Quality of Democratic Discourse in the Age of Political Hashtags and Social Media News Consumption

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ABSTRACT
Whether through television, newspapers, or more increasingly through Social Networking Sites (SNS), journalistic coverage of current events have long played a significant role in mediating knowledge and information to the public. The platforms and channels through which news is produced and consumed shape how the public talk about current issues, exemplifying the critical link between democratic discourse and the press. However, with the advent of social media, the display of online news content has increasingly changed over the years. This implies that the conditions and avenues through which audiences make sense of mediated politics through news have possibly changed as well. This is the premise that motivates my work. In my dissertation, I examine how social media news consumption impacts the viability of online political deliberation around news content. Specifically, I investigate how civil discourse is shaped in relation to political hashtags in the headlines and texts of social media news posts. I use both qualitative and computational (natural language processing) methods on publicly available social media news comments and survey data collected through large-scale experiments.
KEYWORDS
political hashtags; political discourse; civil discourse; democracy; polarization; online social movements; SNS; social media news consumption; digital journalism

INTRODUCTION
Obtaining political news or information through social media is common in today’s digital age. Most news publishers have a social media presence through Twitter or Facebook. Articles are posted with the expectation that readers will use the comments section to engage in discussions on current issues. Over the past few years people have been increasingly using SNS to not only discover news, but to share, comment, ask questions, and engage in discussion with those connected within their networks [3].

These practices of news consumption on social media are a tremendous departure from the way people consumed news in the past. The sheer amount of information people are exposed to is one example: a single Sunday edition of the current New York Times contains more information than what a typical 19th century citizen faced in his or her entire lifetime [5]. Furthermore, it is typical for people to receive news from different sources simultaneously while multi-tasking on numerous screens from various media. Another difference is the “soaring number of sources that provide news via print, broadcast, and interactive modes, spewing text, pictures and video at any time and in any place” [4]. This saturation of mixed content and diversity of media format forces people “to cope with a surfeit of extra information, often unrelated to [personal] interests and needs, including spam and scams” [2, 4], a reality particularly salient to news consumption on SNS.

Social media news consumption in particular engenders a dramatically different experience of news selection, exposure, and interaction with content than in the past. Hashtags, up-/down-votes, emotive reactional buttons, affective comments, or infinity scrolling of content form the conditions that characterize the spheres in which online discourse takes place. These design choices also shape the manner in which people consume and interact with what they see on SNS, including news coverage on current events. For example, these structural elements of social media can help deliver personalized content that is classified based on how people interact with what they see as they click, react, comment, or search for content using a hashtag. The way people interact with these design elements and constraints may shape SNS news consumption behavior and resulting discourse thereby, warranting a deeper investigation into the discursive practices afforded by social media. In this vein, I explore the following research question through my dissertation:

How do the structural conditions and design choices around social media news content shape the quality of democratic discourse?

Given that the empirical study of mediated political discourse is primarily an examination of practices of language in their institutional context [1], I examine the quality of democratic discourse through the linguistic behavior of commenters using discourse analysis, NLP, and statistics. The expected contribution of my work lies in better understanding social media’s potential to cultivate political deliberation, whereby audiences can appropriate mediated discourses to widen perspectives and make informed judgment surrounding current issues.
PROPOSED DISSERTATION WORK

My dissertation work consists of three projects: In Study 1, I examine audiences’ practices of making sense of mediated politics in relation to the political venue of the news source they consume on social media. This part of the dissertation is already completed. In the second study, I use a large scale experimental survey to examine how the presence vs. absence of social media’s structural elements – political hashtags and affective comments – in SNS news posts shape perspectives and commenting behavior around social issues shown in the news content. Finally, in Study 3, I examine how perceived behavior around social media news consumption shapes perspectives and linguistic practices in people’s discussion of social issues.

Study 1: Linguistic Behavior in Civil Discourse Across Different Political Venues of Social Media News Sources

In Study 1, I used the #MeToo movement as the topical lens to compare how linguistic patterns manifest across three politically distinct (far-left, center, and alt-right) news publishers on Facebook [6]. The goal of this study is to investigate how linguistic attributes and rhetorical patterns of discourse differ among people who produce and consume different political news on social media. Using both computational and qualitative methods, I demonstrate that linguistic behavior reflects how social issues are framed and understood within a particular political orientation by showing rhetorical similarities and differences in commenting behavior across the political spectrum. The lexical patterns of discourse among commenters from the two alternative news sites are similar in terms of their relationship to those from the mainstream – exhibiting polarization, generalization, and othering of perspectives in political conversation. Findings from this study have implications for understanding the possibility for civil discourse in SNS venues and the role of commenting behavior in polarizing media sources in undermining such discourse.

Study 2: Large Scale Control Experiment: Investigating How Presence vs. Absence of Political Hashtags Shape Reactions to News Content on Social Media

In Study 2, I use a randomized control experiment to examine how the presence of political hashtags (particularly the most prevalently used #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter) in social media news posts shape reactions across a general audience. The goal of this work is to understand how political hashtags and affective comments shape the quality of democratic discourse and perception around social issues. In March 2019, I launched a survey randomizing the display of article posts to participants who answered questions and left a comment in reaction to the news post that either contained or excluded the political hashtag (control group) as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Each article is displayed to the participant in one of the six scenarios based on a 2x3 factorial design with the following factors and levels (see Table 1):

- Political Hashtag: (1) included, (2) excluded in the news post
- Comments: (1) no comment, (2) positive comment, (3) negative comment

The original news post was identical to the hashtag condition (top), except for the bolded #MeToo followed by the text description. For the control condition (bottom), we excluded the hashtag in the post text, as well as the phrase "#MeToo Prompts".
Table 1: 2x3 Factorial design with hashtags & affective comments as manipulated factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Hashtag Present</th>
<th>Hashtag Not Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Comments</td>
<td>Scenario 1: Article headline &amp; the text portion of the post <strong>include</strong> the hashtag while preserving the intended message of the content as much as possible.</td>
<td>Scenario 2: Article headline &amp; the text portion of the post <strong>exclude</strong> the hashtag while preserving the intended message of the content as much as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Comments</td>
<td>Scenario 3: Supplemented Scenario 1 with (+) comment below the post.</td>
<td>Scenario 4: Supplemented Scenario 2 with (+) comment below the post.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Comments</td>
<td>Scenario 5: Supplemented Scenario 1 with (-) comment below the post.</td>
<td>Scenario 6: Supplemented Scenario 2 with (-) comment below the post.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study 3: Understanding How Reliance & Consumption Patterns on Social Media News Feeds Influence Perception & Discourse Around Social Issues

In Study 3, I look at how perceived news consumption behavior and attitude on Facebook news feeds influence commenting behavior and perception of social issues portrayed in the news content. Data for this study has been already collected. Some of the scales included in the survey measured participant’s perceived reliance on social media as a news source and level of content saturation on news feeds. I will examine these variables in relation to the way people perceive and talk about social media news content focusing on social issues.

GOALS FOR CSCW DOCTORAL CONSORTIUM

By the time I attend the doctoral consortium, I will have completed several analyses for studies 2 and 3. During the consortium I hope to share results and discuss the implications of my findings with colleagues. Furthermore, given the expansive breadth and scope of digital democracy in social media research, a second goal is to gain feedback on the framing of my thesis as it stands and brainstorm future directions.

REFERENCES