

Advocacy groups use Twitter to build policy narratives featuring heroes, villains and victims.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/02/14/advocacy-groups-use-twitter-to-build-policy-narratives-featuring-heroes-villains-and-victims/

2/14/2017

Until recently for advocacy groups, influencing public opinion meant press releases, newspaper articles and emails. Now, social media gives such groups the ability to advocate much more widely and at lower cost. In new research, [Kuhika Gupta](#), [Joseph T. Ripberger](#), and [Wesley Wehde](#) look at how opposing advocacy groups construct narratives via social media. They find that pro and anti-nuclear groups used individual tweets to construct policy narratives featuring heroes, villains and victims.



In recent years, advocacy groups have turned to social media to influence public opinion and the policy process. While groups have long written press releases, published news articles, and even maintained e-mail lists to build and expand their support base, these methods are limited in their reach and often costly to execute, especially for small groups. Social media provides a unique opportunity for advocacy groups of all sizes to attract members and promote their policy positions to wider audiences with relatively smaller investments of time and money.



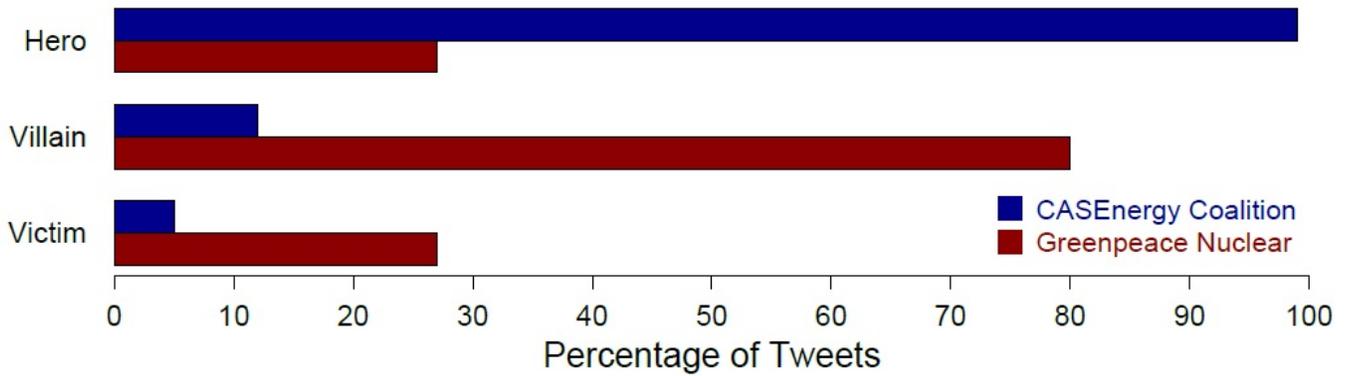
In our recent [research](#), we examine how two opposing advocacy groups use social media—Twitter—to disseminate their policy positions and to influence the policy process. How do they structure their messages on social media? Do they use familiar forms of communication like stories (narratives) that contain characters, plots, and settings? If so, what do their narratives look like and why? These are important questions because emergent research in public policy, [political science](#), [communication](#), and [psychology](#) suggests that people use narrative forms to simplify and make sense of the world around them.



To answer these questions, we use the [Narrative Policy Framework](#), an emerging “[theory of the policy process](#)”, to analyze 245 tweets from Greenpeace Nuclear (an anti-nuclear advocacy group) and 458 tweets from the CASEnergy Coalition (a pro-nuclear advocacy group). While previous research has found that advocacy groups frequently present policy positions in the form of narratives in articles and other types of media, we wanted to see if these same narrative/story components are present in social media messages. Despite their 140-character limit, we find that the majority of messages (tweets) published by these groups, contain the core elements of a policy narrative—at least one character (a hero, victim, or villain) and a basic plot or policy position. Additionally, we find that groups use their narratives strategically based on their position in the policy arena.

While the proportion of tweets that contain the core narrative elements is similar across groups (51 percent for CASEnergy Coalition and 51 percent for Greenpeace Nuclear), we find the plot lines and cast of characters used look very different. As shown in Figure 1, CASEnergy Coalition, a member of the winning side in nuclear energy policy, commonly features anthropomorphized heroes, such as nuclear energy that “saves the people” from cold weather by providing electricity and warmth.

Figure 1 – Character Types in Twitter Messages by Group



CASEnergy Coalition @CASEnergy · 9 Jan 2014

Despite record cold weather across the U.S. #nuclear energy is able to meet our #electricity demands & keep us warm

Polar Vortex Proves Nuclear Power Could Be A Reliable Energy Source
 As temperatures drop, the demand in energy rises, and nuclear power is seen as a reliable source to heat and power homes.
ibtimes.com

Greenpeace Nuclear, by comparison, tends to neglect heroes while emphasizing villains (i.e., the nuclear industry) and victims (i.e., Uranium workers). This distinction is important as new research has shown that character choices and plot lines may influence the power and persuasiveness of a narrative. Stories that feature [heroes](#), for example, are especially persuasive.

 Nuclear Energy Inst. follows



Greenpeace Nuclear @nukereaction · 21 Feb 2014

Running from Responsibility: How the #nuclear industry evades responsibility [PDF] [greenpeace.org/international/ ...](http://greenpeace.org/international/)



 Nuclear Energy Inst. follows



Greenpeace Nuclear @nukereaction · 16 Apr 2014

The price of nuclear power: Uranium workers dying after time at Namibia mine, report warns theguardian.com/environment/20...



In addition to selective use of characters, advocacy groups often use narrative strategies to manage the “scope of conflict” surrounding the issue they care about. Groups that are losing in a policy arena try to expand the number of actors that are involved in the fight. Groups that are winning try to restrict the number of actors that are involved. To accomplish this, losing groups like to highlight the widespread costs of current policy, whereas winning groups focus on the diffused benefits of current policy. When they break with these tendencies, they do so in specific ways—losing groups concentrate benefits to a narrow set of people/groups and winning groups concentrate costs.



Greenpeace Nuclear @nukereaction · 8 Apr 2014

Nuclear makes the profits, the planet pays the price: Nuclear Subsidy Deal 'Will Kill Renewables' greenbuildingpress.co.uk/article.php?ca...

Our research suggests groups are using these strategies on Twitter. Greenpeace Nuclear, arguably on the losing side of nuclear energy debate in the US, discussed costs in 52 percent of their messages and diffused these costs to a wide population (i.e., the planet) 88 percent of the time. On the other hand, CASEnergy Coalition only discussed costs in 5 percent of their Tweets and used diffused and concentrated costs at exactly equal proportions. CASEnergy mentioned benefits (i.e., jobs) in 81 percent of its Tweets, every single one of which discussed the diffuse nature of these benefits. Conversely, Greenpeace discussed benefits in only 14 percent of their messages 55 percent of which were concentrated to a few individuals.



CASEnergy Coalition  @CASEnergy · 30 Apr 2014

#DidYouKnow: There are more than 100,000 high-paying American #jobs in the #nuclear energy industry. Learn more:

Our findings are significant for multiple reasons. First and foremost, they add to a growing literature on the way that advocacy groups use “new media” to influence public opinion and the policy process by way of policy narratives. We show, in contrast to [prior research](#), that groups are able to construct narratives in individual tweets. Additionally, we expand upon [other studies](#) of social media that have primarily focused on YouTube, a social/new media more obviously fit to portraying narratives.

Second, our findings show that groups are using Twitter to disseminate their narratives, which is somewhat unexpected given the space limitations of 140 characters or less. This space limiting feature likely forces groups to simplify their narratives and/or prioritize some narrative elements or story lines over others. This process of

prioritization may provide additional insight into what groups are thinking about when telling their stories.

This article is based on the paper, '[Advocacy Group Messaging on Social Media](#)', in the *Policy Studies Journal*.

Featured [image](#) credit: [mrmayo](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-2.0](#))

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2lfj5k2>

About the authors

Kuhika Gupta – *University of Oklahoma*

Kuhika Gupta is a research scientist at the Center for Energy, Security & Society at the University of Oklahoma.



Joseph T. Ripberger – *University of Oklahoma*

Joseph Ripberger is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and the Deputy Director for Research at the Center for Risk and Crisis Management at the University of Oklahoma.



Wesley Wehde – *University of Oklahoma*

Wesley Wehde is a PhD. student in the Department of Political Science and a graduate research assistant at the Center for Risk and Crisis Management at the University of Oklahoma.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP