



Digital Wildfires, hyper connectivity and the responsible governance of social media

Helena Webb, June 2018



Digital Wildfires = *the rapid viral spread of information that is either intentionally or unintentionally misleading or provocative with serious consequences (World Economic Forum report 2013 “Digital Wildfires in a hyperconnected world”)*





Digital wildfires as a challenge to the governance of social media

*“Establishing reasonable limits to legal freedoms of online speech is difficult because social media is a recent phenomenon, and digital social norms are not yet well established. The question raises thorny issues of the extent to which it would be possible to impose limits on the ability to maintain online anonymity, without seriously compromising **the usefulness of the Internet as a tool for whistle-blowers and political dissidents in repressive regimes.**”*

WEF, 2013: ‘Digital Wildfires in a hyperconnected world’



“Digital Wildfire: (mis)information flows, propagation and responsible governance” project

November 2014-November 2016

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<http://www.digitalwildfire.org/>



RESEARCH AIM

To build an empirically grounded methodology for the study and advancement of the responsible governance of social media

RESEARCH QUESTION

Does the risk of digital wildfires necessitate new forms of social media governance?



WP1: Scoping ethical and regulatory issues in relation to digital wildfires. 4 key governance mechanisms: legal, social media platform, institutional and user self-governance.

WP2: Examination of social media content. *Qualitative (interaction analysis of social media data) and quantitative computational analysis. Inspection of self-governance in action*

WP3: Policy Delphi. Seeking *the informed opinion of individuals on the governance of social media* (social media platforms, users, institutions, lawyers)

WP4: Governance practices observed. *Fieldwork at social media platforms, schools, police, policy institutions, civil rights groups etc.*

Key project findings



- 1) Scale and breadth of the 'problem'
- 2) The complexities and limitations of current governance
- 3) The potential value of counter speech and user self-governance
- 4) The value of education and engagement

1. Scale and breadth of the 'problem'



"Numerous community groups raise concerns about social media and about material available on social media ...it's a massively increasing area." *(Staff member at Ministry of Justice)*

"People sometimes, I don't think, do the research because they see a tweet, similar to what Google may be I think sometimes ...someone will tweet it and that tweet becomes the truth". *(Council worker)*

"[Sexting] is certainly happening, yes... We're constantly talking about the fact that you lose control as soon as you send it.." *(Secondary school teacher)*

"70% of our resources go on online cases. 70% of our cases go on chasing the nonsense day in, day out. I have temp staff and it costs £400,000 a year." *(Staff member at anti hate crime organisation)*

2. The complexities and limitations of current governance



- Legal governance
- Social media platform governance mechanisms
- Institutional social media policies
- User self-governance



Nottingham University lecturer forced to apologise after branding students 'idiots' and 'semi-literate' on Facebook

- As a result of the comments, students' essays will have to be re-marked
- On January 14, Anthony Fisher also made light of a student's panic attacks
- In a bizarre lecture on Tuesday, Fisher apologised to his students
- The sociolinguistics lecturer also lashed out at Nottingham University's HR department

By DAILY MAIL REPORTER
PUBLISHED: 17:57, 9 February 2014 | UPDATED: 17:45, 9 February 2014



"But that's also because from my experience when we've reported something to the Police sometimes they take it seriously and sometimes they don't. I think they struggle as much as I do to know is it against the law or not to be honest. No, I think it's a very grey area, very difficult." *(Staff member at equality organisation)*

"We would report it to Twitter to try to take [racist posts] down and again, the majority of the cases don't get taken down...It is a branding and a numbers game for Twitter." *(Staff member at anti hate crime organisation)*

"If you attempt to police every single transmission on social media you're setting yourself up for quite a large task, ... there are millions of communications every hour, let alone every day, so, realistically, you would have an entirely separate service and police service and prosecution service devoted to that one task, if that was what you wanted to do to vet every tweet, every message" *(Staff member at CPS)*



- Legal governance *limitations of application*
- Social media platform governance mechanisms *tend to focus on individual posts/users rather than the multiple users spreading content*
- Institutional social media policies *tend to be retrospective—deal with posts/users after harm has been caused*
- **Disruption** *Have some capacity to be prospective and limit the spread of harmful content in real time*
- **User self governance**

3. Counter speech and user self-governance



“Social media is a place where everyone is entitled to their opinions but everyone is responsible for that opinion as well. Therefore we should all be able to self-regulate and be responsible for what we say online and be able to defend, question or even apologise for words said” *(Delphi panel survey respondent)*

“Some people on social media are ‘professional users’. They have the skills to –[intervene in inflammatory discussions] in an effective way and also the armour to protect themselves from harm.” *(Staff member at anti hate crime organisation)*

“The best response to bad speech is more speech... Online communities have a right to ostracize, call out, criticize bad actors. Such mechanisms alone are probably not going to stomp out every digital wildfire, but neither have we managed to stomp out every wildfire in real life.” *(Delphi panel survey respondent)*



Analysis of 'cyber hate' on Twitter



YepYoureSexist
@YepYoureSexist

If you have to start a sentence with 'I'm not sexist, but' then chances are you're pretty sexist. RT #endorsement. Inspired by @YepYoureFaced.

Joined November 2012

TWEETS 903 FOLLOWING 23 FOLLOWERS 1,063 FAVORITES 2

Tweets Tweets & replies Photos & videos

YepYoureSexist @YepYoureSexist · 8 Apr 2013

Hey sexists (and @ikearstin), read this. Maybe you'll get it. jezebel.com/you-cant-tell-...



So You're Homophobic
@MelYoureGayist

Chances are if you say 'I'm not homophobic BUT...' you are, in fact, homophobic. Shamelessly copied from @YepYoureSexist. A RT does not show support of your tweet.

TWEETS 587 FOLLOWING 121 FOLLOWERS 2,026 FAVORITES 7

Tweets Tweets & replies Photos & videos

So You're Homophobic @YepYoureGayist · 28 Mar 2013

I don't see how you can NOT be homophobic when arguing against marriage equality... even some who are anti-gay see the issue of legality.





Computational analysis of Twitter threads

<p>collation of conversational 'threads' on Twitter</p> <p><i>Interaction feature identification</i> - characteristics of posts and responses</p> <p>possibility of responses as counter speech</p> <p>panel annotation task</p>	<p>development of classifier tools to identify rumour/provocative posts and counter speech</p> <p>disagreement with hate speech tends to extend thread length; however as the number of users disagreeing rises, the length of the thread goes down.</p> <p>Multiple voices of disagreement work to quell thread length.</p> <p>Disagreement can therefore function as a form of counter speech – could it be promoted through further mechanisms?</p>
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4. The value of education and engagement



“Work with the communities and see how the communities can help without the police being involved, or the criminal justice system, but then we need to work with the communities to get those outcomes” *(Staff member at equality organisation)*

“We would run counter-speech projects online. We would run projects that actually would provide engagement for community groups to come together”.
(Staff member at anti hate crime organisation)

“One of the best ways to address ‘responsible’ behaviour on social media is through education and social media literacy.”
(Staff member at online platform)





#TakeCareOfYourDigitalSelf

Digital Wildfire- Digital Citizenship & Social Media resource pack - KS4/5

by OxfordUniversity

These resources provide a set of teaching and learning materials for Key Stage 4 and 5 on the safe use of social media. They have been prepared as part of the 'Digital Wildfire' research project led by the Computer Science Department at the University of Oxford (www.digitalwildfire.org).

The lesson plan should have encouraged students to discuss the positives and negatives of social media and reflect on what it means to be a good digital citizen. This resource pack includes prompts and links to inform whole class discussion, slides for an introductory activity on the 2015 England riots, and a series of case study cards. The latter are designed to support a small group activity where students are assigned a number of specific scenarios and asked to consider their rights and responsibilities on social media. These materials could be used for example, in a single class session or distributed over a number of sessions to include further research and student presentations.

The final file contains a set of 19 slides that could be used for an assembly on digital citizenship. The slides cover the positives and negatives of social media and discuss about online privacy and thinking before you post. Short notes are included plus a space for schools to add information about their own social media policies.

Both the lesson and assembly include the use of our short Digital Wildfire video 'What makes a good digital citizen on social media?' which is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KX1_TVAnagU&list=PLy0u8

Categories

Understanding the world / Technology / Citizenship / Rights and responsibilities

Computing / Computing, devices, programming / Computing / Digital literacy

Computing / Computing, devices and networks / Social media and online services / Computing / Communication, information

Computing / Computing/ Digital Literacy / (British school / Learning / (British school / Learning)



Maybe we need some Digital Commandments...

Youth panel competitions

Teaching and learning materials tes.com

Further projects



- Impact Acceleration Project and British Academy Small grant project – co-construction and delivery of e-safety teaching materials
- PHEME – verification of online content
<https://www.pHEME.eu/>
- UnBias – user experience of algorithm driven internet platforms
<https://unbias.wp.horizon.ac.uk/>

