

Controversy in Facebook posts linked to speed of spread among users

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This study could help inform predictions of how a given post's engagement timeline might unfold and how much controversy it might generate. Credit: geralt, Pixabay, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

A new analysis of nearly 60 million Facebook posts investigates how users' interest in posts evolves over time, suggesting that the amount of

controversy generated by a post is strongly linked to the speed with which it reaches a broad audience—regardless of the specific topic being discussed. Gabriele Etta of Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy, and colleagues presented these findings in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

This study adds to mounting research examining the influence of social media on how people consume information and form opinions. Prior research has suggested that neither the topic of a social media post nor the quality of its information are associated with the processes by which users form their opinions. Instead, studies suggest, a post that is more viral—meaning it becomes extremely popular—may be more likely to result in polarized engagement, perhaps including hate speech.

To deepen understanding of how interest evolves over time in social media debates, Etta and colleagues analyzed about 57 million posts published across about 2 million Facebook pages and groups from 2018 to 2022. The posts covered a variety of topics, including scandals, tragedies, and social and political issues.

Statistical analysis of user engagement showed that the evolution of people's interest in a given post tended to follow similar patterns regardless of topic. Typically, interest did not increase exponentially over time but instead increased steadily until reaching a saturation point.

Notably, posts that reached a very wide audience—went viral—more quickly were more likely to be associated with negative or controversial reactions among users, regardless of topic. Furthermore, posts with audiences that grew more slowly were associated with more positive reactions.

This study could help inform predictions of how a given post's engagement timeline might unfold and how much controversy it might generate. Such [predictions](#) could help shape approaches for moderating

social media communities as well as strategies for news outlets and [content creators](#) to shape user engagement.

The authors add, "Exploring the dynamism of social [media](#), we've discovered the predictive power of initial reactions to controversial topics. This could fundamentally shift how we understand and navigate the realm of online discussions and polarization."

More information: Etta G, Sangiorgio E, Di Marco N, Avalle M, Scala A, Cinelli M, et al. Characterizing engagement dynamics across topics on Facebook, *PLoS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0286150](#)

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