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Tracking Evolution of Narratives: Understanding and Visualizing

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Narratives are windows into how we understand various aspects of our complex world. Thus, when we evoke names such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Mahatma Gandhi, we conjure up images that are essentially different from others such as Hitler, Stalin, or Attila the Hun. The meaning of these names would, of course, vary with the group of like-minded individuals, based on their nationality and ideological orientation.   Similarly, Armageddon (based on an ancient battle field in Palestine), Waterloo, and Timbuktu transcend their geographic location in our understanding of significant issues and events. These meanings, however, are results of their repeated use in particular narratives over long periods of time. Hence their utterance conveys a very definite set of emotional meaning to the listeners. Therefore, it is not surprising that in every sphere of our social lives we attempt to control the narratives.   The political parties and their candidates strive to convey a specific narrative about who they are, what they stand for, and what public policies they would implement if elected by using these verbal cues. Some of the meanings of these cues are specific, but most of it is vacuous or ill articulated. Together, they capture one of the most fascinating aspects of human communication, particularly mass communication, the roots of which are firmly ensconced in our group psychology.

When these narratives reaffirm or shockingly contradict our deeply held preconceived notions, we embrace or loudly protest against these messages. They explain why certain images or stories go viral at a certain time. Take for instance the story involving dogs in the current political narratives. In 1983 Mitt Romney was taking a vacation, when he placed his Irish setter, named Shamus in a kennel, which was strapped on the roof of his station wagon. This inconsequential story was broken during the GOP primaries by his opponent Rick Santorum. Yet, it spread like wild fire and, seeing its potential as a weapon in the hands of his political opponent, the Romney camp began retelling a story of Obama eating dog meat (no names mentioned this time) as a child in Indonesia. Once again this apparently irrelevant piece of information from his autobiography published years ago spread widely through the news media. If we want to know why these otherwise useless stories have such staying power, we should note that they reinforce the Democratic narrative that paints Mitt Romney an uncaring CEO and the Republican narrative that Obama is a stranger, an alien figure, not one of "us."

Understandably, from corporations to nations, celebrities to political personalities attempt control their image by carefully controlling their narratives by using symbolic signals. When we can find the most fitting word(s) that symbolically communicate complex phenomena in a desired way, we call our endeavor, a successful campaign. For instance, the Republican Party was able to change the

national discourse by calling the "estate" (a word that conjures up large holdings of wealth) tax the "death" tax. The goal for any advertisement campaign for a commercial product is develop a favorable narrative for itself and an unfavorable one for its competitor(s). Thus, the Verizon television commercials convey that it is not only the largest telecommunication network, but also that its competitor AT&T is slow and is plagued by high frequency of dropped calls. If we find evidence that this narrative has resonance with the consumers, the campaign has achieved its desired goal.

The narratives are, however, not stationary. They evolve dynamically through continuing retelling and the resulting discourse. As a result, we change how we view certain individuals, policies, and products. Thus, public opinion has shifted considerably on cigarette smoking from its hay days when it was considered stylish, cool, and even medicinal to light up.   Now it is generally seen not only as a repulsive habit but also a public enemy.

I argue that the evolution of narrative is key to our understanding of some of the central issues of our grant, including the rise of radical groups. I have argued that violent extremist groups do not spring up spontaneously simply there are shared grievances. A collective action takes place when "political entrepreneurs" can develop a collective identity by clearly identifying the community ("us"), the common enemy ("them") and an existential threat. These are constructed by developing appropriate narratives.   Being social animals, when we feel threat to our community we pick up arms to defend it and, some of us are even willing to give up our lives for the "cause." In the animal world, biologists have noted the development of altruistic behavior based on genetic grouping. Among the humans, however, all groupings -- based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, or economic class -- are mental constructs. As inveterate joiners, we engage in self-sacrificing altruistic acts based on our imagined communities.   While this constructed identity is the foundation all public goods that we enjoy, it is also at the root of terrorism and genocide.

I would, therefore, like to spend the coming year trying to understand the process of forming and evolving of narratives through the Internet. The changing narratives cannot only be understood by the differences in the cluster of words, but also by their visual representation through such techniques as the Word Cloud. By tracking narratives we would be able to see how it is transforming. The task, however, is complicated by the way we sort the relevant words and visualize them.