

# Could "narbs" help you tell your social media story?

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Ananda Mitra of the Department of Communication, at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina and colleague Sanjay Mamani point out that there are increasing amounts of unstructured data permeating the internet and in big databases. They refer to the narrative bits of unstructured data, the social media updates and the like as "narbs". They have now developed a theoretical approach that could bring order from the chaos and have demonstrated its advantages in making sense of the data that emerged from Egypt during the so-called Arab Spring. The same approach might be applied to other large-scale events such as political campaigns, terrorist attacks, protests, marketing and advertising campaigns and even at the personal level for biography or autobiography.

"Big Data is becoming an important part of the tools that are available to delve into human behavior," the team says. "Institutions from grocery stores to [law enforcement agencies](#) are interested in gaining access to large amounts of data about individuals and groups so that the analysis of the data would offer greater insights into the 'what' people do." The researchers development of a theoretical paradigm for making sense of Big Data at the level of the narb seems particular pertinent given the state of world affairs at the moment, in terms of wars, revolutions, terrorist activity, the prominence given to celebrity suicide and mental illness, unlawful shootings and many other aspects of events today.

Unlocking the secrets of Big Data one narb at a time might allow us to understand not only the what, when it comes to human behavior, but

perhaps also the why. "The construct of looking at culture, communication and [human behavior](#) and beliefs through the lens of a narrative was suggested by the work of Walter Fisher in the mid-1980s, far before there was the extensive use of the internet, or any inkling of Big Data and Social Media Systems," the team explains. Of course, the story of the storyteller is much older than that still, but with widespread access to even the innermost thoughts of individuals through the ubiquitous world of social media there is now the potential to extract belief and behavior with unprecedented detail.

There are hundreds of millions of people and organizations using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other online tools via their computers, mobile phones and tablets, to consume, share and generate data. This comes in the form of textual updates, announcements and commentary, digital photos, audio files, videos, and more besides. This is Big Data, if not at its biggest then most certainly at its most personal. Of course, if privacy concerns are to be believed the companies offering such tools are already mining the vast quantities of narbs for their own commercial purposes. Moreover, national agencies the world over have been revealed to be spying on our every narb for years. It's no surprise really, unless you live entirely offline or at least use very strong encryption beyond the US military standard, for instance, all of your packets of data could have been open to spying eyes ever since you sent your first [text message](#) or clicked send on that email.

The team's theoretical work suggests a way to processing a narrative through analysis of the unstructured data surrounding a given event and then utilizing appropriate narbs, whether [social media](#) status update, blog statement, text message or email to elicit the overarching narrative themes and, more importantly, the connections between them.

**More information:** Mitra, A. and Mamani, S. (2014) 'Using narbs to create narrative maps from unstructured Big Data: a case study', *Int. J.*

*Logistics Economics and Globalisation*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp.78-98.

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