

Not much originality in social-media discourse

June 3 2014, by H. Roger Segelken

(Phys.org) —If nationally televised candidate debates are supposed to stimulate critical thinking and individual expression among the social media set – "Find those responsible for Benghazi, Obama!" or "4 Pinocchios, Mitt!" or at least "Softball question, Madame Moderator!" – it's so not happening.

Social scientists' analysis of 290,119,348 tweets from 193,522 "politically engaged" Twitter users during the 2012 presidential campaign conventions and debates found little creative thinking, and a slavish blitz of retweeting "elites" like @billmaher and @seanhannity.

"Frankly, we're rather disappointed," says Cornell's Drew Margolin. "Social media has so much potential to improve the diversity of voices and quality of exchanges in political discussion by giving individuals the technological capability to compete with the mass media in disseminating information, setting agendas and framing conversation."

Instead, says the Cornell assistant professor of communication (co-author of a May 2014 *PLoS ONE* report, "Rising Tides or Rising Stars? Dynamics of Shared Attention on Twitter during Media Events"), "during live media events when the largest number of people are paying attention, people move away from this deliberative potential by replacing existing interpersonal social dynamics with increased collective attention to existing 'stars.'"

Those stars would be Twitter users like the liberal comedian Bill Maher

'78, the most retweeted in three of the four candidate debates, and Sean Hannity, the conservative [media](#) personality who popularly opined, "Middle class crushed last 4 years" during the third debate.

Most study subjects were so mesmerized by erudite elites (like @KarlRove: "Are those packs on [debate moderator Martha] Raddatz's back a way for ABC higher ups to feed her questions?") they forgot to think for themselves. The [social media](#) tide of public discourse did not rise far in the 2012 campaign, the [social scientists](#) agreed, but a few stars' fortunes did.

In defense of the retweeting masses, the authors wrote: "The uncertainty of live events may predispose users to seek information from authorities and their expert sensemaking processes rather than from their peers."

Not that there's anything wrong with that ... or is there?

"Combined with our findings about concentrated attention to elite voices and diminished use of interpersonal communication," the researchers wrote, "these factors could combine to create ideal conditions for rumor persistence, belief polarization and the dissemination of misinformation that can – intentionally or unintentionally – undermine deliberation."

More information: Lin Y-R, Keegan B, Margolin D, Lazer D (2014) "Rising Tides or Rising Stars?: Dynamics of Shared Attention on Twitter during Media Events." *PLoS ONE* 9(5): e94093. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0094093](#)

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