How Wikipedia's Dr Jekyll became Mr Hyde: Vandalism, sock puppetry and the curious case of Wikipedia's decline

Abstract

This paper concerns the rise and fall of Wikipedia editor, 'drork' who was blocked indefinitely from the English version of the encyclopedia after seven years of constructive contributions, movement leadership and intense engagement. It acts as a companion piece to the recent statistical analyses of patterns of conflict and vandalism on Wikipedia to reflect on the questions of why someone who was once committed to the encyclopedia may want to vandalize it. The paper compares two perspectives on the experience of being a Wikipedian: on the other hand, a virtuous experience that enables positive character formation as more commonly espoused, and alternatively as an experience dominated by in-fighting, personal attacks and the use of Wikipedia to express political goals. It concludes by arguing that the latter behavior is necessary in order to survive as a Wikipedian editing in these highly conflict-ridden areas.

Keywords (Arial 10, Bold, Centralized, Single Line, 0pt before, 10pt after)

Introduction

Recent scholarship has painted two competing pictures of what Wikipedia and Wikipedians are "like" and what they are motivated by. On the one hand, Benkler and Nissenbaum argue that because people contribute to projects like Wikipedia with motivations "ranging from the pure pleasure of creation, to a particular sense of purpose, through to the companionship and social relations that grow around a common enterprise", the practice of commons-based peer production fosters virtue and enables "positive character formation" (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006). On the other hand, we have heard more recently about how "free and open" communities like Wikipedia have become a haven for aggressive, intimidating behavior (Reagle, 2013) and that reversions of newcomers' contributions has been growing steadily and may be contributing to Wikipedia's decline (Halfaker, Geiger, Morgan, & Riedl, in-press).

Studies on revert wars, vandalism and deletions on Wikipedia have focused on locating, isolating, categorizing and quantifying conflict. From these studies, we know that article reverts (where an editor restores an article to a previous version in order to fight vandalism or to promote one side of a conflict) are on the rise (Buriol, Castillo, Donato, Leonardi, & Millozzi, 2006), that this is a sign of a growth in the "coordination costs" required to manage and resolve such conflict (Kittur, Suh, Pendleton, & Chi, 2007) and that on Wikipedia, conflict is dominated by back and forth between pairs of people who are actively reverting one another (Yasseri, Sumi, Rung, Kornai, & Kertész, 2012). These individuals are generally supported by users who rally around them on "talk" pages and on administrative pages related to conflict resolution so that debates are rarely concluded on the basis of merit but rather by outside intervention, sheer exhaustion or the numerical dominance of one group (Yasseri et al., 2012).

Methodology

This case study involves a series of seven in-depth interviews over an 18-month period between September 2011 and March 2013 as well as content analysis of drork's article edits, discussion pages, mailing list posts, and arbitration committee (arbcom) cases. In addition, I attended a workshop with drork as part of the Oxford Internet Institute's MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Wikipedia project where I was able to observe his interactions with attendees who he had edited (and sometimes clashed) with during his editing of Arabic Wikipedia.

Who is drork?

> I was brought up on this idea that there is objective knowledge and this whole idea of looking for the truth… so when I went to (the first Wikimania conference in) Boston it was like coming home. Everyone talked about how to convey truth and objective knowledge and information. (drork, Skype interview, 16 October, 2011)

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drork was for many years a model Wikipedian. A linguist by training, he epitomized many of the ideals of Wikipedia: he spent countless volunteer hours editing the encyclopedia in three languages, he was transparent and open in his editing (he is one of the few editors who uses his full name in his Wikipedia work), he refused to become involved in any of Wikipedia's "cabals" and played a strong leadership role beyond editing, speaking to the media about his experiences editing Middle East topics and assisting with outreach projects to bring offline Wikipedia to countries in West Africa. A true modernist, drork believed that Wikipedia was a place where people with different ideas about what happened could come together to collaborate in discovering the "truth". He believed that Wikipedia's "Neutral Point of View" that required secondary sources to back up any claims enabled an article to represent an issue in a way that was fair to all parties.

Downfall

> *At first I liked it. It was very interesting – like being invited into a club of intellectuals. When I had some free time at work, I would log on just to see if someone left me a message or note or changed something. It was like being involved in a constant intellectual meeting that is ongoing – a club that I could join day and night whenever I had free time. (drork, Skype interview, 16 October, 2011)*

After a heady period where he spoke excitedly about the goals of Wikipedia, drork started to notice an increasing politicization within the Wikipedia community. He wrote to the internal Wikimedia mailing list in early 2009 that he felt that the principles of NPOV were not being maintained on many parts of the encyclopedia, most notably on Wikimedia Commons where politically-motivated imagery, including swastikas and anti-Israeli cartoons, as well as users' info boxes supporting armed resistance against Israel and/or other political groups like Hezbollah ("Wikipedia," 2013) were able to flourish.

drork was frustrated by the politicized debates and strategic wrangling that was required to prevail in long edit wars. He had always tried to stay away from being part of any cabal but he believed that it was becoming clear that the people who were able to prevail did so by playing politics, whereas drork had naively believed that the project should exist without such wrangling.

In early 2010, after six years of editing Wikipedia, drork was banned from editing for 24 hours on the English encyclopedia and then six months for disruptive behavior in a series of Wikipedia "trials". He had been accused of breaking the English Wikipedia's "3 revert rule" (3RR) that states that editors are not allowed to revert more than 3 edits in a 24-hour period, but drork said that he didn't recognize the authority of the administrators to block him and started a number of new accounts, once again reverting edits and trying to bolster support for his views. Wikipedia administrators blocked each of these accounts for breaking rules against "sockpuppetry" (the use of alternative accounts to deceive other users) until drork became too exhausted to continue and stopped editing altogether.

Conclusion

> *It made me talk in a way I didn't want to talk; it made me fight in a way I didn't want to fight. It corrupted me in the face of people whose opinion of me I value. (drork, Skype interview, 8 March, 2013)*

At some point during this time, drork realized that his behavior had devolved into the kind of political campaigning that he had been actively trying to work against. Despite not recognizing the 3RR or the authority of the arbitration committee, drork had complained about an editor on the "Administrators' noticeboard" for violating 3RR, and he had tried to rally other Israelis through the local press to defend what he believed was an active campaign to alter the encyclopedia in the face of the upcoming UN resolution on the status of Palestine. Looking back on it now, drork believes that the experience brought out the worst in him – it was like "letting the demon out of the bottle," he said.

This case study provides some initial evidence that engagement in Wikipedia editing activities, far from fostering virtue and enabling the kind of positive character formation that Benkler and Nissenbaum write about, can actually have the opposite effect in areas of intense conflict. Wikipedia is a place where distinct groups of people with different points of view are working together and this necessarily results in strategic wrangling, the playing of politics and the necessitation of bureaucracies and judiciaries in order to deal with disputes.

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Acknowledgements

License

Stigma, Humor and Violence on Facebook Memes

Abstract

This paper focuses on how memes in Facebook reproduce symbolic violence through stigmatizing social stereotypes in humorous memes. We analyze three humor fan pages and their content and cross data with 394 online interviews. Results point to several strategies of reproduction of the stigma through humorous discourse, which we classify as a) legitimation, b) humorous allowance and c) discredit o the critics. We also discuss the role social network sites play in this process through its characteristics.

Keywords

stigma; social network sites; symbolic violence; facebook; humor

Introduction

The vast popularity of social network sites such as Facebook has deeply impacted its users' daily lives. These sites became a new place to build social networks (boyd, 2010) and to have contact with different discourses globally and locally (Larsen 2008). These discourses emerge from the social practices in these tools and also have effects in societies. They are not only ways to share ideas, but to reinforce concepts and prejudices. Because social network sites not only support social networks, but also create new forms of connections (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007), they also create new forms of sharing. In this paper we focus on the discussion of how Facebook memes, through humor and diffusion in social networks, stigmatize people and reinforce symbolic violence. We also discuss users' perceptions of this violence and the discussions that emerge from these different perceptions.

Violence, Stigma and Humor

Violence is a concept discussed by many authors. In this paper, we chose to work with Zizek's concepts (2008) which are based on three types of violence. He argues that the most visible one, the outbursts that shock people, is a form of subjective violence (like, for example, a riot). There is another one, less visible, more subtle: the objective violence. While subjective violence is experimented against a background of normality, objective violence is the violence inhered in daily life. Objective violence can also be classified in two types: Symbolic violence happens through language. Systemic violence is the consequence of the politic and economic system. To Bourdieu (1989), in a similar way, symbolic violence comes from the imposition of meanings, the naturalization of the power relation between dominant and dominated. Symbolic violence is silent because victims don't recognize themselves as victims since they don't recognize the violence itself.

One of the many forms of symbolic violence is social stigma. Goffman (1963) explains social stigma as the marks, the attributes by which someone is criticized, discredited and marginalized in society. It is a bad judgment over some quality the person has. Stigma is reinforced through discursive mechanisms and through the ideas discourses share. Stigma comes from the categories society creates for individuals and the outcomes that are expected from these categories, which creates also good (socially valued) and bad (socially discredited) stereotypes. And these stereotypes are used for humor. Humor has a strong role in stigmatizing people. Fun comes often from the "others", the ones who are not "normal". Jokes often create humor through derogatory marks such as stigmas.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected using an ethnographic approach with observation of three humorous fan pages (fan pages dedicated to share memes in Facebook) and the discussions that arise from each humorous post. For this set of data we selected three fan pages and collected all the publications and discussions during two months. We examined these posts looking for clues about symbolic violence and stigma and discussed their role in the reinforcement of discrimination. Our main goal was to discuss (1) how memes display stigma and symbolic violence in Facebook; and (2) how users perceive

this symbolic violence and (3) what are the mechanisms of reinforcement of these discourses. The data was collected in Portuguese and comes from Brazilian fan pages. Individual users were anonymized.

Results

The fan pages analyzed appear to display stigma in several levels, mostly to women and to body images. As Goffman (1963) argues, stigma is based on attributes that "normals" impute to "non-normals" or stigmatized. The stigma in the cases is often related to gender and gender stereotypes, while some were also focused on class and homosexuals. The analyzed posts in the fan pages follow a pattern. There is usually a very stigmatizing message, several likes, shares and comments agreeing. While the majority of posts in the two most popular pages stigmatize women, there is also a focus on poor and homosexuals. Comments also follow a pattern: They are mostly by female profiles and mostly support the content. The stigma, perpetuated by the posts, comments, shares and likes, appears to be naturalized, to be something "normal". But what are the strategies discourse uses to perpetuate the stigma in this data? Three main strategies were identified in the data: a) humorous allowance, b) legitimation, c) discredit of the critics.

Humor Allowance - First of all it has a clear role in naturalizing the discourse of the stigmatizers, "softening" the offense and the violence (Jablonski & Zillmann 1995). Or as commenters often say to defend themselves: "it is only humor". Humorous content has an allowance of saying what can't be said otherwise. Even though, through humor people say things and these things constitute discourses that reproduce the dominance in society (Bourdieu, 1991).

Legitimation is another strategy to perpetuate the stigmas. It is not enough the selected posts and fan pages display different levels of symbolic violence. Their popularity is a form of agreement, support and permission. Symbolic violence thus is not only the post itself, but each like, each share and each agreement comment. And the victims, the women in Facebook, are the ones who also victimize other women by reproducing the content. As Bourdieu (1989, 1991) puts it, they don't see themselves as victims.

Discredit of the critics is another strategy to reinforce the discourse. We observed in our data that when someone seemed to disagree with the post or with the comments and call the attention of others to the stigma, he/she was quickly discredited as someone without a sense of humor, or someone "boring". Discredit is a strategy that looks to undermine the influence of the ones who feel the violence in the community. Discredit was pointed by Goffman (1963) as the most important form of stigmatizing someone.

Conclusions

The three strategies we observed contribute to amplify the stigma and the violence. The fact that is happens online seems to have also other effects. Data showed these posts have hundreds of shares and likes, escalating their visibility to several social networks. Also, because Facebook makes it easy to reproduce content (as other social network sites) and to mark people to see it, visibility is amplified. Facebook also makes extremely easy for people to support these messages, sometimes without much thought about what are the hidden meanings in humor. People simply press "like" and it is enough to reinforce the stigma. However, even when (a few) users seem to react and discuss the content, others also seem to try to silence them by discrediting what they say. This may imply that symbolic violence is stronger online, because people are more bombarded by this type of content because of online social network structures. The more they are exposed to the content, the more "natural" the stigma and the stereotypes seem (Bourdieu 1989, 1991; Goffman 1963).

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The Crunchy Side of Convergence: Facebook and its Resident Trolls

Abstract

This paper examines Facebook memorial page trolling, a subgenre of trolling—the process by which strong emotional responses are elicited through outrageous and otherwise abusive behaviors—in which self-identifying Facebook trolls post abusive comments and images onto pages created for and dedicated to the deceased. The paper draws from extensive participant observation conducted between early 2010 and late 2011, and discusses the complex relationship between platform, community and behavior. It focuses specifically on the ways in which trolls' on-site behaviors both subvert and replicate the behavioral patterns of "legitimate" users—behaviors which are embedded within and necessitated by Facebook's social networking architecture.

Keywords

Trolling; Facebook; online community formation

Introduction

Just as certain cities are said to be supporting characters in the television shows, novels, and films for which they serve as backdrop—New York City comes to mind, in everything from *Seinfeld* to *Manhattan* to *American Psycho* to *30 Rock*—online platforms impart a similar flavor. Far from being empty, value-neutral spaces, platforms have a profound impact not just on how communities form, but what community members are able to accomplish while online. Given this complicated interplay, it is critical to adapt one's research methods not just to the particular group studied, and not just to the particular platform they frequent, but to the evolving interaction(s) between community, platform and behavior.

This paper will focus on these evolving interactions within the context of Facebook Memorial Page trolling (RIP trolling for short), which can run the gamut from harassing so-called "grief tourists," people who post condolence messages onto the Facebook RIP pages of dead strangers, all the way to attacking the friends and family of murdered teenagers. From early 2010-late 2011, I embedded myself within a group of RIP trolls, often spending hours per day pouring over their macabre handiwork (Phillips 2011). Through this research, I came to understand the complicated interplay between Facebook's platform, Facebook's "regular" users and Facebook's resident trolls.

Subculture, Meet Platform

First, Facebook's social networking platform helped ensure the development of an emergent RIP style, one which hews fairly closely to "traditional" trolling but which differs both structurally and in overall tone. Regarding the former, Facebook trolling was, from the very first moment, predicated on the conventions established by Facebook's programmers; it was through the adoption of these protocols—which don't just encourage but engender user enmeshment—that trolling became a fundamentally *social* activity. This differed greatly from most forum trolling and certainly trolling on /b/, since trolling in these contexts is almost always blindly anonymous. Trolls may work together during a particular raid, but they rarely stand still long enough to establish social ties and certainly don't have a persistent online identity to which particular successes may be affixed.

Given their desire to maintain community ties after a profile had been deleted, trolls on Facebook tended to stick with the same family of trolling names so that respawn accounts (new accounts created after an old account or set of accounts had been banned) would have an easier time finding and being found by trolling friends. For example, no matter how many times my profile was banned, I would always respawn as David, integrating this basic nominal building block into both first and last names regardless of gender (David Davison, Brittani Davidson, David Briggs). My research subject Paulie Socash maintained two profile roots, Paul for male accounts and Leigh for female; another troll named

Frank Bagato was variously Francis, Fran, Francois, or Frankie; a troll named Ruthless was Ruth or Ruthie when trolling as a female, etc. In short, and although such an insight might seem almost tautological in its obviousness, trolls on Facebook became friends because suddenly they had stable names to call each other.

In addition to replicating the behavioral patterns of "legitimate" users, the Facebook trolls I worked with eagerly harnessed existing sensitivities. Due to the knee-jerk sympathies they generated, RIP pages were an attractive, almost obvious, choice. This is not to say that all Facebook trolls engaged in memorial page trolling. Quite the contrary—from the trolls' perspective, Facebook was a smorgasbord of exploitable situations and people. One possible (and in my opinion highly likely) explanation is embedded within Facebook's basic architecture, which positions the user as the subject of every sentence he or she utters, indeed as the center of his or her particular social universe. Self-involvement, in other words, is built into the code; one is *primed* to take things personally. This is not to say that Facebook users are solipsists. But the relationship between user and content is and is designed to be solipsistic. After all the "I"—and a carefully-constructed, often fastidiously maintained "I" at that—prefigures every interaction, and lends itself to a particular brand of ego-investment and emotional sensitivity. The trolls I worked with were eager to take full advantage.

Furthermore, to the extent that Facebook's architecture encourages emotional investment in regular users, it encourages emotional divestment in trolls, thus ushering in increasingly outrageous and aggressive behaviors. For every "real" user who is continuously reminded of and interpolated by their own "I," every troll user is continuously reminded of and interpolated by the "I" they're *not*—an ongoing process of emotional repudiation that may explain why Facebook trolls during this period frequently shifted to the third-person to describe their own actions. At first I was taken aback by this tendency. I'd be chatting with a collaborator, and suddenly he or she would mention some amusing thing his or her profile had done, as if the profile was somehow separable from the person whose profile it was. I eventually came to realize that, in the trolls' minds, their profiles *were* separable from their "true" selves. Theirs may have been the fingers pushing all the buttons, but they weren't the ones doing the damage, not exactly.

It should go without saying that the person behind the troll is explicitly and directly responsible for any and all trollish behaviors, and that at a basic level, his or her trolling persona is predicated on his or her offline proclivities. As numerous scholars (Ito 1997; Nakamura 2002, 2007; boyd 2009) have stressed, so-called "real life" necessarily bleeds into online life, and vice versa; our raced, classed, and gendered bodies are encoded into our online behaviors, even when we're pretending to be something above or beyond or below what we "really" are IRL ("in real life") (Nakamura, Kolko and Rodman 2000). That said, while the person can be equated with the profiles s/he creates ("I am David"), the resulting profiles cannot similarly or necessarily be equated with the person ("David isn't *me*"); it is perhaps more accurate to say that trolling profiles, and trolling personas generally, fall somewhere between character and proxy—a sometimes-rupture sometimes-slippage between the real life and online self that Facebook's encoded solipsism inadvertently reinforces.

Conclusion

Given the ease with which trolls on Facebook could find a seemingly endless stream of targets, as well as the ways in which the platform itself primed both subject and object of trolling for trolling, it is unsurprising that so many trolls regarded Facebook as an optimal stomping ground. During Facebook's period of trolls gone wild, which has tapered off in recent months due to Facebook's increasingly hard line stance against any forms of trolling, it may have been the internet's *most* optimal stomping ground—it was, and to a certain extent remains, a perfect storm of technological and behavioral siphoning.

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Exploring Emotions on #auspol:
Polarity, Conservativism and Public Performance in the Twitter Debate on Australian Politics

Abstract

The affective communication patterns of conversations on Twitter can provide insights into the culture of online communities. In this paper we apply a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to investigate the structural make-up and emotional content of tweeting activity around the hashtag #auspol (for Australian politics) in order to highlight the polarity and conservativism that characterise this highly active community of politically engaged individuals. We document the centralised structure of this particular community, which is based around a deeply committed core of contributors. Through in-depth content analysis of the tweets of participants to the online debate we explore the communicative tone, patterns of engagement and thematic drivers that shape the affective character of the community and their effect on its cohesiveness. In this way we provide a comprehensive account of the complex techno-social, linguistic and cultural factors involved in conversations that are shaped in the Twittersphere.

Keywords

Twitter; hashtag; political debate; communicative structure; emotion;

Introduction: Exploring the emotional culture of the #auspol community

Real-time social media spaces such as Twitter have opened up new possibilities for people to participate in communicative action and public debate, uninhibited by spatio-temporal restrictions. Whether such technologies have a meaningful effect on public debate, or simply provide additional channels for the "usual suspects" to express their views, remains the subject of debate; however, we can clearly note that they provide new channels for public communication (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). Recent research has explored how people talk about political issues (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Harlow & Harp, 2012; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Lotan *et al*., 2011; Small, 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012), crisis situations (Bruns *et al*., 2012; Hughes & Palen, 2009; Mendoza *et al*., 2010; Palen *et al*., 2010), shared experiences such as television shows (Deller, 2011), conferences (Dröge *et al*., 2011; Weller *et al*., 2011), and everyday exchanges (boyd *et al*., 2009; Papacharissi, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011) as well as how Twitter is used in brand communication (Krüger *et al.,* 2012; Stieglitz & Krüger, 2011). While these studies offer extensive insights into broader patterns of communication and participation in online debate, more focused explorations of the particular affective dimensions of online discussions (Dang-Xuan & Stieglitz, 2012) can provide insights into their impact on the culture and dynamics of online communities.

In this paper, we examine the communicative structure of conversations taking place in the Twitter hashtag community #auspol (on Australian politics) – a highly active, often heated space. We first provide a quantitative assessment of the structure of the community, in order to demonstrate that there *is* an established community of contributors to the hashtag discussion, before undertaking a qualitative analysis of the content of the #auspol discussion to explore how feelings like discontent, aggression and provocation, as well as positivity and togetherness, feature in the debate and shape the communicative behavior of its participants and the overall atmosphere of the community. To do so, we conduct a detailed manual and semi-automated textual analysis of tweet contents, and explore the use of 'heat maps' that track, identify and visualize data, such as the distribution of sentiment in Twitter conversations, as an innovative tool for research in this area (see Ahn *et al.*, 2012; Mislove *et al.,* 2010a, 2010b for applications of this method). This combined qualitative and quantitative analysis provides insights into the cultural, linguistic and technological aspects of online communication.

Methodology

Quantitative and quantitative analysis of the #auspol community

The hashtag is a technological affordance that shapes and is shaped by the communicative action of people on Twitter. It is used as the standard tool through which conversations around a particular topic are coordinated, enabling online publics to form (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), as well as a linguistic marker for the expression of emotions such as approval (#win, #ftw) or disapproval (#facepalm, #headdesk; Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). #auspol is a long-standing institution in the Australian Twittersphere, having operated at high volume for several years to date, that supports the communion of a stable public of participants in political debate. The discursive use of additional hashtags to denote particular sentiments also features within the #auspol debate and represents a useful indicator for exploring the emotional charge and communicative behavior of the #auspol conversation.

Our quantitative analysis of #auspol interactions to date, using the methods and metrics outlined in Bruns & Stieglitz (2012; 2013), has found that the participants gathered around the #auspol hashtag constitute a highly discursive community of users who actively engage in tweeting and responding to one another. Figure 1 shows that between February and December 2011, the most active 1% of the total #auspol contributor base accounted for almost two thirds of the over 850,000 tweets posted to #auspol; together, the top 10% of contributors posted over 90% of all #auspol tweets. This points to the existence of a highly committed core of contributors, and the formation of strongly centralized community structures. Further, the fact that nearly half of all tweets by the lead users in #auspol were @replies (rather than retweets or unprompted original statements) signals the substantial levels of interaction amongst this community. In essence, this small group of highly engaged political enthusiasts can be said to perform their political debates in front of the wider community of Twitter users.
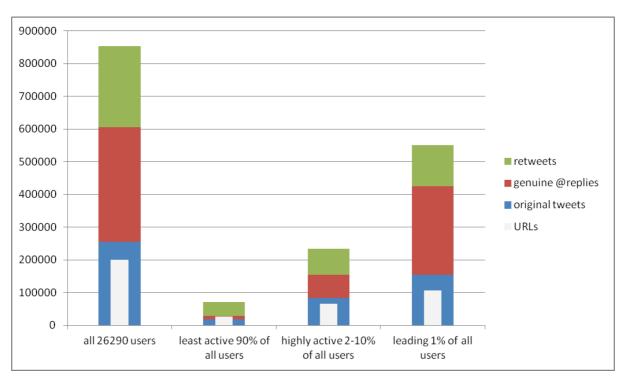

Figure 1: Activity of different user percentiles in #auspol, Feb.-Dec. 2011

As such, the #auspol community provides an exemplary case study for analyzing the linguistic traits, communication behaviors, and social networking structures of an active online community. Huffaker (2010, 595) suggests that 'the message content that users contribute not only includes the subject of the individual messages but also the emotional valence associated with a message, or the way in which it is framed'. In this paper, we complement our quantitative insights into the #auspol debate with qualitative analysis of the content of tweets to explore how emotions are expressed and performed in the context of publicly visible online debates in order to explore the following questions:

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- What are the key themes of political debate in #auspol, and what is the communicative tone with which they are addressed?
- How do lead users in #auspol perform their community leadership in engaging with other users?
- What drives intense communicative interaction between leading #auspol participants (agreement, antipathy, or rational political discussion)?
- Are there established tropes of discussion which support and maintain a sense of community even across political divides?

Conclusion: #auspol as a case study of the role of affect in public debate in the Twittersphere

The #auspol community is an interesting case in point to explore the affective nature of tweeted communication, due to the highly discursive and polarized nature of this particular political discussion. In-depth content analysis of the communicative behavior of Twitter users who discuss contentious political issues in the #auspol debate, in combination with our quantitative evaluation of the structure of the #auspol community, offers a comprehensive insight into the complex socio-technical context within which hashtagged conversations are shaped. Using #auspol as one particular example of how feelings feature in online conversations allows broader inferences about how publics engage in debate in the Twittersphere. Innovative ways of researching and displaying data, such as the use of 'heatmaps', contribute to an enhanced understanding of the culture of online communities.

Acknowledgments

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"Breaking dancing in a mine field" -- Solidarity and aggression in the German #aufschrei/#outcry Twitter debate over sexual harassment

Abstract

Our paper assesses the discursive politics of a public debate that erupted in January 2013 in the German-speaking Twittersphere after a journalist complained in an interview that a prominent German politician had commented on the size of her bust following a party event. Under the hashtag *#aufschrei* (#outcry) a group of Twitter users posted personal accounts of acts of discrimination, sexual harassment and violence they had experienced, behavior primarily directed by men against women and girls, but also against men and lesbian, gay, and transgender individuals. We present the results of a content analysis of 9,000 *#aufschrei* tweets to demonstrate how online environments can become a stage for the struggle of different actors to define gender as a relevant social category, and how a discourse on Twitter can come under siege from aggressive detractors. Key focal points out of our analysis are the different conflicting interpretations of the *#aufschrei* meme and the interplay of mass media and social media discourse.

Keywords

sexism; verbal aggression; Germany; social media; twitter

Introduction

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter regularly become the stages of intense debates over a variety of political, societal, and cultural issues (Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012). The object of our study, the hashtag *#aufschrei* (outcry), was used in over 25,000 tweets within 48 hours following January 24, 2013 (according to the analysis tool Topsy), generating a significant spike of hashtag activity in the German-language Twittersphere. In a period of five days approximately 90,000 tweets accumulated, of which we drew a representative 10% sample for content analysis, accompanied by significant media interest and coverage on several popular talk shows (Spiegel, 2013). A journalist had ignited the debate through an interview in a popular national magazine in which she gave an account of remarks about her bust made by a high-ranking German politician on the eve of a party event (Deutsche Welle, 2013). In reaction to this account, her colleague Nicole von Horst (@vonhorst) tweeted: "we should collect these kinds of experiences under a hashtag. I suggest #outcry". The series of tweets that followed gave strikingly personal accounts of sexist remarks, harassment, discrimination, stalking, and physical sexual violence. The accounts described the behavior of teachers, workplace colleagues, and random strangers, but also of acquaintances, friends and partners. While the canonical format of the initial tweets was that of a narrative, provided in the form of an answer to the question "who harassed you", this quickly changed, as the hashtag gained in popularity. Below we provide three typical examples of tweets posted within the first hour of activity.

> *The man on the train who grabbed my bum while why friends (male and female) were with me. #outcry*

> *The driving instructor who offered my friend to repeat her driving test if she would be 'nice' to him. #outcry*

> *the professor who wanted to know if i was dating my term paper partner. every appointment alone with him was pure tension. #outcry*

Thousands of users followed suit in the same style, but the meme was quickly modified to also include expressions of solidarity, questions, retorts, sarcasm, insults, and spam. While the hashtag is still actively used, the bulk of activity took place between the 24th and the 30th of January 2013 (see Figure 1). Many major German newspapers addressed *#aufschrei* with front-page editorials, two prominent national television talk shows featured it, and the international news media including the *New York Times* (Eddy & Cottrell, 2013), the *Economist* (2013), and *Forbes* (Zandt, 2013) covered it, wondering

about 'Germany's problem with women.' Beyond the mainstream media, countless blogs also commented on the debate, both those with large audiences, and smaller personal blogs.
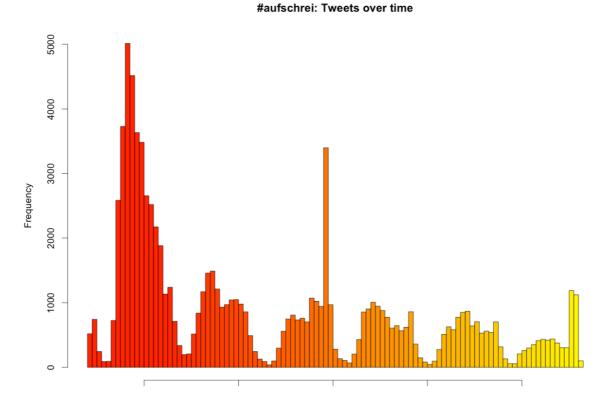

Figure 1: Histogram depicting the number of tweets with the hashtag *#aufschrei* posted between January 24th and January 30th. The spikes in activity on the 27th and 30th coincide with the airing of evening talk shows devoted to discussion of the event.

Conflicting themes inside a single hashtag

The discourse we examined reveals a series of loosely interwoven themes which are only bracketed as a coherent whole by the *#aufschrei* hashtag. The initial instigators of the hashtag used it to collect accounts of everyday discrimination, ranging from sexist remarks that stereotype women and girls, to incidents of outright physical sexual violence. The original contributors' tweets were characterized by sharing their experiences with others and by voicing acts of discrimination they have encountered as a means of empowerment. The hashtag thus demonstrated collective action to delineate a public space in which to show solidarity with one another and opposition to everyday sexism. Such accounts evoked a range of reactions, such as endorsements and messages commending the victims of sexual assaults for their bravery, but also voicing criticism. While the idea of collecting personal accounts under a common hashtag was triggered by the interview describing the sexist remarks of a politician towards a journalist, the resulting narratives are highly personal and largely apolitical. Rather than sticking to the script of the mass media they retell very personal experiences. Reactions come in five variants:

- **expressions of solidarity, shame, grief or affection**, both as a reaction to specific tweets and towards the hashtag in general,
- **counterclaims and detractions** (e.g. the problem of sexism is greatly overstated, sexism is also directed against men, women supposedly enjoy being the object of sexist remarks),
- **'calls to order'** (ranging from pleas to 'tone down' the debate to imperatives literally demanding silence),
- **sexist and misogynist remarks** and images, sarcasm and other attempts to ridicule the original discourse,
- **meta comments** noting that a debate is taking place and expressing surprise.

(Gender) hashtags politics

The reactive tweets partly drown out the original narrative theme, creating associations with a large number of over issues and arguments. One such fork issue is the role of politicians in sexual discrimination, especially of Rainer Brüderle, Minister of Economics and Technology in Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition government and senior political figure in Germany's Liberal Democratic Party (FDP). Both his supporters and opponents reconceptualized the hashtag as a political arena and sought to position themselves inside the ad-hoc public space it offered. The interplay of original and reactive tweets emphasizes the hashtag's role as a discursively contested space, which must be won over by the respective faction. Especially those tweets stating angrily that 'it's enough already' and chiding the instigators to 'shut up' are revealing in this respect. Silencing is an established tactic in gender debates, yet the attempt to silence a Twitter conversation seems bizarre. Frequent are also remarks that imply the instigators have a narrow definition of sexism and which rush to 'defend men'. The accounts of sexual harassment, which were initially given, are strikingly devoid of any claims that sexism is exclusively enacted by men towards women, and much less gendered than the reactive tweets.

Social media discourse and mass media critique

In the course of its development, the hashtag also evolves into a site of media criticism, as commentators increasingly integrate arguments made in newspapers and evening talk shows into their posts. Figure 2 shows the use of other hashtags in conjunction with *#aufschrei* between January 24th and 30th 2013 (*#jauch* and *#zdflogin* are shows on German national television). Many messages actively criticize the sensationalist approach of individual news media, in particular the national news magazine *Stern,* which published the interview that sparked the debate, arguing that *Stern* is itself sexist (see Figure 4). Such remarks show how commentators call out the mainstream media for instrumentalizing the discussion for public visibility, and how they critique their hypocrisy and sensationalist reporting. Debates such as #aufschrei illustrate the struggle of different actors to define gender as a relevant social category (Allmendinger, 2011).
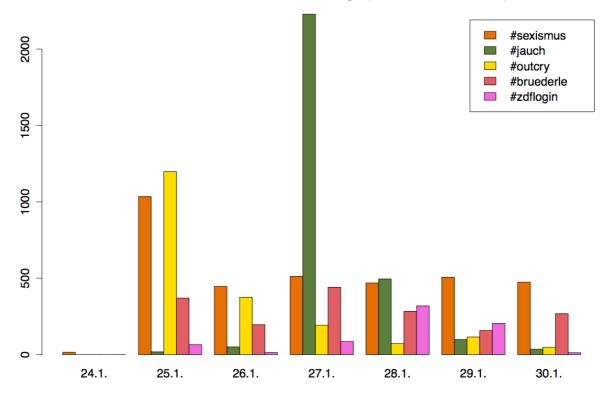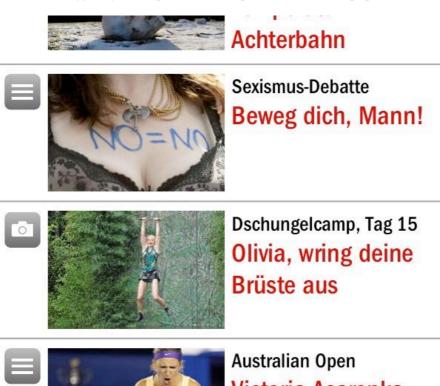

Figure 2: Use of the *#aufschrei* hashtag over time in conjunction with other hashtags.

Figure 3: Cover collage of the popular German magazine *Stern*, in which the feature on everyday sexism that triggered the debate initially appeared, depicting (mostly female) nudity. The caption reads #aufschrei – danke, stern! (#outcry – thanks, stern) suggesting that the publication itself practices the sexism it perpetrates to critique.

Figure 4: Screen capture of Stern's front page promoting an article related to the debate ('Sexismus-Debatte: Beweg dich, Mann'; 'Sexism debate: move, man'). Positioned directly below the snippet is a piece on the popular reality TV series Dschungelcamp in which candidates are portrayed as living in the wilderness under adverse conditions. The caption on this mostly likely algorithmically selected snippet reads 'Olivia, wring deine Brüste aus' ('Olivia, wring out your breasts'). The original poster points out the double standards of Stern with regards to its use of female nudity.

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