Lost and Found in Translation: Coding Infrastructure for FTM Online Community Studies

Clara Belitz, 2017

Social science disciplines are increasingly turning to online tools to gather data, study marginalized groups and communities, and perform large-scale computational analysis. However, current methods for studying social media are limited. Programs currently exist to scrape data from social media sites like Twitter, but other social media platforms remain less explored. Tumblr, the most visual of such sites and networks, is primarily used by young people. Transgender young people, unable to access a physical gathering of their peers, often turn to Tumblr to connect to one another, receive advice, post photos, and share their stories.

“Lost and Found in Translation” required the creation of a robust infrastructure to scrape and store data related to a particular hashtag that the community that uses it. Professor Gieseking and I were particularly interested in transgender online spaces, specifically the #FtM (female-to-male) hashtag which is used by transgender men. While we specifically looked at #FtM use on Tumblr using its application programming interface (API), I successfully developed code for gathering data on any hashtag someone may wish to track on Tumblr. Using the Bowdoin cron job scheduler, the code requests data every hour. We store detailed information on a minimum of 480 posts a day, and creates a network out of “reblogs” from the Tumblr community. The code is written in highly robust and accessible Python and will be shared for public use on GitHub.

The resultant data affords network and statistical analysis that informs understandings of the community structure, interests and issues of discussion, and the interactions between and among the users. We plan for the code to run over 3 months, in order to capture the community in its entirety, and not just a single moment in time. We hope that findings from this research will shed light on FtM’s everyday experiences, sense of self, sharing of health information, and development of community.
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Funded by the Gibbons Summer Research Fellowship