The Role of Impression Management Dynamics in Social Media Reach

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Impression management is "the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions" (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6). In online environments, impression is managed through the text that users choose to put into their profile bio, an image they use as their profile picture, or the content they share in their posts and stories. Even small features such as the facial expression in the photo may be a significant factor that affects the impression that the users make on their audience.

The purpose of this research is to develop a theory to explain the role of impression management, as a social-psychological process, on the mechanics of online social media, as an IT artifact, in highlighting and raising the voice of influencers. The new theory, that is a result of a marriage between social psychology domain and IT domain, is to be developed to eventually give us an insight on to what extent online social media is being perceived a democratic online society and why.

To answer our bigger question, we start with the following questions:

What group of impressionists receive more reach (attention) when expressing their opinion?

What are the dynamics of the impression management process of users with the highest reach? (For example, are there any changes in the way they influence the perception of their image over time? Are there any external events such as a trending controversial topic that trigger changes in the impression being made?)

In this research we take a data-driven approach to answer the above questions.

We have collected tweets with the controversial topic of abortion bans (used #abortionbans as the search term) posted from May 17th, 2019 to Jun 2nd, 2019. Then we extracted the user names of the tweet owners. We annotated each user account according to the photo features and textual features of the bio text. The goal is to classify a smaller set of users into several impressionist categories, and then use a classification technique to label the rest of the users according to the prediction model. In the next step, we will analyze the tweets both before and after the #abortionbans topic was trending, to record the changes in the impression management. This gets us one step closer to identifying the dynamics of the impression management process. We hope that the result of our analyses will help us identify the role of impression management dynamics on reach and eventually help us understand the concept of democracy in online social media.

Since we are still in the initial phase of our research, any kind of suggestions and feedback on the theory development and the methodology in general would be very helpful. We hope to receive constructive feedback and find potential collaborators who are interested in pursuing this type of research with us.

References

Schlenker, B. R.: 1980, Impression Management: The Self-concept, Social Identity, and Interpersonal Relations (Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Montery).