Nasty, Brutish, and Short: What Makes Election News Popular on Twitter?

Anonymous

Abstract

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Introduction

In the changing landscape of both journalism and politics, social media is playing an increasingly large role in mobilizing and spreading information to citizens. A Pew Research survey from August 2015 showed that nearly two-thirds of adults in the U.S. who are on Twitter use the platform to get news, and the 2016 election cycle highlighted the power of social media on the election process (**?**). The New York Times estimated a 2 billion-dollar advantage in free media for Donald Trump on platforms from television to Twitter, all of which has had no small impact on the messages broadcast to voters (**?**).

The popularity of sharing articles on social media shifts the role of the news consumer from armchair reader to information propagator. Sharing a story requires a level of interest and activation on the part of the reader beyond passive readership; yet often, this trigger is predictably emotional in nature. In a 2011 study of the New York Times' "most emailed list", Berger and Milkman found that the potential for a news story to go viral is partially driven by physiological arousal, defined as "an excitatory state of sensory alertness, mobilization, or energy [Milkman 7]."

The (Short) Attention Economy

At the same time that social media has the power to create a flood of free advertising and media for political candidates, the abundance of information on the web has created new challenges and questions about the kind of content being processed by readers. This paradox– between the ease of accessibility to information and the increasingly limited bandwidth of consumers– is described as one of the challenges of being in an *attention economy* (**?**). Moreover, high-impact events like the presidential elections especially intensifies this effect– about 60 % of Americans reported feeling exhausted by media coverage of the elections in July of 2016 (**?**). To explore the effects of the attention economy on the reading of political news, we examine **story length** and how it relates to sharing popularity in the analysis to follow.

Negativity in Politics and the Internet

In addition, the option of anonymity and pseudo-anonymity on a social network like Twitter (along with other traits of Internet communication), is theorized to contribute to increased negative and hostile behavior, potentially increasing tension for the already-fraught subject of politics. This phenomenon, is coined as the *online disinhibition effect* (**?**).

In Berger and Milkmans study of story virality, it was found that *positive* content was more likely to be shared than negative content– against conventional belief (**?**). Political news, however, is a unique category of news, and this election in particular– where one-in-four Americans report disliking the presidential candidates– appears to have a negative overtone.

To compare the sharing of election news stories versus patterns of general virality in the news, and to examine the extent in which negative sentiment is popular, we calculate the *negativity* of stories, and how that relates to Twitter behavior.

We also examine the effects of the degree of combined emotionality in the content and how that relates to Twitter shares, to see if either more positive or more negative content is more likely to be shared overall than content that ranks low in emotionality. Although positive content was found to be more popular than negative content in the sharing of stories, both highly positive and highly negative content was more likely to become viral, and we expect the same to hold for political news (**?**).

Hypotheses

We focus on three key aspects: length, emotionality, and positivity of political news content. We hypothesize the following behavior in our dataset of stories and tweets:

- **H1:** Story length has a *negative* correlation with Twitter shares, due to the effects of the Internet attention economy and overexposure to political media (**?**).
- **H2:** Emotionality has a *positive* correlation with Twitter shares, consistent for viral content in general (**?**).

- **H3:** Positivity has a *negative* correlation with Twitter shares, due to the nature of political news and contrary to generalized findings (**?**)

For each of these three independent variables (story length, emotionality, positivity) we repeat analyses across three views of the data: first, the entire dataset; then, by political candidate followed amongst users who follow only one candidate; and finally, by the number of political candidates followed (degree of political engagement), to look for differences amongst different populations of political tweeters.

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\author{Author 1 \and Author 2\\
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Rice, J. 1986. Poligon: A System for Parallel Problem Solving, Technical Report, KSL-86-19, Dept. of Computer Science, Stanford Univ.

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Clancey, W. J. 1979b. Transfer of Rule-Based Expertise through a Tutorial Dialogue. Ph.D. diss., Dept. of Computer Science, Stanford Univ., Stanford, Calif.

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Additional Resources

LaTeX is a difficult program to master. If you've used that software, and this document didn't help or some items were not explained clearly, we recommend you read Michael Shell's excellent document (testflow doc.txt V1.0a 2002/08/13) about obtaining correct PS/PDF output on LaTeX systems. (It was written for another purpose, but it has general application as well). It is available at www.ctan.org in the tex-archive.

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Thank you for reading these instructions carefully. We look forward to receiving your electronic files!