Asserting “Truth” in Political Debates

Emily T. Metzgar & Hans P. Ibold

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Austin, Texas
• Influences the communication ecosystem
• Performs many functions once reserved for professional journalists
• Connects citizens who can organize
• Empowers the “former audience”
Big Picture

• What do we know?
  ▪ We know Twitter is growing in popularity.
  ▪ We know Twitter is increasingly used for political discourse.
  ▪ We know Twitter can be studied: partisan analysis; content analysis; textual analysis; big & small data projects possible

• What do we want to know?
  ▪ How are journalistic behaviors manifesting on Twitter?
  ▪ How is political rhetoric used?

• How do we get there?
  ▪ Collaboration with IU School of Informatics’ Truthy project
  ▪ Mixed methods approach leveraging Truthy’s blunt instrument for data collection and our hand-coding of selected data

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The Basic Question

- If Twitter is becoming a new and powerful platform for “storytelling with a purpose,” then to what extent and how are Twitter users employing the technology as a journalism-like tool?
Literature

- Twitter in context
- UGC in the communication ecosystem
- The internet & politics
- Media credibility
- Media literacy
Types of Journalistic Behaviors

Kovach & Rosenstiel identify patterns of journalistic behavior (2010). We adapt this for coding Twitter content

- Verification
- Assertion
- Affirmation
- Special interest
- None of these
Types of Political Rhetoric

- Benoit (1999) & Wicks et al (2011) identify types of political rhetoric. We adapt for coding Twitter content
  - Attack
  - Acclaim
  - Rebuttal
  - None of these
Previous work

• We expand on Conover et al’s work by exploring the left/right partisan structures for journalistic behaviors

• We seek evidence of journalistic behaviors among Twitter users based on the partisan categorization of their tweets
Data Collection

- Generated by Truthy
- Tracking two hashtags with partisan association
  - #tcot
  - #p2

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What is Truthy?

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Target HASHTAG Communities

#tcot

#p2

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Research Questions

- **RQ1**: To what extent do Twitter users produce content consistent with the categories identified by K&R?
- **RQ2**: What are the characteristics of the tweets associated with each function?
- **RQ3**: What are the differences in the ways the left and the right exercise these functions?
Methodology

• Pilot study
• 250 politically-oriented Tweets
• Dated from early 2012
• 50% with partisan labels

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Preliminary Findings: General

• Tweets consisting entirely of RTs more likely to be associated with the left
• Regardless of political alignment, these tweets tend to be scandal-oriented & emotionally charged
• Overall disregard for verification in the tweets, regardless of partisan orientation
• Links to the outside tend toward assisting with verification
Preliminary Findings: Journalistic Behavior

- “Assertion” the most frequently occurring practice
- Content not fitting any of the categories was second most common
- “Affirmation” was third
- “Verification” was fourth
- “Special interest” didn’t appear at all
Preliminary Findings: Journalistic Behavior

- Journalistic behavior & content of embedded links
  - “None of these” most common
  - “Assertion” second most common
  - “Verification” third most common
  - “Affirmation” fourth most common
  - “Special interest” least common
- Tweets labeled as “verification” most likely to link to “verification”
Preliminary Findings: Political Rhetoric

- “Attack” form appears most often
- “None of these” second most frequent
- “Acclaim” was third
- “Rebuttal” was fourth
Example

- Attack:
  “Virginia Board Of Elections Did Not Bother To Verify Voter Petitions During 2008 Primary, But Suddenly Doing It... http://t.co/Bv73MhB2 #tcot”
Preliminary findings: Political rhetoric

- Of tweets assigned partisan label, the left was more likely to engage in attacks.
- Content from the right most frequently categorized as “none of these”.
- “Acclaims” only one third as common as attacks.
- “Rebuttals” only appeared a few times.
- “Attack” tweets more likely to be engaged in “assertion” or “affirmation”.

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Next Steps

• Larger & more systematic sample
• Refined manual coding mechanism
• Addition of categories for describing individual tweets and users
Contact Info

Emily Metzgar
Assistant Professor
Indiana University
School of Journalism
emetzgar@indiana.edu

http://www.anastasiamak.com/PAINTINGS%20full%20size/sample_gates.jpg

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