

Opinion Neutralizers in Online Discussions on Communal Service Issues¹

The role of individual users in opinion cumulation has been in focus of researchers for over a decade now; however, only several most important roles of such users have been detected within social network studies. This, first and foremost, includes influencers (Freberg et al., 2011), but not only; thus, our earlier research shows that users may bridge modules in the discussion (Bodrunova et al., 2018), as well as create authoritative chains of co-referencers who define the discussion atmosphere (Bodrunova et al., 2016). However, the democratic functions of such users within cumulative opinion formation (Bodrunova, 2023) have not been the primary focus of research – that is, rare works focus on structural-discursive user roles where the micro-effect of a particular user utterance in a discussion shapes the course of the discussion and defines the role of the given user.

Studying the online discussions on communal service and housing construction issues, we have noticed that some users perform the function of opinion neutralizers. This means denying a dominant or a just-expressed opinion without clearly expressing an alternative opinion; often, this strategy is accompanied by aggression or humiliation of the author(s) of the dominant/previous opinion. As a result, such users are often labeled by other users as bots or trolls thinking that the opinion is rebutted on some hidden intention – sometimes with no proof or reason for such labeling. The effects of appearance of an opinion neutralizer are diverse – from termination of a discussion branch to consolidation of users who bear the opinion subjected to rebuttal by the opinion neutralizer.

In our exploratory study we manually collect the data on two middle-range cases of communal service and construction discussions in St. Petersburg (as based on VK.com closed-up communities), with the final dataset reaching over 3,000 user comments. We manually detect opinion neutralizers and explore the patterns and effects of post-neutralizer communication.

Our results suggest that there may be three labeling reactions to an opinion neutralizer, namely non-marking as a bot/troll, marking a bot/troll with no reason, and marking a bot/troll with additional explanation. We show that the three discursive labeling situations end up differently and have

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clear implications for opinion cumulation and continuation of the discussion. We suggest a matrix of labeling/effect where effects include ignoring the neutralizer, deliberative engagement, non-deliberative (cumulative/aggressive) engagement, and discussion termination. We show that the most frequent patterns in our dataset are the patterns which lead to discussion ending, and show which elements of neutralizers' speech lead to it. This adds to the concept of cumulative deliberation by exploring the speech patterns that prevent deliberative engagement.