Boon or Bane for Political Engagement: A Large-Scale Study of Normalization of Facebook

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Purpose

- To test and expand Resnick’s (1997) theory of the Normalization of the Cyberspace
- To test its application in studying online election campaigns
- To examine extent to which the candidates (President Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton) applied offline campaign strategies on Facebook
Theory: Normalization of Cyberspace

- Internet takes over old media (e.g., newspaper, television) as a leading communication channel

- Internet neither helps or hurts democracy, as communication occurs within preexisting economic, legal, and social frameworks

- Therefore, communication practices online resemble offline practices
Related Concepts

Relational normalization: Unequal power relations continue on internet as major political actors enjoy more influence and resources than minor actors.

Discursive normalization: Offline communication practices are shifted to cyberspace (e.g., personalization, negative campaigning).

Selective exposure: Users typically connect and spend more time with those who are already known to them offline.
Social media play strong roles in political engagement and voter outreach, but not as much in motivating the uninterested to engage.

Many heavy users of social media abandoned political news and embraced entertainment (Ancu, 2015; Duggan, 2015; Mindich, 2005).

Lack of engagement may result from selective nature of the Internet (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Ellison et al., 2010)

**Literature: Engagement Online**
Candidates use social media to construct online presence through personal manifestation (Bimber, 2014; Davis et al., 2010)

Information flow is mostly one-way: from candidates to voters (Lin, 2015; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Nielsen and Vaccari, 2013)

Political websites espouse the traditional top-down model of communication (e.g., Carlson & Strandberg, 2008; Schweitzer, 2011)
Research Questions

RQs 1, 2 and 3: To what extent, did the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates:

- interact directly with followers on Facebook?
- discuss policy issues in their Facebook status messages?
- use Facebook for building image?

RQ 4: To what extent, do followers approve or disapprove Facebook status messages of the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates?

RQ 5: Which topics discussed in Facebook status messages of the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates attracted more engagement?
Method: Data

- Two Facebook pages run by the 2016 Clinton and Trump campaigns
- 6,122 posts published between Nov 8, 2015 and Nov 7, 2016
- 3.4 million comments and replies to comments
  - Top 500 comments on each post, determined by number of replies and reactions
**Method: Data**

Distribution of Status Messages by Post Type:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Type</th>
<th>Donald J. Trump</th>
<th>Hillary Clinton</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>1086</td>
<td>1696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>1539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo</td>
<td>1247</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>2161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Only</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3034</strong></td>
<td><strong>3088</strong></td>
<td><strong>6122</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Method: Knowledge Mining

- Difficulties of existing knowledge mining solution:
  - Manual knowledge mining is difficult to address the research questions
  - Previous attempt of supervised machine learning methods weren’t fully suitable in our case due to domain difference

- Coded a subset of the dataset manually and semi-automatically

- Developed a knowledge mining model to analyze the whole dataset
Method: Operationalization

- Relational normalization
  - Direct interaction of candidates with followers
- Discursive normalization
  - Automatic detection of topic in status messages related to policy and non-policy issues
  - Techniques used by candidates to build images
- Selective Exposure
  - Number of unique users who commented on both pages
  - Engagement of commenters
Methods: Topic Analysis

- Topic detection
  - 14 topics relating to policies based on a Pew study
  - Manual content analysis by topic related keywords search
  - 2,584 policy related posts, rest are non-policy issue
Results: RQs 1, 2, 3

- **Interaction**: No direct interaction found
  - No comment or reply to followers from the candidate/campaign
- **Policy**: 53.8% of Trump posts and 48% of Clinton posts mentioned policy
- **Policy Stance**: 10.2% Trump posts and 17.1% Clinton posts show a candidate position on a policy
- **Image building techniques**: 89.8% of Trump posts and 82.9% of Clinton posts employed image building techniques
Results: RQ 4

- Trump received more positive comments (about 0.8M) than Clinton (about .65 M)

- Clinton received more negative comments (about .65M) than Trump (about 0.42M)
Results: RQ 5

- Trump page had 523,132 uniques commenters compared to 379,305 on Clinton page
- Only 5.9% commenters commented on both pages
- Trump posts had more engagement than Clinton posts
- Non-policy topic drew more engagement
Results: RQ 5

Trump’s posts had more engagement than Clinton’s in terms of reactions.
Discussion

- This study largely supports existing works suggesting online interaction between political elites and ordinary citizens follows traditional top-down model
- Candidates use social media to disseminate information, build and maintain image, attack opponents
- A vast majority of followers (94.1%) doesn’t engage in discussion on the page of candidate they oppose
- Findings are consistent with concepts relating to the theory of the normalization of the cyberspace
Limitations & Suggestions for Future Studies

- Only two Facebook pages were studied; more pages need to be studied
- Social media practices are evolving fast; investigation of campaigns must continue to see if explanations of the theory holds
- Keyword-based model developed by authors for topic detection could be improved for better results
- Analysis was limited to post texts and comments; content of website, image and video embedded in posts would provide more insights