Giving & Philanthropy in the US
Analysis of discourse in news and social media

Findings from research period August 2018 – August 2019

For the second year in a row, this project sought to analyze and describe the news media and social media discourse surrounding giving and philanthropy in the United States. The period of time examined in this iteration of the research was 8/1/2018 through 8/1/2019. This project was initially commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to fill a gap in research describing and understanding conversations around giving and philanthropy that are taking place in the news and across social media in the United States. The year-over-year replication of the research allows for deeper understanding of trends over time.

Researchers from the MIT Media Lab’s Media Cloud project and the Media Ecosystems Analysis Group replicated content analysis methods developed in the first year of research to surface content related to giving and philanthropy. Data sources included the following:

data was narrowed to US content when possible:

- Media Cloud, an open source news media database developed by Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society and the Center for Civic Media at the MIT Media Lab. Over 64K stories from over 9K media sources were collected.
- Crimson Hexagon, a privately-owned platform that collects and analyzes data from Twitter. 36M Tweets were collected.
- CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned platform that provides access to public posts on Facebook and Instagram. Over 5M Facebook posts and 621K Instagram posts were collected.

Who and what drove coverage and discussion?

While key tragic events drove coverage in the first year of research (2017-2018), there were no clear driving events across platforms this year, and coverage was more thematic. All social platforms did have peaks in discussion on the date of Giving Tuesday. News media had the largest peak in coverage around Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony during the confirmation process of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, with coverage including links to GoFundMe pages supporting Blasey Ford.

In the news media, Forbes published the most content on giving and philanthropy, followed by The Washington Post, FOX News, USA Today, and The New York Times. Content published by The New York Times received the most Facebook shares, a finding also found in the first year of research. The crowdfunding website GoFundMe.com was the external website most linked to by news media articles for the second year in a row.

On social media, philanthropists, nonprofits, and celebrities are the most influential posters on the topic of giving and philanthropy. Philanthropist Strive Masiyiwa had the most-liked post on Facebook for the second year in a row. As in the first year of research, influential posters on Twitter tended to include more politicians, while influential posters on Instagram tended to be younger singers and actors.
What narratives were present in the discourse?

Nearly all of narratives identified in the first year of research were present again this year:

- Power of Crowdfunding, Giving and Philanthropy of Everyday People,
- Donating as Part of a Healthy Lifestyle, Celebrity Charity,
- Corporate Donations, Philanthropists and Their Gifts,
- People Requesting Money, Untrustworthy Charities and Fundraising Scams, and Political Influence through Donations.

The narrative Hypocritical Donors evolved this year to focus more on hypocrisy of institutions accepting charitable gifts from compromised individuals. **Additionally, a new critical narrative, Donations and College Admissions, emerged.** This was motivated in part by the 2019 college admissions bribery scandal involving actresses Felicity Huffman and Lori Laughlin. Several of the most influential news articles in this research period had to do with this narrative.

How did results from 2018-2019 (Year 2) differ from 2017-2018 (Year 1)?

While coverage and discussion of this topic was largely similar from year to year, there were a few key differences in Year 2. Coverage and discussion in Year 1 was driven by key tragic events (e.g., Hurricane Harvey, Las Vegas mass shooting); although there were smaller-scale natural disasters and instances of violence in the time period of Year 2, these events did not create peaks in volume, and coverage was more thematic. News stories in Year 2 retained focus on philanthropists Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, but Jeff Bezos and Warren Buffett were no longer in the top 20 mentioned individuals. A new narrative emerged in Year 2 focusing on problematic links between philanthropic gifts and college admissions. Finally, there was an overall decrease in the volume of Tweets on the topic in Year 2.

What trends emerged over the two-year research period?

Giving and philanthropy intersect with a wide range of topics; no single campaign, event, person, or theme dominates the conversation. For example, while Giving Tuesday caused the largest peak in daily volume on social platforms, Giving Tuesday content only accounts for <1% of news articles and <2% of social posts from the overall philanthropy topic.

There is a notable intersection between giving and political causes, officeholders, and candidates. Although content with the word “election” was removed from the results, political coverage and discussion retained a strong presence. In a sample of content, 14% of philanthropy news articles and 22% of philanthropy Tweets were about political giving. The most-mentioned people in news stories were largely political figures. Further, individuals who tweeted about philanthropy are more interested in politics than the rest of Twitter users.

Animal rights issues are a popular subtopic. Posts about animal welfare were frequent and among the most popular on all social platforms. Animal charities were among the top influential posters on Instagram and Facebook in particular. When examining Giving Tuesday and Red Nose Day, posts about animals were more prevalent than those about children, homelessness/poverty, or illness/disease.

To discuss this research: Emily Boardman Ndulue, emily@mediaecosystems.org