

Controversy Mapping in the Era of Platformization: The Case of the Controversy about Vistula Spit Canal

This doctoral dissertation is devoted to mapping the controversy surrounding the canal through the Vistula Spit, following the history of controversy mapping: starting with a scientometric analysis, through an analysis of Wikipedia, to an analysis of the controversy on social media platforms: Facebook and Twitter. The dissertation focuses on tracking one of the native digital objects—URL links—which serve a variety of functions in online debate on each of the platforms studied.

While research on the dissemination of URL links was popular in the early days of Web 2.0, with the development of platformization, this approach to network research has been largely abandoned. Although internet research currently focuses on aspects such as epistemologies of search engines, hashtags, and Google ads, the use of URLs as a means of studying public debates has not been revisited. In this dissertation, I show that URL links are still relevant for studying cross-platform controversies, using the debate over the construction of a canal through the Vistula Spit in Poland, which has been ongoing for nearly a decade.

Based on an analysis of article citations, the use of wiki links on Wikipedia, and 37,995 Facebook posts and 26,4821 tweets, this study shows that URL links can still serve as reliable indicators of controversy, but in a platform-specific way: in article citations, links serve as references; on Wikipedia, they serve as indicators of an article's level of controversy; on Twitter, links highlight political sentiment and polarization; while on Facebook, links highlight protest mobilization and local organization. Second, it shows that these differences can be explained by the capabilities of platforms, which shape not only the circulation of content but also its meaning within controversies. Third, it advocates a methodological return to the analysis of URL links as a valuable tool for mapping controversy across platforms, combining early digital methods with contemporary research on platformization.

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