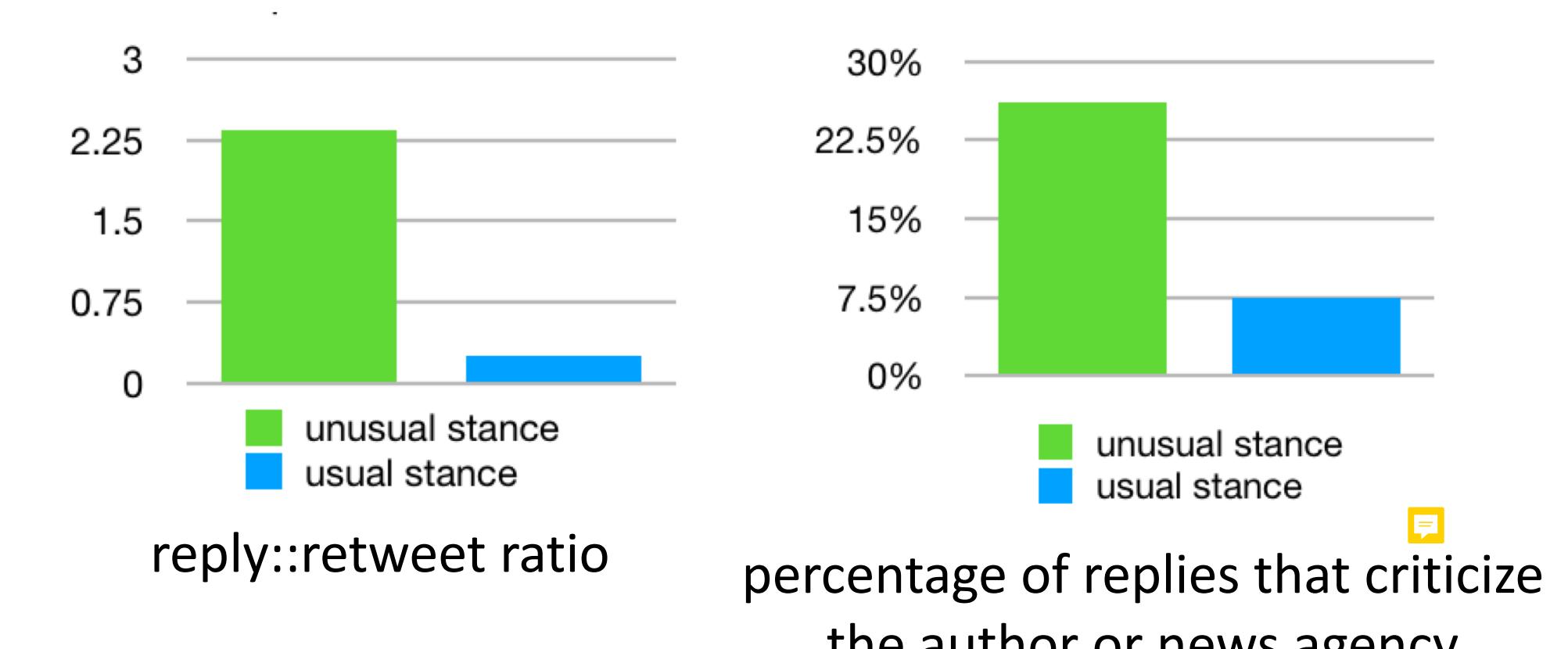
Top: Data summary of "opinion networks"  
Left: Tweets in the "opinion" network

**Observation C: Users engage with opinion articles mostly through retweeting (>replying >mentioning>quoting).**



**Observation D: When the opinion piece doesn't align with the news agency's usual stance, 1) there is a higher amount of interaction, 2) the interaction is more negative.**

Based on observations on all tweets with > 50 replies by @nytopinion over a 10-day period:



## Future works

- Extend experiments to multiple news agencies
- Contextualize findings by consulting literatures
- Create recommendations for social media managers and news curators

## References

1. Shipley, David. "And Now a Word From Op-Ed," *The New York Times*, Feb 1, 2004.
2. Bassett, James. "The Battle of the Analysts," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1967, p. 6.
3. Socolow, Michael J. "A profitable public sphere: the creation of the New York times Op-ed page." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 87.2 (2010): 281-296.
4. Pennebaker, James W., and Laura A. King. "Linguistic styles: Language use as an individual difference." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 77.6 (1999): 1296.