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GOOD NEWS OR BAD NEWS: ANALYZING NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

By

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A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

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University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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Interim Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education

Abstract

This paper summarizes and analyzes results of a two-month research done on three of the most popular social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) and analyzes how daily news is portrayed. Past research has been done on the tone and portrayal of news on print media, such as magazines and newspapers. However, the main concern of this research is determining what goes on social media news and how it is portrayed.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In the 21st century, almost everyone is involved in social media, therefore, I decided to conduct a research study on social media due to my interest in marketing. Social media has psychological effects on the regular user, with advertising and personalized content being one of the greatest examples. Many users have developed a persona behind the screen; by not logging on to their social networking site instigates within them a fear of missing out. With the rise of different social media communication platforms comes negatives and positives. Although one of the greatest advantages can be rapid communication across all nations, a recent disadvantage society is dealing with on social media is the rise of cyberbullying. Topics discussed on social media attract a wide variety of audiences, with interests stemming from politics to health to entertainment. To some, social media platforms are the sole source of their daily news, as print media is on a slow decrease. The purpose of my capstone is a two-month (60 day) study in which I analyzed daily trending topics on social media platforms, specifically Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and characterized them as positive, negative, or neutral news. As the percentage of people who read the daily newspaper decreases across all age ranges, there seems to be a sharp increase of social media users sharing and reporting news stories. For example, in a study done by the PEW research center in the year 2014, 50% of people who go onto social networking sites share or repost news stories, images, or videos. 46% discuss the news in person once they've seen it on a social networking site. (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, Madden, 2014) This study was done in 2014, and numbers have generally increased since then. With more research being done on print media rather than digital media, I found only a few sources I was able to use as a

secondary source. Some research has been briefly done on the psychological aspects of news and media. For example, it is widely known that news stories with negative tones are more likely to be read because psychologically readers feel a sense of peace and content when comparing their lives to the unfortunate article. therefore, negative news draws more attention. (Soroka, Young, Balmas, 2015) However, no studies were done on how news is portrayed through social media platforms. Before starting this research, I had originally hypothesized that most of the news that I would study on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, were also going to be centered upon negative news. My research question focused on finding out what type of news is more prevalent on different social media platforms, and in what tone are they portrayed. Specifically, what kind of news stories trend on social media? And, what kind of tone are they written in? However, after conducting this research, the answer was far more complicated than it seemed. For example, not only did the tone of news stories change to different social media platforms, but the subjects that were trending were also different. For example, Facebook was more likely to hold more political based news rather than Instagram or Twitter. Instagram was more likely to have trending news based on different subjects, such as health and sports. Twitter, on other hand, had more extreme views. Neutral news on Twitter was very rare as more people feel limited when expressing their opinions in 140 characters or less, resulting in expression of exaggerated thoughts.

Literature Review

My expectations when approaching this study were that politics would be the trending topic on all social media platforms, and all would be portrayed in a negative tone. I did not think that each platform would have different trending topics. The main purpose of this research was to determine what type of news was trending, and how it was portrayed. I found a couple different research projects that have been done that helped me when gathering and analyzing data for my capstone. In a study done by Stuart Soroka, Lorie Young, and Meital Balmas in 2014, they concluded that negativity, fear, and anger were most common in print news content. Through analyzing newspaper and magazine articles, they captured different modes of fear and anger. They stated that this was a method for readers to alleviate their daily life stress. In another study done in 2016 by Damian Trilling titled "From newsworthiness to Shareworthiness", it was concluded that there were certain aspects of news that made them "share-worthy" on social media. Those aspects include timing, proximity, and prominence. If it held bland content with non-famous subjects, it was most likely not going to be one of the top trending topics on social media. Another research study that helped me in determining the purpose and effects of the social media platforms was research done in 2012 titled "Social Media Use for News and Individuals". Authors Homero Zuniga, Nakwon Jung, and Sebastian Valenzuela found that those that were more likely to share news on social media were more likely to vote when compared to someone who is not as active on social media. Those who shared news and were constantly active on the trending news stories page, and were more likely to express their views both online and off-line. This served as a tool

to measure political interest. Therefore, they concluded that social media was an

advantage to the political sphere rather than a disadvantage.

Methodology

The three different social media platforms that were used towards the making of this project were Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Throughout the course of the two months of March and April, every day between 3:00 to 3:30 PM, I would go on to record the top 10 trending news stories on these three platforms. Therefore, after the months of March and April, I had studied 610 news stories for each social media platform. Once logged into the Facebook account, the top trending news stories would show up on the right side as a column. Once logged in to the Twitter account, the trending news stories were placed under the moments tab. Although Instagram did not have a specific page that listed all the trending stories, I used ABC News, which had a page specifically designated for top trending Instagram news stories of the day. First, I recorded the categories of each type of news; categorizes included nation (local news and politics), food, entertainment, science, health, sports, and travel. The articles' titles were categorized into having a positive, negative, or neutral tone. Then, after reading articles themselves, I categorized them into having either a positive, negative, or neutral tone overall. When the article showed signs of hope, when certain group members got along, or when an agreement was made, the article was categorized as positive. Keywords that automatically categorized the article as positive included "peace", "agreement", "union", "beginning", and "inspiration". For example, articles that can be categorized as negative are those that show no signs of hope at all, such as articles that may be libel. Keywords that steered articles into a negative direction included "disagreement", "battle", "attack", "death", and "convicted". For example, the Paris police shooting that took place on April 20 seemed

to have a negative tone in the article, with words such as "fear", "questioned", and "resentment" being repetitive. Neutral news start off as holding a negative tone, however finish by looking into the future and showing some signs of hope. An example of this is an article that was written about France's first round of elections. It may also be the case if it were switched, meaning that if the article started out with a positive tone but ended in a negative tone.

Analytical Discussion

Instagram was found to hold a broader range of topics pertaining to trending news stories. (Figure 1)The other media platforms did not cover as many topics as Instagram did. Entertainment news stories were much more likely to be seen on Instagram rather than Facebook. About 61% of news stories on Facebook were related to either local news or politics. Only 23% of news were entertainment-based. Most topics covered on Facebook were pertaining to politics. (Figure 3) Twitter almost covered politics and entertainment evenly, with 30% of trending topics being entertainment and 40% of trending topics being local news and politics. 12% of trending news stories were also pertaining to health, compared to Facebook and Instagram where health articles were very scarce. (Figure 2)

When comparing the tone of the title to the tone of the article, each social media platform show different results. For example, Instagram had a lot of political news with a neutral title followed by a negative article. (Figure 4) Entertainment-based articles held negative titles, but had neutral articles. The best example of this may be a title discussing an artist's poor choice of fashion, but later goes on to discuss the artist's latest philanthropic interests in the article. Entertainment articles seemed to have a negative title to catch readers' attention, however discuss just about everything going on with the celebrity/public figure later in the article.

Facebook displayed a different trend. When there were articles pertaining to local news and politics, the majority of the articles held negative titles followed by a neutral article. (Figure 5) Negative titles highlighting death and disaster were very common,

followed by a focus on hope and organizations that may help ameliorate the situation. Twitter showed unique trends as well, with most articles holding either a negative or a positive tone. Entertainment news seemed to be all neutral, however, political news was either portrayed in a negative or a positive light. (Figure 6)

Topically, Instagram contained more entertainment based news rather than political. Trending news topics were also more diverse compared to Facebook and Twitter. Reasons for this are due to the main purpose of Instagram. Instagram is more picture based compare to Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, it is more likely to hold an artistic view, with eye-catching pictures being more share-worthy. With so many diverse types of accounts, one can explore various interests and hobbies. This also explains today's "Instagram famous" fad, where average bloggers market assorted items from vitamins to clothing brands. Therefore, it is more likely for entertainment based news to spread and trend rather than political news. Political news is always followed by extensive wording, and Instagram my not be the right platform for that, especially since users are mostly early teenagers.

On Facebook, there was a dramatic shift with political news stories holding negative titles, and later being accompanied with a neutral article. Facebook has a wide demographic of users; therefore, politics is most likely to be spread through that platform. Facebook is also used as a networking site, specifically on a professional basis. Therefore, unbiased and neutral news articles are more common as people don't want to express their extreme views due to their family, friends, colleagues who are likely to see that post. Ideas are mostly addressed on Facebook in a professional manner, therefore, it is unlikely to see extremely positive or negative news on Facebook.

Compared to Instagram and Facebook, Twitter was more extreme in tone, neutral news were very scarce. Reasons for this lie in the 140-character word limit. Twitter users are limited to only a certain number of characters to express their views, and so get straight to the point which may come off as extreme. Compared to Facebook and Instagram, accounts are public and encourage open communication, encouraging everyone to hold and express a strong position. It is also acceptable to tweet numerous times on Twitter rather than on the other social media platforms studied. It's steers away from professionalism and more foul language is likely to be seen on this social media networking site. One of twitter's biggest problems today are hate speech and bullying.

Conclusion

My capstone studied trending topics on social media platforms and the tone in which they were portrayed throughout the months of March and April of the year 2017. Looking back, if I were to repeat this project, I would want to do the study throughout a longer time frame. Because the months of March and April followed the American presidential election, that might have been the reason as to why political news stories were so prevalent on Facebook. If I redid this study to include a longer time frame, I could have ruled out any outside effects.
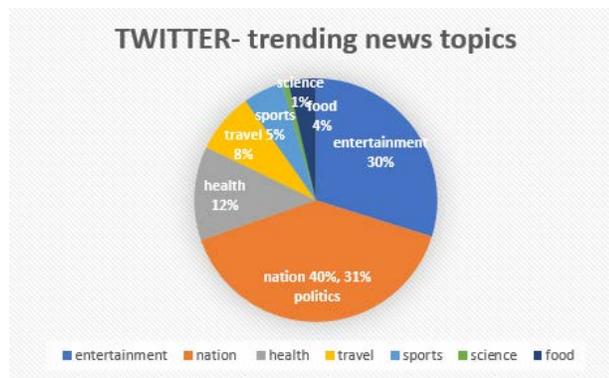
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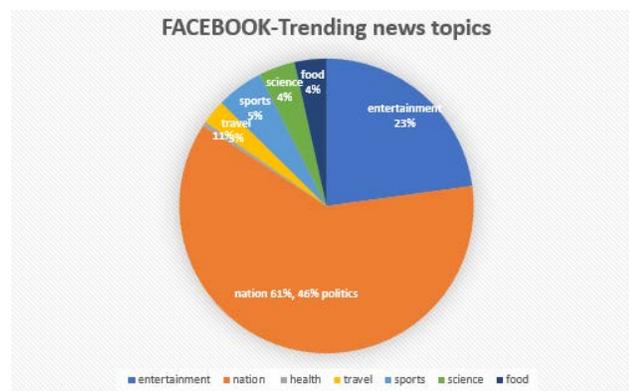
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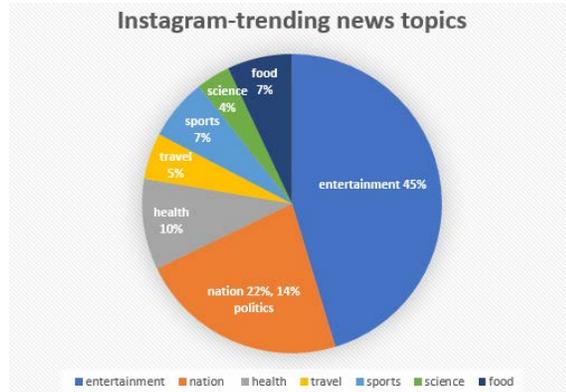
Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Instagram- Title Tone

Instagram- Article Tone

Figure 5

Facebook- Title Tone

Facebook- Article Tone

Figure 6

Twitter- Title Tone

Twitter- Article Tone
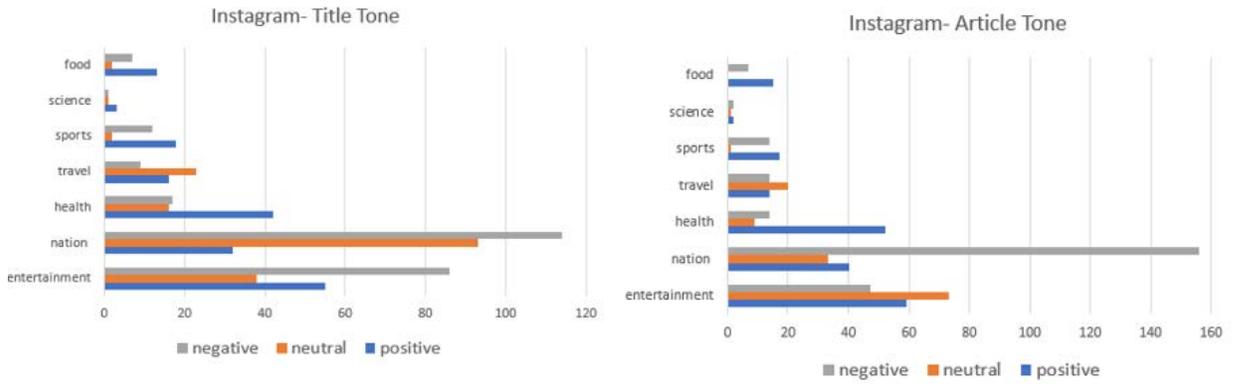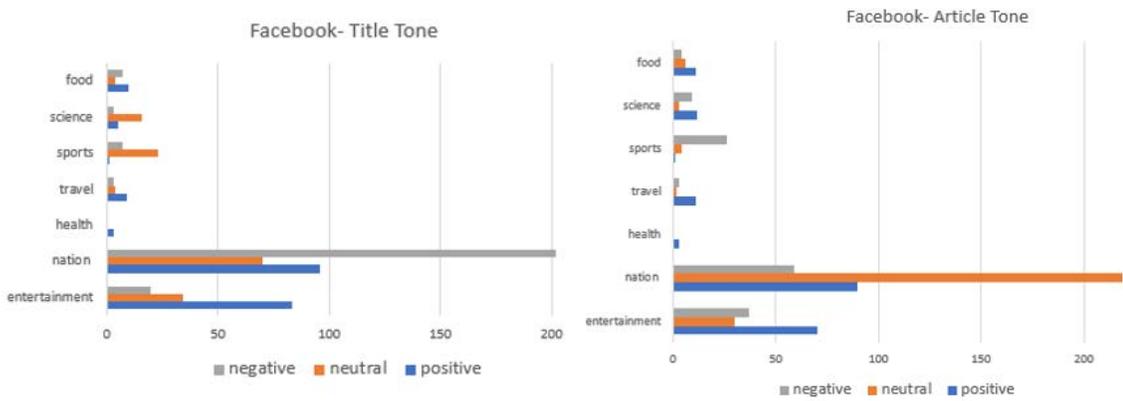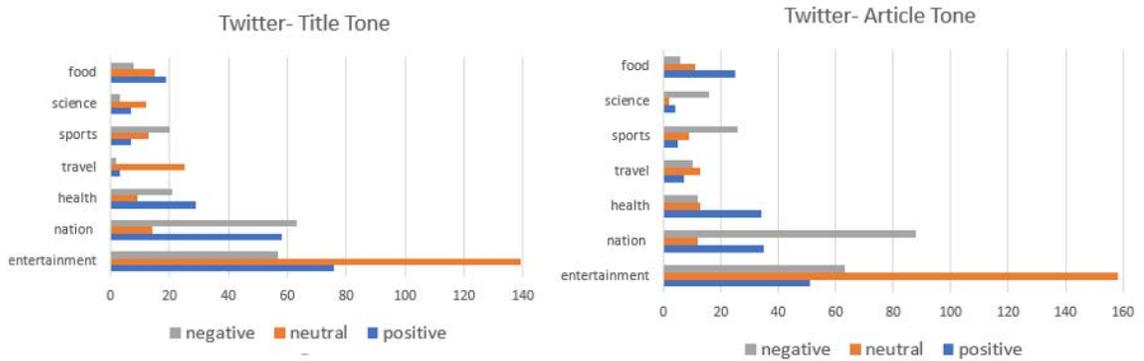
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