

Fueling the online hate machine

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How emotion drives the conversation about moral ideas on social media.

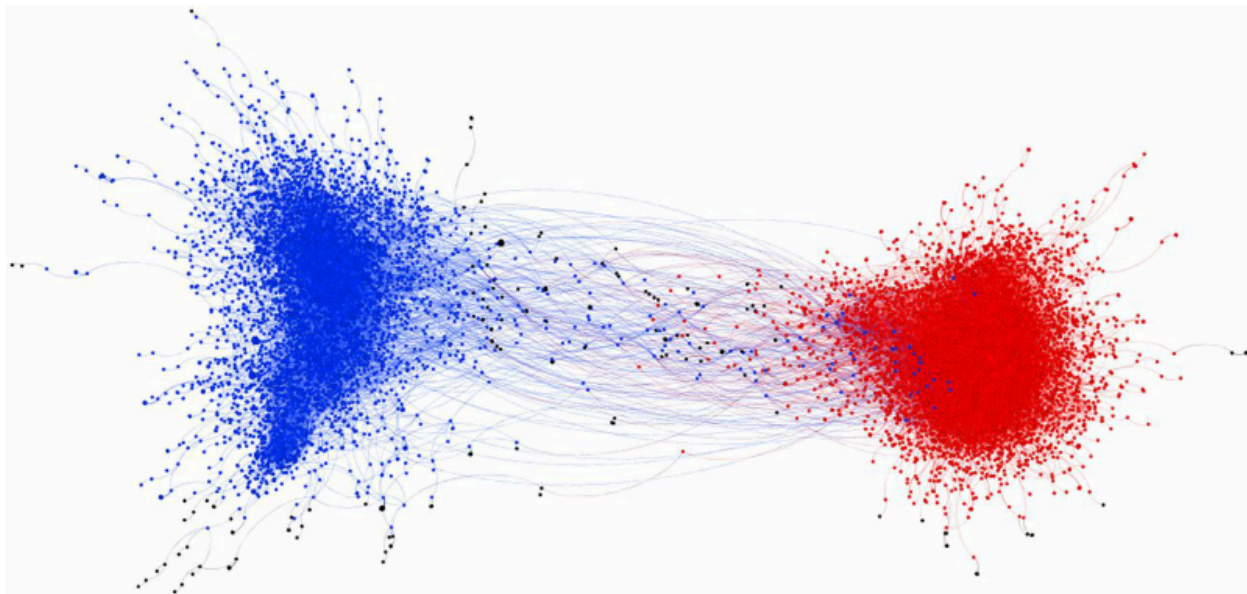
U.S. politics has been a train wreck lately, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than on social media. Evidence so far [does not suggest](#) that social media increases political polarization. Rather, it would seem this polarization is driving the way we use these platforms. Outrage is the norm, and the ability to share our thoughts in real-time makes it all too easy to post emotionally charged messages.

There is nothing wrong with expressing emotions on social media. However, if you spend a little time on Twitter or Facebook you quickly see the type of hate-filled rhetoric it can lead to in this polarized climate. Anger is easily targeted not just at bad policy, but also at anyone who might disagree with our particular point of view. It is no longer just their ideas that are bad, but the people themselves. This is when any kind of productive discourse becomes impossible.

Perhaps not surprisingly, posts that include a combination of moral and emotional content tend to get more attention and spread faster. A [study published in 2017](#) examined the impact of moral-emotional language on “moral contagion” (the diffusion of moral messages within networks). Looking at a large sample of social media communications about three issues, including gun control, climate change and same-sex marriage, researchers found a 20% increase in retweet rate for each moral-emotional word added.

“Across three contentious political topics, moral-emotional language produced substantial moral contagion effects...”

With this in mind, it makes sense that outrageous attacks and emotional meltdowns are dominating your Twitter feed. There is essentially an incentive for sharing this type of content—it feels good to get retweets and news sites are desperate for clicks. National tragedies instantly become shouting matches between two sides that are no longer just correct or incorrect, but inherently good or evil. The study also found that the effect of moral-emotional content was even more pronounced within in-groups.



Network graph of moral contagion shaded by political ideology. The graph represents a depiction of messages containing moral and emotional language, and their retweet activity, across all political topics (gun control, same-sex marriage, climate change).

[Source](#)

Emotion and moralizing has its place in effective communication, and I don't believe online discourse should be limited to logic and facts. Rather, I'd like to suggest that we consider the language of messages we share on our various networks. When we are trying to make a point about an idea we disagree with, it can be tempting to lash out at anyone and everyone who doesn't see it the same way. By resisting this urge and focusing on ideas, we can contribute to the conversation instead of just adding to the noise.

I would also advocate using more positive moral-emotional language, which the study found to be just as effective at increasing the spread of a given message. The recent pro-marriage equality campaigns utilized this strategy successfully and managed to change people's hearts and minds in the process. Pessimism is en vogue at the moment, but there are reasons to be hopeful. While social media may not be living up to its idealized potential, it still has the power to expose people to novel ideas and [reduce polarization](#).

To end, I'd just like to add that swearing at the president on Twitter is our right as Americans. But maybe take it a bit easier on everyone else.

Originally published on "Sort of Smug Blog"

Sources

Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks

Is the internet causing political polarization?

How Social Media Reduces Mass Political Polarization