

Department of Marketing



Research Seminar Series | April 26th, 1-3pm | TC.3.12

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When News gets Negative: The Evolution of Content in the Successive Re-telling of Events

What happens to the fidelity of news when it is retold? This question has drawn increased attention in recent years because of the rise of social media, where news - be it about politics or products - often takes the form of second-or-third-hand retellings of original source material. As such, it has been widely blamed for the proliferation of “fake news”. In this research we investigate this issue by reporting the findings of three large-scale experiments on how the substantive characteristics of news changes over multiple waves of written re-summarization by different agents. We offer evidence that when news events are successively re-summarized they are not prone to exaggeration or fabrication of facts, but rather a unique pattern of distortion that we refer to as disagreeable personalization: highly subjective, personalized interpretations of news that are laced with negatively slanted expressions of opinion. This evolution toward disagreeable personalization is found to be quite robust, observed even for news stories that are originally positive in tone, and even when writers are given the goal to be as accurate as possible when retelling original events. We further find that this evolution is the consequence of a linguistic mimicry process in which injections of opinion by one writer in a chain serves as a catalyst that encourages the next not only to inject his or her opinions, but also to craft summaries that are more unique in their use of words and disagreeable in tone than the previous version. This increased personalization, however, has a perhaps unintended consequence: as the summaries become increasingly heterogeneous and opinionated, they are also perceived by outside judges as increasingly less appealing to read. Hence, rather than widening interest in the original topic, the process of retelling ultimately limits it.