

Chapter 10

Emergent Networks of Topical Discourse: A Comparative Framing and Social Network Analysis of the Coffee Party and Tea Party Patriots Groups on Facebook

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10.1 Introduction

Political action has become increasingly rooted on the Internet. During the 2010 election season, 73% of adults in the United States used the Internet to acquire political information and 23% of individuals used social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, to actively participate in the political process (Rainie 2011). This represents a significant increase from 2008, illustrating that technology is playing an increasingly important role in engaging citizens in the political process.

Social media is becoming a new center in the political process, but little is known about how political groups function online. Often, it is group administrators who set the agenda that guides discourse. Agenda setting and framing is thoroughly examined in traditional media (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs 1994; Nelson et al. 1997), but there is limited examination of the agenda setting activities of online groups. Group administrators have a noticeable effect on the discourse in these groups through selection of the topics for discussion and as a result of this influence it is necessary to understand how groups select and promote certain topics of discourse.

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This chapter presents findings from a comparative analysis of two politically oriented groups on Facebook, “Join the Coffee Party Movement” and the “Tea Party Patriots”. We examine how administrators frame issues through article links and topic selection in parent posts on a group’s social media page. Parent posts are those posts included on the main page for the Facebook group that are managed by the group administrators. We couple this framing analysis with social network analysis to identify how group members participate differently depending on the topic. Our findings identify how administrators of two ideologically distinct groups are able to affect participation and how our novel methodological approach applies social network analysis to identify salient actors by topic area.

First, we present a brief overview of the relevant literature pertaining to agenda setting, framing, and political groups. Next, we introduce the Coffee and Tea Party groups followed by an in-depth description of our methodological approach. We then present the findings of our study in three parts to illustrate how the agenda setting activity of the administrators affects participation by group members. We finish with a discussion of the implications for citizen engagement and technology design for political engagement.

10.2 Literature Review

10.2.1 *Agenda Setting/Framing*

Agenda setting is conceptualized as the ability for the media to influence what items the public thinks are important based on its coverage (or lack of coverage) of certain issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Previously, agenda setting analysis was used for studying the ways that the news media focused on certain issues (McCombs 2005). Because the Internet provides a variety of news and information sources to every user, it is difficult to study using traditional media analysis techniques and tools. McCombs (2005) states that “there are many agendas in contemporary society and many more of these are now available to a large segment of the population” (p. 544). In the case of online groups controlled by a subset of administrators, we argue that it is possible to study agenda setting by analyzing the topical inclusion of stories within a group’s social media presence.

Framing is related to agenda setting. Unlike agenda setting, framing can be studied on an interpersonal or one-to-one level and is related to how a message is delivered (Goffman 1974). Issues can be framed negatively or positively by using keywords with positive or negative connotations. Framing has specific effects on the way that a message’s receiver interprets information. For example, the terms “freedom fighter” and “terrorist” are used to ascribe values to a group (Hughes 2007). It is in this subtle way that the frames used by mass media can influence public opinion as not all frames are interpreted the same.

Due to the significant number of information sources on the Internet, agenda setting and framing analysis now have new roles as modern research tools

(McCombs 2005). One of the newest areas of research is the occurrences of these concepts within blogs and forums that encourage political discussion and action. Woodly (2008) builds on previous work (Farrell and Drezner 2008) to suggest that blogs in particular draw upon traditional agenda setting techniques to influence reader's opinions. Through frame analysis, Woodly was able to investigate the ways the Internet allowed for new forms of political engagement with fellow citizens and government and how the Internet was being used to help frame public viewpoints about certain issues. We apply similar techniques to our analysis of two Facebook groups.

10.2.2 Groups and Social Movements

Research on online groups has shown that political discourse occurs more frequently than other forms of discourse in non-politically focused online communities (Hill and Hughes 1997; Gonzalez-Bailon et al. 2010). When individuals participate in politically focused groups they do so to engage with other supporters (Sweetser et al. 2008) and to share information with other individuals who share their viewpoint (Kavanaugh et al. 2010; Robertson et al. 2010). This prior research has also illustrated the ways that technology facilitates the discourse.

Facebook first openly supported political discourse in 2006 by creating a part of its website called *Election Pulse*. Many candidates and groups adopted Facebook as a component of their campaign's communication strategy, with mixed results (Williams and Gulati 2007, 2009). Social media and the Internet also played an integral part in the 2008 and 2010 election cycle as candidates began to rely on the technology to engage with individuals more and individuals understood the power of technology to communicate with others (Rainie 2011).

Technologically mediated groups empower administrators and participants to engage in a shared discourse space. The electronic trace data of an online group like the Coffee Party and Tea Party Patriots make it easier to identify and analyze leadership and participation. Bebbe & Masterson (2009) identify leadership as "communication that influences, guides, directs, or controls a group." In an online group the leadership role is taken on by administrators and highly prolific participants as administrators set the initial agenda and participants then take control in the discourse stream (Hersey and Blanchard 1992; Cassell et al. 2006). In previous research (Mascaro and Goggins 2011a), we have used social network analysis to understand leadership and control of political groups on social networking sites (Mascaro et al. 2012).

In this chapter, we apply the constructs of agenda setting and framing along with social network analysis to examine the presentation of information and discourse in the Coffee Party and Tea Party Patriots groups on Facebook. We identify differences in the activity of participants and how the agenda setting power of the administrators within each group influences individual participation. We do not speculate on how these activities within the groups are reflected in the physical world (Karpowitz et al. 2011); instead we identify important factors of online group activity.

10.3 Coffee/Tea Party

The Coffee Party was established by Annabel Park, a documentary filmmaker, in response to the Tea Party Movement in the United States in January 2010. Park established the group as a virtual place for civil deliberation among individuals (Park 2010). The Coffee Party moved quickly from a virtual to physical presence by holding numerous “National Meeting Days”, during which groups of individuals organized at local coffeehouses to discuss issues facing the country. These activities helped the organization gain momentum and lead to the first Coffee Party Convention in September 2010 that drew 350 participants from all over the world (Zak 2010).

The Tea Party Patriots (teapartypatriots.org), a faction of the larger Tea Party, was established in a much different fashion than the Coffee Party. The Tea Party Patriots group is a self-identified national grassroots organization that promotes fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government, and free markets. The Tea Party first became recognized in 2009 for sponsoring and organizing the September 12, 2009 “Taxpayer March on Washington” along with the citizen opposition at the town hall meetings for healthcare reform in 2009 (Urbina 2009). The movement was also established with some political support from members of the Republican Party who had become frustrated with the party. This is a distinctly different formative trajectory than the Coffee Party.

During the 2010 mid-term election, the Coffee Party fielded one candidate in a US House of Representatives election that received over 200 write in votes, while the Tea Party fielded 139 candidates for House of Representative contests, winning a number of them (Spillius 2010). The Coffee Party is rooted online but directed toward activity in the physical world. In contrast, the Tea Party is affiliated with a traditional political organization and utilizes social media to organize and garner support in both the physical and virtual space. Both organizations use their online presence to facilitate discourse, but as illustrated in the findings section, they each utilize different topics and strategies to engage their group members.

10.4 Methods/Dataset

Our sample includes parent posts with more than 25 comments from each group’s main Facebook page between 25 October 2010 and 12 January 2011; enabling analysis of interaction networks within the parent posts. The total sample included 345 parent posts with 52,774 comments from the Coffee Party and 245 parent posts with 47,167 comments from the Tea Party Patriots group. As of October 1, 2011 the Coffee Party Facebook group had just over 400,000 followers and the Tea Party Patriots had just over 840,000 followers.

We bound our analysis to this time period because it represents a politically active time period in the United States. Our data set begins the week before the election and ends the week after the newly elected Congress is seated. In addition

to these events, there was significant debate surrounding key pieces of legislation, including immigration reform, social issues, and economic policy. The time period also includes the days immediately following the shooting of Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords.

We follow a previously established method of categorizing the topics of the parent posts (Mascaro and Goggins 2011a, b; Mascaro et al. 2012) by utilizing a process of open coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006) to identify one salient theme for each parent post. We identify 17 discrete codes for the Coffee Party, which we apply to 345 parent posts; and 16 codes for the Tea Party Patriots, which we apply to 245 parent posts.

Our methodological approach builds a weighted social network from the electronic trace data for each parent post category. In our construction of the network, each comment in a thread has some relationship to all the comments before it, but the strength of that relationship decays with time. The strength of connection between a comment and the comments immediately before it are strongest (Goggins et al. 2010). After constructing the network, we calculated betweenness for each actor within the parent post category network using the TNET package (Opsahl 2009) in the statistical software program, R. We use betweenness centrality (Freeman 1979) as a social network analysis measure to identify individuals who act as information brokers in conversational discourse similar to our previous work on political discourse (Mascaro and Goggins 2011a, b).

10.5 Findings

In the following sections we present specific findings in three parts. First, we present an agenda setting and framing analysis of the topical content of the parent posts to understand the administrator controlled activity in the groups. Second, we present the distribution of comments versus the distribution of parent posts from a categorical perspective. We operationalize the construct of role disparity by looking at parent post percentages. Finally, we use social network analysis to analyze the individuals with the highest betweenness in each of the parent post categories to identify the differences in discourse between the two groups.

One of the most significant overall findings is the difference in participation by the administrators for the Coffee and Tea Parties. The time period contained 345 parent posts (average 153/comments per parent post) from the Coffee Party and 245 parent posts (average 192/comments per parent post) from the Tea Party Patriots. Within the discourse, the Coffee Party contributed 521 times whereas the Tea Party Patriots administrators only contributed 12 times. Neither of the group administrators posted in the other group. The Coffee Party participated in discourse as a facilitator, whereas the Tea Party Patriots used their comments to clarify misunderstandings. These actions illustrate different levels of involvement in each of the respective groups.

10.6 Topical Analysis of Parent Posts

The topical focus of the two Facebook groups varied significantly. Table 10.1 illustrates the percentage of the categories coded in each of the groups determined through a process of open coding explicated in the methods sections (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). The topics bolded with 0% represent a code not applied to that specific group. The Coffee Party was identified as having 17 categories of parent posts and the Tea Party was identified as having 16 parent post categories. In total, the two groups shared nine categories of parent posts, illustrative of organizational activities and temporally specific to the studied time period. These shared categories include: Defining the Platform, Economy, Election 2010, Giffords, Immigration, Mobilization, Security, Social, and Tax. Though the groups shared some categories, the manner in which the issues were presented differed significantly.

10.6.1 Organizationally Focused Parent Posts

The codes of Defining the Platform and Mobilization were used differently in the two groups and help to illustrate the organizational differences in the groups. The Coffee Party had very limited access to traditional media and relied on Facebook to establish their group identity. One example of a Coffee Party parent post coded as “Defining the Platform,” said: “We the People Speak Out! ... Yes, we know you’re frustrated, but let’s keep this discussion civil. Let’s listen to one another and strive to understand.” This post helps to identify and further proliferate the Coffee Party’s interest in facilitating open discourse and lead to a threaded discussion about the importance of such discourse.

In contrast, the Tea Party used “Defining the Platform” messages on Facebook to refer physical activities that were serving as the primary vehicle for proliferating their message. In one parent post, the Tea Party Patriots administrators posted a link to a documentary about the Tea Party. This documentary served to further explain the roots of the group and define the views of the group.

The other shared, organizationally focused code was “mobilization”; parent posts were coded as mobilization if they included a member call to action. One of the greatest focuses of the Coffee Party in the early part of the time period was to get individuals to vote in the 2010 mid-term election, and participate in physical rallies such as the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” hosted by Comedians Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert. Mobilization messages in the Coffee Party group were also often coupled with references to specific legislation that was about to be voted on with instructions on how to reach members of Congress and what should be said in support or dissent of the legislation.

While many of the Coffee Party “Mobilization” parent posts were focused on supporters coming out to rallies or calling Congress to stop certain legislation, the Tea Party Patriots mobilized support differently. One of the most significant

Table 10.1 Topical distribution of parent post categories

Parent post category	Coffee (%)	Tea (%)
Campaign finance	10	0
Congress	4	0
Current congress	0	7
Defining the platform	12	9
Economy	11	3
Election 2010	4	8
Employment	4	0
Environmental	3	0
Future planning	0	3
Giffords	5	4
Get out the vote	0	6
Health	4	0
Immigration	2	4
Media	3	0
Mobilization	5	7
New congress	0	12
Organizational	0	9
Political atmosphere	6	0
Quotes	8	0
Security	6	5
Social	6	4
Spending	0	9
Tax	7	7
Voter fraud	0	3

mobilizations drives for the Tea Party during the time period was to call the incoming Tea Party Congressional Freshmen to voice their support and clarify policy stances of the Tea Party. The Tea Party also provided phone numbers of members of Congress that were voting counter to the Tea Party interests before the new Congress was seated. In a non-politically directed illustration of mobilization capabilities, the Tea Party group encouraged voting for Bristol Palin on the television show “Dancing with the Stars.” These similar mobilization actions, with different purposes, illustrate the differences in the groups.

10.6.2 Shared Parent Posts of Discourse

The other shared parent post categories concentrated on specific external events salient to the group. One of the most interesting sets of parents posts were those coded as “Giffords”, which all occurred in the last 4 days of the data set and pertained to the attempted assassination of Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona on January 8, 2011. The Tea Party was blamed by many in the media for the shooting as a result of what some perceived as the promotion of violent rhetoric. Many of the posts coded as “Giffords” on the Tea Party Patriots page were defensive and linked to articles or

interviews where individuals defended the group. On the other hand, the Coffee Party utilized the shooting to further their platform of promoting open discourse and not resorting to violence. In one parent post, the Coffee Party administrators were retrospective: “Friends, this is not the moment to justify anger and hatred directed at our own perceived opponents. This is the time to unite in our love for peace and the well-being of our community, country and humanity...” This illustrates the different framing of the same issue within the two groups.

The categories of Economy, Immigration, Security, Social, and Tax were all specific to external events ongoing in the American political environment. Parent posts in the Coffee Party coded as Economy (11% of the total) pointed fingers at the bankers and Wall Street as to why the economy was in its current state. In one parent post, the Coffee Party explicitly identified the problem from their perspective, “As you know, the current concentration of power and wealth is not only morally wrong, it is politically and economically unsustainable...” On the other hand, the Tea Party Economy parent posts were limited (3%) and were mostly focused on criticizing the economic policies of the Obama administration. The different framing of the economic problems in the country illustrate the ideological differences in the groups.

The immigration-focused parent posts in the two groups mostly focused on the December 2010 legislative action of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) act that afforded certain categories of illegal immigrants permanent residency and benefits. The bill passed the House of Representatives, but not the Senate. The framing of the bill on the two groups illustrates the vastly different ideological stances of the groups. The parent posts on the Tea Party Patriots group were focused on educating the members of the group about the bill and calling Senators to ensure a filibuster. On the other hand, the Coffee Party posted many things during the time period alluding to the positives of the DREAM act. One such positive aspect of the bill that was identified in a parent post was, “The CBO estimates this measure would reduce our deficit by \$1.4 billion over the next 10 years due to increased tax revenue.” This illustrates the different framing and ideological stances of the groups on a specific issue.

10.6.3 Parent Posts Unique to Each Group

Analyzing how similarly coded parent posts are framed in the previous section allows for an analysis of the differences in framing of issues. In this section, we analyze the parent post categories that are not shared between the groups. The different topical content of the two groups illustrates the distinctly different ideological stances of the two groups and helps to illustrate the ability of Facebook to mobilize individuals utilizing political issues. It also highlights the interests of the group and the intended discourse by the administrators.

Although different codes emerged from the two groups, the Congressional elections were a salient issue. The Coffee Party mostly focused on Congress in general, whereas the Tea Party focused much of their posts on distinguishing

between the “Current Congress” and trying to stop the passage of certain bills before the newly elected members took office and the “New Congress” which discussed committee assignments and legislative agenda for the newly elected members. In addition to posts categorized as “New Congress”, the Tea Party had many posts categories as general future planning that took things beyond just the incoming congressional members to future elections and platform decisions.

The framing of the problems with the political system and election was one of the most salient findings in analysis of the parent posts. The Coffee Party blamed electoral issues with campaign finance deregulation and the Citizen’s United decision, but the Tea Party attempted to highlight the possibility of voter fraud as an issue with the elections. The Coffee Party was created on January 26, 2010 right after the Supreme Court ruling about Citizens United, which allows for unlimited corporate donations to candidate campaigns. Almost 10% of the Coffee Party posts were related to Campaign Finance issues and most discussed the problems surrounding money in campaigns. The Coffee Party identifies this issue as being at the core of political problems and influence: “...The decision to abandon public financing in presidential elections and recent Supreme Court rulings, particularly the Citizens United case early this year that gave unions and corporations a greater voice in politics, will push the boundaries further.”

In contrast, the Tea Party Patriots group does not discuss campaign finance issues at all. The group is mostly focused on getting candidates elected which they see as a legitimizing action of the group. Analysis of the Tea Party parent posts indicates that Citizens United is mentioned within the group. Instead, the Tea Party believes that the sanctity of elections is at stake as a result of “voter fraud” (3%) and the belief that individuals would try to usurp possible electoral gains of the Tea Party. In the week leading up to the election, the administrators attempted to solicit 2000 volunteers to monitor voting. The different framing of the problems with elections and the political systems illustrates the differences in groups at different stages in the political environment.

10.6.4 Parent Post Category Participation Levels

In the following section, we present a descriptive analysis of the distribution of comments based on parent post category. We calculate a measure of comment disparity, which is the total percentage of parent posts of a particular category minus the percentage of total comments within that parent post category. The disparity between the two provides the researcher a lens to analyze the interest in specific categories of discourse. A positive number indicates a greater interest in the topic from the group administrator whereas a negative number indicates greater interest from the participants.

In Fig. 10.1, we see the disparity between the percentage of parent posts and the percentage of overall comments in the Coffee Party. The parent posts with the greatest disparity of interest from the administrators are Campaign Finance,

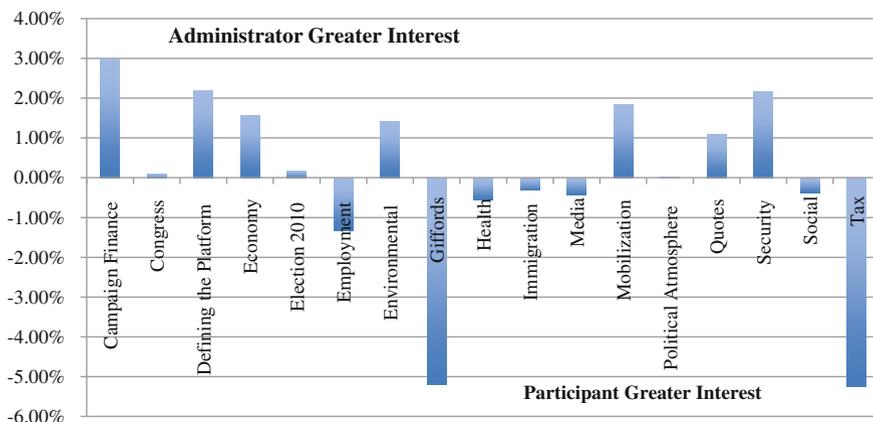


Fig. 10.1 Topical distribution of parent post categories in the coffee party

Defining the Platform, and Security. On the other hand, the parent post categories with the greatest interest from the participants are Giffords and Tax.

The higher interest in Campaign Finance and Defining the Platform for the administrators are correlated because one of the most significant issues for the Coffee Party was the Citizens United decision. The Coffee Party used these parent posts more as an informational broadcast mechanism and as a result facilitated less discourse from participants. Parent posts coded as Security mostly focused on foreign policy and defense. The limited amount of discourse from the participants is likely attributable to the prevailing discursive focus on domestic issues.

The higher interest on behalf of the participants in the Coffee Party group in the parent posts pertaining to the Giffords shooting and issues of Tax are likely a result of the contentious nature of both of the parent post categories. The Giffords shooting marked a highly active time in both the Coffee and Tea Party groups and the discourse in the Coffee Party group focused on furthering the fundamental message of the Coffee Party, open and civil discourse, instead of promoting violence. The message of civil discourse was widely discussed in the comments of the parent posts and significant blame for the shooting was placed on those who did not promote such ideals. The increased interest in the issue of parent posts related to the category Tax is a result of the possible expiration of the Bush era tax cuts that was being highly debated in Congress in fall 2010.

In Fig. 10.2, we see the disparity between the percentage of parent posts and the percentage of overall comments in the Tea Party. The parent posts “Get out the Vote”, “New Congress”, and “Organization” illustrate the greatest disparity between administrators and participants in the Tea Party group. Participants in the group focused more on commenting on posts coded as Giffords, Immigration, and Social.

Similar to the Coffee Party, the Tea Party administrators mostly focused on organizational issues of getting individuals out to vote and promoting the Tea Party message to the newly elected members of Congress. The less interest in

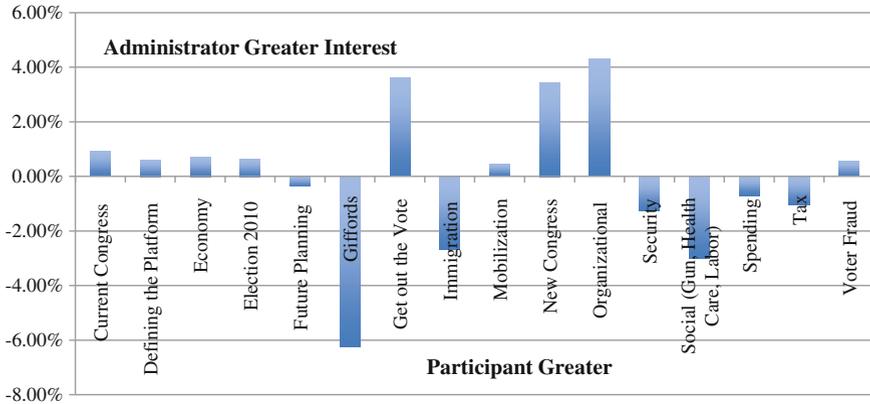


Fig. 10.2 Topical distribution of parent post categories in the tea party patriots

organization parent posts from the group members is likely the result of the fact that many of these parent posts were informational in nature and did not spark significant discourse among individuals. The high interest in parent posts associated with the Giffords shooting is similar to the Coffee Party. The increased participation during that time period may be the result of the supporters of the Tea Party defending against many dissenters who participated in the group to blame the shooting on the Tea Party’s activities. The high interest in Immigration and Social issues was the result of significant legislation relating to these issues during the time period as explained in the previous section.

The comment disparity figures of the Coffee and Tea Parties allow for a high-level analysis of the activity within the group at a topical level. The presence of electronic trace data allows for a granular analysis such as this to be conducted. Understanding which topics the members of the group are more interested in informs the administrators what topical areas are generating the most interest from participants. We now present a detailed analysis of user activity in the parent post categories by identifying individuals who had the highest betweenness measure in each parent post category. We conceptualize these individuals as topical leaders of discourse within the groups that act as information brokers and can influence the direction of the discourse.

10.6.5 Identifying Topical Expertise Through Social Network Analysis

Our prior empirical work in various domains demonstrates that individuals high in betweenness centrality act as information brokers (Goggins et al. 2010). Research in political discourse by the authors (Mascaro and Goggins 2011a) has further connected those individuals highest in betweenness in electronic trace data to the

concept of “issue entrepreneurs (Agre 2004),” individuals who specialize in discourse focused on a specific issue.

Through our network analysis, the Coffee Party administrator account has the highest betweenness actor in 6 of the 17 parent post categories (Quotes, Defining the Platform, Security, Campaign Finance, Mobilization, and Economy) and in the top 15 in betweenness in 5 other categories. This position illustrates the Coffee Party Administrator’s important role in those categories indicating that they are able to propose the initial agenda and then shape it over time. The Coffee Party administrators are not in the top 15 in betweenness in Tax, Media, Election 2010, Environmental, Health, and Congress. The users who are the highest in betweenness in the other 11 categories that the Coffee Party is not the highest in betweenness are all unique illustrating that discourse participants concentrated on one topical area in the overall context of the network and acted as “issue entrepreneurs.”

The limited participation in the discourse of the Tea Party Patriots administrators did not put them in the top 15 of betweenness in any of the parent post categories. Instead, there were two individuals who were the highest in betweenness for more than one category. “Frank” was the highest in betweenness in Defining the Platform, Spending, and Tax and “Jason” was the highest in betweenness in Economy, Election 2010, and Voter Fraud. At least one of these individuals finished in the top 15 in betweenness in all but four parent post categories, Giffords, Immigration, Security, and Social. The other individuals who were the highest in betweenness were all unique.

Analysis of Frank and Jason’s activity in the group indicates that they are the two most prolific commenters in the Tea Party Patriots group. Analysis of their comments indicates that though they are high in betweenness in these topical areas, they express dissent with the views of the Tea Party group and use negative-worded comments to illustrate their displeasure in the way that the Tea Party addresses issues. Many of the comments from these two individuals are directed toward other individuals in the discourse arguing specific points that Frank and Jason believe are misguided. These findings illustrate that the most prolific individuals in a group are not necessarily supportive of the overall group message and viewpoint. In the case of Frank and Jason, we see that they are most influential in some of the more controversial topics, the fundamental organization of the Tea Party and issues that the Tea Party is trying to champion.

One of the interesting findings in the Tea Party Patriots group was the presence of “Rebecca” as the second highest actor in betweenness in the categories Spending and Social. Rebecca is an individual who posted in both the Tea Party and Coffee Party groups and tended to debate issues with individuals in the Tea Party and voice a general dissatisfaction with the state of politics in the United States in discourse in the Coffee Party group. The presence of Rebecca as being highly between in the Spending and Social parent post categories in the Tea Party Patriots group helps to further narrow down the areas of discourse in which the individual debated the most with Tea Party group members. These two areas also tended to be the categories where the Tea Party defined their platform the most in cutting spending and changing social programs.

The identification of individuals high in betweenness in certain categories is important for identifying subject matter or topical issue leaders. The difference in the type of actors who are high in betweenness illustrates the difference between the two groups. The high participation of the Coffee Party illustrates both a topical- and discourse-based leadership, whereas the Tea Party does not participate in the discourse, but instead relies on others to lead the discourse. In this case, many of the more prolific leaders are those individuals who do not agree with the overall viewpoint of the group and end up high in betweenness because they argue with others in the group.

10.7 Implications for Future Research of Technologically Mediated Political Groups

Our analysis of two politically focused groups on Facebook illustrates how technology facilitates mobilization and discourse in an open online space. The group administrators of the Coffee and Tea Parties set the agenda for discussion, resulting in different levels of discourse in each group. The focus on similar topics in the two groups such as Mobilization and Defining the platform illustrate traditional group processes enacted in distinct ways and represent the different structure and interests of the two groups. Through analysis of the unique topics that the administrators chose to include, it is possible to identify the agendas of the groups.

Understanding how group participants react to the inclusion of different topics in a group space enables groups or candidates to better tailor the message or the issues being addressed in the open forum. The second set of findings related to topical comment disparity highlight the fact that sensational events, like the shooting of a political figure, can lead to variations in interaction levels. Social network analysis combined with how certain issues are framed in a virtual discourse group can highlight the power that administrators have in setting an agenda. Analyzing the specific activities of the participants and how they respond to certain parent posts or messages included in a group for discussion can help groups or political candidates better decide to include specific stories to develop more engagement in the technological space.

The administrators of the two groups engaged in the social networking space in two distinct capacities. The Coffee Party administrator's high involvement in the group discourse was representative of the group wanting to engage with individuals who had shared viewpoints or debating with those who may have dissented with the views of the Coffee Party. This activity was in line with the stated purpose of open and civil dialog. In contrast, the absence of the Tea Party administrators except to further highlight events or points within the discourse illustrates the lack of focus on participating in the online discourse of the group. This distinction also represents the more traditional structure of the Tea Party in which they were originally developed as a physical group with an augmenting presence as opposed to a virtual group that moved to the physical world.

The identification of individuals who participate in specific forms of topical discourse also has many implications for groups or candidates who wish to influence the message within technologically mediated discourse. The Coffee Party administrators were able to influence the discourse through both setting the agenda and actively participating in topical areas of greatest interest to them, while allowing others to take on key roles in other topical areas. On the other hand, the Tea Party administrators only participated in the discourse a small number of times, contributing very little to the evolving threads of comments. This allowed dissenters to play a significant role in the discourse stream and may have led to limited activity by supporters in some topical areas. Understanding how to both set the initial agenda and then influence the agenda as discourse carries on is important to understand from the perspective of a group administrator.

10.8 Conclusions

This study represents an initial foray into comparing the agenda setting and discourse practices in two political groups on Facebook. The reliance of groups and candidates on using technologically open spaces, such as Facebook, for discourse and mobilization means that more understanding needs to be developed with respect to how individuals participate and interact with others in the group. We have shown in other research that the administrators of a group can censor individuals who do not support the viewpoint of the group without notifying the group at large (Mascaro et al. 2012). This has significant negative implications for open discourse. The fact that Facebook requires a real identity and as a result individuals have some physical social capital at stake makes individuals accountable for their contributions. Therefore, the activity that occurs within the group is likely to be able to be moved outside of the group and still have some level of effect in the “real” world.

As technology evolves, understanding how to design and use systems for civic engagement will be important. Building open spaces with the hope that individuals will participate may not be enough. Designers must understand how groups and individuals utilize these technologies and provide the appropriate affordances to facilitate and increase the productivity of these interactions. This is likely to be an iterative process requiring more understanding of the activities and requirements inside of the variety of systems currently in existence.

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