

## Mediated Conversation and the Contemporary Social Fabric

Yoram M Kalman  
The Open University of Israel  
[yoramka@openu.ac.il](mailto:yoramka@openu.ac.il)

Carmel Kent  
Arden University  
[kent.carmel@gmail.com](mailto:kent.carmel@gmail.com)

Sheizaf Rafaeli  
University of Haifa  
[sheizaf@univ.haifa.ac.il](mailto:sheizaf@univ.haifa.ac.il)

### Abstract

*An introduction to the Mediated Conversation minitrack, and description of the three papers in the minitrack: (1) Social Media and Journalism: 10 Years Later, Untangling Key Assumptions; (2) Characterizing Political Talk on Twitter: A Comparison Between Public Agenda, Media Agendas, and the Twitter Agenda with Regard to Topics and Dynamics, and; (3) The Impact of Twitter Features on Credibility Ratings - An Explorative Examination Combining Psychological Measurements and Feature Based Selection Methods.*

### 1. Introduction

Social lives are enacted through conversation. Mediated conversation has moved to the forefront.

Digitization, and the adoption of digital media, closely weave mediated conversations into the fabric of social life. Research on mediated conversation is focused on understanding the impacts of this process. Does mediated conversation weaken or strengthen the social fabric? How does mediation influence the texture and patterns of conversations?

Communication practices in recent election campaigns around the world focused public attention on the role of mediated conversation in shaping major social, cultural and political processes. As noted by Zeynep Tufekci [1], censorship in the past was carried out by keeping information from being disseminated. This is no longer the case. In networked environments, where social media provide every individual and organization almost unlimited broadcasting capabilities, censorship and propaganda are now carried out through altering perceptions of credibility, and by manipulating attention and engagement.

This year's papers in the Mediated Conversation minitrack reflect two overall themes. A concern with how conversation and its content are reshaped by current modes of mediation. What has changed since the early, utopian hopes for digital media? And a renewed interest in the measurement affordances of mediated conversation. As communication now has a

longer memory and deeper tracks are left behind, what are the implications for research?

In the first article presented in this minitrack, "Social Media and Journalism: 10 Years Later, Untangling Key Assumptions", Lewis and Molyneux question three key assumptions at the core of a decade of journalism research. The first assumption is the utopian notion that social media is a net positive to the social fabric, and that the transparency, reciprocity and openness that it affords will positively impact journalism and increase the social good. The second assumption is that social media reflects reality, and that "real life" is reliably reflected on sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The third assumption is that social media is a uniquely singular and powerful component influencing journalism. Although the discussion by Lewis and Molyneux focuses on social media in journalism studies, their critical examination of social media and key assumptions about its societal impact have a much wider relevance. An interesting demonstration of this relevance is that both the second and the third papers accepted to the minitrack this year explore topics related to the questions raised by Lewis and Molyneux.

In the article titled "Characterizing Political Talk on Twitter: A Comparison Between Public Agenda, Media Agendas, and the Twitter Agenda with Regard to Topics and Dynamics", Posegga and Jungherr explore a topic related to Lewis and Molyneux's second question. The study explores the extent to which popular political hashtags used in Tweets related to the campaign for the German Federal Election in 2013 are congruent with the public agenda and media agenda relating to those elections. Their findings show a weak relationship of these hashtags to the public and media agendas, and thus provide additional empirical support to some of the warnings raised by Lewis and Molyneux.

The third and final article in the minitrack is titled "The Impact of Twitter Features on Credibility Ratings - An Explorative Examination Combining Psychological Measurements and Feature Based Selection Methods". In this study, Meinert, Aker and Krämer look closely at credibility ratings of Tweets. The issue of the credibility of social media messages is

related to Lewis and Molyneux's first question about the positive impact of social media, and is a natural consequence of the "post-truth" age described by Tufekci [1], where well funded censorship and propaganda rely on the difficulty of distinguishing between truth and falsehood. Meinert, Aker and Krämer's approach is to enhance current methods of automated credibility ratings by identifying additional features that correlate with the perceived veracity or credibility of Twitter messages. Based on a survey of 2626 participants, they identified several novel author-related features, message-related features and meta-informational features that affect credibility judgements.

The strong focus of this year's submissions, on Twitter and on political communication, reflects the current fashionable media of choice among politicians. We should not forget that the same questions about the power and societal influence of mediated conversations

extend well beyond the latest political skirmish on Twitter or critical reflections by journalists and other members of the elite. Similarly, the longer term epistemological implications of having access to machine readable records will remain with us and shape future research. Mediated conversation is impacting not only politics, but also a wide variety of other societal processes, including education, interpersonal relations, organizational communication, business, sports, and health. We plan to continue the conversation around these topics in the minitrack.

## 2. References

- [1] Zeynep, T., "It's the (Democracy-Poisoning) Golden Age of Free Speech", *Wired*, 2018.  
<https://www.wired.com/story/free-speech-issue-tech-turmoil-new-censorship/>