

The spiral of silence in politics and social media – new research

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LSE student Shaikha Nurfarah Mattar reports on a presentation by the latest winner of the [Polis/Human Digital social media research prize](#) which looks at how you can measure political sentiment online.

“We have a moral obligation to keep thinking,” urged CEO of Human Digital Christian Gladwell, in an intimate discussion about social media research and the POLIS Social Media Prize.

Thinking critically was precisely what alumna Cristina Malaspina did, when she observed jarring discrepancies between online sentiments of citizens and actual voting behaviour in the 2013 Italian Political Elections.

With the help of Human Digital, Malaspina conducted human-generated content analysis of blogs, forums, content hosting sites and social networks over a six-month period. This was part of her concerted effort to better understand the climate of opinion and willingness of citizens to speak about contending parties in the legislative race. In other words, Malaspina studied how the spiral of silence functioned in an online political context, to which she uncovered fascinating results.



[You can see [Cristina's presentation here](#)]

Her findings revealed high levels of negativity toward Italian political leaders, as online anonymity has removed the fear of isolation for citizens, who increasingly expressed themselves through spontaneous interactions. Malaspina shared that her methodology was an application of content analysis, but captured “specific nuances and sensitive content” which machines tend to be less proficient in.

There are questions about her research. These include the viability of social media research to predict voting results for future elections, which Malaspina feels is not representative of the population yet. However, her conclusions on the spiral of silence is potentially useful when applied to other areas like fashion or even same-sex marriages.

Malaspina bagged the POLIS Social Media Prize with her inspiring project, contributing original research which relates to a real-world problem. The award, according to POLIS Director Charlie Beckett and Dr. Ellen Helsper who were also in attendance, encourages students to achieve commercial application of their academic work. Human Digital, having collaborated with POLIS, also offers the winner an esteemed position in their social media intelligence agency.

Interested students should submit their proposals of 500-1000 words to polis@lse.ac.uk before April 4, 5pm. These proposals should involve the domain of social media, rewarding the winner with academic recognition and an arguably cooler, 500 pounds.

This report by *LSE student Shaikha Nurfarah Mattar*

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