How twitter is being used in the Scottish independence referendum debate

January 9 2014, by Cara Macdowall

Analysis of traffic on the social media site Twitter which includes #indyref shows the Yes campaign has more followers and a wider network of active tweeters spreading their campaign message than Better Together.

A snapshot of data on #indyref was collated by researchers at the University of Glasgow's Policy Scotland as part of an ongoing research project to monitor how twitter is being used in the referendum debate. Details of this snapshot and the Policy Scotland project can be found at PolicyScotland.gla.ac.uk, including a fully searchable graphic of the network of tweeters and hashtags used in the snapshot period (13th-19th December 2013).

Michael Comerford from Policy Scotland said, "As might be expected, the official campaign accounts, @yesscotland and @uk_together and the related hashtags, #yes and #bettertogether are the most prominent nodes on the network graph. These accounts, which show the YES campaign with around 28,000 followers and Better Together at 16,000 followers are primarily used for broadcast purposes, to let the world know what the campaign is doing and what its views are. The other main sources of information provided by the campaigns through twitter are from spokespeople who have significant followers – for example @nicolaSturgeon who has 34,000 and @TogetherDarling with 9,000 followers."

The colour of the lines indicate the target rather than the source of the

tweet, so blue lines centred on the official accounts are tweets from other users prompted by campaign messages. The red lines show connections being made between less prominent users, and less utilised hashtags. For clarity's sake we have only included on the data map those nodes with twelve or more connections during the week in question. The most interesting aspect of the datamap is the spread of 'conversations' through twitter about the referendum between users that are not channeled through the official campaigns.

On the datamap, a number of influential accounts appear alongside the official campaigns as lesser but still significant nodes. Amongst groups with significant online profiles on the Yes side are @wearenational the [twitter account](#) of National Collective, the pro-independence artists group, and @celebsforindy an aggregation of non-partisan pro-independence comments from celebrities. Yes' bloggers are also strongly represented in the snapshot through accounts such as @wingsscotland - the twitter expression of 'Wings Over Scotland' an independent pro-independence website.

The strongest nodes in the network on the No side are apparently anonymous individuals such as @strongerunited1 and @mulder1981 who generate a lot of pro-union traffic. Compared with the Yes side however, there are fewer independent pro-union nodes not directly linked with the official campaign. With the exception of the campaign spokespersons and First Minister Alex Salmond, politicians do not feature strongly in the #indyref network.

Twitter is being used by both campaigns to notify their supporters of local events and messages. Tracking this local traffic (e.g. from @YesAberdeenshire or @Edin_Together) provides an insight into grassroots activity in different localities in Scotland. There are potentially many other uses of the network map - it is open to those who log on to our website to make sense of the traffic flows for themselves.

Each month, Policy Scotland at the University of Glasgow will publish a snapshot of activity during a one week period on the website, and will collate the information for analysis at a later date. The archive will allow the use of analytical techniques to provide a more detailed account of how twitter is used and what impact it might have.

Michael Comerford added "From an academic point of view, the referendum is an opportunity to observe, analyse and interpret what is going on in a unique set of political circumstances. We invite comments about the network that might help us discern what is going on and will approve (without endorsing) those that seem to us to aid understanding in the interest of promoting the widest non-partisan discussion of the way twitter is being used in the referendum debate"

"What both campaigns will want to understand is how, if at all, this medium can be used to communicate with, motivate and mobilise their existing supporters and also attract the attention of new and different audiences with the aim of securing votes in September.

Our network map shows however that many users of social media are not merely content to receive and pass on messages from the official campaigns or their leaders. The debate on twitter has a wide range of contributors and their conversations are an interesting aspect of the referendum debate. What effect they have of the eventual outcome is yet to be seen – but how the medium is being used is what for the moment we are focusing on."

  More information: To access the map, go to policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/

Provided by University of Glasgow