Exploration of Values and Frames in Social Media Texts Related to the Homeless Hotspots Debate

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ABSTRACT
In this study we conducted framing analysis and thematic analysis of social media texts to explore the qualitative relationships of salient values in frames that shaped the Homeless Hotspots debate. We identified three key frames and associated values in the debate: (1) the Entrepreneurship frame evoking Self-Enhancement values, (2) the Dystopia frame de-emphasizing the Self-Enhancement values put forth by the Entrepreneurship frame, and (3) the Societal Failure frame that emphasized Self-Transcendence values like universalism. We discuss the implications of these findings and use them to develop hypotheses for a follow-up experiment investigating the relationship between personal values of readers of texts and the texts themselves, as well as an examination of the timeline of frames and how they are propagated via social media.

Keywords
Human Values, Framing Analysis, Homeless Hotspots

INTRODUCTION
Information today moves rapidly, in real-time, and is proliferated on the Internet through diffuse social networks. For example, real-time updates on Twitter, a popular social network that supports microblogging, have been shown to support earthquake detection faster than the U.S. Geological Survey’s earthquake notification system (Sakaki, Okazakai, & Matsuo, 2010). The rapidity of information sharing can be useful, but it can also be confusing when the ability for almost anyone to comment on almost anything leads to highly charged debates, such as the recent debate about Homeless Hotspots (HH). Because small changes in the presentation of an issue can produce large shifts in public opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007), it has become increasingly important to explore relationships between values and framing strategies in texts like newspaper articles and blog posts and then their eventual proliferation through social networks.

This paper reports the qualitative findings from the first phase of a sequential, exploratory mixed-methods study of the values expressed in frames by key stakeholders in the HH debate, addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the primary frames used to present the debate about Homeless Hotspots?
2. Which values are most salient in each frame?
3. What are the relationships between the salient values expressed and the frames that are used to shape the arguments?

For this first phase we reviewed 30 blog posts and online news articles (dated March 6-29, 2012) and observed (though we did not critically analyze) the tweets related to the #homelesshotspots hashtag that emerged after the unveiling of the HH project at the South by Southwest interactive (SXSWi) conference in Austin, Texas, in March 2012. We examined the relationship between salient values and frames from three key stakeholder groups who responded to the controversy and shaped the debate: (1) BBH Labs, (2) the digerati, and (3) homeless advocates, organizations, and individuals. This led us to three originating online articles representing each perspective, to which we conducted framing analysis to identify key constructs that structured the core elements of the debate. We then conducted thematic analysis of values expressed within those same originating articles to determine the relationship between values and frames. The findings from this study support the development of a second quantitative phase of research in which we will experiment with the role of the reader’s values and use of various frames within the debate, described further in the Discussion section.

BACKGROUND
Homeless Hotspots (HH) was a “charitable innovation initiative” (http://homelesshotspots.org) by BBH Labs, a division of the Bartle Bogle Hegarty marketing firm. During SXSWi, BBH Labs partnered with a local social services organization called Front Steps Shelter (http://frontsteps.org) to equip clients from the case management system with 4G MiFi devices to serve as pay-per-use hotspots for attendees at SXSWi.
Program participants wore t-shirts provided by BBH that read: “I’M [FIRST NAME], A 4G HOTSPOT SMS HH [FIRST NAME] TO 25827 FOR ACCESS. www.homelesshotspots.org”. Payment in physical cash or via PayPal for the service was optional; a donation of $2 for 15 minutes of Wi-Fi was suggested. HH was brought to public attention by a New York Times post on Tumblr and a flurry of tweets and blog posts that emerged from there.

**Homelessness** is an important social issue with significance in social network discourse, on sites such as Twitter (Koepfle & Fleischmann, 2012).

**Framing** is “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue...having implications for multiple values” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104).

A **value** is “a belief pertaining to desirable end states or modes of conduct that transcends specific situations; guides selection or evaluation of behavior, people, and events; and is ordered by importance relative to other values...” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 20). More simply, values represent the things that people consider important in life, and are prioritized to greater or lesser extents in various contexts.

**Framing and values.** Individuals who hold a particular value or set of values strongly are less influenced by frames that contradict those values (Gross, 2000). However, even individuals who hold firm values are vulnerable to framing on new issues or events for which they do not yet have a clear interpretation or are otherwise uncertain (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Rieh & Danielson, 2007).

Salient values of the text come into play here. **Salient values** “consist of the individual’s sense of what the important goals (ends) and/or processes (means) are that should be followed in a particular situation” (emphasis ours) (Siegrist, Cvetkovich, & Roth, 2000, p. 355). Both framing theory and salient values research takes into account that, in practice, people often rely heavily on affective considerations, like values, for making judgments about topics or issues that they may not know much about. Prior research has suggested that framing of issues may play an important role in how values are perceived in texts (Templeton & Fleischmann, 2011).

**METHODS**

Framing analysis is an important method in communication research (e.g., Lawrence, 2004). It has also emerged in Internet and information studies research (Jha, 2008; Rieh & Danielson, 2007). We used Chong & Druckman’s (2007) widely used, flexible, and intuitive method for identifying frames in texts. Their method requires researchers to: (1) identify an issue or event (i.e. HH); (2) isolate specific attitudes or sentiment towards the issue or event (i.e. pro or con); (3) inductively generate frames (i.e. qualitatively review the texts); (4) select sources for content analysis (i.e. originating posts); and (5) code articles for presence or absence of identified frames.

To study values within the frames, we used the Schwartz Value Inventory (1994) as the guiding framework. There are many value inventories that could be used (for a list, see Cheng & Fleischmann, 2010), but we chose the Schwartz Value Inventory because it provides a hierarchy of values, including 56 basic human values, ten motivational value types, and two orthogonal dimensions of four values classes. This Inventory is also the foundation for the Portrait Value Questionnaire (Schwartz, 2007), a survey instrument that assesses people’s value priorities, which we will use in the quantitative phase of our study.

The two orthogonal dimensions of four values classes (Self-Enhancement vs. Self-Transcendence and Openness to Change vs. Conservation) in Schwartz’s framework directly address value tensions, which are important for understanding the role of values in debates and controversies. For the first dimension, Schwartz places power and achievement values (Self-Enhancement), which emphasize the pursuit of self-interests, opposite universalism and benevolence values (Self-Transcendence), which involve the concern for the welfare and interests of others. For the second dimension, Schwartz places self-direction and stimulation values (Openness to Change), which emphasize independent action and readiness for new experiences, opposite security, conformity, and tradition values (Conservation), which emphasize self-restriction, social order, and resistance to change. The tenth value, hedonism, shares a border with both the Openness to Change and Self-Enhancement classes, but has been shown to align more with Openness to Change (Hinz et al., 2005).

In this study, we coded paragraphs of the originating articles into one of these four value classes. Coding at the level of values classes supported thinking about the broad value orientations at work in the debate. We draw attention to specific values within those classes when they illustrate an interesting point about the role of values in the debate.

**RESULTS**

This section highlights the three frames emphasized by the originating articles in the debate and describes salient values that emerged based on Schwartz’s four value classes. We provide an example of a tweet for each frame that is representative of the types of tweets that proliferated the various frames rapidly across social networks.

**Frame 1: Entrepreneurship.** According to this frame, HH extended the street newspaper model, which is threatened with irrelevance by digital technology. Like street newspapers, HH offered homeless individuals an opportunity to earn money, while promoting interaction between homeless individuals and encompassing communities. This frame was projected by BBH, the company that created HH. The frame initially appeared in the BBH blog post (http://bbh-labs.com/homeless-hotspots-a-charitable-experiment-at-sxswi) announcing the project on March 6, 2012:
…One particular aspect we find interesting is Street Newspapers, which are print publications created and sold by homeless populations as a form of entrepreneurial employment. The model has proven successful enough to be adopted in cities spanning 30 countries. The issue however, is that like any print publication, these newspapers are under duress from the proliferation of digital media.

The frame remained a touchstone throughout the debate and was echoed by tweets like this: “Side note. I think homeless people used as wifi hotspots is a great idea. It can allow them to get money and meet new people. #dope”

Salient values for the Entrepreneurship frame emerged primarily from the Self-Enhancement values class and, to a lesser extent, from the Openness to Change class (most notably stimulation in terms of the innovation of the project) and a nod towards Self-Transcendence in the form of helpfulness towards the homeless. The main thrust of the frame, however, focused on Self-Enhancement values of empowerment and achievement for the individuals experiencing homelessness, as well as an opportunity to obtain new wealth through the small job opportunity that the project provided them.

Frame 2: Dystopia. According to this frame, HH reinforced a division between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. One argument was that participants in HH did not have creative input like they do for street newspapers, and they have no opportunity for real entrepreneurship. In this frame, the t-shirts that participants wore stating “I’m…a 4G hotspot” illustrated the objectification of humans argued to be at the heart of the project. Further, SXSWi as the venue for the project amplified a contrast between extremes of (dis)empowerment across the digital divide.

This short article by David Gallagher on the NYTimes SXSW Tumbler blog (http://nytsxsw.tumblr.com/post/19145988299/getting-a-decent-data-connection-at-sxsw-can-be-a) prompted the Dystopia frame on March 11, 2012:

Getting a decent data connection at SXSW can be a challenge…Homeless people have been enlisted to roam the streets wearing T-shirts that say, “I am a 4G hotspot.” Passersby can pay what they wish to get online via the 4G-to-Wi-Fi device that the person is carrying. It is a neat idea on a practical level, but also a little dystopian. When the infrastructure fails us…we turn human beings into infrastructure?

This was picked up and developed against the original BBH frame by Jon Mitchell at Read Write Web, then by Tim Carmody at Wired.com, and also in tweets like this: “[link] Homeless Hotspots: A Disgraceful and Exploitative Experiment – Sabotage Times”.

Salient values from the Dystopia frame emphasized Self-Transcendence values, particularly universalism, and de-emphasized, or in some cases negated values evoked in the Entrepreneurship frame. The Dystopia frame emphasized HH as a project that objectified and exploited individuals experiencing homelessness, while de-emphasizing the empowerment values evoked by authors using the Entrepreneurship frame. The Dystopia frame also injected self-direction, a value in the Openness to Change class, into the debate, and linked this value to the Self-Transcendent goal of helping the homeless.

Frame 3: Societal Failure. Many debates are characterized by statements for or against an issue (i.e. Entrepreneurship vs. Dystopia). However, in the HH debate a third frame emerged and deliberately elevated the discourse from the issue of HH to concerns for homelessness in society more generally. According to this frame, society had systematically failed individuals experiencing homelessness by not providing adequate support for its most vulnerable members. In this frame, whether or not HH raised awareness about the issue or empowered the homeless was a moot point; HH was relatively unimportant compared to the long-term work of ending homelessness.

This frame was promoted primarily by social service and homeless advocacy organizations. For example, the CEO of Healthcare for the Homeless posted this on their blog (http://www.hchmd.org/blog/?p=868) on March 14, 2012:

Contemporary homelessness emerged over the past 30 years following specific public policy decisions, and despite recent acknowledgement at the highest levels of the federal government that supportive housing is in fact the solution to homelessness…evidence mounts at overburdened shelters, soup kitchens, and health clinics that the problem is only getting worse. That’s what’s outrageous…Current events at an Austin technology conference aren’t in the same book let alone on the same page.

Tweets from other organizations and homeless advocates on Twitter propagated this frame with tweets like this: “From the (@[twitter name]) CEO: Outraged in Baltimore? << << Health Care for the Homeless [link] GREAT post about @HHSXSW”.

Salient values for the Societal Failure frame emphasized values from the Self-Transcendence class, explicating the HH project as primarily one that was benevolent to the individuals who participated in it and provided them with an opportunity to feel like a part of society by engaging with individuals of the SXSWi community. Though these are nice things for the participants, advocacy groups emphasized that HH itself would not solve the problem of homelessness, which requires much greater concern for values of human equality and social justice.

DISCUSSION & FUTURE WORK

A few things become apparent from this analysis. First, the qualitative relationship between values and frames is that values are embedded strategically within frames. Frames bring some values into salience in the consideration of an issue and de-emphasize or obscure others, attempting to align values that are important to the audience with the rhetorical aims of the authors. This is consistent with the
literature on persuasion and argumentation: if someone wishes to make an ethical claim or moral judgment publicly, they need to make public appeals to other people’s values (Fisher, 1978; Wallace, 1963). Second, values are used both directly and indirectly to shape a frame. Direct invocation of values are used by authors to appeal to the values of the reader, while indirect methods attempt to paint the values of another frame in a negative light, as in the Dystopia frame. Finally, the ways that values in frames are shaped early in a debate, especially in social media posts that pre-date official news articles, are likely to impact how information is spread about an issue over time and how it is eventually presented in an official news article. Our review of the social media articles and tweets that showed up later in the debate indicated that most re-posters simply re-hashed the arguments made by one or more of the originating frames.

These findings draw us toward several research hypotheses: 1) Individuals who hold personal values similar to the salient values of a frame will hold positive attitudes towards text that uses that frame; 2) Individuals are more likely to be persuaded by text that reflects their values; 3) Social media users who hold positive attitudes towards a frame are more likely to re-post it through their social media outlets; and 4) Over time, authors may shift their frames to try to counter claims made by other authors in a debate, by de-emphasizing or negating the values evoked in the first frame.

In the next phase of our study, we will set up an experiment that first assesses the values of readers (using the Portrait Value Questionnaire) and then asks readers to look at one of the three frames. We will use Likert-type items to ask readers about their attitudes toward that text and toward the HH project and then whether or not they would re-post that text. Separately, we will systematically examine the ways that the originating frames were propagated through social media (i.e. tweets) and identify the ways in which appealing to certain values may have shifted the frames and overall debate.

Understanding values in frames and people’s affective response to them has implications for how we communicate about sensitive social issues, like homelessness. Future efforts towards innovating in the social services sector might be reframed to encourage public acceptance of a project like HH (perhaps with a reframed name to start with) or potentially controversial policy changes that might emerge.

REFERENCES


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