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A Content Analysis of Political Discourse on TikTok

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COMM 460: Digital Rhetoric

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Abstract

There is a gap in research about political discourse taking place on the social media platform TikTok. Traditionally, the public saw this platform as trivial and less important than other platforms because of its young user base. With the increase of political videos on this platform within the past few years, scholars are now beginning to observe this platform more seriously. This study aims to recognize how TikTok influences political discourse. A content analysis examined 500 videos under the hashtags, “politics” (10.0 B views), “conservative” (6.9 B views), “republican” (7.0 B views), “Trump” (7.2 B views) “democrat” (4.2 B views) and “leftist” (2.3 B views). The researcher made two accounts to engage with left-leaning and right-leaning videos separately. The results showed that creators on the platform made videos that lead to the further polarization of political parties. The results also suggest that TikTok’s algorithm creates online echo chambers, leading to users becoming radicalized on either side of the political spectrum.

Literature review

In 2004, Facebook was created by the then Harvard University sophomore, Mark Zuckerberg, as a social media website to connect college students. Zuckerberg envisioned a way of “bringing the existing social experience of college onto the internet” (McFadden, 2020). His goal was to build and facilitate online communities and social ties. At the time, only college students were offered access to Facebook. In late 2006, Zuckerberg released Facebook to the public, and within a year, it had over 100,000 pages on which companies promoted themselves

(Boyd, 2019). Within three years, it grew to over 350 million users. Facebook is a way to connect with others, as well as share and promote ideas.

As Facebook began to grow in prominence as a social platform, it created a space for users to have political discourse. Before social media, political discourse took place primarily through “traditional media,” such as newspapers, radio, and television. Social media is unique because it allows for two-way communications, whereas traditional media primarily uses one-way communication. Information also spreads at a much faster rate than conventional media.

In the 2008 election, the Obama campaign utilized Facebook to help win, so much so that some now name this election as the “Facebook election” or the “new media election” (Woolley, 2010). Although previous presidential elections have had candidates who have used their websites to communicate with their supporters, no other candidate had utilized the internet in this way. This election showed that social media is a necessary tool in the political realm. The use of Facebook during the 2008 election was so significant that the major news organization CNN asked the question, “Will the 2008 presidential election be won on Facebook? (Will the 2008 USA election be won on Facebook?, n.d.)” Not only was Obama able to promote his page through his campaign’s Facebook profile, but many people made Facebook groups supporting him. Facebook allows its users to have a personal profile and access to group pages (Morgenson, 2011). Anyone with a Facebook account can create a Facebook group. It is a virtual space that allows discourse with others who hold similar interests, views, or beliefs. These Facebook groups can be anything someone wants. A few examples of these groups are book clubs, sports teams, and pop culture fan clubs. Users creating Facebook groups for a political candidate were

unique at the time because content and messages were created by ordinary people instead of being carefully curated by a candidate's campaign team. During the primary season until Election Day, more than 1,000 Facebook groups focused on Barack Obama and Republican candidate John McCain (Carlisle & Patton, 2014). A study by Julia Woolley noticed that group membership and activity levels were higher for Obama than for McCain (Wolley, 2010). Altogether, Obama was portrayed more positively across Facebook groups than McCain.

Alongside Facebook, Twitter is another social media platform that has been influential in the political realm. Obama was also known for using Twitter in the 2008 election to communicate and connect with a young demographic. Since this time, Twitter has been known as having a pivotal role in online campaign strategies. Twitter allows space for political discourse among its users, including everyday people, celebrities, and high-ranking politicians. Twitter makes it easy for users to follow the messages of others. Users share their messages to their followers, and their followers can share or "retweet" these messages to their followers. This setup allows for a wide range of people to be able to see a person's tweet. Users can reach a large audience and gain more followers to have a greater reach with their messages.

In regards to politics and digital rhetoric, many mainstream media companies also have large followings on Twitter. There is an advantage if a politician or a political candidate can get their tweet picked up by the media and retweeted. This exposure brings a person's message to an even larger audience. Candidates who want to grow their audience benefit from aligning the messages they post with the kinds of content that the public chooses to share into their networks (Hemsley, 2019). Studying the disconnect between what candidates post and what different

groupings of users decide to share provides us with a more nuanced view of the flow of political messages on platforms like Twitter. It can also help us understand the roles of users with different levels of influence over the diffusion process.

Twitter also allows users to join discussion communities through the use of hashtags (#). Hashtags are used at the beginning of a word or an unspaced phrase, and when clicked, they take you to an ongoing discussion. The use of hashtags allows users to share ideas and hear ideas from any user on the platform. It is similar to discussion communities on Facebook, except you don't have to join a group. All you have to do is click on the hashtag, and it takes you to an already ongoing conversation.

Today, social media is an essential campaign tool, with candidates tending to be active on multiple social media platforms simultaneously. It is a way for candidates to market themselves as well as connect with their followers.

A new social media platform that political candidates are beginning to give more attention to is TikTok. TikTok is a relatively new platform. It was created by the Chinese company, ByteDance, and was launched in the United States of America in September 2016 (Doyle, 2021). It is a video-sharing social media platform that allows users to create and share short looping videos. Users usually record over soundtracks chosen from a vast library of licensed music and audio clips, though creators can record original sound (Literat, 2021). Users participate in hashtag-based trends. TikTok features a wide variety of content that users are able

to participate in, but the most popular videos on the platform consist of lip-syncing, dances, and comedy skits, often around trending challenges.

TikTok has a relatively young user base. It has about 80 million monthly active users in the United States, and around 60% of these users are between the ages of 16-24 (Doyle, 2021). Because it has the youngest user base of all other social media platforms, observers initially saw this application as trivial or more childish than other social media platforms. There is previous research done about this app in general. Still, it wasn't until 2020 that we started to see a surge of political discourse on the app. This development has caused more researchers to begin studying this platform. In 2020, we saw political discourse rise on all social media platforms. This increase is frequently attributed to significant events like the Covid-19 pandemic, national lockdowns, record-high unemployment rates, racially motivated protests, and the presidential election season. All these events happening at once in the United States lead to outstanding amounts of civil unrest. This unrest spread out onto social media, and this includes TikTok as well. Not this, since the pandemic and the national lockdowns, TikTok has blown up as a platform. It was a way to keep people, particularly young people, busy during the lockdowns. Many youths turned to TikTok to waste time, socialize, and share their everyday experiences. (Literat, 2021). There was a rise of political videos on TikTok and more political activists sharing their views through this app. TikTok creators have now been able to start a following and gain recognition through their political-centered videos.

Because of its young user base and its primary use, many people have seen TikTok as a trivial app that didn't influence the political realm. We have recently begun to see this shift in

thinking change within the past year. TikTok creators have now been able to start a following and gain recognition through their political-centered videos.

In 2020, President Trump's campaign promised huge crowds at his rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but failed to deliver. Trump's campaign manager stated that over 800,000 tickets had been registered for the rally, even though the venue only had a 19,200 person capacity (Solender, 2020). Ultimately, only around 6,200 tickets were scanned to go into the rally. It was rumored that TikTok users were the cause of the low number of participants. Users claimed that they registered potentially hundreds of thousands of tickets to the rally as a joke. TikTok users began encouraging their followers to register for the rally and not show after the Trump campaign team posted a tweet asking supporters to register for free tickets using their phones on June 11. (Lorenz et al., 2020). Over 80,000 videos from over 600 TikTok users published at least one video related to the Tulsa rally (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020).

Soon after this situation, President Trump made plans to ban the app from the United States. It would be possible to continue to use the application if users already downloaded it to their phone, but he wanted to make it so there would not be updated. It would not be available in app stores anymore. In Trump's statements, his reasoning behind the ban was that TikTok was a Chinese platform, and he feared that our nation's security could be at risk if we allowed China to get information through the app (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020). Although this was his official statement, some questioned whether Trump wanted to censor the app in retaliation for the Tulsa rally.

Method

Since TikTok is a relatively new platform, little in-depth research has been done on the political influence. Researchers have conducted studies concerning how political discourse occurs on older social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, but very few about TikTok. As mentioned above, this is potentially due to the demographics of its users. Because of this, I wanted to research further and see how TikTok influences political discourses.

R.Q.: In what ways has tik tok influenced political discourses?

For my research, I decided to conduct a content analysis on TikTok. This research took place for ten days between April 15, 2021, and April 25, 2021. I created two TikTok accounts. I made one account to look at more left-leaning videos and one account to look at more right-leaning videos. TikTok has multiple sections within the application. There's a section on the app where you can look at videos from creators you follow. There is a section where you can search for videos under different sounds and songs and different hashtags. There is also a section called your "For You" page. The "For You" page is unique from other social media platforms because it allows users to see videos from anyone, regardless if they follow them or not. Consequently, anyone has a chance to go viral.

I searched the hashtags #politics, #democrat, and #leftist when using the left-leaning account. For three days, I did not go on the "For You" page. I only liked videos under those hashtags that spoke positively about democratic views. After three days, I went on my "For you" page and started to observe the kind of videos the app now recommended. I continued to only

like videos on my “For You” page that were left-leaning. I followed the same process for the right-leaning account, but instead, I used the hashtags #politics, #conservative, #republican. In total, I archived around 500 TikTok videos containing the hashtags, “politics” (10.0 B views), “conservative” (6.9 B views), “republican” (7.0 B views), “Trump” (7.2 B views), “democrat” (4.2 B views) and “leftist” (2.3 B views). I should note that I filtered the search only to see videos from the prior month and beyond. I did not watch any videos before March 15, 2021. This database served as the primary database for my study.

Results

Although this research only took place within ten days, I was able to see how my account changed as time progressed. I noticed that the more I liked one particular viewpoint, the less I would see other perspectives on my “For You” page. Unless I searched for another view through different hashtags, I was unlikely to see it. I also noticed that TikTok began recommending videos to me that were extreme on either side of the political spectrum. For example, once I liked videos under the democrat hashtag, I started seeing videos about far-left ideas on my “For You” page. I started seeing videos about communism, socialism, and the evils of capitalism. The TikTok algorithm began recommending these types of videos to see if I would engage with them or not. The same thing happened on the right-leaning account. I eventually started to see videos about extreme far-right ideas.

Another common theme I noticed when conducting my research was that the videos I came across were of people on both sides of the political spectrum who would ridicule the opposing side. Creators of these videos would convey the positives about their party and mock and bash those on the opposite side, often demonizing them.

Discussion

TikTok is beneficial in that it does allow for political discourse to take place on its platform. It enables its creators to share their political views. The “For You” page is a unique feature considering it allows a wide range of people to see videos and allows anyone to go viral. Unlike other social media platforms, users are not limited to only seeing people that they follow. It also is helpful that TikTok’s algorithm does tailor videos to a person’s liking. TikTok’s algorithm is also problematic. The research shows that TikTok’s algorithm plays a role in creating online echo chambers. An echo chamber refers to situations in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system and insulated from rebuttal. Because of the algorithm, a person will only see videos that the algorithm thinks they may like. Online echo chambers can be dangerous to individuals because they do not hear messages that challenge their views. This one-sidedness can lead to people becoming radicalized. It can also be especially dangerous if the algorithm recommends videos that are more and more extreme as a user continues to show interest in one particular side.

Another major issue when looking at the research is the increase in political polarization. Political polarization occurs when subsets of a population adopt increasingly different attitudes toward parties and party members and ideologies and policies (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). When conducting the content analysis, I noticed that many people would not just say what they were for in a video; they also had to make points against the opposing view. These two themes can be classified under two terms: negative difference and identification by antithesis. The term negative difference meant that any description of something is also a description of what it is not

or what it is yet to become. I saw a common theme of people bashing the opposite side on these videos, saying the same thing: “I know what I am because I am not that.” The other concept I saw in these videos is the concept of identification by antithesis. This term means that people identify and unite against a common enemy (Slater, 2018). They have in common their dislike or hatred from another person, group, or thing. Identification by antithesis doesn’t usually provide a person with a solid identity. Ultimately, when we see this happen, it leads to political polarization.

We need to start taking digital platforms more seriously. TikTok was initially perceived as a childish and trivial app. It was only until recently that it has been seen as a significant influence in the political realm. Although the primary user base is younger than 18, these creators are making videos that influence those older and younger than them. These are the ones that are now voting in elections and will vote in upcoming elections, and will ultimately change the landscape of our nation. Suppose we continue to create digital spaces that echo chambers. In that case, we risk the chance of further polarization in our country, and we also risk people becoming radicalized on both sides of the political spectrum.

Conclusion

Amid the tumultuous times in which we live, the ascendance of social media causes further rifts between the different political groups in our society. Extant literature has established that fact. However, TikTok’s effect on political discussions has not been adequately documented. This paper represents a critical advance in the scholarship surrounding this issue. The strength of the research lies in the methods employed. This research offers an analysis of the problem

through a first-person perspective, just as the typical, unsuspecting 18-24 year old may experience the influence of this ever-growing platform.

The careful reader will notice the limitations of this study. Most importantly, the sample size is by no means representative. Nonetheless, the findings are significant since it allows insight into the typical experience. Others should conduct further research on this topic to provide a representative sample size over an extended period. Finally, TikTok is an emerging political tool for both online activists and political candidates. The use of the “For You” page makes the platform unique in that it allows for anyone to go viral and for users to see a wide variety of videos. Given the potential influence of this platform, researchers and everyday people would do well to consider the possible adverse effects to mitigate the polarization of the American political sphere.

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