News via Voldemort: The role of parody and satire in topical discussions on Twitter

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the role of parody accounts on Twitter within the ongoing coverage of breaking news and mediated events. These accounts, which are established components of social media, are recurring contributors to topical discussions, from politics to live broadcasts of sports and popular entertainment, yet their presence within large Twitter datasets is often treated as an aside within the wider analysis of such archives. This paper then analyses the contributions of parody accounts - alongside other satirical tweets - across multiple contexts, drawing on various political and cultural Twitter datasets collected between 2011 and 2013, to examine the extent to which such accounts are central, or disconnected, to the wider discussions at hand.

Keywords

Social media; satire; Twitter; parody; framing

Introduction

Twitter accounts satirizing public figures and fictional characters are "part of the fabric of the platform" (Vis, 2013, p. 35), often tweeting in response to breaking news or mediated events by reframing these stories to their own character's context. However, while tweets from users parodying Queen Elizabeth II or Lord Voldemort appear within political or entertainment archives, their contributions to the captured discussions are not the focal point of the accompanying research. This paper evaluates the role of parody accounts - alongside other satirical tweets - across multiple contexts, examining to what extent is such behavior central to, or disconnected from, the wider discussions at hand.

Context

The involvement of Twitter parody accounts within public discussion is part of a wider trend towards "silly citizenship", in which playful elements are key to the "performance of political deliberation and participation" (Hartley, 2012, p. 151); extending from the growing importance of comedy as the "go-to source for civic understanding" (p. 146), online platforms such as Twitter provide citizens with the opportunity to create, recreate, and participate in public debate, whether by sharing extended commentary or by remixing or spoofing political videos. The creation of Twitter accounts satirizing politicians is an established part of the "mediated spectacle of mainstream politics" (Wilson, 2011, p. 458). Fake accounts become performances of political engagement, with public attention an intended goal of these parodies.

The proximity between public figures and citizens, celebrities and fans, on social media make this kind of public performance both more possible (for more users) and more visible than on other platforms. However, these aspects of Twitter parody accounts have their roots in earlier online humor, including the merging of fiction and reality, and the "comic commodification of celebrities" (Shifman, 2007, p. 205). Prior comic material online took elements of fictional texts and integrated them into contemporary settings, and Twitter accounts such as @lord_voldemort7 and @deathstarpr take a similar general approach; conversely, parodying public figures allows other users to challenge a celebrity's public image for humorous, or subversive, purposes.

There is no one format for parody on Twitter. Some accounts take fictional characters or groups and place them within current events (reformatting breaking news by framing it within the relevant fictional universe); others provide long-running satires of public figures, challenging their traditional media portrayals. There are also the myriad short-lived, and topic-specific, accounts set up in response to a single event – for example, the numerous users purporting to be the empty chair addressed by Clint Eastwood at the Republican National Convention in 2012.

Further forms of fake accounts may have more deceitful intentions, such as impersonating public figures without demonstrating that these accounts are hoaxes (Hutchins, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Parody accounts can attract greater attention than their inspirations; in response to the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, a @BPGlobalPR Twitter account posting sardonic comments about the disaster was more widely followed than BP's official account (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Furthermore, accounts develop from characters featured in other texts but, rather than providing responses to current events, act as a conduit for roleplaying; these Twitter accounts take on particular characters, with their tweets and interactions based primarily on the original text's narrative – although there is still some context collapse, where tweets mix contemporary events or other online phenomena, such as appropriating trending hashtags, with the world of the narrative (Magee et al., 2013).

Twitter parody accounts, and comic tweets more generally, also suggest a mix of the memetic and viral distinction discussed by Shifman (2012) within the context of YouTube videos. A viral video receives wide circulation and attention without the audience changing its content - similarly, a single tweet retweeted thousands of times may be treated as 'viral'. Memetic texts attract "extensive creative user engagement" (p. 190), particularly through imitation and remixing, and parody accounts demonstrate recurring participation within the commentary on public issues. The spread of these accounts, and their imitability, also means that the appearance of parody accounts is an expected trope, or "meta-meme" (Shifman, 2012, p. 190), of Twitter coverage of media events.

Methods and research questions

The analysis carried out for this paper addresses the following research questions:

What is the role of parody and gimmick accounts, and other users posting irreverent or humorous takes on news and media events, within the ongoing discussion of such topics on Twitter?

Do these accounts bridge different sections of the social media audience, discussing the same topics but otherwise separated along national, linguistic, topical, or other lines – or is the satirical coverage of an ongoing story only a small, disconnected part of the relevant Twitter activity? Do such accounts play the same role across multiple topics?

This paper provides an exploratory analysis of the role of parody accounts within Twitter discussions surrounding political communication, popular culture, sports, and other media events, including the coverage of election campaigns, the Eurovision Song Contest, and the Tour de France, collected between 2011 and 2013. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods is used to determine the presence and contribution of parody accounts and comic tweets within wider topical discussions. Drawing on established approaches for processing and analyzing Twitter data (Bruns & Liang, 2012), the visibility of parody accounts within these discussions is determined from the number of retweets and @mentions received. Relationships with other users are also employed to determine the role of these accounts within the tweet network, based on replies, retweets and @mentions, to identify whether the humor-based discussions are central or distant from other tweets covering the relevant events. Finally, the individual tweets from relevant accounts are analyzed for both their content and their longevity - not just how many times they are retweeted, and by whom, for example, but also how long after the tweet's creation it is still being rebroadcast by other users.

Initial findings

The analysis for this paper is still ongoing, particularly the comparison between different cases and datasets. However, some initial findings from the individual case studies completed thus far show that humorous or satirical content often accounts for the most widespread retweets, from professional comedians (or rebroadcast by them) and from parody or gimmick accounts. The context for such discussions is important to note, though; the frequent tweeting by @queen_uk during the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, plays not only on the idea of the Queen live-tweeting while watching television, but also on the wider depiction of the event as a kitsch broadcast to be enjoyed ironically (Highfield, Harrington & Bruns, 2013). Similarly, while the wider coverage of the 2012 Tour de France features cyclists and their teams as central nodes within the Twitter discussion, fake accounts play a prominent role within broadcaster-specific conversations. Commenting using the broadcaster's hashtag, these fake profiles have a more limited audience and scope (satirizing the broadcaster's commentators), but also represent an additional means of tweeting along with television coverage (Highfield, 2013).

Several of the accounts discussed here appear within multiple datasets, sharing their comments in response to different news events; the ongoing analysis for this paper will then provide further comparison – and tracking of common accounts – between these cases, to evaluate the different roles and contributions of these users to various types of public debate on Twitter.

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