

The Mediated Conversation Continues, with Politics Front and Center

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Abstract

This brief paper introduces the seven manuscripts presented at the 2022 HICSS Mediated Conversation minitrack.

1. Introduction

We write this brief introduction to the Mediated Conversation minitrack as 2021 wraps up. We can only speculate what you, who may be reading this in January 2022, is experiencing, though it is clear that the major social issues that dominated 2021 are still prominent: The COVID-19 pandemic is nearing its second anniversary and is still the most influential short-term societal disruption that most people around the world have encountered in their lifetimes; global warming is still the most worrying long-term threat to human existence as we know it on this blue planet; and politics still hold both the promise of addressing and resolving such global challenges as well as the potential to accelerate these threats and lead to further destruction and human suffering.

Global and local politics are also front and center in the seven papers accepted for presentation at the Mediated Conversation minitrack. Of the 15 minitrack submissions that encompassed topics such as discussions on social media, language use in mediated conversation, news sharing on Twitter, chatbots, nonverbal communication in mediated conversations, user attention on Reddit, and, of course, COVID-19, seven were selected by the reviewers and by us. More than half of these discuss politics, and specifically U.S. politics. Is this the result of bias, or does this reflect the centrality of politics in the study of mediated conversation? Or, possibly both answers are correct and complement each? We leave this question open as we present the seven papers — first the four that deal with U.S. politics, and then the rest.

2. This year's papers

The paper “Online Political Comments: Americans Talk About the Election through a “Horse-Race” Lens,” by Gina M. Masullo, Jeremy Shermak, Jordon Brown, Martin J. Riedl, and Ori Tenenboim, sought to evaluate whether user comments that were made on news stories about the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign emphasized the candidates’ policies or instead focused on horse-race aspects (i.e., who’s winning vs. who’s losing). This is important because while a long line of research has suggested that an over-emphasis on horse-race dimensions in news media coverage of politics is associated with a number of undesirable effects—such as by contributing to increased polarization, cynicism, or distrust—little is known about whether the public discusses politics through the same kind of lens as journalists. Through a quantitative content analysis of nearly 1,900 comments posted on three major news sites (*The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and Fox News), the authors discovered that although most comments had neither policy nor horse-race elements in them, it was nevertheless the case that horse-race dynamics were more frequently mentioned than those about policy—which is reflective of that larger trend in news coverage.

Moving to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the paper “Crafting Audience Engagement in Social Media Conversations: Evidence from the U.S. 2020 Presidential Elections,” by Linus Hagemann and Olga Abramova, sought to extend the literature on the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and the effects of sentiment of social media content by examining empirical evidence from a large-scale political event, and also by focusing on both central route and peripheral route modes of information processing on the part of individuals receiving and responding to message stimuli. In effect, they asked, how are social media message characteristics connected to dimensions of audience engagement? Using a dataset of more than 3 million tweets, they found the

prominence of both processing cue types (central and peripheral). Additionally, they found that negativity and more emotionally charged content were associated with more likes, comments, and retweets, but that the role of sentiment decreases as the number of followers increases (to the point of becoming insignificant for Twitter users with huge numbers of followers).

Next, the paper “Breakdowns in Mediated Conversations: How and Why Youth Exit Cross-cutting Political Talk on Social Media,” by Ashley Lee, uses in-depth interviews to better understand cross-cutting political talk on social media by U.S.-based youth ages 15-25, and particularly the exiting of youth from such talk. The author found that when these youth encounter different-minded others, they tend to exit from cross-cutting talk despite their expressed willingness to be open-minded and to engage with diverse perspectives. The author discusses these disappointing findings in the context of the potential for democratic engagement on social media.

Moving away from elections and campaigns but remaining in the realm of the politics, the next paper, “Mobilizing Consensus on Facebook: Networked Framing of the U.S. Gun- Control Movement on Facebook,” by K. Hazel Kwon, Chun Shao, Shawn Walker, and Tanush Vinay, takes up the contentious public policy issue of gun violence in the U.S. Specifically, the authors seek to understand how theories of networked framing and intermedia agenda-setting might explain how different actors framed the March for Our Lives gun control movement in 2018. By analyzing the Social Science One Facebook URLs share dataset, they found that news media’s framing remained the richest and most dynamic overall—confirming the agenda-setting role of the press—but that emerging media enlarged the scope of framing by bringing race, gender, and equity questions into the conversation about gun control. Additionally, they found that movement/activist organizational actors bore the least resemblance to other media types, which calls up questions about the role of such actors in shaping the public agenda.

Shifting away from politics, the final three papers take on an important set of questions about the continuously evolving role of technology in mediating conversation.

For example, the paper “Believing Journalists, AI, or Fake News: The Role of Trust in Media,” by Castulus Kolo, Joschka Mütterlein, and Sarah Anna Schmid, expands on a growing line of research regarding the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to produce news stories. In particular, the authors build on research about consumers’ perceptions of

automated news by comparing how people express their relative trust in machine-written or human-written texts. But the paper does so with a wrinkle: adding the element of so-called “fake news” in comparison to true journalistic accounts. The authors’ experiment with 263 participants shows that people see AI-produced articles and true news stories to be roughly similar in terms of credibility, but they associate AI-written news more akin to fake news when it comes to readability. Notably, too, they find that consumers with lower trust in media appear to be less turned off by AI-based news compared to those with higher trust in media

The paper “PokerFace Mask: Exploring Augmenting Masks with Captions through an Interactive, Mixed-Reality Prototype,” by Josh Urban Davis, John Tang, Edward Cutrell, and Teddy Seyed, tackles one of the prominent interpersonal communication challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic: the obstruction of a large portion of the face, and the muffling of the voice, by traditionally designed face masks. The authors designed and tested a prototype mask that presents, in real time, a video of the obscured part of the face, and speech-to-text captions of the mask wearer’s words. The authors demonstrate the improved ability of the study participants to communicate when using the prototype, and they discuss the findings in detail.

The paper “Will You Talk about God with a Spirituality Chatbot? An Interview Study,” by Charis Asante-Agyei, Yimin Xiao, and Lu Xiao, explores the way people who profess a religion perceive the involvement of chatbots in their religious service. Furthermore, it studied the reactions of these participants to screenshots of three prototype chatbot scenarios. The findings include both perceived beneficial uses of such chatbots as well as concerns. It concludes with design implications as well as theoretical and methodological implications.

3. Concluding remarks

Overall, these papers offer several key directions for the ongoing study of mediated conversation—whether between humans and machines, between media organizations and media consumers, through interpersonal (masked) encounters, or among users posting and reading comments online.

And while the pandemic keeps us from meeting yet again in Hawaii, we look forward to a time when we can carry on these conversations more fully together in-person.