

A Politician's Speech Echoed in Computer-Mediated Communication of his Supporters

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The presentation advances the studies of the receiving end of political communication by addressing the question whether a politician's statements affect the discourse of his followers. This premise is often assumed to be true, but studies empirically validating it are not very numerous. US ex-president Trump is famous for prejudiced and discriminatory speeches (Rubin Wilson, 2021) which are believed to influence his supporters. To check this assumption, I examine a large (over 2.3 million words) corpus of online conversations devoted to one of Trump's controversial statements. The UltraViolet Bleach (UVB) corpus was collected in May 2020, and it consists of readers' comment sections after online articles devoted to Trump's suggestion to treat COVID-19 with disinfectants and UV light (Knoblock Malkin, 2020). Trump's words prompted heated debates: readers discussed Trump himself, his words, facts and events mentioned in the articles, and they also engaged in insults, flaming, and trolling.

The corpus was analyzed with the help of corpus-assisted discourse studies methodology (Baker et al., 2008). To reveal the level of "echoing" of Trump's words in the discourse of his supporters, I used the Sketch Engine corpus-management system (Kilgarriff et al., 2004) and identified key words and clusters, studied frequency lists of words and phrases (n-grams), and examined concordance lines containing them. To check the commenters' political leaning in cases where it was not clear, I referred to the comment files looking for other comments by the same person to see if any of them provided clearer clues.

The results contradicted the expectations since Trump's words were mostly repeated by his opponents rather than by his supporters. Direct quotes of his statement were indeed the most frequently repeated phrases. For example, Trump's question "Is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?" was quoted over 1,300 times in the corpus. However, most of the quotes came from anti-Trump commenters who adopted the strategy of copying and pasting chunks of the briefing's transcript. It was their reaction to the numerous pro-Trump comments to the effect that he never said what he said or that his words were taken out of context. It appears that the willingness of a politician's fans to adopt elements of his discourse and/or repeat specific words and phrases depends on the nature of what is said. The presentation will include examples of most frequently quoted words and phrases, reasons they were included, and reactions by pro-Trump commenters to the quotes, and it will discuss the complexity of the interaction between a politician's speech and the speech of his audience.

References

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