

Abstract

Technologically Mediated Discourse and Information Exchange through Medium Specific Syntactical Features: The 2012 Presidential Election On Twitter
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Political discourse has been historically constrained by geographic proximity of participants. The introduction of the Internet and specifically social media has altered these geographic constraints and political discourse is now one of the most prevalent activities in social media. The increasing use of technology to acquire political information and participate in the political process in the United States creates a gap between what is understood about political activity in a democratic society and the specific technological features people use. As more individuals begin to use technology for political activity, understanding how the technology is used becomes increasingly important.

Previous research exploring political discourse on social media has focused on one discrete event or a narrow time period. This narrow focus limits the understanding of the complex environment that comprises an election. This study takes a longitudinal approach and uses network analysis, co-occurrence analysis and temporal frequency analysis to examine a 53 million Twitter message (tweet) corpus collected during the 2012 Presidential Election (August 20, 2012 – November 13, 2012) to understand how individuals use Twitter to engage in political discourse. The queries used to compose the dataset were theoretically informed based on democratic theory and previous socio-technical research.

This study makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, this study identifies that individuals use syntactical features differently in the context of an acute event such as a debate. Second, this study indicates that, although candidates and media are the most talked about and talked to, these interactions elicit no response. Third, this study reveals that information shared through URLs was predominantly user-generated content from Twitter and mass media information suggesting a reflexive information-sharing environment.

This study illustrates that even with the availability of the numerous technological and syntactical features to facilitate interactions and share information, there is still a limited realization of the promise that technologies such as Twitter afford. Instead of fundamentally changing the political discourse process by having individuals use it for two-way communication, Twitter amplifies the existing political environment where there is limited cohesive discourse and communication is one-way.