

Introduction

Social media platforms have become a fundamental aspect of everyday life. From news to entertainment to communication, these supposed tools have engrained themselves in modern society. Social media, however, is not benign, these platforms exist as double-edged swords. For the first time in history, millions of people are all connected to the same informational network, a network that can amplify voices that previously had no platform.

Compounding on this situation are the specific curation algorithms employed by the social media platforms. By encouraging interaction with content that is both popular and similar to previously engaged with content, these platforms have great deterministic power over their userbase (Milan, 2015).

Research Question

Social media is a staple of the modern world, connecting people like never before. But with this increased communication may come complications for democracy. I seek to identify if there is any correlation between social media usage and political unrest.

Background and Literature Review

A study conducted in 2013 found that an estimated 52% of crowdturfing campaigns were to manipulate social media in some capacity (Lee, Tamilarasan, & Caverlee, 2013). One of the most nefarious usages of these crowdturfing campaigns, called 'astroturfing,' is spreading propaganda in such a way that it appears to be from an organically formed grassroots movement.

In 2012, the NIS used employed crowdturfing techniques in favor of presidential candidate Park Geun-hye (Song, Kim, and Jeong, 2014). As found in a 2014 study, the accounts responsible,

belonging to both humans and bots, leveraged Twitter's trends system so that their content would be suggested to authentic Twitter users (Keller et al., 2017).

A common belief about bots is that they're only effective if they can convincingly pass themselves off as human, but, in a study done by University of Turin researchers, it was found that even a bot that made no effort to act as a regular social media user could successfully influence 62% of human users (Aiello et al., 2012).

Method

Participants

A random sample of at least 100 users from three social media platforms that have engaged with political content.

Materials

Data will be collected from Facebook, Instagram and analyzed by hand if necessary or, ideally, with the assistance of an algorithm that can determine the intended tone of a given text.

Design

I intend to apply a correlational design to my research. I will be looking for increased hostility in posts made by individuals who engage with such content more frequently.

Procedure

I will be comparing the number of posts by a given user with the relative hostility of their posts that contain political keywords. Hostility will be determined based on the presence of various tone-indicating keywords. Once the total number of posts from a user and the associated hostility scores are determined, each user's average hostility will be evaluated and compared with each

other's to determine whether users that engage more frequently with political content are more hostile. This procedure should take no longer than a few months.

Expected Results

I expect to find that users that frequently engage with political content on social media exhibit significantly greater hostility than those who rarely have any interaction with such content.

Significance

If users that engage more frequently with political content express greater hostility than users that do not it would indicate that political content on social media fosters aggression and that the design of social media platforms, such that they expose users to content that is similar to content they have previously interacted with, encourages such behavior.

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