Political Science

G. R. Boynton's New Media and Politics

University of Iowa 11-8-2010

COP 16 and twitter

Andrea Bunting* Miranda J. Nielson†
Kaitlin Davies‡

*University of Iowa, andrea-bunting@uiowa.edu
†University of Iowa, miranda-nielson@uiowa.edu
‡University of Iowa, kaitlin-davies@uiowa.edu

This paper is posted at Iowa Research Online.
http://ir.uiowa.edu/polisci_nmp/186

COP 16 and Twitter

Andrea Bunting, Miranda Nielson, Kaitlin Davies

To begin COP 16 stands for the 16th session of the conference of parties (the United Nations Climate Change Conference). What they do is the parties of the convention meet annually to assess programs in dealing with climate change. This year COP 16 will be held in Cancun, Mexico starting November 29th, and ending December 10th, 2010. Looking at the data, we were curious about the level of commitment twitter users have to combating global climate change.

Question:

How committed are twitter users to combating Global Climate Change?

Procedure:

We were given COP 16 data set by Professor Boynton. The search went from September 1, 2010 to October 24, 2010. We started by reading the tweets and coming up with a common theme we thought was important and relevant to global communications. After we came up with our question, we re-read the tweets in English to determine how committed twitter users were to combating Global Climate Change. Are total numbers of tweets were 7,932, with approximately half being re-tweets, and 1,420 being re-tweets of COP 16 messages.

Never before in this class have we attempted to gauge opinion. We took a sample of 3,000 English tweets, divided them amongst the three of us, read through them all, and tallied tweets showing weak or strong commitments, excluding messages from cop16.

How does this information help us understand the spread of global communication?

To begin global climate change is a global issue, and COP 16 addresses it globally. One user tweeted, "kudos to whomever is behind @cop16 acct: perfectly bilingual/bicultural relevant content, nonstop! Felicidades y gracias." This quote exemplifies the theme of COP 16, being a bilingual quote. Although we could not read all the tweets that were not in English, we found many hash tags of English words, such as 5,326 for COP 16, 1,807 for Cancun and 2,905 for climate. These hash tags in foreign language tweets show the international interest in combating global climate change. The two most common languages of these tweets were English and Spanish. We then took the number of tweets and divided it by the number of days in the search period. We found the average to be 147 tweets per day, which is a considerable amount of tweets.

Strong commitments:

We determined that twitter users who have a strong commitment were those who tweeted personal statements. These statements focused on personal goals, opinions/beliefs and cries for support of the issue. Examples of strong commitments include, “Go and sign the ItsOneHumanity.org visual petition for climate justice at UNFCCC COP 16…”and “Hoping world leaders make real progress at #COP16 in Cancun. I'll be there to keep an eye on them! #climate #cancun #2515 #350 (15:55).” Approximately one percent of the total number of English tweets showed strong commitments. This being a very low number, we determined the average twitter user does not express a strong commitment to combating climate change.

Weak Commitments:

We determined that twitter users who have a week commitment were those who tweeted facts, and those who re-tweeted messages, especially those from cop16. These statements focused more on factual information rather than opinions and personal goals. We discovered that only 2,329 users were following @cop16 UN Climate Change, and only 377 users were following @cop16_Agenda COP 16 Agenda. The fact that these two have so few followers shows the relative lack of strong commitment from twitter users.

Conclusion:

Twitter users, we came to find, want to combat global warming but are contributing the bare minimum in terms of demands and personal statements on Twitter. Even though there was an average of 147 tweets a day, which is fairly substantial, these tweets were mostly re-tweets, announcements, and other statements showing weak commitments. Regardless of the level of commitment, the presence of foreign languages and the number of tweets shows that this is clearly a global issue.