

Social Media in the Las Vegas Shooting

—The Social Structure of Discourse in the Digital Public Sphere—

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On October 2, 2017, a gunman from the thirty-second floor of the Mandalay Bay resort opened fire upon an unsuspecting crowd attending a music concert. Fifty-nine people were killed and over five hundred people were injured, making it one of the worst shootings in modern American history. Responses have poured out on social media networks from all social strata, from celebrities to politicians to writers to locals.

This landmark disaster represents an ideal case to examine several characteristics of offline social networks which have gone unexamined in the rise of social media as a platform for the public sphere: how do users exchange support online community in response to disaster? How do users respond to disaster? What is the social structure of hierarchies of networked influence in online responses to disaster, if they exist at all?

I adopt an inductive approach to investigate how popular discourse, comprised by online participants after the shooting, is shaped in response to disaster by applying network and textual analyses to a dataset of 10,000 posts on Twitter responding to the shooting. I conduct a series of network (name and chain networks, based on edges between people mentioned and people responded to, respectively) and textual (frequency, topic modeling, proximity, thematic, and content) analyses to examine how users are connected to one another and how they respond to the disaster itself. Combined, they uncover the social structures formed in the online network of responders and embedded within its disaster response, articulating how themes in discourses are diffused and how individuals are positioned to one another through the way their responses fall under and relate within these themes.

First, the findings from this study expose the weak solidarity of apparent online communities and the weaknesses of the concept by demonstrating that the asymmetric nature of Twitter connections (where one may follow someone without having them follow one back,

see also Cheng & Evans 2009) is a particularly salient and visible issue during emergency events, when Twitter activity differs considerably from general activity by tending towards information broadcasting and brokerage (Hughes & Palen 2009).

People say community, but they do not show it in a network sense. From the network analyses, there was a significant drop in network size and density from name to chain networks that sheds light on how engagement works online – or fails to. No interpenetration was identified between persons (Fararo & Doreian 1984). Users failed to engage or exchange support online, be it instrumental or expressive, nearly as much depictions of online communities suggest.

Topic modeling did show how people claimed to form a community, consistent with the popularized notion of building a community worldwide that typically follows closely after a disaster. But it seems these messages are simply shot out into the wild on Twitter and without an intended recipient. Thus, while collective agency is present as users converge into common opinions or themes, it does not resemble a community online so much as mass-to-mass communication (Rheingold 2000) without the dissolution of public opinion – expressive posts are voices joining into a chorus, but without a refrain or audience, situated in different locations.

Second, results show that what users tweeted about was not simply a matter of homophily, but of influence by elites. Some prominent influencers produce content that resonates very strongly with their followers, causing the content to propagate and attain popularity (Romero et al 2011). But the gravity and universal awareness of disasters are different. Everyone already knows about them from many sources, contacts, and media outlets. Yet, that the popularity of a disaster is independent of what elites produce while user responses and information flow are still directed by elites underscores the powerful influence elites wield and the role of influence itself for what people say as they connect with others (see also Narayan & Cassidy 2001).

Influence determined the expression of interests and values as well as the congruity of these values and their network structure. Among user communication with elites, a large proportion of their responses consist of retweets – this does not mean a large proportion of their responses are unoriginal, but that they are strongly influenced by elites. Resonating with a prominent line of inquiry in social network research, my findings suggest that attitudes are heavily relationally based (Erickson 1988); that a great deal of the nature of our attitudes are determined by the social structural characteristics of our relational position in networks (Rivera et al 2010). In terms of themes, content analyses revealed that cultural elites, like BTS, are tied to themes about expressive support, which are almost entirely insulated from the other themes, particularly distinctly political ones. News elites are expressly tied to themes about the immediate environment, also devoid of those that evoke political orientations. Institutions

with vested interests in related causes of the disaster, as the NRA, expectably attract ire. Political elites, like Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, are linked to the full range of the themes, as each was framed as a form of political endorsement or criticism against them, their parties, and their political ideals.

Finally, the themes identified were consonant with the network structure of clusters and their relations. Cultural elites without political orientations were entirely isolated, whereas those cultural figures with political orientations (James Woods) drew more connections with smaller-level public figures holding similar ideologies. The distinction was also visible with news outlets. News media with more neutral political orientations (not pictured) tended not to attract as much attention or linkages with other clusters. By contrast, news media figures with markedly visible political leans were comparable to political elites, inviting linkages between other users and institutions with similar ideologies. In particular, the clusters around the President, Fox News, and the NRA shared thematic identifications, interlinking ties, and, thus, comparable values in face of gun violence.