Research Notebook

Weekly Entry:

Reading: *Using the President's Tweets to Understand Political Diversion in the Age of Social Media by Stephan Lewandowsky, Michael Jetter, and Ullrich K. H. Ecker (2020)*

Summary

This week's reading examines how Twitter can be used to divert politics. Using Donald Tsrump's presidency as an example, this study offers empirical evidence that Twitter activity had been used to strategically shift media attention to other politically harmful issues, namely during the Mueller investigation. Analysing Trump's tweets with daily news coverage from leading sources such as The New York Times and ABC News, the authors discovered that when media coverage of the investigation spiked, so did Trump's tweeting on other, unrelated but favourable topics including China, jobs and immigration. In most cases, it was accompanied by a noticeable decline in media coverage of the Mueller investigation the next day. The results show how nonlinear is the relationship between online messaging and media response and it includes the fact that digital platforms can not only convey messages to the public but also shape the public agenda.

Relation to the topic Communities

The paper provides a compelling way of thinking about how digital communities have helped shape the public's discourse. Trump's Twitter followers were not only a political base, but also a real time amplification system for narratives almost instantly. Such an online political community exists outside of its own boundaries and has power over the way in which broader audiences, like journalists and news institutions, engage with specific topics. It is precisely the porous frontier between some communities and the media, and the ability of one to put pressure on the other's priorities, that the study emphasizes. This also brings to the fore important questions regarding the leadership of communities and how someone like Trump can lead collective attention and influence, directly or indirectly, the public agenda through brief, frequent messages. On this point of view, it is not just about shared beliefs or interests that make a community, communities are also directed by how well they do in the moments of political tension.

Research Direction & Possibilities

It turns out that the reading can be used as a starting point to explore how communication in digital communities is formed and influenced. This might be a direction to look to see how communities react when someone who occupies a central role of the community changes the conversation or introduces new topics. It may include such things as how quickly attention shifts, which messages get the most attention and how people interact with the messages. A second line of inquiry is the comparison between one sort of online community against another, such as political, activist, or fan community who react differently to attempts to distract or narrative control. And it may also be helpful to think about the purpose of leadership in these spaces in particular, as doers or leaders who shape communal focus. More generally, these ideas are relevant to questions of power, trust and participation in the online environment and how communities handle making something visible and other things invisible in public discourse.

Conclusion

This study is a good example of how digital communication can be leveraged to channel the concentration of media and online communities. The paper shows that influence can be exerted not just through direct messaging but by manipulating the public focus in a way that temporarily suppresses the reporting of topics with the potential to damage Trump politically. This dynamic helps to understand how communities can be

actors in shaping, amplifying or ignoring narratives based on how they are energized by such figures in positions of authority.

For our theme of communities, the findings make us reflect that these groups are not only a space of shared identity, but also highly determined by the flow of information and the actors who steer it. Given the current state of the world (fast communication; attention is a resource), understanding how communities are to respond to distraction, or a change in agenda, is essential and the focus of today's work. It is concerning in the light of questions that leaders, media organisations and the collective consciousness are required to exercise to navigate digital spaces critically.

Next Steps

The next step is to find one or two digital communities where the same pattern might be observed. It could be political Twitter circles, niche online forums, or even influencer circles on sites like Instagram or TikTok. Examples for message redirection, narrative control, or crisis management could be collected and analysed from that point.