Confidence in the Government: A Content Analysis of Reactions to a Reddit Post on COVID-19 and Public Opinions Towards the Government

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Abstract

This study examined public reactions to a Reddit post about a news article that showed a decreasing level of confidence from the public in response to the government's actions during COVID-19. A content analysis on the 50 best comments from the Reddit post identified four common themes among user comments: a) sarcastic comments, b) explicit comments, c) personal comments, d) past comments. The most prevalent theme was sarcastic comments, which made up 50% of the sample. While the study mainly focused on low confidence levels in the government due to COVID-19, the study also emphasized ways in which political beliefs can have an impact on one's attitude towards the government.

Introduction

COVID-19 is a pandemic that has impacted the world in a number of ways. Many different social actors and institutions have had to create policies and procedures in order to help contain the virus. Specifically, the government has had the burden to share precise information to the public to ensure that they are properly informed and are taking the precautions that they need to be taking. The government has received a lot of negative responses from the public, as there is a level of distrust among some members of society.

During previous global crises such as the 2014 Ebola virus epidemic, research has pointed out that there was a low level of trust in the government based on their ability to provide accurate information to the public surrounding the virus (Steelfisher, Blendon, & Blanco, 2015). Rodríguez et al. (2012), for example, focused on public opinions following the 2009 H1N1 pandemic and showed how much of a shift there has been in public opinion roughly 10 years later.

Opinions regarding the information being provided by the government is highly individualized. Levels of trust can be skewed due to personal values, past experiences, religious beliefs, etc. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge these opinions because it gives researchers a chance to evaluate the level of trust that the public has in the information provided by the government. This study expands on literature from previous pandemics in order to focus on negative reactions to information being provided by the government during COVID-19. Specifically, the study looks at how Reddit users react to a news post which indicates that there has been a drop in the level of confidence in the government. The post used for the study can be found by opening the following link: https://www.reddit.com/r/Coronavirus/comments/fjvkbx/us_poll_shows_growing_worries_about_coronavirus/

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of Reddit posts in reaction to a news post shared by u/Kindred87 that was titled *U.S. poll shows growing worries about coronavirus; drop in confidence in government*. This news article came from Reuters and was reported by Andrea Shalal. The reddit post was identified through an online search by using the keywords "trust" and "government" on the subreddit r/coronavirus on reddit.com. Reddit was used as a data source because it is easily accessible to the

public and has a wide range of comments and posts from users. Also, r/coronavirus is a primary source for individuals looking to get informed on the virus. R/coronavirus is the fastest growing subreddit on Reddit as it grew by nearly 1.2 million members in the span of two months. The subreddit seeks to monitor the spread of COVID-19 by allowing members to create, read, and discuss posts on the disease. Currently, r/coronavirus is sitting at 1.9 million members.

Sample Selection

The Reddit sample examined in this study was posted on r/coronavirus 20 days ago. The post by u/Kindred87 was selected because it had a large number of comments, totalling at 547 comments at the time of the data collection. The number of comments showed that the post was able to initiate discussion and opinions from members of the subreddit group. The comments that are included in the study are based upon negative reactions to the "drop" in confidence in government, as stated in the post headline.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

 Comments included in this convenience sample were the first 50 individual comments found. Due to the high amount of comments, they were sorted from best to worst, meaning that comments which users upvoted the most were shown at the top and comments that users upvoted the least or downvoted were found later as you scrolled down the page. This helped to provide context on how users supported certain comments more than others. Individual comments were chosen for the study, meaning that replies to initial comments were sometimes excluded. These secondary replies were excluded as they would sometimes go off topic and did not contribute to the research at hand, however, some were chosen because they were relevant. An example of one of the secondary comments that was excluded came from u/angrylilbear who commented, "that is comedic genius as a read through." This comment is unable to provide a clear analysis on the topic at hand and instead simply acknowledges another user comment. As a result, comments like these were excluded from the study.

Units of Analysis

Each individual comment was examined and coded based on its relevance in accordance to the original news article that was posted. Key words such as "trust" and "confidence" were searched for on the page by using CTRL F on the keyboard while on the desktop site to filter those specific words on the webpage. Once 50 relevant posts had been found based on the above criteria, the sample was finalized.

Results

Results from the study indicated that commenters on the post do not have confidence in the government. The comment thread had a number of themes in terms of how users reflected their opinions on their low confidence in the government, specifically the ways in which the comments were made. These themes, in order of prevalence, included: a) sarcastic comments b) explicit comments c) personal comments d) past comments.

Sarcastic comments were the most prevalent in the study, as exactly 50% of users from the sample claimed that they do not have confidence in the government in a sarcastic way (see Figure 1). An example of a sarcastic comment came from u/Carmiche who commented "Water is wet," when referring to the headline that there has been a drop in confidence in the government. Although sarcasm can be difficult to detect when reading opinions online, it was evident that a lot of the comments were sarcastic because these comments did not get many upvotes. This was because sarcastic comments were often found near the bottom of the thread since a lot of them were being recycled and were repetitive. One sarcastic comment in particular was used 6 times in the entire comment thread. The sarcastic comments also had an undertone which was simple to interpret due to the general trend that there was low confidence in the government.

Explicit comments were the second most prevalent type of comment found in the study, as 30% of these comments were explicit in their meaning. Explicit comments were the ones that had a direct reply to what was being said in the original post. For example, u/Anodyne-Sunflower commented, in terms of the news article, that it was "Not really that shocking to hear." This comment was categorized as explicit

because it captured the opinion of the user as it directly related to the user's low level of confidence in the government. The explicit comments in the thread reinforced the idea that users from the sample have low confidence in the government.

At 16%, the third most common type of comment found in the sample were those that were personal in nature. These comments were made by users who have had a direct experience with the government, which is why they had a low confidence level in them. For example, u/SoulFactoriesX commented that they got laid off from work, and that they are certain the government would not be giving out any aid as a result of being laid off. This comment received four upvotes, meaning that there were a number of people who were able to relate to the nature of the comment. The low confidence levels in the government from this user was a direct result of personal experience after being laid off work and assuming that the government would not pay any insurance benefits.

The final 4% of commenters from the thread had no confidence in the government and displayed this low confidence by looking to past experiences. An example of one of these comments comes from u/pwnstar, who commented about the government's inability to recognize COVID-19 as a serious issue leading up to that point in time. The user mentions how the government initially recognized the virus as a "bad cold" and also mentions how the government mislead the public on how many test kits would be available for use. By looking to how the government has acted in the past, the user was able to display why they did not have confidence or trust in the government. To reinforce this, 368 users upvoted u/pwnstar's comment, meaning that the low confidence in the government due to their past negligence is a common trend.

The Reddit thread for the post was eventually locked by Reddit moderators because of the increasing amount of political attacks that were present in the comment section.
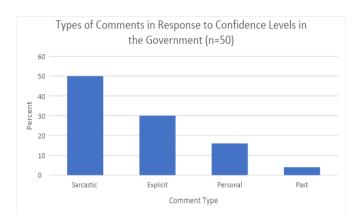

Figure 1: Key Comment Themes

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to look at how Reddit users would react to a news post that shows a drop in the publics level of confidence after the government's actions against COVID-19. Based on a sample of 50 commenting users, data showed that all of the users agreed that they had low confidence in the government. Specifically, the study showed that users portrayed this low level of trust by writing comments in a variety of different ways (i.e. sarcasm, explicit, personal views, historical context).

These low levels of confidence in the government during the COVID-19 pandemic are reinforced by previous literature, as we can look back at the public's reaction to the government during the 2014 Ebola crisis. According to past research only 14% of the public said they trusted the federal government to do what is right "almost all the time" or "most of the time," (Steelfisher, Blendon, & Blanco, 2015). When comparing this data to the news article that was posted on Reddit, the numbers have shifted significantly. According to the poll that was conducted in that article, sixty-one percent of Americans are "very" or "somewhat confident" in the U.S. government's ability to respond to COVID-19 (Shalal, 2020). This number (61%) represents a greater trust by the public in their governments ability to respond during times of crisis in comparison to the number (14%) that was found during the Ebola crisis. These figures also display the limitation that is found in the Reddit comments that were used for this study.

The comments which were used for the study indicated low levels of trust in the government, however, the

actual poll which the news source used showed greater trust than what the Reddit sample produced. This means that the sample taken from the Reddit population does not accurately represent how the majority of the public feels towards the government. Instead, this sample can be seen as an outlier group or one that has different political beliefs than the rest of the population. The news article mentions that only 43% of Democrats were "very" or "somewhat confident" in the U.S. government's ability to respond (Shalal, 2020). This could potentially mean that a large proportion of Reddit users are democrats and thus do not have confidence in the Trump administration due to political bias.

Past literature on the 2009 H1N1 crisis also shows significant differences in the public opinion on the government during crises. According to Rodríguez et al. (2012), health authorities and specialized personnel do not intervene sufficiently in the information work and of health education. This justifies the study done on the Reddit users, as there is a commonality in the distrust towards the government. Specifically, u/pwnstar's comment about how the government believed COVID-19 was just a "bad cold" helps to reinforce the idea of low confidence in the government and how there was insufficient health education during the H1N1 crisis.

While there are limitations to the application of this study, specifically how there were discrepancies in the confidence levels in the polls and from Reddit users, it is still clear that a large proportion of the public have low confidence in the government during times of crisis. The ways in which these low confidence levels are shown can be represented by the sarcastic, explicit, personal, and past views towards the government. As a result of the limitations from this study, future research should focus on the ways in which political values impact the public's confidence in the government. Because the Reddit thread was locked by moderators for political reasons, there is a lot of potential for future research in terms of confidence levels in the government based on one's political views.

References

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