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

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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 content sharing
- Human-centered computing~Social media

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 discussion and debate to accompany that in traditional and broadcast media. Our paper, therefore, is framed within the wider problem of understanding how social media is used during political campaigns or events and how citizens and voters attempt to craft and propagate their socio-political stance and opinion through their online social networks.

Though a good deal of previous work has investigated the use of social media during political campaigns, [6], political deliberation [5] and ‘everyday’ social-political talk [1], such work has tended to focus on either the qualitative narrative within posts, simple quantitative statistics or the social graphs of contributors. Increasingly, however, social media users are including more and more visual media in their posts, as tools to easily support such behavior become commonplace and widely adopted; indeed the platform Instagram now exceeds Twitter in terms of monthly users. It seems evident therefore that, in future, analyses of visual media posted to social media platforms will become increasingly

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important markers of everyday social-political statements and discourse. However the analysis of large volumes of, for instance, image data from Instagram, poses significant research challenges.

Previous work [3] has proposed semiotic analysis to understand the nature of low volume imagery posted to social media during political campaigns. However, the time required for such handcrafted analyses can severely limit the amount of images that can be reasonably processed. In our work with Instagram and the Scottish referendum we were interested in studying the posts of a large number and wide range of users in order to explore the 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 this. 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 of the sharing

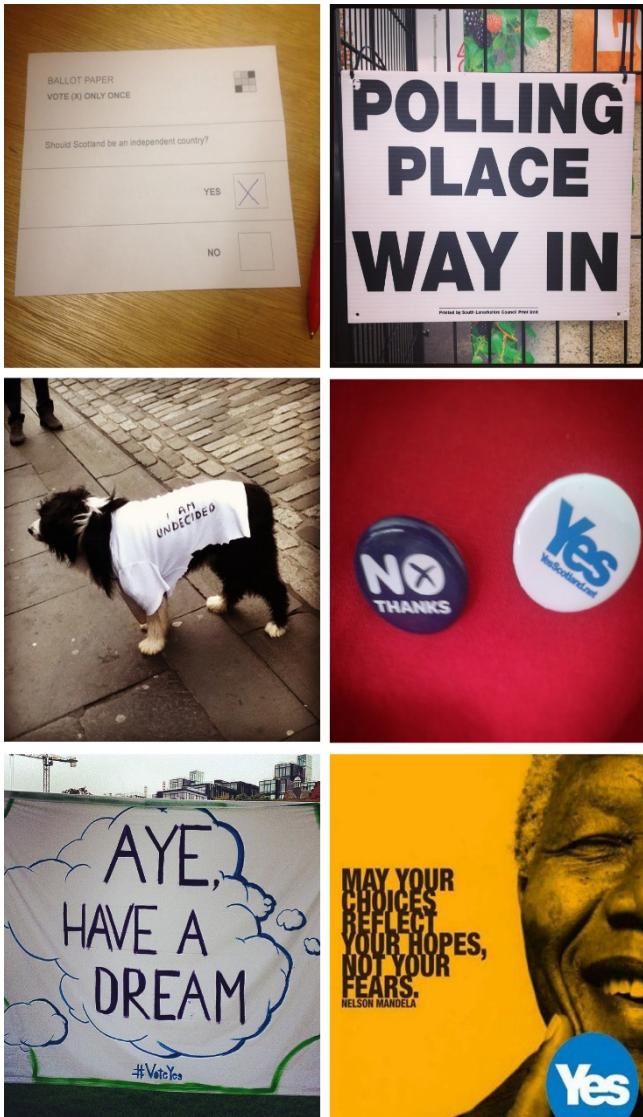


Figure 1. Examples of images for themes generated from analysis of posts. Row 1: 'The Election'. Row 2: 'Portrayal of Human Side of Debate'. Row 3: 'Symbolism'.

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 debate. For example musicians with signs behind their band, rallies in the streets and politicians who represent a side of the debate.

3.3 Symbolism

Usage of *established* or *appropriated* symbolism describes this theme. *Established Symbolism* classifies the use of images or depictions, which already have cultural significance to the referendum, such as images of bagpipes, Braveheart, the Union

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.

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.

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