

Report on Media Consortium Collaborations

July 2015

Overview

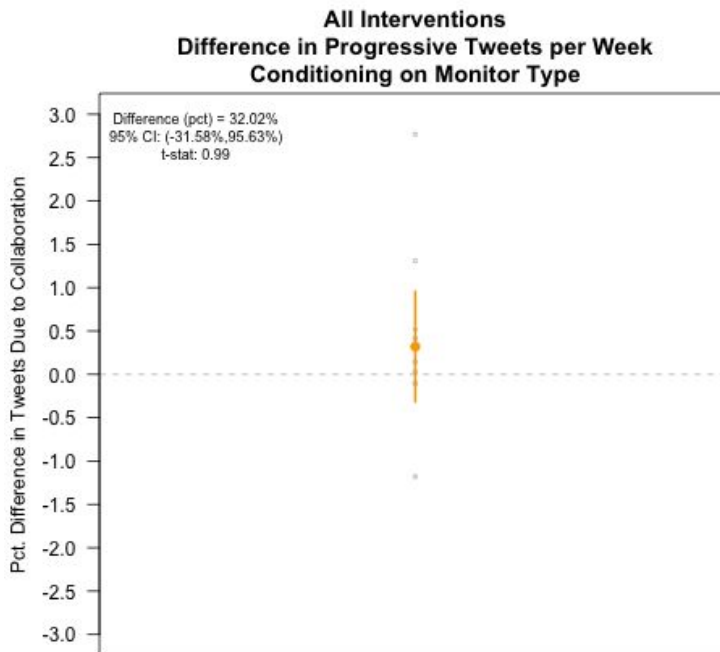
What impact do the Media Consortium (TMC) member sites have on online conversations? How can TMC outlets most effectively work together to increase their influence? We are well on our way to answering these questions based on the results of an ongoing series of experiments.

So far, we have completed fifteen experimental trials, in which participating outlets have created new content on topics including immigration, reproductive justice, education, and the environment. We will have scientifically valid results (that you can use to help persuade funders) at approximately 40 trials. At that point, we will be able to provide feedback to each site to help you understand what works and doesn't, to test alternative formats and strategies, and to suggest new ones. We aim to create a virtuous circle of continuous improvement of every TMC site with feedback and testing via these and other scientifically rigorous experiments.

In these experiments TMC outlets agree ahead of time to release their content on the same day (and, in some cases, to re-publish and/or cross-promote content). The key to the experimental protocol is that it is a randomized controlled trial, which is the gold standard for making rigorous causal inferences. Specifically, the outlets allow the researchers to choose the publication date by flipping a coin -- so that the week of publication is chosen at random between two previously agreed upon possibilities. We then track online discussion on Twitter related to the topic of the collaboration, comparing the amount and content of discussion during the week chosen for publication ("treatment") to the week that was not chosen ("control").

The preliminary results are promising. In the experiments so far, eleven of fifteen trials have led to increases in the number of Twitter posts per day made on the topic covered by the collaboration that expressed progressive sentiments (Note: For articles on Immigration, we examined the total number of posts on Immigration rather than only Progressive posts because we are currently improving this measure for consistency).

The plot below presents the average increase in public conversations across all 15 collaborations. We saw a 32% increase in progressive on-topic tweets in "treatment" weeks as compared to "control" weeks. Our estimates will become more precise as we undertake more collaborations.



In the rest of this memo, we provide further details on each collaboration. These should be interpreted with one note of caution in mind: the results of any single experimental trial can be affected by idiosyncratic factors -- for instance, when publication on a topic happens to correspond with a news story that independently drives higher levels of discussion on Twitter. Only by looking across a number of experimental observations do the idiosyncratic factors start to cancel out and allow us to make definitive inferences about the effects of the collaborations on online conversations. For the same reason, medical trials include many patients.

GMOs & Pesticides in Hawaii

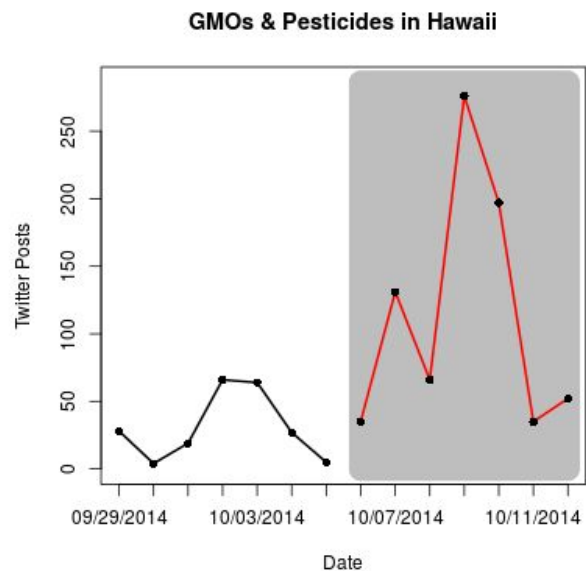
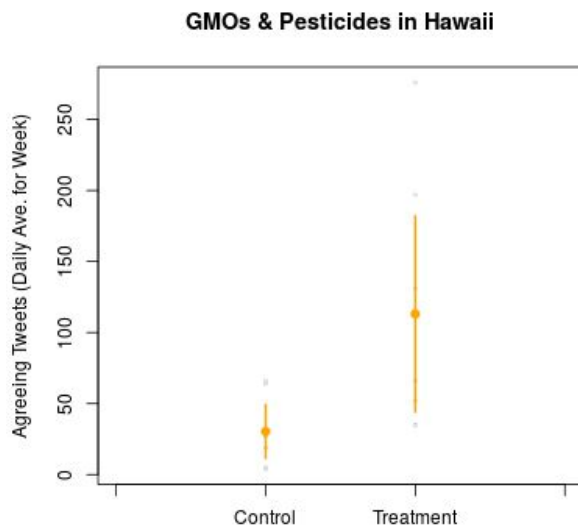
Dates: Weeks starting 10/6/2014 (Treatment) and 9/29/2014 (Control)

Outlets: Tikkun, Cascadia Times, Alternet, Earth Island Journal, Hawaii Independent, PRWatch

Hashtag: N/A

This collaboration involved the co-publishing the article “The Ghost in the GMO Machine,” which examined the use of the synthetic insecticide chlorpyrifos and its effects on health. The participating outlets released the story on October 7, 2014. Many outlets used the hashtag #GMO to promote their stories. There were slightly more than 100 tweets (including participants in the intervention) that directly mentioned the article title during the treatment week.

The plots below compare Twitter conversations about genetic modification, pesticides, and corporate involvement in food systems across the “treatment” week (when the collaboration ran) and the prior, non-collaboration (“control”) week. The plot on the left compares the mean daily conversation volumes expressing concern about health effects of pesticides or GMOs in the control week and the treatment week, showing a large increase in the week of the collaboration. The plot on the right shows each day’s conversation volumes in both the control (black/white) week and the treatment (red/gray) week, again demonstrating a large increase in conversations about the topic of the article on the week that the collaboration ran.



Child Refugees & Migrant Youth

Dates: Weeks starting 10/27/2014 (Treatment) and 10/20/2014 (Control)

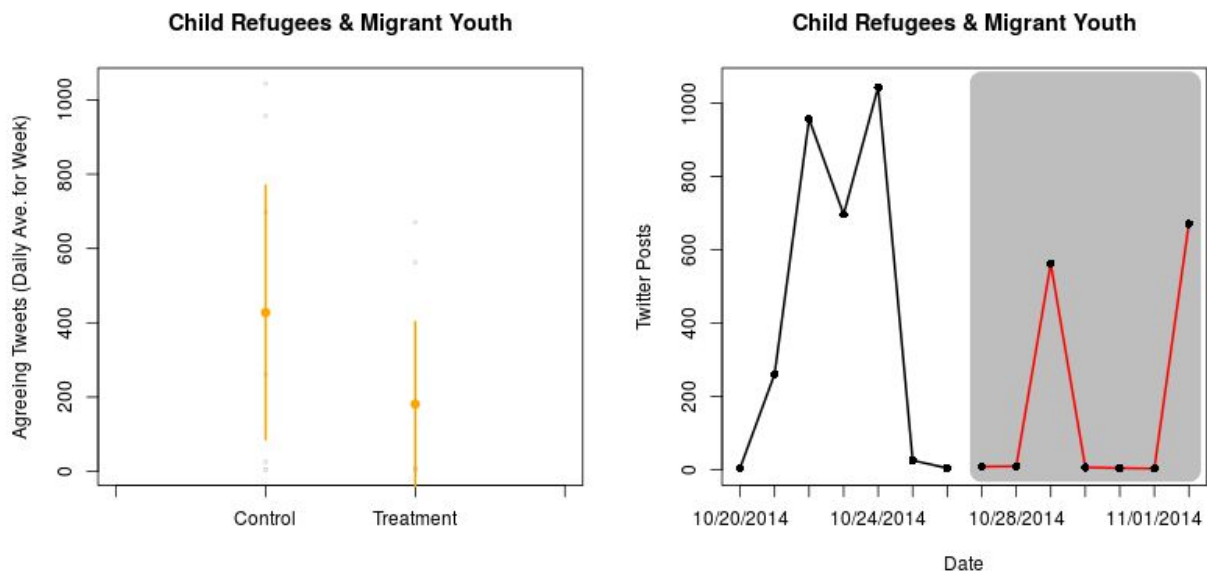
Outlets: City Limits, Tikkun, New American Media, Rabble

Hashtag: #TMCimm

In this collaboration, each participant generated original content. City Limits published an article on unaccompanied minors who had immigrated to New York. Tikkun published an article on faith groups rallying around migrant youths. New America Media published an article on religious organizations leading a sanctuary movement to help child immigrants. Finally, rabble.ca wrote on Canada's managed migration system.

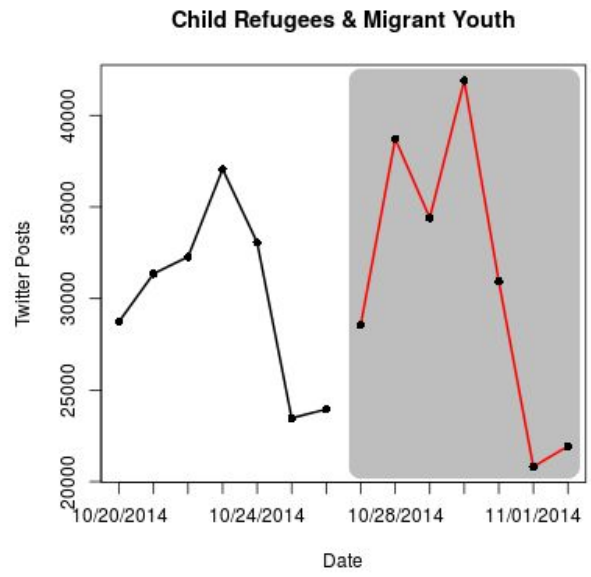
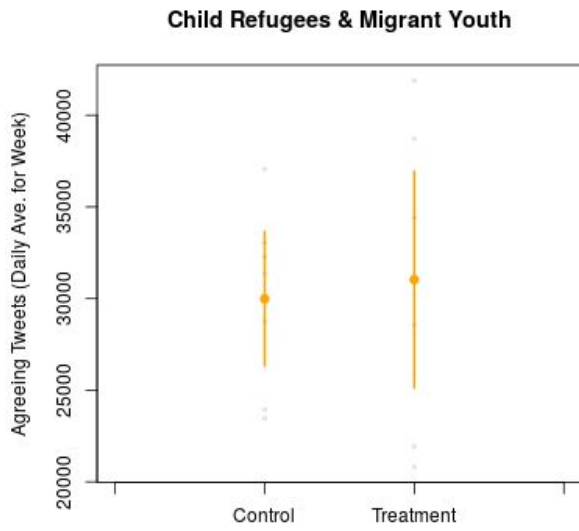
The outlets used the hashtag #TMCimm to promote the stories. There were 69 tweets, including participants in the collaboration, that directly referred to this hashtag. In addition, there were 78 tweets that linked to one of the articles published (54 of the tweets linked to rabble.ca's piece). All of this activity on Twitter occurred October 28 or later.

The plots below compare Twitter conversations on immigration, which express pro-immigration sentiments, in the treatment and control weeks. In the plots below, we do not observe a large uptick corresponding with the collaboration. As discussed above, this could be due to a true non-effect, or to a problem with our current system of classifying immigration posts as pro-immigration or positive towards immigrants.



On the other hand, when we examine overall discussion on immigration (including all sentiments, rather than just pro-immigration sentiments), we do observe a slight

increase in twitter posts on the issue during the week of the collaboration -- an increase of roughly one thousand posts per day.



Abortion (Intervention 1)

Dates: Weeks starting 12/8/2014 (Treatment) and 12/15/2014 (Control)

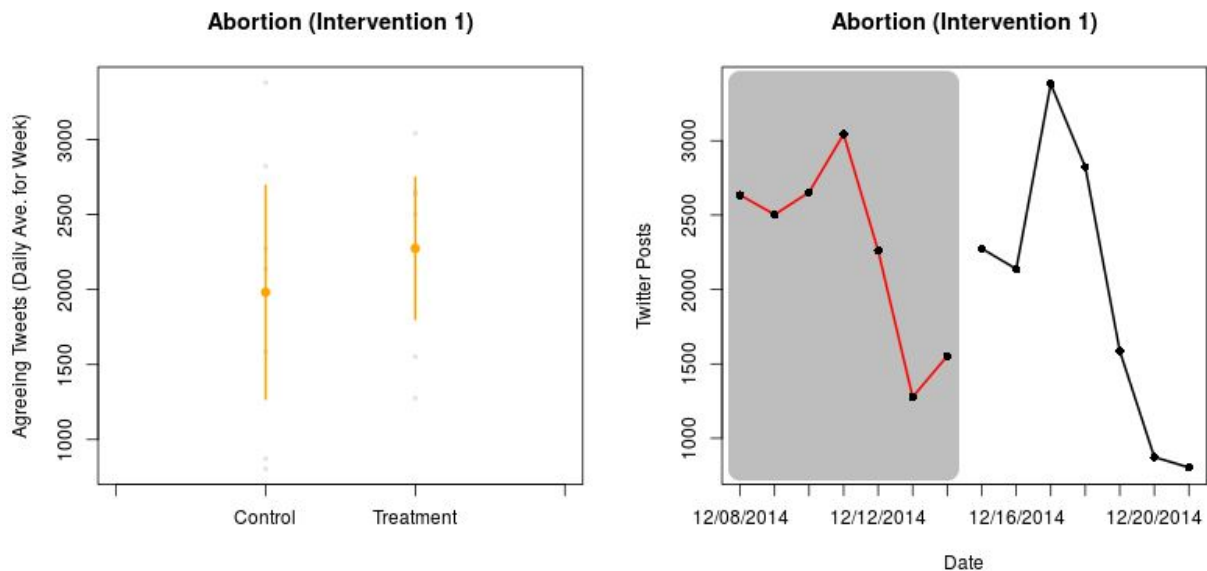
Outlets: Bitch, Ms. Magazine

Hashtag: N/A

Both Ms. Magazine and Bitch published original content for this collaboration. Ms. Magazine published a story recapping pro-choice victories in 2014, and Bitch covered anti-choice christmas carollers.

The outlets did not use a particular hashtag to promote the stories in this case. Twelve articles linked directly to the Ms. Magazine article. There were 33 tweets found that directly mentioned the title of the Bitch Media article on anti-choice Christmas Carolers.

The plots below compare Twitter conversations about abortion (specifically, tweets expressing pro-choice views) in the treatment and control weeks. The plot on the left compares the mean daily tweet volumes during treated and control weeks, showing a slight increase during the collaboration week. The plot on the right shows each day's conversation volumes during the control (black/white) and treated (red/gray) weeks.



Abortion (Intervention 2)

Dates: Weeks starting 1/12/2015 (Treatment) and 1/5/2015 (Control)

Outlets: Bitch, Ms. Magazine

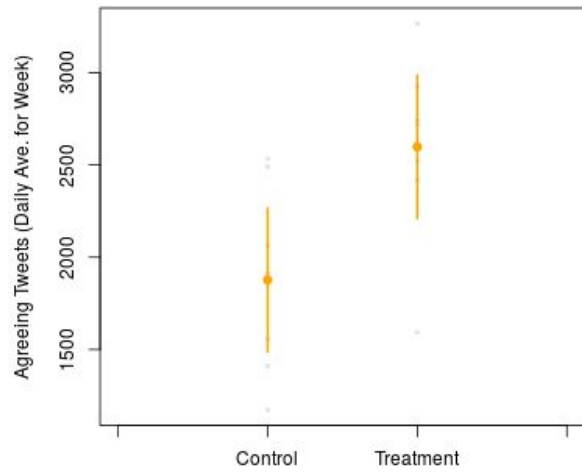
Hashtag: N/A

Both outlets published original content, with Ms. posting a piece on the “junk science” employed by the anti-choice movement and with Bitch publishing a piece on Nicki Minaj discussing her choice to have an abortion as a teenager. The piece on Nicki Minaj coincided with a larger discussion in the news on this issue, as she had recently given an interview with Rolling Stone that discussed her experience. This led to a flurry of activity on Twitter that then gradually declined in the following weeks. For example, tweets that included the terms “Nicki Minaj” and “abortion” numbered 933 in the treatment week. But in the control week (one week before), they numbered 1109; and, in the week before the control week (12/29/2014 -- 1/4/2015), which is when Minaj first gave the interview to Rolling Stone, there were 12,496 tweets.

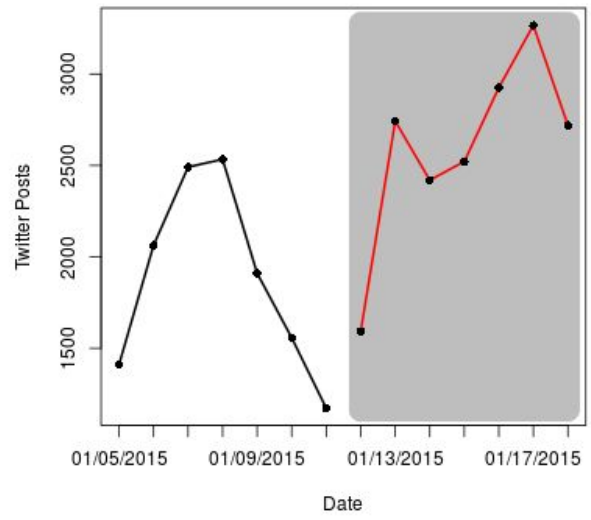
In the week following these articles being published, 28 twitter posts linked directly to the Ms. Magazine piece. Roughly 50 twitter posts directly mentioned the Bitch piece.

The plots below compare Twitter conversations about abortion (specifically, tweets expressing pro-choice views) in the treatment and control weeks. The plot on the left compares the mean daily tweet volumes during treated and control weeks, showing a large increase of over 500 posts per day during the collaboration week. The plot on the right shows each day’s conversation volumes during the control (black/white) and treated (red/gray) weeks.

Abortion (Intervention 2)



Abortion (Intervention 2)



Abortion (Intervention 3)

Dates: Weeks starting 4/6/2015 (Treatment) and 4/13/2015 (Control)

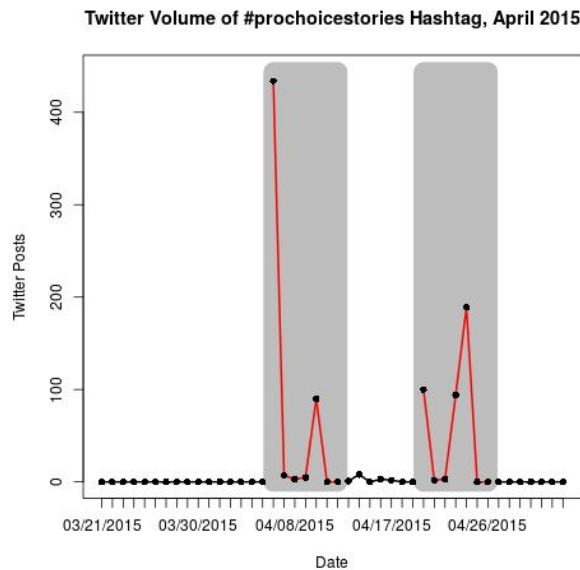
Outlets: Making Contact, Ms. Magazine

Hashtag: #prochoice; #prochoicestories

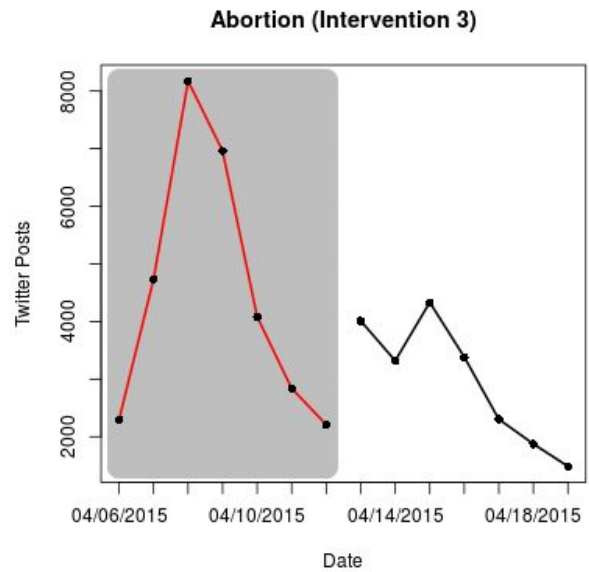
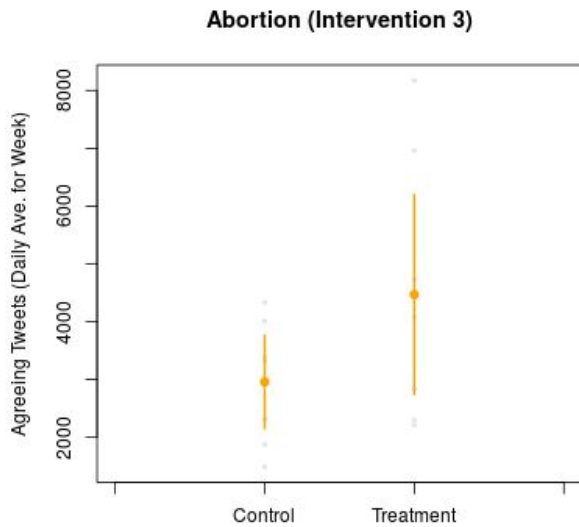
Ms. Magazine published an article on anti-choice activists who co-opted the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and attempted to repurpose it for an anti-abortion message. Making Contact posted a radio story analyzing Nick Cannon's and Nicki Minaj's messages on abortion.

The outlets used two hashtags -- #prochoice and #prochoicestories -- to promote their articles on Twitter. We tracked the use of these hashtags over time, and it appears the stories were responsible for a modest uptick in their use. For example, there were 3374 tweets during the treatment week that used the hashtag #prochoice. In the same week during the previous month, there were only 3071 tweets using that hashtag. Even more starkly, in the treatment week there were 539 tweets using the hashtag #prochoicestories, as compared to zero tweets using that hashtag in the same week of the previous month.

The plot below displays the number of tweets each day using the hashtag #prochoicestories. As is evident from the plot, there were no mentions of this hashtag before the intervention. During the weeks where stories were published collaboratively, there was a sizable uptick in tweets using this hashtag.



The plots below compare Twitter conversations about abortion (specifically, tweets expressing pro-choice views) in the treatment and control weeks. The plot on the left compares the mean daily tweet volumes during treated and control weeks, showing a large increase of over 1000 posts per day during the collaboration week. The plot on the right shows each day's conversation volumes during the control (black/white) and treated (red/gray) weeks.



Abortion (Intervention 4)

Dates: Weeks starting 4/20/2015 (Treatment) and 4/27/2015 (Control)

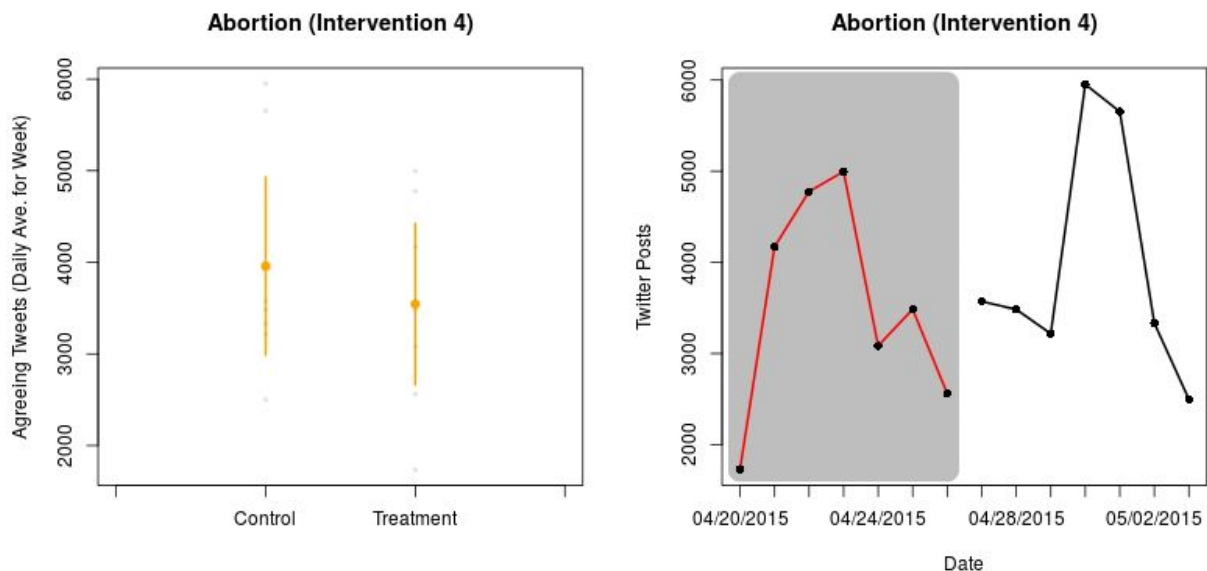
Outlets: Making Contact, Ms. Magazine, Truthout

Hashtag: #prochoice; #prochoicestories

Making Contact and Ms. Magazine collaborated here to publish three original pieces of content, covering expanding access to abortion care, an interview with Dolores Huerta on reproductive health and a women's right to choose, and a recap of actions taken to restrict abortion rights in 2015.

The outlets used the same hashtags -- #prochoice and #prochoicestoreis -- as in the previous intervention. This time there was a slight decline in usage of the hashtag #prochoice when compared to the corresponding week from the previous month (from 2828 to 2446); on the other hand, the #prochoicestories tag had 388 tweets, compared with none in the corresponding week from the previous month.

The plots below compare Twitter conversations about abortion (specifically, tweets expressing pro-choice views) in the treatment and control weeks. The plot on the left compares the mean daily tweet volumes during treated and control weeks, showing a small decrease during the collaboration week. The plot on the right shows each day's conversation volumes during the control (black/white) and treated (red/gray) weeks. We do not observe a significant change across weeks (there is a slight decline in fact).



DACA/DAPA Extension Update

Dates: Weeks starting 5/11/2015 (Treatment) and 5/18/2015 (Control)

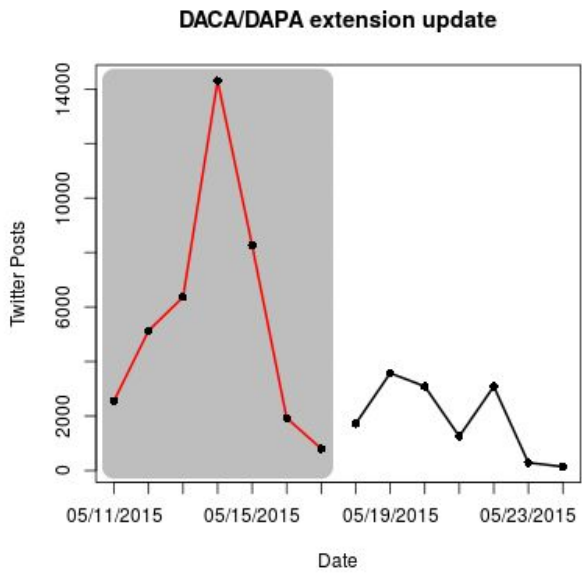
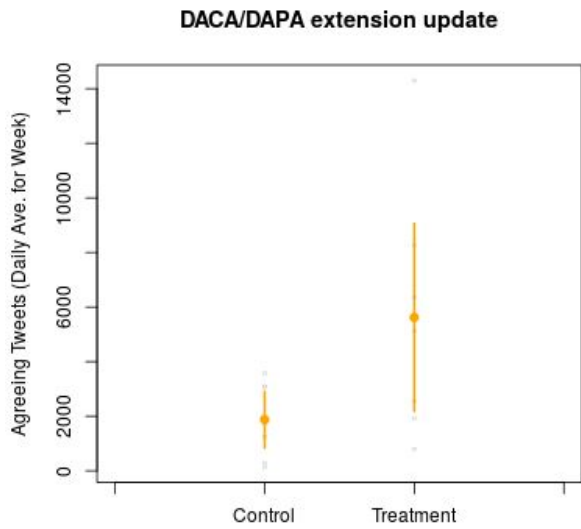
Outlets: FSRN, Defending Dissent, In These Times

Hashtag: #CIRstories, #immigrationreform

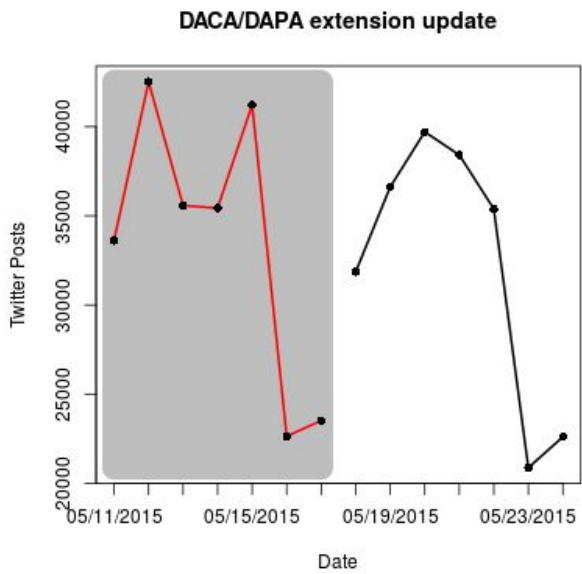
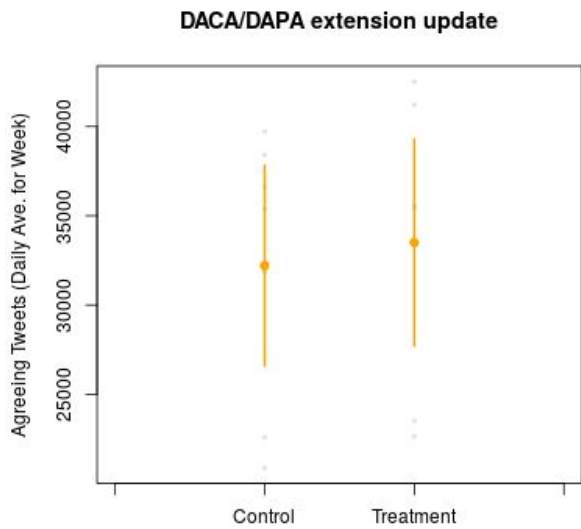
Each of Making Contact, Ms. Magazine, and Truthout published original content discussing the DAPA injunction, which left millions of unauthorized immigrants in legal limbo while they waited for the challenge to the deferred action program made its way through the courts.

The outlets used the hashtags #CIRstories and #immigrationreform to promote the stories on twitter. The #CIRstories hashtag was included in 116 tweets in the treated week versus no tweets in the corresponding week from the month before. The #immigrationreform hashtag is very commonly used in tweets that have nothing to do with these stories. We observed 12713 tweets using this hashtag in the treatment week and 17717 tweets using this hashtag in the corresponding week from the month before. As a result, it is difficult to determine how much, if at all, this hashtag was picked up based on the collaboration. The modest use of the #CIRstories hashtag is probably a good estimate of how often the #immigrationreform hashtag was used due to the collaboration.

The graphics below display the effects of the intervention on the broader conversation on immigration. When we examine progressive tweets on immigration, we estimate a positive effect for the collaboration. The plots below illustrate an estimated increase of several thousand tweets per day on average. However, as discussed above, there may be flaws in our current classification system for posts about immigration.



On the other hand, when we examine total tweets on Immigration -- rather than just progressive tweets -- the effect seems smaller. As the plot below illustrates, there is a modest increase during the treatment week that is statistically indistinguishable from the number of posts during the control week.



Impact of Drought in California

Dates: Weeks starting 5/11/2015 (Treatment) and 5/18/2015 (Control)

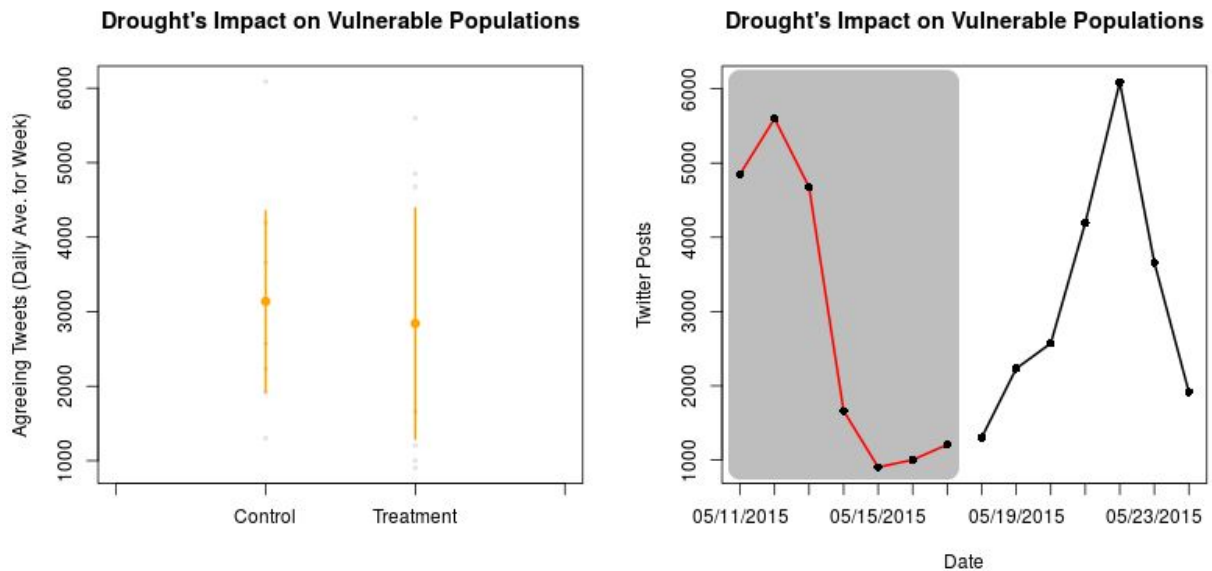
Outlets: Earth Island Journal, The Progressive, Yes! Magazine, Bitch, Truthout

Hashtag: #CADrought; #waterrights

In this intervention, five outlets published or re-published content. Articles included field notes on the drought in California, an examination of farms that use very little water, and an interview with a water activist.

Both hashtags appear to have been used in tweets that had nothing to do with the collaboration, which makes it a bit more complicated to determine the collaboration using this metric. There were 4946 tweets using the #CADrought hashtag in the treatment week, and 4356 tweets using the hashtag in the corresponding week from the previous month. For the #waterrights hashtag, there were 111 tweets on the treatment week versus 39 on the corresponding week from the previous month.

As the plots below illustrate, we did not pick up a substantial increase in progressive conversations about climate change and the environment due to the collaboration. Instead, we observed a small decline.



GMO Pressure on Higher Ed in Hawaii

Dates: Weeks starting 5/18/2015 (Treatment) and 5/11/2015 (Control)

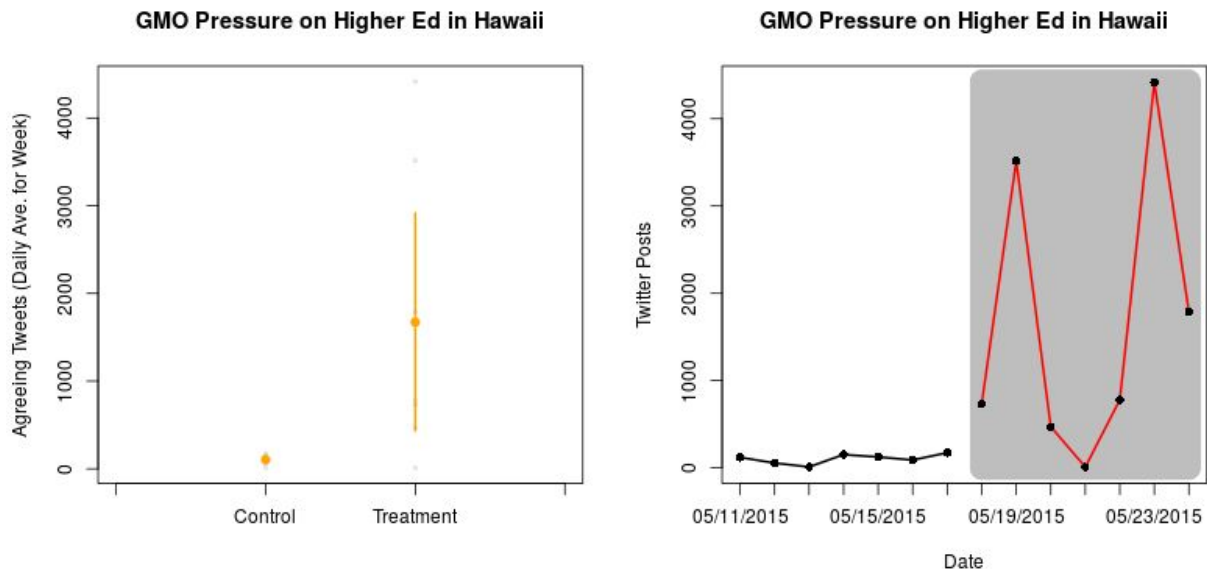
Outlets: Cascadia Times, Earth Island Journal, Truthout, PRWatch, Public News Service, Hawaii Independent

Hashtag: #foodsovereignty; #monsantomoney

Five outlets all co-published The Cascadia Times' "The Silencing of Hector Valenzuela," which examined alleged unjust treatment of a professor after he spoke out about genetic engineering (just as the University of Hawaii was accepting large sums of money from Monsanto).

The hashtag #foodsovereignty was tweeted 98 times during the treatment week. In the corresponding week from the previous month, it was tweeted only 23 times. The hashtag #monsantomoney was tweeted 69 times in the treatment week; it was not tweeted at all in the corresponding week in the previous month.

We observed a substantial positive increase in progressive slanted tweets regarding food security during the week of the collaboration. As the plots below illustrate, the daily average increased from almost none to more than 1500 per day on average. The plot of daily values show that six out of seven days had a higher number of tweets on the topic during the treatment week than during the control week.



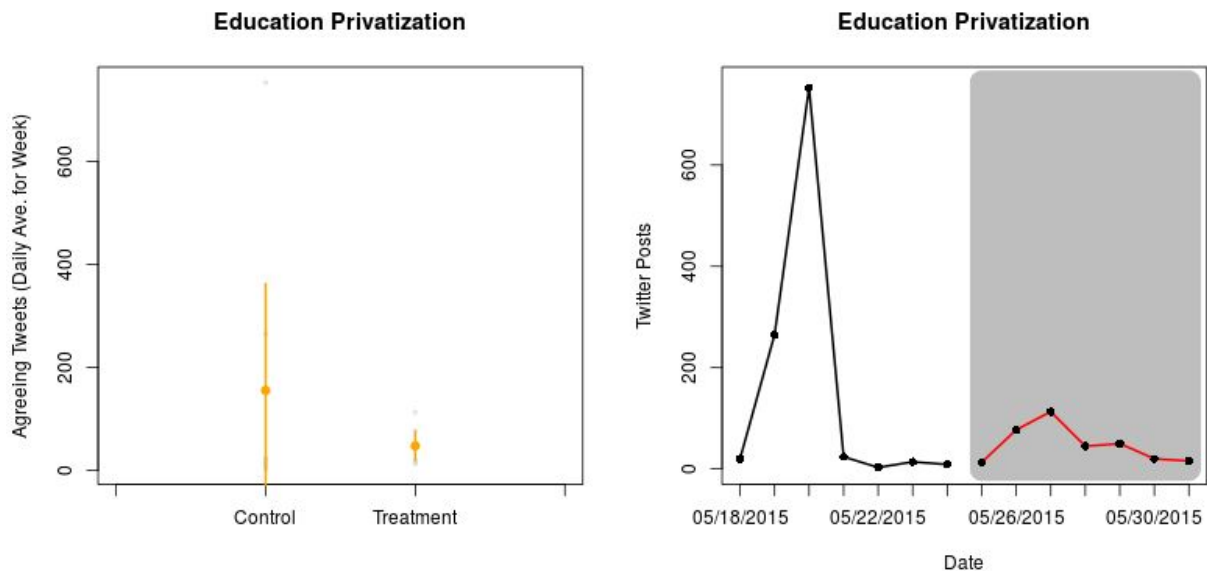
Education Privatization

Dates: Weeks starting 5/25/2015 (Treatment) and 5/18/2015 (Control)

Outlets: The Progressive, In These Times, Alternet

Hashtag: #chartercreeps; #requiredreading

Three outlets combined to publish an original story on CRPE, an education reform organization that advocates for changes to school curriculums. The #chartercreeps hashtag appears to have had relatively limited pickup. On the other hand, close to 150 tweets linked to The Progressive's article during the week of publication, and the links at the other outlets also got a similar response.



However, our measure of progressive discussion on the topic of education and school choice did not pick up this discussion. As the plots above illustrate, we measured a greater degree of discussion on the topic in the control week than during the treatment week -- though there was a slight uptick on the day of and day after publication of the articles.

This may be because of idiosyncratic factors such as other news that drove higher levels of discussion in the off-week. Or, we may not have fully detected the extent of the online discussion using the techniques we have available.

Farmworkers and the Drought

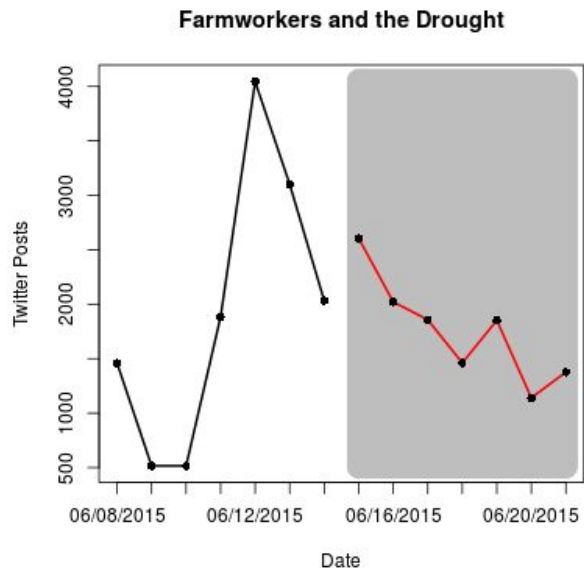
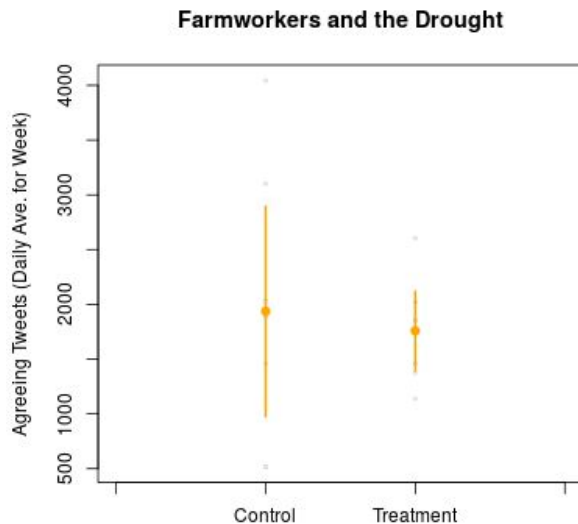
Dates: Weeks starting 6/15/2015 (Treatment) and 6/8/2015 (Control)

Outlets: People.Power.Media, Truthout

Hashtag: #CADrought; #migrantrights

People.Power.Media published an article on farmworkers and the drought and Truthout republished it. The outlets promoted the article on twitter using the hashtags #CADrought and #migrantrights. As noted before, #CADrought is a very commonly used hashtag; it does not appear that the collaboration moved the needle on use of this hashtag. The week of the collaboration saw 2464 tweets using the #CADrought hashtag. However, the corresponding week from the previous month saw 3053 tweets using the hashtag. The #migrantrights hashtag was tweeted 38 times during the treatment week, and only 9 times in the corresponding week from the month before.

In this case, we did not observe a detectable increase in progressive discussions on the issue.



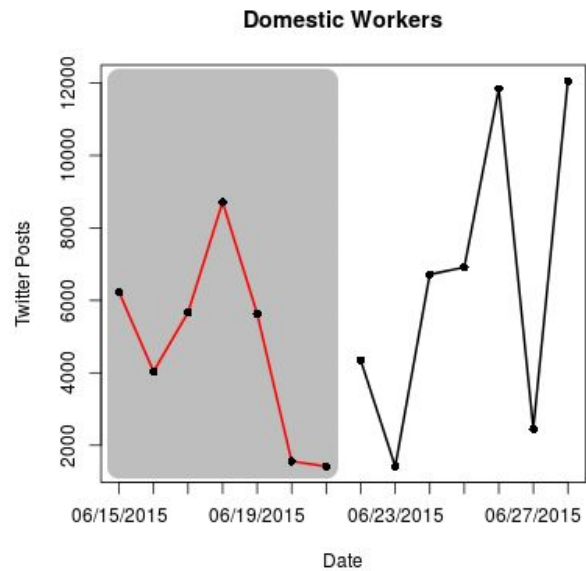
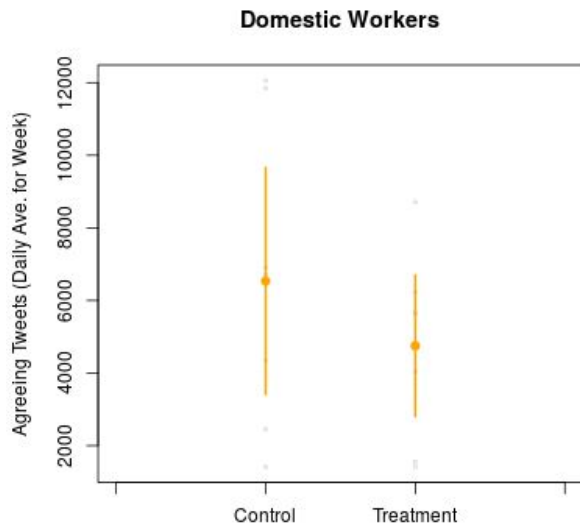
Domestic Workers

Dates: Weeks starting 6/15/2015 (Treatment) and 6/22/2015 (Control)

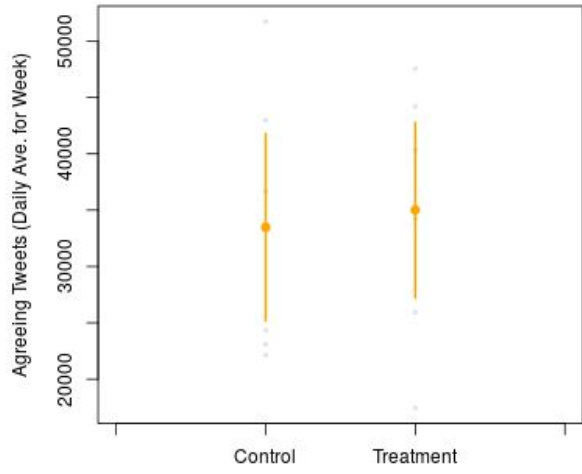
Outlets: Journal of Race, Poverty & the Environment; Defending Dissent

Hashtag: N/A

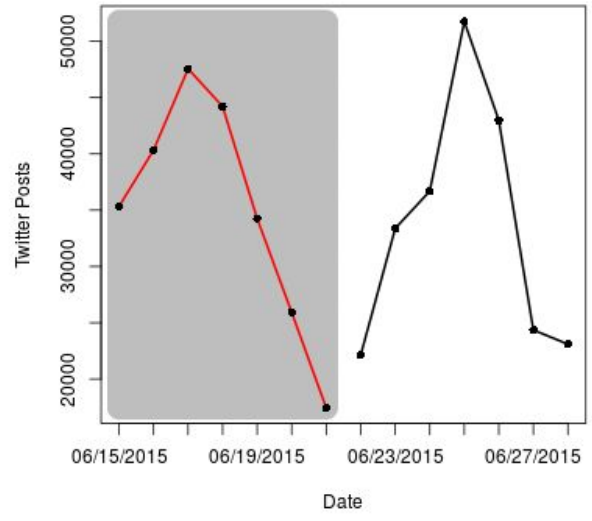
The Journal of Race, Poverty & The Environment published a number of pieces on domestic workers. Defending Dissent republished one of them. There does not appear to have been much activity on Twitter directly tied to this content. As the plots below illustrate, we also did not detect much change in discussion on immigration -- either in the aggregate or just espousing progressive views -- around the collaboration.



Domestic Workers



Domestic Workers



Climate Change

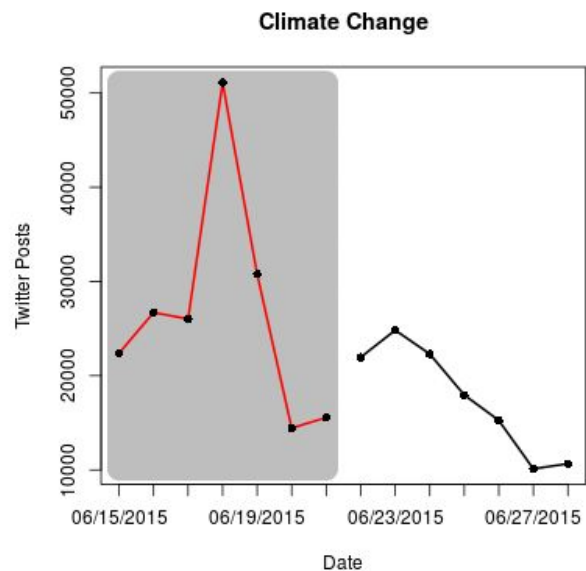
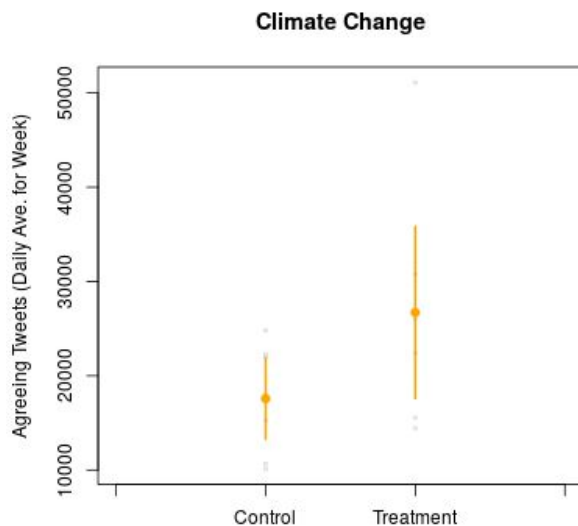
Dates: Weeks starting 6/15/2015 (Treatment) and 6/22/2015 (Control)

Outlets: In These Times, Generation Progress

Hashtag: #climatechange; #climatewars

In These Times and Generation Progress published an article on the end of climate “denialism” as a political strategy. The outlets promoted the piece on twitter with hashtags #climatechange (tweeted 25813 times, compared to 22,082 in the previous month and #climatewars (tweeted 33 times, compared to 10 in the previous month).

We detected an increase in progressive tweets on climate change for the week. Because climate change is a much-discussed issue on Twitter, it is unlikely that the full extent of the difference was due to this intervention (for example, we detected over 50 thousand progressive tweets on climate change on one day during the treatment week). However, the effect is nonetheless in the right direction. And, even if we were to omit that one day as an outlier, the average during the treatment week would still be higher than during the control week.



Migration and Climate Change

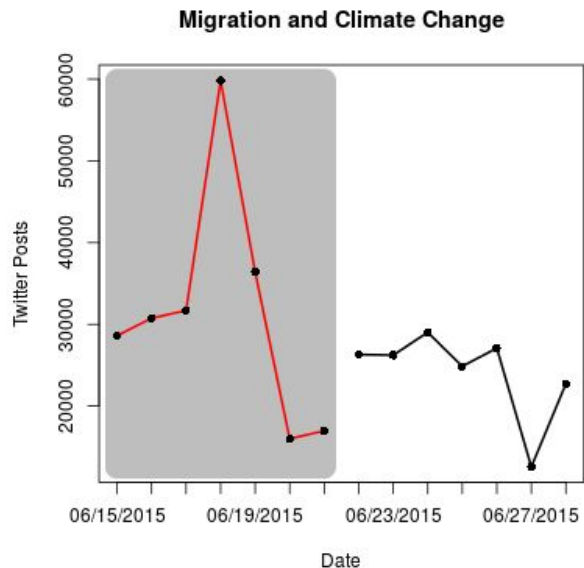
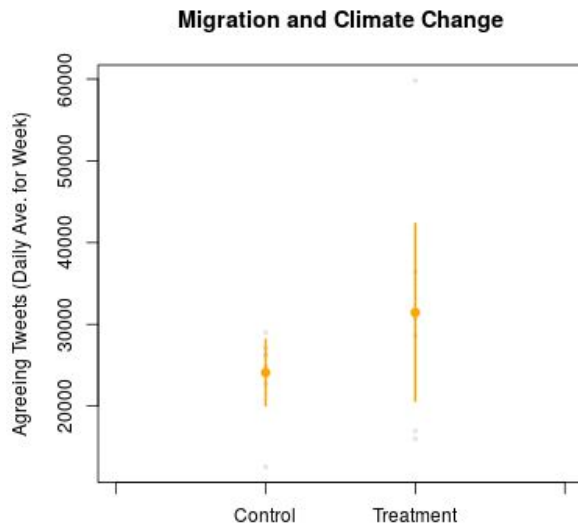
Dates: Weeks starting 6/15/2015 (Treatment) and 6/22/2015 (Control)

Outlets: In These Times, Truthout

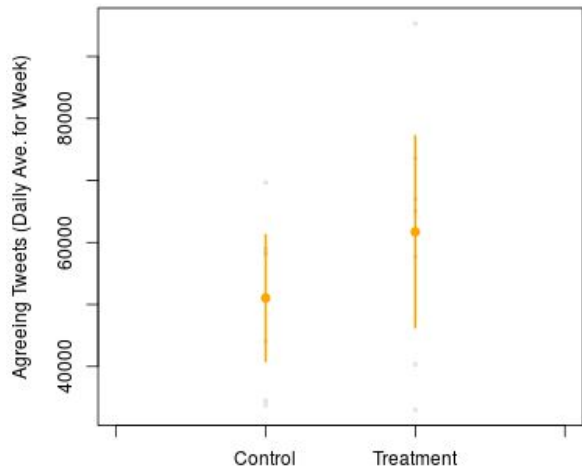
Hashtag: #climatechange; #climatewars

In These Times and Truthout published an article on the possibility that climate change might drive migration -- for example, in response to natural disasters. As with the previous collaboration, the outlets promoted the piece on Twitter with hashtags #climatechange (tweeted 25813 times, compared to 22,082 in the previous month and #climatewars (tweeted 33 times, compared to 10 in the previous month).

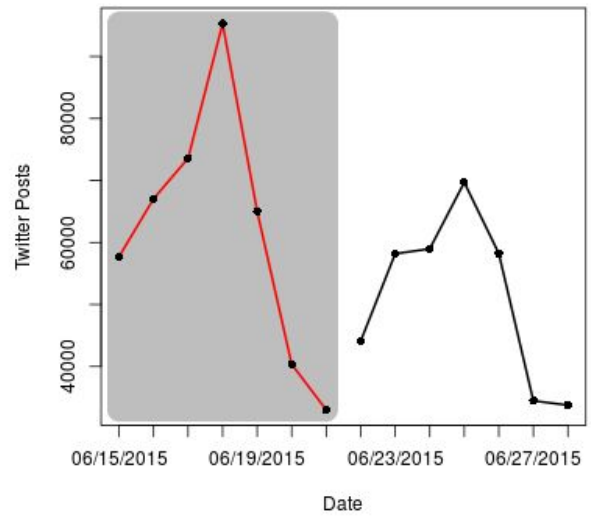
Because this collaboration is on the border of two collaboration topics -- immigration and the environment -- we combined our monitors of both of these topics. In the first plot, we examine only progressive tweets on the topics. In the second plot, we include all tweets for the topic of immigration (regardless of sentiment). In each case, we observe an increase in discussion during the treatment week.



Migration and Climate Change



Migration and Climate Change



Families in Detention Centers

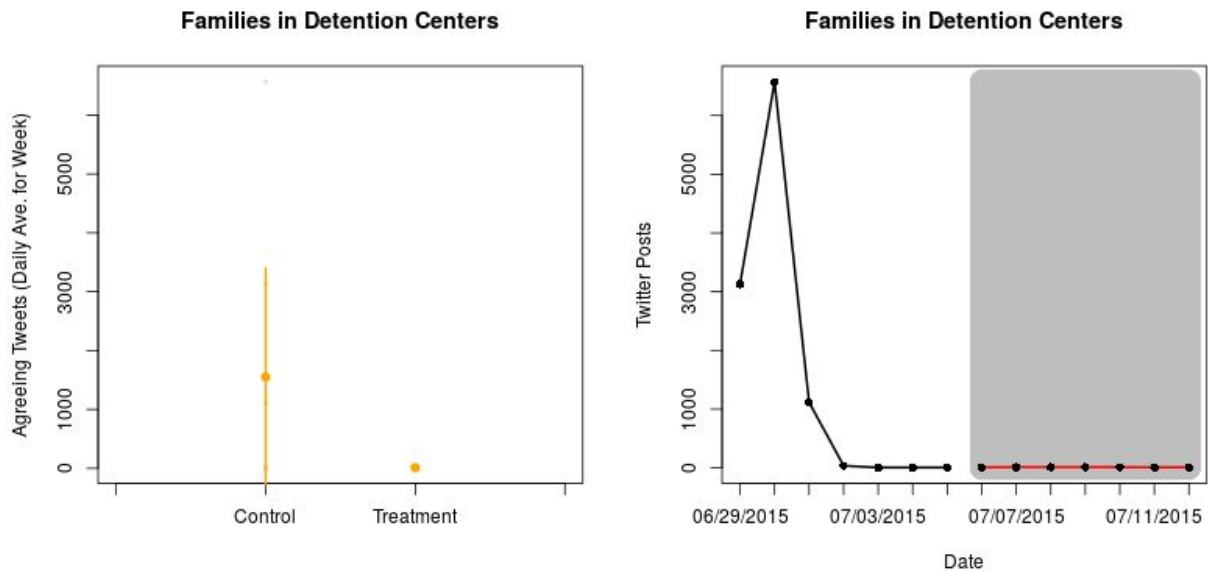
Dates: Weeks starting 7/6/2015 (Treatment) and 6/29/2015 (Control)

Outlets: In These Times, Feministing, Generation Progress

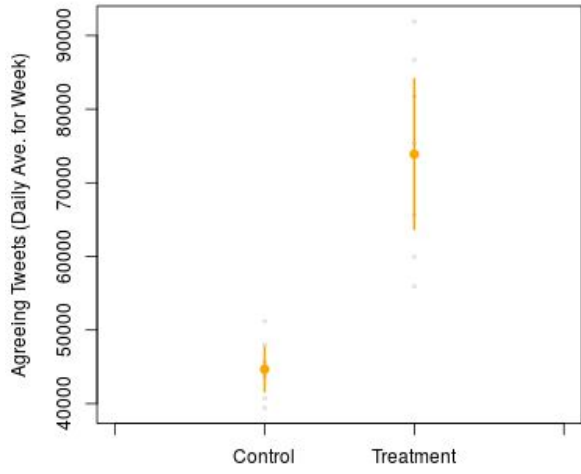
Hashtag: #endfamilydetention

In These Times published a story on children in private prisons, and it was republished by Feministing and Generation Progress. The outlets promoted the story using the hashtag #endfamilydetention. During the treatment week, there were 485 tweets using this phrase. During the control week, there were 611 tweets using the hashtag (and, in the previous month, the week corresponding to the treatment week saw 3617 tweets using the hashtag).

In this case, we observe stark differences in our estimates depending on whether we examine progressive (i.e., pro-immigration) tweets or all tweets on immigration. The first plot displays progressive tweets on immigration only. As is evident, we detect essentially no progressive tweets on the topic in the treatment week. We think this is due to a problem with our post classification process. On the other hand, as is evident in the lower plot, when we examine all tweets on immigration, we do detect a positive effect.



Families in Detention Centers



Families in Detention Centers

