SOCIAL MEDIA FEEDS AMID THE ELECTION EVERYDAY: DIGITAL BOUNDARIES AND DISRUPTION DURING THE 2020 U.S. ELECTION

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Elections are established media spectacles, marking major points of democratic transition through events that disrupt established media routines and rhythms of everyday life (Dayan & Katz, 1992). However, the extent and ways that elections and other political events intervene in the "regularly scheduled programming" of "ordinary" people's media use are highly contextual, particularly as politics becomes more digital and our entanglements with the digital become more algorithmic (Couldry, 2004; Papacharissi, 2015).

The internet and social media have contributed to collapsing abstract distinctions between personal or everyday life and political events, even amid democratic milestones (Highfield, 2016). Yet experiences of everyday life, time, and disruption are inherently tied to power relations and social positionalities (Sharma, 2014). In digital spaces, they are also shaped by the hybrid sociotechnical environments, social networks, and information flows that co-curate our exposure to news and other political media (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Layered with individual political attitudes and knowledge, these structural factors suggest that experiences of election media might be all-encompassing to one citizen while being more ambient to another.

With these concerns in mind, I draw from research on experiences and affect amid political change (Coleman, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015) to examine how "ordinary" U.S. American citizens (i.e., not political figures) consume, witness, and feel through digital media during an ongoing election. I carry out this work by centering the social media feed as a space for political media exposure and boundary management. Across platforms, feeds are endless, ephemeral strands of text personalized for single users from minute-to-minute. Feeds allow many different information types and sources to collide and compete for prominence, helped along by quantified metrics and algorithmic curation (Wells & Thorson, 2017). These consequential spaces have proven exceedingly difficult to study, with legal, ethical, or technical limitations obstructing top-down analysis of individualized feeds.

In this paper, I decenter top-down analyses of the social media feed by utilizing a series of "small data" observational interviewing techniques that incorporate my research participants as co-analysts of their own personal platform ecologies. I describe this method as feed analysis interviewing, which draws on approaches such as walkthrough and scroll back methods (Møller & Robards, 2019). Through these interviews, I set out to examine the social and technical practices that citizens use to navigate political media disruption during an unfolding election. I studied this during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which extended far longer than a typical election timeline due to mail-in voting and political contestation. Ultimately, my findings suggest that participants understand their feeds as spaces for articulating and maintaining symbolic boundaries. This is not merely to endorse their own political beliefs, as prior research suggests (e.g., Neely, 2021), but also to maintain imagined distinctions between their experiences of politics and everyday life online.

Research Design

I conducted a series of three hour-long, in-depth virtual interviews with the same group of respondents (*N* = 21) over the course of the 2020 U.S. election, with each interview taking a different perspective on the social media feed. There were 55 interviews in total. I conducted this cross-platform study over the course of five months surrounding the election in November 2020. Respondents were residents of New York State recruited through advertisements posted to local Craigslist pages and subreddits.

Each interview involved a different feed-based elicitation method. During the first interview, which took place in October 2020 before Election Day, respondents screenshared their social media feeds, and we scrolled through them together in real-time to discuss the state of their social media ecologies pre-election. Before the second interview, conducted immediately after the election in November 2020, I asked respondents to compile and submit a "feed diary" describing and screenshotting their feeds during the week of Election Day from November 1–7. The second interview involved an in-depth discussion of the feed diary and screenshots. Finally, in the third interview, conducted in February 2021 after the U.S. Capitol Insurrection, I compiled a collection of widely circulated news images from the election and its aftermath, constructing a feed of my own to spark conversation and critique from respondents.

I am analyzing the interviews in MAXQDA through an iterative coding process that involves identifying emergent themes, consulting the literature, and revisiting transcripts and observational memos (Charmaz, 2014).

Preliminary Findings

According to Lamont and Molnár (2002), social actors articulate symbolic boundaries "to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (p. 168). My initial findings suggest that participants conceive of their social media feeds as environments for constructing and enforcing symbolic boundaries between their "normal," "real," or "everyday" lives and the events of the election. In doing so, they forged a kind of temporal boundary work realized through sociotechnical practices.

While some participants reported that their feeds were overtaken with political posts, others described the election as a background event. One of my participants (woman, 24) recounted the former experience in her feed diary by writing, "It feels insensitive to post anything other than election-related content." Regardless of the make-up of their feeds, participants described feed management measures to separate the election from their everyday lives, especially as ballot-counting and unrest extended longer than they expected. An initial overview of emergent practices includes: alternating periods of hyper-vigilance with detox and disengagement; humor and memeification; self-representation; and compartmentalizing politics within particular platforms.

Conclusion

Political communication literature has devoted significant attention to practices and effects of political avoidance on social media, such as unfriending networked political detractors (e.g., Neely, 2021). However, this paper challenges scholars to examine how people use and consume social media to define boundaries between realms of political experience. It also employs a bottom-up approach to studying the social media feed as lens for understanding these experiences. In doing so, it probes the junctures and overlaps between the personal and political as well as political events and mundane media routines.

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