
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



Literature: Engagement Online

- 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: Social Media in Election Campaigns

- 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?

RQ5: 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:

Post Type	Donald J. Trump	Hillary Clinton	Total
Link	610	1086	1696
Video	553	986	1539
Photo	1247	914	2161
Event	1	3	4
Text Only	623	93	716
Note	0	6	6
Total	3034	3088	6122



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

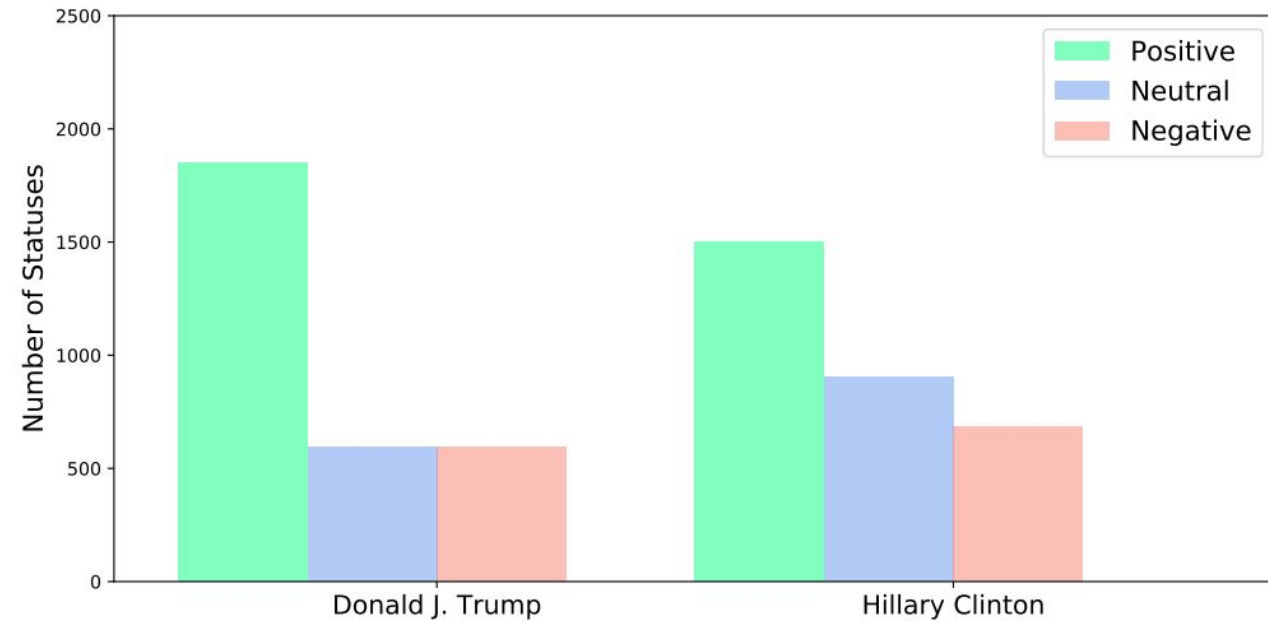


Results: RQs 1, 2, 3

- **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)

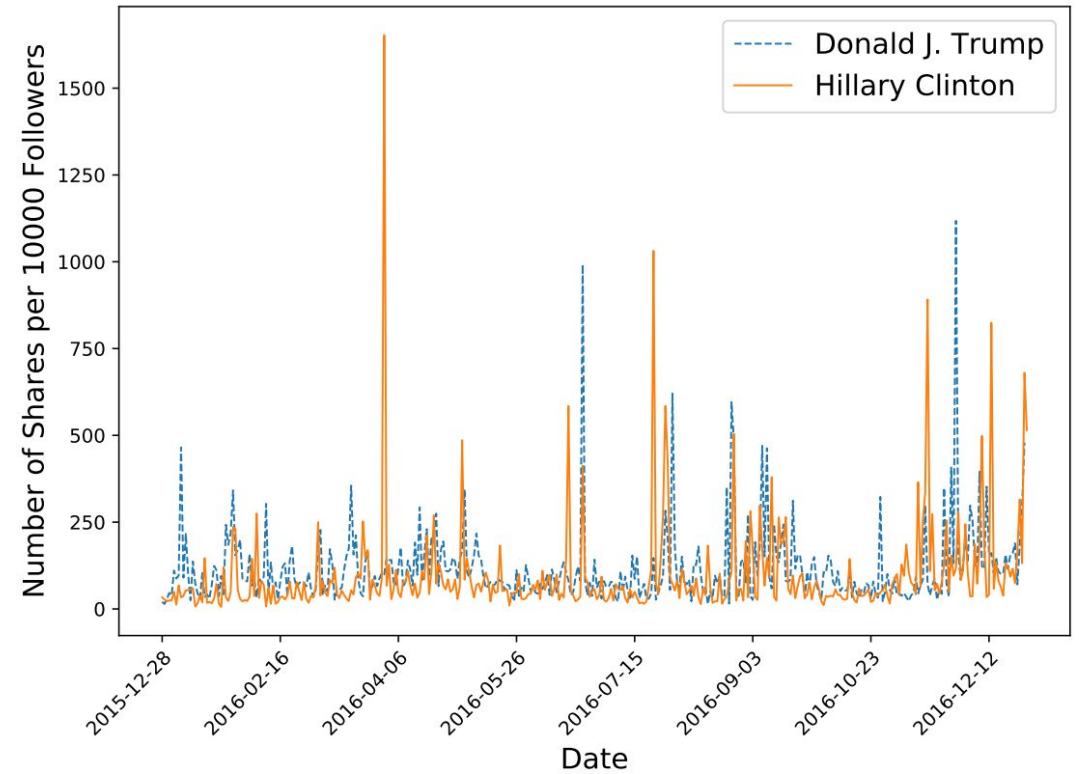
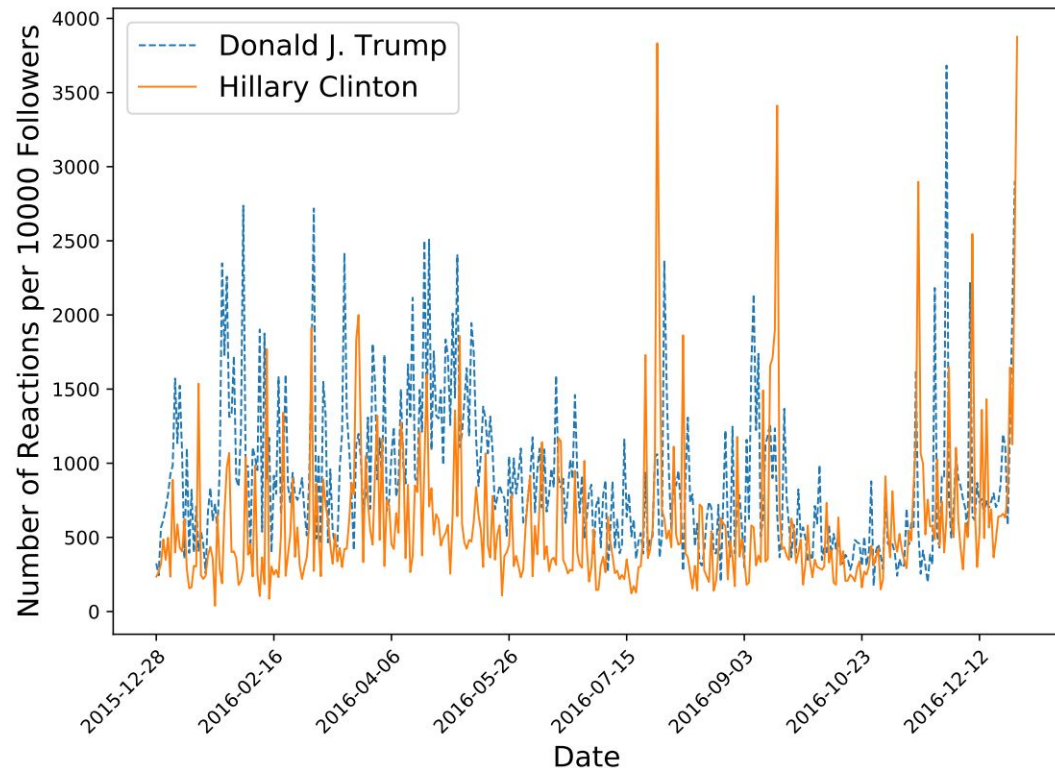




Results: RQ 5

- 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