Social media metrics: measuring manifestations of the public in online spaces

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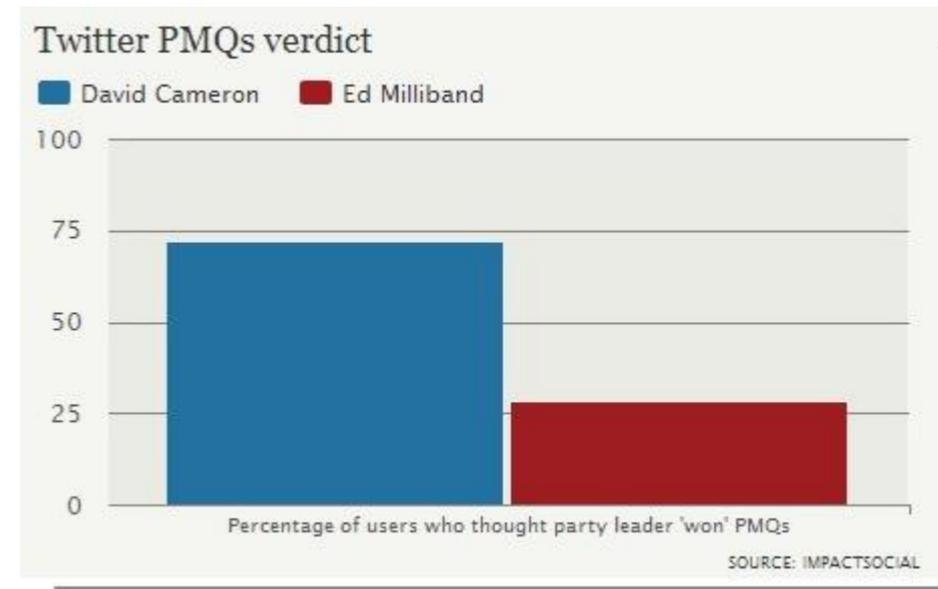
Today's presentation

- Something you may have noticed…

- BBC Question Time, 22nd October 2009
  - What are citizens doing on social media when they watch television?

- The 2010 UK General Election
  - Social media as the public
  - Three manifestations of the public

- Issues raised by semantic polling
  - How will this data be presented? How can it be made transparent?
  - How do public opinion researchers view the data?

- Going forward
  - A new (or old) epistemology of social media and the public

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Something you may have noticed...

Social media is increasingly being used to represent the public or being linked to public opinion.

This is especially true around live, televised events.

But what does this mean in practice?

Twitter PMQs verdict

David Cameron · Ed Milliband

100

75

50

25

0

Percentage of users who thought party leader 'won' PMQs

SOURCE: IMPACTSOCIAL

BBC Question Time, 22nd October 2009

- This was an unusual episode of the programme, as it featured Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party.

- It was very divisive and a major television event.

- It was also one of the first occasions when a British audience engaged with a television event using social media.

- However, this was unofficial (i.e. the programme had no hashtag).

- Working with Professor Ben O'Loughlin of Royal Holloway University of London, we harvested 70k tweets and analysed the content and publication patterns.

- We published results in Anstead, N., & O'Loughlin, B. (2011). The Emerging Viewertariat and BBC Question Time: Television Debate and Real-Time Commenting Online. *International Journal of Press-Politics, 16(4), 440-462.*

What was happening?

- We found that citizens were doing a number of things when they commented on the programme:
  - Annotating information that was appearing on the programme
  - Adding additional information to the broadcast
  - Noting the broadcast while actually commenting on their own lives.

The 2010 General Election

- Things had moved on!

- The country's first ever Prime Ministerial debates provided a media centre-point to the campaign, when significant numbers of the public could comment.

- The media was now far more aware that the public were using social media when watching televised events.

- This was the first time the media reported what was said on social media and equated it with the public and public reaction.

Public opinion and social media: three manifestations

Broadly, a content analysis of electoral media coverage revealed three methods used by journalists to link social media data to public opinion:

- **The anecdotal**. Quoting individual sources as a type of electronic vox pop.

- **The trending**. Noting that particular topics or hashtags were trending on twitter, and implying strong public opinion from this ie. #iagreewithnick and #nickcleggsfault.

- **The semantic**. Using natural language processing techniques to analyse vast numbers of campaign related tweets and then applying an overall opinion value to them. This is what we refer to as "semantic polling".

Issues raised by semantic polling

- While on the periphery of campaign reporting, this development raises a number of questions:

  - How is the data explained to the public?

  - What regulatory / self-regulatory institutions should be set up to ensure transparency of method?

  - What can social media tell us about public opinion?

  - How is the data processed? Can we look inside the "black box"?

  - What are its limitations? Does it challenge paradigmatic conceptions of public opinion?

- These questions are likely to become more relevant in future elections.

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Two views of semantic polling

- We interviewed social media researchers and traditional pollsters after the general election.
- Our interviews threw up a lot of data, but two particular views were very evident:

    1. A traditional view of public opinion which equated the very idea with opinion polling and associated techniques (this view was largely espoused by opinion pollsters themselves).
    2. An alternative view that saw semantic polling as having particular advantages in terms of understanding movement within public opinion and causation.

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The traditional view of public opinion

Our interviews threw up a lot of skepticism about the value of social media data (especially among traditional pollsters and politicians), focused on:

- It is non-representative of the population as a whole;

- That twitter-users were abnormal, compared to the rest of the population (younger, more affluent);

- That twitter-users commenting on politics were even more abnormal (more interested in politics);

- That the data was non-predictive.

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The traditional view of public opinion
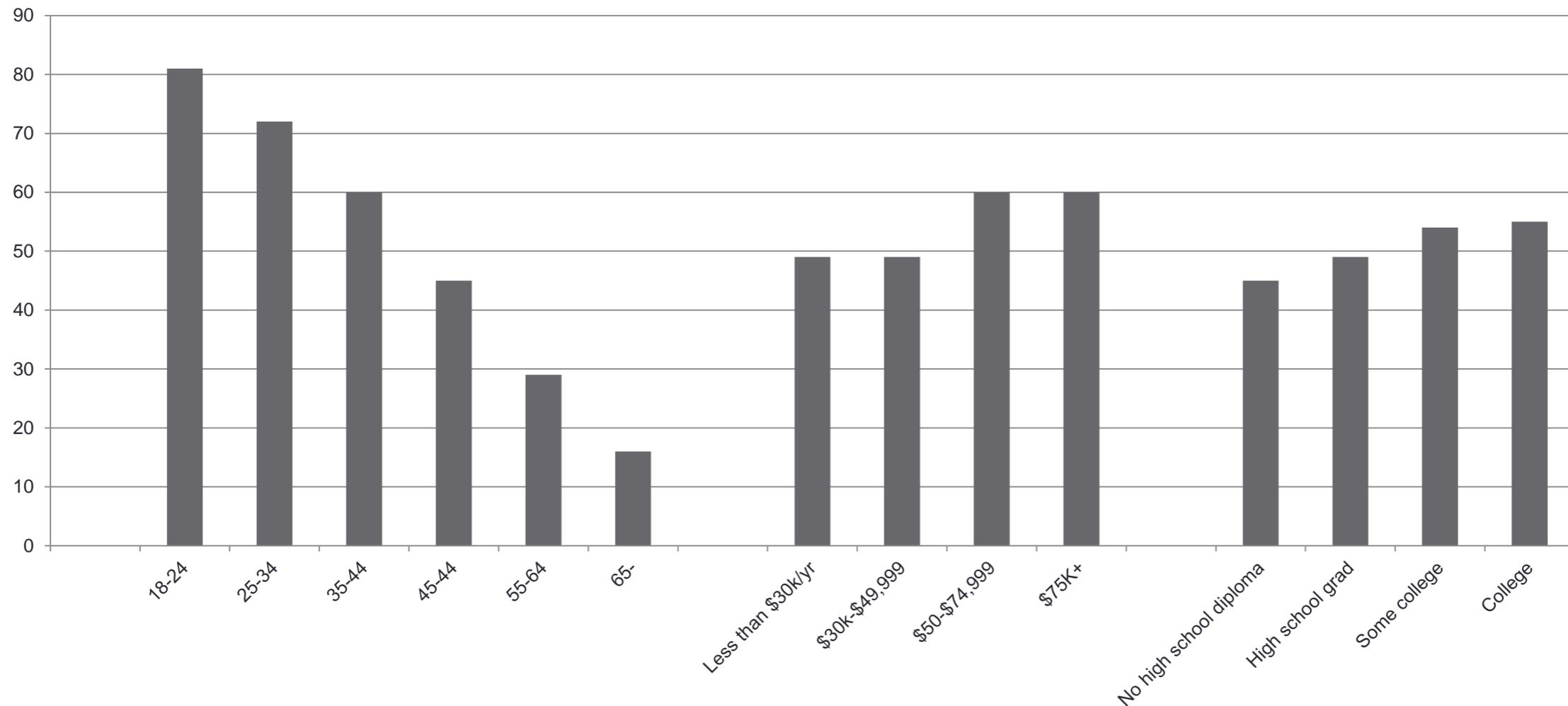
Who is using social media and watching television in the US (Pew, 2012)

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A different view…

- Social media researchers offered a very different argument.
- They saw virtues in the way they gathered data:
  - They could spot shifts in the public mood before a poll could be put in the field.
  - They were more interested in public opinion as a social phenomenon.
  - They claimed to be able to understand the public without the "contamination" of data gathering.

Re-conceptualizing the public
(or remembering some old ideas)

- Our conception of the public and public opinion is heavily framed by the dominance of opinion polling and the ideas of George Gallup.

- However, this need not be the case. We might for example look to:

  - James Bryce (1888) and the idea of organs of public opinion.

  - Herbert Bumler (1946, 1948) who argued that the public was distinct from the mass and was social in nature (as opposed to methodologically individualist).

- Going forward, we need to think about multiple conceptions of the public to better deploy, understand and explain the new tools that social media will offer us.

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