“Aye, Have a Dream #IndyRef”: Use of Instagram during the Scottish Referendum

Tom Feltwell, Jamie Mahoney, Shaun Lawson
Lincoln Social Computing Research Centre
University of Lincoln, UK
{tfeltwell, jmahoney, slawson}@lincoln.ac.uk

ABSTRACT
In this paper we investigate the use of Instagram by citizens engaged with the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014. Using qualitative analysis, we explore the themes that were evident in the images that Instagram users posted in the run up to the vote and highlight the importance of future work in understanding the use of imagery in social media during political campaigns.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
• Human-centered computing~Social media
• Human-centered computing~Social content sharing

Keywords
Socio-political imagery, social media, Instagram, visual analysis, thematic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION
We describe an investigation of how the social media platform Instagram was used by citizens during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum (#IndyRef). The referendum, which took place on 18th Sept 2014, asked the citizens of Scotland whether they wished to become independent from the remainder of the United Kingdom. Heavily covered by national media, the referendum saw high turnout by voters (84.6%). As can now be expected of any democratic event, there was also extensive online deliberation. Though a good deal of previous work has investigated the use of social media during political campaigns, recent work focusing on everyday, casual, socio-political talk generated by citizens. In particular we wanted to understand what citizens felt compelled to post and, if possible, why they chose to do so. Therefore we decided to conduct a more general purpose inductive thematic analysis [2, 4], a method that accounts for subjectivity by interpreting each image [2].

2. METHODOLOGY
The prevalent social media hashtag used for the independence referendum was #IndyRef, along with peripheral hashtags #VoteYes and #BetterTogether which were used by the pro and anti-independence sides respectively. Using Instagram's API, we collected all available posts that used #IndyRef for the 7 days running up to and including the election, 12th September – 18th September 2014. This data totaled 13,689 posts, sent from 8,879 unique user accounts. Due to the quantity of available data and the preliminary nature of this work, a 5% random stratified sample was selected, totaling 684 posts. Initial inductive thematic coding of the sample was performed by one researcher, with coding validated by a second researcher. In a further iteration, these 31 categories were then grouped into 6 first-order themes and 4 second-order themes. These themes are explored in more detail in the following section.

3. RESULTS
In this section, we briefly describe the three overarching themes “the election”, “portrayal of the human side of the debate” and “symbolism” found during our analysis of the data. Examples of posted images for each theme are given in Figure 1.

3.1 The Election
Two first-order themes make up this theme: propaganda and persuasion and voting process. The former refers to the tangible campaigning efforts such as printed leaflets, posting of signs in windows and graffiti daubed on walls. The latter consists of images of the voting process itself such as ballot papers and polling stations.

3.2 Portrayal of Human Side of Debate
This theme encompasses images containing representations of self and others within the debate. Portrayal of Self consists the sharing
of selfies with an allegiance to the debate clear, such as badges on clothing, and other similar acts like children or pets with allegiance. Portrayal of Others classifies images of other people displaying their allegiance to the vote, along with tangible aspects like the voting process and traditional leafletting. It is perhaps interesting to note the appropriation of symbolism from outside the #IndyRef debate, such as the use of Internet memes, other users’ tweets and celebrities and TV characters to supplement traditional symbolism such as the Saltire and thistle.

Potential further work includes a more comprehensive study of this dataset, as well as a comparative study including other political campaigns. The increasing use of social media during political campaigns highlights the importance of work in this field, with the analysis of large scale visual datasets representing a particular challenge.

5. REFERENCES


Figure 1. Examples of images for themes generated from analysis of posts. Row 1: 'The Election'. Row 2: 'Portrayal of Human Side of Debate'. Row 3: 'Symbolism'.

and Saltire flags and other independence movements such as that in Catalonia. Appropriated Symbolism consists of images whose symbolic meaning is applied to the referendum debate. For example, tweets and text messages, Nelson Mandela’s likeness and figures from film and TV.

4. CONCLUSION & FUTURE WORK

We present a comparatively large visual analysis of everyday political imagery, collected from Instagram, a social media platform whose use in everyday socio-political talk is not yet widely researched. Our results show images shared using #IndyRef predominantly feature direct references to the referendum. This is manifested as representations of citizens and their allegiance to the vote, along with tangible aspects like the voting process and traditional leafletting. It is perhaps interesting to note the appropriation of symbolism from outside the #IndyRef debate, such as the use of Internet memes, other users’ tweets and celebrities and TV characters to supplement traditional symbolism such as the Saltire and thistle.