

CITIZENFOUR: INTERNET PUBLICS AND THE IMAGINARY OF PRIVACY A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TWITTER COMMENTARIES AROUND THE 2015 OSCAR WINNING DOCUMENTARY

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to analyze the Twitter conversations produced by networked publics of the Laura Poitras's documentary *Citizenfour* (2014). The documentary deals with the case of the computer analyst Edward Snowden and it was aired by HBO in USA and Channel 4 in UK respectively the 23th and 25th of February 2015. We focused on the type of representations produced around the relationship between privacy and the Internet, ie the imaginary related to privacy conveyed by Snowden case. The paper thus attempt to answer the following RQ: what are the privacy's imagery around Snowden case emerging from double screen audience of documentary *Citizenfour*?

Based on a complete corpus of 25,000 tweets containing the hashtag #citizenfour and created between 22th and 26th of February 2015, the research identified peaks in the Twitter activity (through a 'breakout detection') as well as what accounted for those peaks (through a semantic cluster analysis). Finally, a sample of original tweets will be content analyzed using a codeset derived by DeCew (1997) definitions in order to identify the emerging imaginary of privacy.

Keywords: privacy, Twitter, networked publics, *Citizenfour*, Snowden

Introduction

The documentary *Citizenfour* (2014), directed by Laura Poitras, has been shown on HBO (and on Channel 4 for the UK readers) soon after receiving the Academy Awards Best Documentary Feature of 2014. The documentary deals with the case of the computer analyst Edward Snowden who, in 2013, leaked classified documents he had obtained from the National Security Agency detailing the extent of government surveillance of U.S. citizens. After going into hiding to avoid extradition and arrest,

Snowden himself became a news story that threatened to eclipse the implications of the information he had revealed.

As Poitras said in her acceptance speech “The disclosures that Edward Snowden reveals don’t only expose a threat to our privacy but to our democracy itself. When the most important decisions being made, affecting all of us, are made in secret, we lose our ability to check the powers that control”¹.

Under this perspective, the focal point of a documentary as *Citizenfour* is to produce a representation of the privacy based on a non-fiction story. This representation is, in turn, able to affect the collective imaginary, that is the set of symbolic representations generated by media that serve for the communication of a social system (Morin, 1962; Williams, 1974).

As a topic clearly linked to the digital culture, the case appears also particularly interesting from the point of view of the digital imaginary for a number of different but interlinked reasons. 1. The case, and the documentary that revealed the attack to our privacy, concern some of the most important topics of the Internet imaginary: privacy and its relation to surveillance and security (Moglen, 2014). 2. Documentary, despite its character of non-fiction cinema (Nichols, 2001; Bruzzi, 2006), can be seen nowadays as an important part of the collective imaginary based on the mix of fact and fiction (Benson & Anderson, 2002). Under this perspective, *Citizenfour* produces a narration of the digital culture that is able to affect the audience leveraging the storytelling archetypes (for example Snowden seen as a hero) (Vogler, 2007). 3. Part of the audience that followed the documentary on HBO and Channel 4, live commented the documentary on Twitter and other social media (Doughty et al., 2012). This group can be seen as a networked publics (Ito, 2008; boyd, 2010) producing and sharing a double-screen storytelling by spreading an imaginary of the digital based on the collapse of some different digital qualitative contexts: Internet and privacy, the documentary storyline, the audience and its narration about the case.

Citizenfour’s online conversations and the representations of privacy

The aim of this paper is to analyze the conversations produced by networked publics of the documentary *Citizenfour* on Twitter and to identify the type of representations produced around the relationship between privacy and the Internet, ie the imaginary related to privacy conveyed by Snowden case.

¹ Cfr. <http://www.meetthefilmmakers.com/filmmakers/laura-poitras/>

For our purpose, privacy is intended throughout this paper as “the claim of individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent information about them is communicated to others” (Westin, 1967, p.7). The question of privacy in a digital era has resurfaced as a central topic a. from the point of view of the state power, in relation to issues of surveillance and security (Chadwick, 2006) and b. from an individual perspective, because of the increasingly blurred boundaries between private and public generated by social media practices (boyd, 2014). More exactly we will code the imaginary of “privacy” on Twitter conversations using the distinction between (DeCew, 1997, pp. 75-76):

1. informational privacy, regarding the control over one’s information;
2. accessibility privacy, about control over physical access to information;
3. expressive privacy, that is the control over how to choose, interact and act.

Therefore, we will especially attempt to answer the following research question:
RQ: What are the privacy’s imagery around Snowden case emerging from double screen audience of documentary Citizenfour?

Methodology

Based on a complete corpus of 25,000 tweets containing the hashtag #citizenfour and created between 22th and 26th of February 2015, we identified peaks in the Twitter activity (through a ‘breakout detection’) as well as what accounted for those peaks (through a semantic cluster analysis).

Finally, a sample of original tweets will be content analyzed using a codeset derived by DeCew definitions in order to identify the emerging imaginary of privacy.

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