

Media provocateurs in Twitter's attention economy: A comparative analysis of antivax and climate denial discourses

Digital platforms have become sites of contestation on issues as diverse as health, politics, gender, and science. Opposing sides express their antagonism in the form of combative hashtags, hate speech, memetic humor and other forms of weaponized discourse. These contestations are propelled by, but also reproduce, the attention economy—the competition for visibility between multiple actors enabled by platform affordances and algorithms. This research turns its focus on one group of actors in the attention economy: *media provocateurs*, or “public debaters who establish themselves as professional opinion-makers and media personalities via ‘media provocations’” (Rønlev & Bengtsson, 2022). Building on this performative concept, our empirical study identifies media provocateurs across two contentious contexts— antivax (AV) and climate denial (CD) campaigns on Twitter—and distinguishes their action frames, discursive styles and performed personas.

We draw on two corpora of tweets collected between mid-July and mid-September 2022 using AV and CD hashtags, respectively. The AV corpus comprises 390,305 tweets and the CD corpus has 170,508 tweets. The study employs a novel mixed-methods design in which social network analysis is used to identify media provocateurs while digital discourse analysis of their tweets and Twitter profiles helps distinguish their frames, styles and personas. The picture that emerges from analyzing selected tweets and profiles is one of homogeneity of content frames (e.g., the rather narrow bandwidth of conspiracies, debunking scientific claims, truth bombs, etc.) across the two contexts; and heterogeneity in discursive styles (degree of emotionality, engagement/interaction) and persona (intellectual provocateurs, meme warriors, established voices). The findings throw into relief the difficulty of establishing oneself as a media provocateur during critical discourse moments and consistently finding provocative angles that trigger audiences.

Rønlev, R., & Bengtsson, M. (2022). The media provocateur: A rhetorical framework for studying an emerging persona in journalism. *Journalism*, 23(6), 1233-1249.

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