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DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE FUTURE OF LEGACY MEDIA

ABSTRACTS

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Elena Vartanova (ed.)

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE FUTURE OF LEGACY MEDIA

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Svetlana Bodrunova
Saint Petersrburg State University
s.bodrunova@spbu.ru

Speech Platformized: Language Similarities and Differences for Twitter, Reddit and Telegram as Assessed by the Deep-Learning Semantic Neural Encodings Method

The 'platform society' (Van Dijck et al., 2018) has posed questions to many aspects of public communication, including even speech structures. One of the questions so far unexplored is whether the very structure of speech on the level of grammar, phrase construction, and phrase semantics changes depending on platform affordances. In this respect, social media platforms may potentially cause the biggest impact upon divergence of speech practices, as they accumulate the biggest amount of written public speech.

To detect the differences in on-platform speech, textual machine learning models may be applied. Social media have already become a major source of data for the majority of such models. Today, advanced models of deep and transfer learning in textual analysis use the so-called neural encodings – standardized phrases that substitute variable parts of sentences and allow for better text comparisons (Elson & McKeown, 2009). The use of encodings has opened new possibilities for case studies with limited or unsupervised data from social media.

In this paper, we discuss data collection and data analysis on social media platforms with the respect of text structure comparisons. Then, we perform a comparative case study using data from Twitter (160,000+ tweets), Reddit (195,000+ posts), and Telegram (200,000+ messages) to outline linguistic differences and measure similarity for deep neural encodings in the three datasets. As such, semantic similarity is shown using readability metrics, text statistics metrics, and encodings created by the RUBERT neural-network model that provides general semantic characteristics of text data. Among other questions, we have posed the one on whether the average text length matters for semantic similarity of speech on platforms. If the text length does not correlate with the semantic metrics, then other platform features must matter for semantic differences between speech on platforms.

Our results suggest that, despite the average text length (tweets shorter than posts on Reddit and Telegram), Reddit and Twitter are significantly more similar semantically than Reddit and Telegram. Thus, there is evidence that online speech is 'platformized' semantically and grammatically, and platform affordances may have deep impact upon online speech. We conclude by establishing key similarities and discrepancies between general semantic structures for each platform.