The Psychology of User-Generated Content

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One of the most important trends in the dissemination of news and information today is the explosive growth of user-generated content. In this presentation I report findings on how the nature of such content is shaped by two key factors: first, how news information evolves as it is successively retold across consumers online, and second, how online content differs depending on the technological medium used to generate it. In the first project I show across ten experiments that, when information is sequentially retold from one consumer to the next, it undergoes a stylistic transformation termed “disagreeable personalization,” wherein original facts are increasingly supplanted by opinions and interpretations with a slant toward negativity. The work also offers evidence that these effects arise when retellers believe they are more (vs. less) knowledgeable than their recipient about the information they are relaying, which compels them to provide more guidance on its meaning and to do so in a persuasive manner. In the second project I show that when creating user-generated content on their smartphone (vs. personal computer), consumers tend to be more self-disclosing of personal or intimate information. This difference is observed across three large-scale field studies and two controlled experiments in a variety of domains including social media posts, open-ended survey responses, and compliance with requests for personal information in web advertisements. The increased willingness to self-disclose on one’s smartphone is found to arise from two distinguishing properties of the device: first, feelings of comfort that many associate with their smartphone, and second, a tendency to narrowly focus attention on the disclosure at hand due to the relative difficulty of generating content on the device. Taken together, the two projects help explain the often subjective, self-disclosing, and even negative nature of much of the user-generated content one comes across in online settings.