

Summary of Project

This project critically examines the rhetorical construction of “Twitter” and “bots” as nonhuman political actors in mainstream political news coverage. Using a combination of text mining and visualization digital tools, I will analyze a set of articles on the topic of bots and politics from mainstream news sources (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*) to examine the frequency and context of specific metaphors or words used to describe bots. In particular, I am looking for references to monstrosity, the supernatural, or “uncanny” “agency” in accordance with narratives around technology that media historian Jeffrey Sconce calls “haunted media” -- a communication technology that has been culturally ascribed an “uncanny” “agency” by undermining perceived binaries between the living/dead, human/nonhuman, passive/active, or collective/individuated consciousness. My hypothesis is that using text mining tools will show that the “mystification” of software agents (like bots) works through narratives that 1) predate and persist beyond a specific election cycle or medium and 2) cannot be abstracted from larger political narratives.

Goals and Objectives

This project is to undertake a preliminary empirical research stage in preparation for an article on the rhetorical construction of bots as haunted media. The first stage of the project shall look at a single set of news articles published over a specific time period to be determined in preparation for a macroanalysis.

The long-term goal will be to keep the text-mining process current with ongoing publications. Not only should references to the rhetorical construction of bots as haunted media be archived and traced, but visualizing the ongoing coverage of electoral politics may prove useful in unpacking the coverage as it happens.

Scholarly Rationale

In the months preceding and following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, numerous mainstream press outlets speculated the extent to which specific technologies “interfered” in the “natural” democratic process of the election. Media coverage that positions “software agents” -- semi-autonomous software functions that have been programmed by humans to perform automated tasks without direct human oversight -- as a “glitch” in ‘the political machine’ reveals a transpartisan anxiety around the potential effect of non-human political agents on electoral politics.

What role does media coverage of “bots,” “algorithms,” “hacking,” and even “technology” play in the processes by which these terms become cultural artifacts? What are the political implications? What insight might a rhetorical analysis of this coverage offer into common assumptions around the relationship between technology, democracy, and the nonhuman?

While the fields of rhetoric, communications, and new media studies have produced a diverse body of scholarship around social media and politics, textual analysis of *political analyses* of social media remains relatively unexplored. Given the amount of information facilitated through social media and the increasing prevalence with which their role in politics is analyzed in mainstream news, the news coverage of technology in electoral politics shall remain

a fruitful site of analysis for scholars in digital rhetoric, political rhetoric, and cultural studies long after the technologies themselves become obsolete. This project seeks to contribute to the intersection between rhetoric and the digital humanities by bringing this textual analysis in conversation with DH scholars including Frabetti, Raley, Galloway, Chun, Stiegler, and Hayles.

Resources Needed

A text-mining tool must be decided. Candidates include: [Philomine](#) with [PhiloLogic](#), TextFlo, Textable, or [Overview.docs](#). The most important factors shall be ease of uploading and managing large amounts of text for content and relational analysis. When writing the article, [PAIR](#) may be useful to visualize and examine specific articles of note in more detail. I am considering publishing/managing data via [Heurist Data Manager](#). If the project ultimately becomes crowdsourced, I may choose a different profile.