

Study Shows How Social Media is Changing American Political Discourse

Researchers tracked about a million Tweets about the Common Core and found sophisticated networks, operating strategically to push debate.

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Philadelphia, March 2, 2017 — The undeniable influence of Twitter in the recent presidential election raises important questions about the evolving role of social media in American political discourse. A new study analyzing how the Common Core educational standards were debated on Twitter offers insights into how actors gain and wield influence on social networks, and what these strategies mean for big policy debates. The lessons can help us understand debate around a range of contentious issues beyond education policy.

Researchers from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education used a combination of social network and psychological analytic techniques to scrutinize about one million tweets about the Common Core State Standards over a 32-month period. They found a sophisticated set of savvy participants who creatively used social network principles, BotNets (tweeting robots that exploit network systems), hashtag rallies (bringing people together online to surge an advocacy message), and issue framing to leverage sets of relationships and move their messages effectively through a system.

Instead of a traditional academic study, the #commoncore project is an interactive website that allows users to experience how the Twitter conversation evolved.

- **See the study at www.hashtagcommoncore.com**

The study documents how these tools, coupled with the loosening of the hold of the 'professional' media, has led to broader reporting of activity and events, but also has the effect of increasing unsubstantiated, exaggerated, and even outright fake news stories. The researchers explain how phenomena have also contributed to increasing segregation of people by beliefs, which has reduced opportunities for common experiences and diverse interactions and led to a polarization of opinions.

They also found the Patriot Journalist Network, a loosely affiliated group of social conservatives that used innovative technologies to send coordinated tweets across a range of issues, including opposition to the Common Core. At their peak, #PJNET generated almost a quarter of the Common Core related tweets in the network.

The research team of Jonathan Supovitz (University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education), Alan J. Daly (University of California San Diego), Christian Kolouch (University of

Pennsylvania) and Miguel del Fresno (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Madrid, Spain) uncovered patterns including:

- The Common Core debate on Twitter reveals how social media is transforming political discourse in America.
- The combination of social and technological advocacy strategies have ratcheted up the power of external political pressure groups.
- The consumers of political content are becoming increasingly segmented, reducing vital opportunities for engagement with ideas
- Fake News is not news. It is a longstanding problem, and the education sector is not immune.
- Differences in the ways we process information may lead to misunderstanding rather than genuine disagreement.
- Twitter is a uniquely powerful tool for disseminating information, but its structure lends itself to manipulation.
- Paradoxically, even as we have more information available to us, we are less informed.

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