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Controversy and Conversation

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Controversy and Conversation

Abstract
In this research study, we examined the relationship between the degree of controversy (referred to as controversiality henceforth) of subject matter and the amount of conversation generated by the subject matter. In the first step of the research project, we analyzed online conversations. Our data set included data on the attributes of 207 news articles linked to Topix.com. Our analysis of these articles indicated that on average, articles of medium controversy generated the largest volume of conversation when using the number of comments as the metric. These findings led us to create a survey to determine if these results would be replicated in a laboratory study. In the survey, the likelihood of sharing the article was designated as the metric for the volume of conversation. Survey results showed that people were more likely to share articles of high controversy, which is contrary to conclusions drawn from our analysis of data from Topix.com. The findings are applicable to any writers who disseminate information and opinions.

Disciplines
Business
CONTROVERSY AND CONVERSATION

BY TIFFANY YU
UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF
PROFESSOR JONAH BERGER
Abstract: In this research study, we examined the relationship between the degree of controversy (referred to as controversy henceforth) of subject matter and the amount of conversation generated by the subject matter. In the first step of the research project, we analyzed online conversations. Our data set included data on the attributes of 207 news articles linked to Topix.com. Our analysis of these articles indicated that on average, articles of medium controversy generated the largest volume of conversation when using the number of comments as the metric. These findings led us to create a survey to determine if these results would be replicated in a laboratory study. In the survey, the likelihood of sharing the article was designated as the metric for the volume of conversation. Survey results showed that people were more likely to share articles of high controversy, which is contrary to conclusions drawn from our analysis of data from Topix.com. The findings are very applicable to any writers who disseminate information and opinions.

In recent years, the methods for holding a conversation have proliferated. As both individuals and companies flock to social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube to hold conversations with their friends and customers, the most effective ways to maximize outreach have become a hot topic. A perfect case example is Mashable, which has branded itself as "the top source for news in social and digital media, technology and web culture". With more than 50 million monthly page views and 4 million followers across the various social media outlets, Mashable is evidence for the importance that modern society and companies are placing on social media, specifically, the best practices for engaging users. Yet despite the intensity of the debate on the best ways to use social media to have a conversation with your audience, and the social factors driving utilization of social media, there is less focus on the attributes of subject matter that trigger conversations between individuals. Understanding the motivations for individuals to begin dialogues may help companies better tailor their social media strategies.

As humans have evolved, so has the form of conversation. We imagine that originally, the purpose of conversation was a purely evolutionary need for cave men to communicate their basic needs and desires. Now, the motivations behind conversation are as varied as the vast array of outlets available for communication. In this research project, we will focus on controversy as a factor influencing conversation. In this research project, we will specifically look at the influence of controversy on sparking conversations among people.

Earlier this year, a research report published by audience analytics company, ComScore, reported that The Huffington Post attracted more “U.S. Unique Monthly Visitors” than the New York Times in May. Along with other recent developments such as the New York Times’ establishment of a pay wall, this announcement proves that the news industry is very interesting to follow. The competitive nature of the industry means that companies must cleverly strategize in order to remain as a player in the industry. Therefore, when deciding upon at data source for our project, we decided to look at conversation generated by news articles, as we felt that the research findings would be of great interest to media outlets.

As the demise of the print newspaper continues and newspapers turn their focus to turning their online websites into sources of revenue, the success of these online editions of the newspapers hinges on their ability to draw readers to their websites. A great advantage of the internet is the ability to immediately communicate your reaction to what you have read about and seen online and to connect with hundreds, if not thousands, of other internet surfers. Therefore, unlike traditional print newspapers, whose main draw is the quality of the news itself, a primary attraction of online news sources is the opportunity to engage with other readers. Thus it is important to publish articles that will elicit reaction from readers and motivate them to post comments to initiate conversations with other readers. If indeed, controversy does provoke more conversation, then the newspaper publishers should use controversy as a deciding factor when choosing which stories to use as its headlines and which stories to display prominently on their websites.
Goals

The objective of this research project was to study the specific effect of controversy on the generation of conversation.

Measuring the Volume of Conversation Generated

The length of a conversation depends on the medium in which the conversation is held. Furthermore for each medium, there are several different ways for measuring the length of the conversation. To illustrate, I will use the example of face to face conversations. The first metric that comes to mind is the actual length of time expended having the conversation. However, it could be argued that this is an inaccurate method because each individual speaks at a different pace therefore counting the actual number of words spoken could be perceived as a better measure. This would unfortunately be an impractical and very time-consuming method though as it would require first recording the conversations and then transcribing them. Another possible metric could be the number of times the conversation switches from person to person.

For the first step of the research project, we chose to analyze online conversations because the conversations were already recorded and therefore data could easily be collected. We evaluated several different online news websites as potential data sources but ultimately chose the online news aggregator, Topix.com.

There were several advantages of using Topix.com:

- Topix.com is a very popular online news source. (According to Topix.com, it was listed as a Top 10 online newspaper destination by comScore)
- It links news articles from a wide variety of sources (According to Topix.com, the site links news from 67,000 sources to 450,000 news topics.)
- There is considerable variation in the number of comments posted below each article.

For this medium, we determined the volume of conversation to be the number of comments posted. This was deemed to be appropriate since the only direct way that readers can react to the article and engage with one another is by leaving comments. Furthermore, it is evident that the most popular websites are aware of the significance of comments and their influence on the likelihood of readers clicking on the article. On the homepages of the most popular websites and blogs across a wide variety of genres, the number of comments for each article is prominently displayed along with the article titles and blurb. A few notable examples include Fashionista, the online fashion authority, Mashable, the leading social media expert, and The Huffington Post, the popular online news source.

One possible concern about measuring the volume of conversation using the number of comments was the possibility of spammers leaving irrelevant advertisements in the comments section. However, in our study, we assumed that spammers leave comments at random and therefore their actions would not greatly distort our results.

The second step of the research project would naturally be to carry out a research study analyzing the impact of controversy on the length of face to face conversations. Unfortunately, due to the restricted timeline,
we were unable to carry out laboratory studies but we did create a preliminary survey that offered interesting insights into the type of findings that we may have discovered in research study with live subjects.

Method

Sample and Procedure

This study examined data collected from the online news aggregator, Topix.com. Topix.com allows readers to sign up for alerts when articles have been posted in the categories in which they are interested. I signed up to receive alerts for articles in the categories of US politics, US News, World News, Business News, Entertainment News, Science/Technology News and Sports News. The data set included articles published on the 25th of January, 2011 and the 26th of January, 2011 and consisted of a total of 207 articles. See Appendix A for an example of the type of alerts I received.

I recorded information about basic attributes of these articles on the day of publication and the number of comments they had attracted around 10pm. I also continued to monitor the articles and collected information regarding the number of comments 3 days, 16 days and 19 days after the publication of the articles.

Measures and Controls

The independent variable in this research study was the degree of controversy of the news articles, which we called the 'controversiality'. Two people coded for controversiality in this study.

Controversiality: According to dictionary.com, controversy is “the extent to which a topic allows for dispute, debate, and differing opinions”. Using this definition, we constructed a scale to aid the people who coded the data. See Appendix B for the scale.

The dependent variable was the volume of conversation generated.

Volume of conversation: The metric we used to measure this was the number of comments posted in response to each article.

However, the human mind is complicated, and so are the motivations behind conversations. Therefore, after brainstorming factors that could also possibly affect the generation of conversation, we isolated several factors that we needed to control for in order to clearly determine the impact of controversy on conversation.

There were several controls for this research study that are listed below along with the way we measured the controls in our study. See Appendix C for detailed explanations about each of the controls.

**TABLE 1: Controls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Control/Metric in Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic Category</td>
<td>The articles were separated into groups according to their topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of the Article</td>
<td>The number of words in each article was recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Interesting the Article Is</td>
<td>Each article was coded for how interesting it was on a scale of 1 to 7; 1: not interesting to 7: very interesting (3 coders)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preliminary Analysis

During the preliminary analysis of the data, we tried both fitting a linear regression:

**FIGURE 1: Fitting Linear Regressions to the Data**

I. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
   (Day of Release)

II. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
   (3 Days after Release)

III. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
    (16 Days after Release)

IV. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
    (19 Days after Release)

**TABLE 2: R^2 Values for Linear Regressions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>R^2 Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Day of Release</td>
<td>0.019134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. 3 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.038413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. 16 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.018473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. 19 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.023983</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and doing a log transformation:

**FIGURE 2: Log Transformation**

I. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(Day of Release)

II. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(3 Days after Release)

III. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(16 Days after Release)

IV. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(19 Days after Release)

**TABLE 3: $R^2$ Values for Log Transformation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>$R^2$ Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Day of Release</td>
<td>0.008513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. 3 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.03327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. 16 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.001375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. 19 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.002851</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, both regressions did not seem to be appropriate for the data as neither was a good fit therefore the next step was to perform a quadratic regression.

**FIGURE 3: Fitting Quadratic Regressions to the Data**

I. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(Day of Release)  

II. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(16 Days after Release)

III. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(16 Days after Release)  

IV. Conversiality vs. Number of Comments  
(19 Days after Release)

**TABLE 4: $R^2$ Values for Quadratic Regressions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>$R^2$ Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Day of Release</td>
<td>0.029984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. 3 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.046765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. 16 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.025077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. 19 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.026699</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

From the three different regressions that we performed, it was evident that the strongest relationship between controversy and the number of comments occurred 3 days after the article was released. The quadratic regression was the best fit because for articles 3 days after release, the $R^2$ value for the relationship between controversy and the number of comments was raised to 0.046765 from 0.038413 for the linear regression to 0.03327 for the log transformation. Although this is not conventionally considered a high $R^2$ value, due to the nature of our research matter, it does indicate that to an extent, some of the variation in the number of comments (metric for volume of conversation in our study) can be explained by the controversy of the article.

The quadratic regression demonstrates that on average, articles of medium controversy had the largest number of comments. The interpretation of this is that subject matter of medium controversy will generate the largest volume of conversation. This is interesting because it is contrary to our hypothesis that articles of high controversy would generate the largest volume of conversation due to the opportunities for debates and exploration of the complex issues behind the controversial subject matter.

Analysis of Controls

Table 5 below gives a breakdown of the number of articles that fell under each topic category. Due to the inherent differences in the topic categories themselves, it is evident that there would be differences in the number of articles published each day for each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5: Topic Categories and Article Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. US News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. US Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. World News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Entertainment News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Business News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Science/Technology News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Sports News</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After performing regressions on the data, I attempted to analyze the specific relationship between controversy and the generation of conversation for articles in each separate topic category. This analysis did in fact reveal that there were stronger relationships for certain topic categories such as science and entertainment despite the fact that the average controversy for both these topic categories was not the highest amongst all the different topic categories. However, because our data set of 207 articles ranged across 7 categories, we did not have an adequate number of articles for each topic category that would have allowed us to draw meaningful and valid conclusions. However, these specific relationships for different topic categories would indeed be an interesting area for future research.
The second control was the length of the articles.

**FIGURE 4: Length of the Articles and Number of Comments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Article Word Count vs. Number of Comments (Day of Release)</th>
<th>III. Article Word Count vs. Number of Comments (16 Days after Release)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Graph 1" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Graph 3" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>II. Article Word Count vs. Number of Comments (3 Days after Release)</th>
<th>IV. Article Word Count vs. Number of Comments (19 Days after Release)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Graph 2" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Graph 4" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 6: R² Values for Article Word Count vs. Number of Comments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>R² Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Day of Release</td>
<td>0.014186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. 3 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.020212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. 16 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.004597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. 19 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.001757</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The reason for the differences in axes for these graphs was that there seems to have been outliers in the data. Some of these articles were removed from Topix.com during the period of data collection so we did not have complete data for these articles.*
As can be seen from the above graphs and $R^2$ values, it appears that there is some type of relationship between the number of words in an article and the number of comments posted in response to the article soon after the article is released. It seems to be that the longer the article, the greater the number of comments for articles posted up to 3 days after release. This is contrary to our initial hypotheses about this control, which was that the longer the article, the fewer the number of comments. We believed that the greater the number of words in the article, the less likely people would be to read the article and therefore the less likely they were to respond to it.

To determine whether in fact this relationship had skewed our results and invalidated our findings, we next looked at the relationship between controversiality and the number of words in an article.

![FIGURE 5: Controversiality vs. log(Article Word Count)](image)

**TABLE 7: $R^2$ Value for Controversiality vs. log(Article Word Count)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$R^2$ Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.003385</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There does not seem to be a significant relationship between controversiality and the number of words in an article which means that the correlation between article word count and number of comments did not distort our results.
Our last control was how interesting the article was.

FIGURE 6: How Interesting the Article is vs. log(Number of Comments)

I. How Interesting the Article is vs. Number of Comments (3 Days after Release)

II. How Interesting the Article is vs. Number of Comments (3 Days after Release)

III. How Interesting the Article is vs. Number of Comments (19 Days after Release)

IV. How Interesting the Article is vs. Number of Comments (19 Days after Release)

TABLE 8: $R^2$ Values for How Interesting the Article is vs. log(Number of Comments)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>$R^2$ Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Day of Release</td>
<td>0.036051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. 3 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.065848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. 16 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.035596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. 19 Days after Release</td>
<td>0.052809</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the graphs above demonstrate, there does seem to be a correlation between how interesting the article is and the number of comments posted in response to the article. This makes sense because the more interesting an article is, the more likely people are to read the article and therefore the more likely they are to comment on the article. However, before we can conclude that it is in fact how interesting the article is and not its controversiality that determined the number of comments in our study and ignore our study findings, we have to examine the relationship between controversiality and how interesting the article is.

**FIGURE 7: Controversiality vs. How Interesting the Article is**

![Graph showing the correlation between controversiality and how interesting the article is.]

**TABLE 9: R² Value for Controversiality vs. How Interesting the Article is**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R² Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.501597</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As expected, there is a considerably strong relationship between controversiality and how interesting the article is. From our data, there is no clear indication whether articles that are more controversial happen to be more interesting due to their controversial nature or whether articles are more controversial because their subject matter is more interesting. Therefore, there is no concrete reason to discount our findings that controversiality generates conversation. The relationship between controversiality and how interesting the subject matter is could also be an area for potential exploration in future studies. These two attributes are inextricably linked and therefore it would be very interesting to try to determine the causal relationship between the two.

After the preliminary analysis of the first three batches of data collected (day of release, 3 days after release and 16 days after release), we decided to go back and collect another piece of data – the number of unique commenters. The rationale was that it would be interesting to try to determine whether our use of the number of comments as the metric for volume of conversation was valid.
The $R^2$ value of 0.630595 suggests that there is some type of relationship between the number of unique commenters and the number of comments posted. This is intuitive as we expect the number of comments to increase as the number of people posting comments in response to the article increases. However, since there is not a perfect correlation between the number of people commenting and the number of comments, this indicates that some people are returning to the article and posting more comments in response to other people’s comments. Examination of specific comments indeed confirms the occurrence of this. Therefore, we can conclude that it was valid to use the number of comments as the measure for the volume of conversation in our study.

**Preliminary survey for laboratory research study**

We planned to hold a laboratory research study if time permitted and created a survey to test the conclusions formed from the analysis of data from Topix.com and to help frame our study.

When creating the survey, we considered several different methods of measuring the volume of the conversation generated such as giving subjects a topic then asking them to record their conversation with another person via an instant messaging system.
Seeing as the purpose of the survey was to allow us to gather some preliminary data for constructing a laboratory experiment, sharing was chosen as a proxy for conversation. This was felt to be an appropriate proxy seeing as it seems probable that people are more likely to start a conversation about an article that they would share with their friends compared to an article that they would not be inclined to share.

When constructing the survey, we consulted Norbert Schwarz's study 'When Thinking Feels Difficult: Meta-Cognitive Experiences in Judgment and Decision Making'. His research findings indicate that the more difficult it is to come up with sufficient reasons supporting a particular scenario or proposition, the more unlikely people are to accept the outcome or proposition as being true. The reason is that when people feel that they are having difficulty thinking of evidence supporting the given statement, they conclude that the statement must not be true. In order to arrive at these findings, he asked participants to think of either 2 or 10 alternative outcomes for a historic event. Another experiment involved asking participants to think of either 2 or 10 reasons supporting a proposition.

The relevant finding to our study is his discovery of the fact that the more reasons people are requested to think of, the more likely it is that they will perceive the task as being difficult, resulting in them being convinced that the statement is false.

For the survey, to eliminate any possible biases, it was necessary to show the same articles to all survey participants but seeing as we were testing the effect of controversy on the generation of conversation, we needed some method of manipulating the same articles so they were perceived to be of varying degrees of controversy by different survey participants. For this, we used the 2 vs 10 manipulation that Norbert Schwartz used in his study.

Firstly, we chose articles from our Topix dataset that had been coded to be of medium controversy. In our survey, we asked participants to think of either 2 or 10 reasons for why the articles were controversial. The survey included 4 articles and for each article, it was random whether participants were asked to list 2 or 10 reasons. See Appendix D for the full survey. By extrapolating the findings from Norbert Schwartz's study, it follows that those who were asked to think of 2 reasons would be more convinced that the articles were controversial whereas those who were asked to think of 10 reasons would be more likely to believe that the article was not controversial. There was also a control group who was not asked to list any reasons and was simply presented with the article. After listing the reasons (for the control group this was after they were shown the article), participants were then asked how likely they would be to share the articles with their friends. Sharing was defined to be through any media such as face-to-face conversations, Facebook, Twitter and any other appropriate methods.
Survey Results

FIGURE 9: Number of Reasons Required vs. Likelihood of Sharing

Article Titles

1. Banning electronic cigarettes
2. Obama ‘strongly opposes’ bill to cut federal funds for presidential campaigns
3. Huge Toyata Recall Begins 2011 on Embarrassing Note
4. Say good bye to the color-coded terror threat levels

TABLE 11: Controversiality vs. Likelihood of Sharing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Number</th>
<th>Likelihood of Sharing 0</th>
<th>Likelihood of Sharing 2</th>
<th>Likelihood of Sharing 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9166666667</td>
<td>3.611111111111111111</td>
<td>2.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.55555555555555555555</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.08333333333333333333</td>
<td>3.92857142900000000000</td>
<td>1.83333333333333333333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.83333333333333333333</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.41666666666666666666</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Judging from Figure 9 above, for 3 out of 4 of the articles, people were most likely to share the article when they perceived it to be of high controversy. This is demonstrated by the fact that people who were asked to only list 2 reasons for why the article was controversial were most likely to share the article. From the discussion of Norbert Schwartz’s study above, the people who were asked to list 2 reasons were more prone to perceiving the article as being controversial compared to those who were asked to list ten reasons. This is due to the fact that the difficulty of coming up with ten reasons primes people to believe that the reverse of the statement is true – in this case, the thought process is that since they are having trouble with generating ten reasons for why the article is controversial, they conclude that the article is in fact not controversial.

Interestingly, the only article for which the manipulation we used did not appear to have an effect was the article about the elimination of color-coded terror threat levels. Like the other articles used in our survey, this article had been coded to be of medium controversy. However, the deviation of results for this article suggests that perhaps there was either an error in our coding and this article would be perceived to be of high controversy by the general population or due to nature of the subject matter, the manipulation was less effective at changing how controversial people perceived the article to be. Therefore, an area of research for future studies could be determining the relationship between different categories of subject matter and the malleability of people’s perception of the controversiality of the subject matter. The findings of these results would be particularly applicable to politicians who would be interested to see for which types of issues or regulations could they easily change and manipulate people’s opinions to match their own agendas.

It is interesting to note the discrepancy in the conclusions that can be drawn from the different studies. Our analysis of data from Topix.com found that articles of medium controversy were more likely to generate more conversation while articles of extremely low and extremely high controversy generated the least volume of conversation. However, the survey indicated that this does not necessarily hold true for conversations held through different media.

It could be possible that the difference in results could be attributed to the fact that for the survey, the methods for holding a conversation involve reaching out to people with whom the survey participants have more personal connections. The survey participants are more likely to know and interact on a regular basis with those people who came to mind when they were asked the likelihood of them sharing the article. Contrastingly, it is very unlikely that the people who posted comments on the Topix articles that we analyzed were familiar with one another. Perhaps people are more inclined to censure their personal thoughts and feelings when interacting with strangers compared to when interacting with friends and acquaintances. This could be reflected in the fact that people were least likely to comment on articles of high controversy on Topix.com yet they were most likely to share articles of high controversiality with people they know.

This is a particularly interesting finding seeing as it negates our hypothesis. Originally, we believed that since online expressions of thoughts and opinions are granted anonymity due to the nature of the Internet, people may be encouraged to share their opinions, no matter how controversial and outspoken they may be. However, in interactions with people with whom they are familiar, they may defer to social convention and refrain from sharing their opinions if they believe they may offend other people.

Further research

Our findings revealed that there is a very interesting relationship between controversiality and the volume of conversation generated but the nature of the relationship is highly dependent on the familiarity of the people conversing and the medium through which the conversation is held. Future research could extend
our survey and explore the relationship between controversiality and the volume of conversation in a laboratory research study with live subjects.

Furthermore, as our research indicates, the direction of the relationship between how interesting something is and its controversiality is still not very clear. Therefore, future studies could aim to determine the exact causal relationship between these two attributes. The results would offer interesting insights into our thought processes.

Lastly, the results from our survey hinted that there could be a variation in the strength of the relationship between different categories of subject matter and the malleability of people's perception of their controversiality. The findings would be very applicable to political campaigns and any other people who are interested in manipulating others thought and opinions.

Applications for Research Findings

Earlier this year, LSA Today caused considerable debate when it was rumored that the newspaper was considering instigating a bonus payment scheme for writers based on the number of unique page views for their articles. However, the number of unique page-views only tells part of the story. A useful analogy can be drawn with social media. It is popular belief that the greater the number of followers, the more successful your social media strategy. However, the real metric for success is the degree of engagement of the followers with your brand. A brand could hold an extremely popular competition that results in it attracting a large social media following but in reality, many of the new followers are perhaps not currently and will never be loyal users of the brand, having just become your fan on Facebook or your follower on Twitter simply to take advantage of the competition. Similarly, an article or a writer may have a high number of unique page views but this does not necessarily translate into a loyal fan-base for the newspaper or writer. Perhaps the writer simply had the luck of covering some spectacular news or sensational event or perhaps the subject matter of the article had mass appeal. Returning to the social media analogy, a brand only truly achieves success in terms of social media when it is able to nurture an actively engaged fan base because that, rather than simply a large social media following, is what translates into sales. Examples of how fans can actively engage with your brand are through having conversations with other customers and your company through social media or by creating user-generated content that extols your brand.

I believe that the newspaper industry mirrors the social media example where simply having a large number of fans does not translate into success. For the newspaper industry, a large number of unique page views is not what determines success but rather an actively engaged reader base that begins conversations in the comments section below the article.

For newspapers and media outlets, it is highly unlikely that the material they produce could result in a lot of user-generated content but they are beginning to show signs of their acknowledgement of the importance of engaging with their readers. For example, in the wake of large event such as natural disasters, CNN often seeks videos and reports from viewers and readers who were on the scene. Blog readers will often pose questions to their readers in their posts and open up a discussion through the comments function.

Thus, the findings of this research study could be incorporated when newspapers and other media outlets are trying to build an actively engaged fan base. In order to encourage readers to start discussions with one another and the writer, they should choose to publish articles of medium controversy in order to generate the largest volume of conversation.
In a broader sense, these findings could be applied to any writer who is interested in disseminating both information and his opinions to the public. As our findings have shown, the controversiality of the material that he should discuss in order to elicit the largest volume of conversation depends on his familiarity with the readers and the type of medium he is using to communicate with them.

Conclusion

Our findings indicated that there is indeed a relationship between controversiality and the volume of conversation generated and disproved our hypothesis that the relationship would be linear, with articles of higher controversy generating the highest volume of conversation. These findings offer interesting insights which would be very useful to people who work in the media industry and any other individuals whose profession or hobby is to communicate information to others. However, our study revealed that there is indeed a very complex interaction between the factors that motivate us to have a conversation therefore there are many potential areas of exploration for future research studies.
Works Cited


Appendix A: Example of Topix Alert

15 new posts about US News

Topix | X

- [Topix US News Forum](forums@topixalets.com) to me
- [show details] Jan 6
- [Reply]

- 1 new post - Rep. Bachmann: 'not ruling out' bid for president
- 1 new post - House GOP challenges Obama to join them
- 1 new post - Letters: Costs of illegal immigrants
- 1 new post - Rick Scott gets an 'A' for first day as Florida's governor
- 1 new post - House GOP asks business for advice on regulations
- 6 new posts - Harper will chair health panel
- 1 new post - Rep. Bachmann: 'not ruling out' bid for president
- 1 new post - Montel Williams cited after pipe found at airport
- 2 new posts - Boehner: Republicans take charge of House, pledging no more 'business as usual'

This email is sent as threads are created. Change to daily

US News Forum | Unsubscribe

Appendix B: Controversial Scale

Scale - 1: not controversial to 7: very controversial

Examples:
1 – Vt city stumbles in effort to do telecom itself, Landslide buries 50 homes in northwestern Colombia
2 – Bristol Palin says her mother didn't force her to go on Dancing With The Stars, Playboy opens Mexican casino
3 – WikiLeaks prepares for possible Twitter account termination, Many fat woman think they are slim
4 – Key Test Vote On 9/11 Bill Likely Wednesday,
5- Atheists on the march in America, Christian group tires petition to return 'anti-gay' app to App Store, Islamic publishing house prints forged Bible
6 – Senator seeks bill to deter body scan image misuse, Bid to Limit Tax Cuts to Middle Class and Poor Fail
7 – Hispanics fear profiling under new Arizona law, China believes the Internet is "controllable", 'Don't ask' discharges fall sharply, but for how long?

The scale was chosen to range from 1 to 7 because 5 was deemed to offer too small of a range and therefore not enough variation but 10 would be impractical because it would be hard to convey to the person who was coding the minute differences between neighboring points on the scale. An odd number was preferable because an article perceived to be of medium controversy would automatically be coded as being the middle number on the scale.
Appendix C: Controls

Topic category:
Some topics are inherently more interesting and popular than other topics, therefore this would have an influence on the number of people who would want to read the article and consequently the number of people who actually comment on the article.

Length of the article:
The length of the article could possibly be a deterrent for readers. Longer articles naturally take more time to read and might have fewer comments as a result. Therefore it would be important to determine if there is a relationship between article length and number of comments because this could distort our results.

How interesting the issue is:
People are naturally more inclined to read an article if they perceive it to be interesting therefore it is important to determine whether it is how interesting the article is, rather than the controversiality, that is determining the number of comments posted.
Appendix D: Full Survey (Note: number of reasons was randomly chosen)

Conversation Study

On the next few pages, you will see the title and blurb for several articles.

Please read the information carefully and then list the required number of reasons for why you believe the article is controversial.

After you have listed the reasons, you will be asked to rate on a scale of 1-7, how likely it is that you would share the article and its content with others.

Sharing includes any medium: eg, talking, texting, emailing, Facebook, Twitter etc.

Banning electronic cigarettes

New York lawmakers are considering what could become the first state ban on electronic cigarettes, devices touted on the Internet in ads promising all the pleasures of smoking without the deadly health threat.


Please list 2 reasons why you think this topic may be controversial.

Reason 1

Reason 2

How likely would you be to share this story with others?

Not at all likely to share

Extremely likely to share

[Options]
Appendix D cont.: Full Survey

Obama 'strongly opposes' bill to cut federal funds for presidential campaigns

The White House "strongly opposes" a Republican-backed bill to stop federal funding of presidential campaigns and political conventions — a position offering President Obama declined during his 2008 campaign.

http://voices.washingtonpost.com/federal-eye/2011/01/white_house_strongly_opposes_b.html

Please list 2 reasons why you think this topic may be controversial.

Reason 1

Reason 2

How likely would you be to share this story with others?

Not at all likely to share

Extremely likely to share

Huge Toyota Recall Begins 2011 on Embarrassing Note

Toyota begins 2011 with something it saw far too much of in late 2009 and 2010: a Toyota recall, and another huge one, in fact, of 1.7 million vehicles globally.


Please list 2 reasons why you think this topic may be controversial.

Reason 1

Reason 2

How likely would you be to share this story with others?

Not at all likely to share

Extremely likely to share
Appendix D cont.: Full Survey

Say goodbye to the color-coded terror threat levels

By the end of April, terror threats to the U.S. will no longer be described in shades of green, blue, yellow, orange and red.


Please list 2 reasons why you think this topic may be controversial.

Reason 1

Reason 2

How likely would you be to share this story with others?

Not at all likely to share

Extremely likely to share

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