

Social Software's Social Side Effects: Political Discourse in Non-political Spaces

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Abstract

This poster will present a research plan for characterizing online political discussion that happens on non-political blogs, an area that has often been overlooked literature about online political discourse. We will present some preliminary results regarding the percentage of blogs that are political and research design for evaluating discourse quality. This work is in its preliminary stages and will benefit from conversations with DIAC 2008 participants.

Introduction

Political theorists have articulated normative ideals for political deliberation [3, 4, 5, 11]. While details vary, a common theme is that deliberative discussion should involve airing of diverse views, participants who are open to changing their minds, and the formulation of arguments in terms of common interests rather than only in terms of competing interests of individuals or subgroups [11, 13, 14, 15]. Theorists argue that democracy flourishes in societies where political discussion is frequent and frequently approaches these deliberative ideals: people become much more public-spirited citizens, and thus such societies will make better collective choices on important matters at all levels of government, and those choices will have greater public legitimacy [4, 12, 16].

To date, scholars have examined the extent to which online political spaces generate discussion that approximates deliberative ideals. For example, Adamic and Glance found that political blogs rarely link to blogs expressing opposing views [6], but more diversity can be found in discussions within political USENET groups [7]. Stromer-Galley found that participants in online political discussions report seeking out diversity in opinion, though she was unable to determine the actual diversity in the discussions [8]. Price and colleagues created a political chat room to use as a research setting [9]. They introduced random citizens to this research setting and then measured indicators of quality of online discussion and its impacts on participants, including opinion change, opinion quality, electoral engagement, social trust, community engagement, distortions, and alienating effects. The researchers observed positive outcomes in discourse quality and civic engagement.

We hypothesize that, although political discussion is less frequent in spaces where people have connected for non-political reasons, when it does occur the political discussion may be closer to deliberative ideals. People who have come together for a non-political reason may have diverse political views, and because they have existing relationships to protect, they may be more open to other viewpoints and more willing to do the hard work of formulating their own opinions in ways that they think will appeal to others who do not fully share their own political outlook.

Research Plan

Our research will first characterize the political discussion on non-political blogs – where does it happen and what does it look like? We will then evaluate the hypothesis that some non-political spaces yield more deliberative political discussions than political spaces.

Space, sample, and data collection

We have identified several non-political spaces in which political discussion ranges from occasional to frequent, including blogs, message boards, social networking sites, and photo sharing services. For our first analysis, though, we wish to compare spaces that are similar to each other in design and technical capabilities but vary in topic, commenting policies, and number of authors, and we have chosen just one type of online space, blogs from Blogger.com. A secondary advantage of harvesting from Blogger.com is that the service's API permits me to download entire blogs at a time, which is very compatible with automatically building a sample. We are currently developing automated crawlers to harvest discussions from a range of these blogs and an automated text classifier to identify discussions as political or non-political. Preliminary evaluation of this classifier using a small test set of 250 blog posts from Blogger.com indicates that it performs satisfactorily, achieving a precision of 0.8, recall of 0.94, and kappa around 0.85, which is considered almost perfect agreement [10].

By using an early version of the harvester and classifier, we were able to characterize the percent of political posts on a sample of 9,094 blogs (generated by downloading a random sample of blogs updated in the last week of October 2007). These results are presented in figure 1. There are some shortcomings of this sample including: (1) a number of spam blogs made it past the filters, and (2) several blogs that were not sustained beyond a few initial posts were included. Nevertheless, there clearly exists substantial political discussion in spaces that are not primarily political.

To overcome the problems in the earlier sample, we have been building a list of blogs updated since 6 January 2008 that have at least five posts before 5 August 2008 (these criteria appear to effectively exclude many spam blogs – which get deleted by Blogger once noticed – and many of blogs that fail to ever take off). We will then be able to filter this list to blogs that meet the minimum discussion criteria (based on some number of mean or median comments per post), and from the filter list, build a sample of blogs that are mostly political and blogs that are occasionally political.

Data analysis

After exploratory analysis of some of the political discussions, we are developing a coding scheme based on many of the measures described by Price and Steenbergen et al. Potential measures include number of individual arguments and conclusions expressed, number of sources referenced, tone or sentiment, and willingness to ask questions and admit uncertainty.

Many of the above are concepts we are still working to operationalize in a way that will allow for consistent coding that can be compared across blogs. Should we compare all posts on a topic, individual posts, or individual comments? How do we normalize for different quantities of discussion across blogs? One example comparison we propose is to isolate comments that express disagreement with the poster or another commenter and score each comment based on how respectful it is (respectful, neutral, disrespectful).

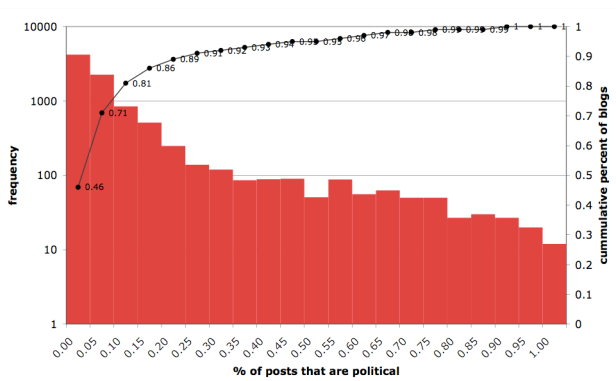


Figure 7. Blogs and percent of posts that are political

Once developed, the coding scheme will be revised based through preliminary coding. Once we are comfortable with it, we will apply it to the random sample of political discussions from platforms that host both political and non-political spaces. Human rater(s) will code the discussions and we will then be able to compare the deliberative quality of the discussions that occur in the political and non-political blogs.

Implications for future work

One extension of this work would be able to apply some of the same measures to other online spaces, i.e., not just blogs, to characterize the quality of discourse in these spaces. Beyond characterization, if, as we expect, at least some of the non-political spaces sometimes have political discussions that approach the deliberative ideals, we will next try to identify which technical and social design choices make non-political spaces more hospitable to occasional deliberative political discussion. These design choices include target audience, topic, administration policies, use of pseudonyms and real names, existence of personal profiles, conversation format (many-to-many, few-to-many, one-to-many), and other choices that will emerge during this research. We expect correlation between design choices and the quality of political discussions in these spaces. For example, we anticipate that allowing people to bond through off-topic conversation, or allowing users to create rich personal profiles, will allow for more frequent political discussion and more deliberative discussion when it does occur.

The Internet allows people to connect in a range of new online spaces. It is unclear whether connections formed online around shared hobbies, heroes, or health concerns can be repurposed to generate positive social side effects for individuals and communities. Do participants in online spaces have access to a network of people they trust and in whom they can confide? Do they give and receive favors? Are they more aware of different perspectives? Are they open to persuasion by their online acquaintances about important matters? Political discourse is but one aspect of a broader research agenda to develop a comprehensive understanding of how different spaces and the design decisions behind them generate different social benefits as side effects, including awareness of different views, access to information, and emotional support.

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