Chapter 7
Social Media as Mirror of Society

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, social media use has gained much attention of scholarly researchers. One specific reason of this interest is the use of social media for communication; a trend that is gaining tremendous popularity. Every social media platform has developed its own set of application programming interface (API). Through these APIs, the data available on a particular social media platform can be accessed. However, the data available is limited and it is difficult to ascertain the possible conclusions that can be drawn about society on the basis of this data. This chapter explores the ways social researchers and scientists can use social media data to support their research and analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Arguably the most famous headline in the newspaper's 150-year history, DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN is every publisher's nightmare on every election night. Like most newspapers, the Tribune, was lulled into a false sense of security by polls that repeatedly predicted a Dewey victory while under sampling the supporters of Truman (Mosteller & Doob, 1949). This event did not discredit polls and the way they are conducted. But this event emphasized the need to develop more sophisticated statistical techniques and higher standards that could provide more accurate and rigorous poll results. After almost 70 years, the use of online social media data as a tool to predict human behavior has brought us to a similar situation where many are questioning the validity of the predictions offered by the social media data analysts. The massive social media datasets combined with powerful computational techniques (such as machine learning, natural language processing, and network analysis) have provided huge opportunities to understand human behavior. Increasing amount of evidence suggest that many of the social media data analyses do not provide true representation of the real world (Tufekci, 2014; Cohen & Ruths, 2013).

Social researchers and analysts can use social media data for two important purposes. First, this data can help determine the information seeking behavior of public. This in turn can help determine

the public awareness and level of interest in certain topics and the sources of information they use to get information about these topics. Second, analysis of social media data can help reveal public opinion of and human behavior against specific events. Social media data can be benchmarked against other sources of data. However, social media researchers should be cautious while interpreting the results of their research or generalizing their findings. This is because the research methods used to analyze social media data are still developing and their best practices of use are still to be developed (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014).

The objective of this chapter is to look at social media role in social research and analysis by exploring in what ways social researchers and analysts can use the social media to support their research and analysis. The chapter would highlight issues involved in the study of human behavior through large scale social media datasets. These issues are not new to social science. However, the new kinds of data and entry of many new communities of researchers into the social science domain requires that these issues should be revisited and updated. The chapter also discusses various strategies that can be used to address these issues. After introduction, section two would discuss role of social media in social research. The section three would discuss various issues associated with use of social media data. Some strategies to deal with these issues would be provided in section four. Future research directions would be provided in section five. The chapter would be concluded in section six.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

This section would provide a general overview of the use of social media data for social research. After providing a broad definition of social media, the chapter moves on to describe the usefulness for social science research of the data generated by the social media platforms. Though applications are still in nascent stages, the online social media holds promising potential to predict public opinion on different issues and the sources of information masses look for information about these topics. The chapter also compares social media with traditional social science research methods (such as sample surveys) to highlight their associated strengths and weaknesses.

Social Media: The Definition

Social media may be defined as websites or other internet based services where the content being communicated is created by the people who use the service. On social media sites there is no clear distinction between producer and consumer of the content (Bruns, 2008). Different social media sites distinguish the producers and consumer differently e.g. by awarding status based on the amount of content produced or by allowing everyone to create the same kind of content. Users can also decide the ways in which they would like to interact with social media sites. Some create content while other only consume but never create any content (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014).

Within this broad definition of social media, there are other sites as well. These sites can be differentiated from other social media sites on two aspects. First, the way in which these site manage the identities of their users and second their dedication to a specific theme or niche interest (Ellison, 2007). Besides, there are other sites whose purpose is not to facilitate communication among users but to serve as archives of large amounts of social data. One good example is Google (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014).

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