Fury and vitriol

Polarization of mask wearing on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Social media platforms have become a primary battleground of partisan views and a hotbed of political polarization (Bail et al. 2018; Chadwick 2016; Conover et al. 2011; Du et al. 2016; Gruzd & Roy 2014; Hong & Kim 2016; Lai et al. 2015; Macy et al. 2015; Shelley 2016). Mask wearing has been a polarizing issue in the United States from the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Pew, June 2020, October 2020). The public clash of opposing opinions and discourses on mask wearing was particularly fierce on Twitter during the early months of the pandemic (Lang et al. 2021). In this presentation, we show results from a Twitter-based corpus study of aggressive English language hashtags related to mask wearing during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We found "excessive" semantics in terms of verbal aggression in both pro-mask and anti-mask hashtags. However, the two classes of hashtags differed in semantic type, structural representation, discourse function, and frequency of use, as well as in the direction of interaction in terms of who sends what kind of hashtags to whom and whether the posting was replied to. We discuss these findings in light of the politicization of masking during the pandemic and political polarization in public discourse on Twitter in general. We argue that one of the key conditions of excessive language in public discourse is political polarization and that social media provides fertile soil of mass impoliteness and linguistic violence in an unprecedented fashion.

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