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Ebola in the American Imagination: Contagious Metaphors and Narratives on Twitter

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Citation

Polak, S. A. (2017). Ebola in the American Imagination: Contagious Metaphors and Narratives on Twitter, 22-25. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/58470>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Ebola in the American Imagination.

Contagious Metaphors and Narratives on Twitter.

Sara Polak

is assistant professor in American Studies at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society. As part of her NWO Rubicon project at the Graduate Center for the Study of Culture in Giessen, she investigates US American imaginations and cultural memories sparked by the 2013-2015 Ebola epidemic on Twitter. While her previous research was in the area of American cultural memory, this is the first time she focuses on memory as mediated through a digital social medium. Polak also regularly writes about American politics, culture and history in a range of Dutch local newspapers, and teaches American literature and culture.

Since 2009 Donald Trump has been a fervent user of the social medium Twitter, well before he became president-elect or was even running for the presidency. Through Twitter users can publish ('tweet') and relay ('retweet') very short messages – with a maximum length of 140 characters. The wealthy businessman and reality television star was already using Twitter for political purposes. The best-known instance is his role as leader of the – online loudly present – 'birther movement', which falsely claimed that president Barack Obama was born outside of the United States.

Another phenomenon that was very visible on Twitter – and in which Trump was also highly involved – revolved around the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, and the ensuing 'Ebola scare' in the United States between 2013 and 2015. When a Liberian man who carried the virus, but was not yet experiencing symptoms, entered the United States in the fall of 2014, Trump tweeted: 'The Ebola patient who came into our country knew exactly what he was doing. Came into contact with over 100 people. Here we go – I told you so!' (3 October 2014, @realdonaldtrump). This is just

one of a few hundred tweets Trump posted about Ebola patients, whom he claimed were streaming into the country via a "highway" from Africa, and were actively invited by the Obama administration.

The way in which Trump attributed agency and malign intentions to the Ebola patient – who, did not at the time of travel know he was infected – fits seamlessly into a pre-existing tradition of what Priscilla Wald has termed 'outbreak narratives'. Trump's suggestion that Ebola patient 'knew exactly what he was doing' imagines a



Trump's suggestion that Ebola patient 'knew exactly what he was doing' imagines a 'Patient Zero' ...

'Patient Zero', who is not a victim, but a criminal who deliberately brought his own deadly virus to the United States. Pinpointing a Patient Zero creates a reproachable guilty other, and constructs a narrative within which that person owes their social exclusion to their own behavior. Once you believe there is a culpable Patient Zero, it is no longer morally problematic to exclude, isolate, or deport that person. Trump cast the man he referred to as a criminal or, even, as a zombie-like figure.

Striking about many American tweets and other social media messages about the Ebola epidemic – not only from Donald Trump – is that they mostly employ conceptual metaphors, which activate a network of cultural narratives and associations. The Trump tweet quoted here, for instance, about the patient who came into contact with as many people as he could so as to infect them, fits into a far broader discourse, in which Ebola patients are likened to zombies. Undead creatures, whose purpose it is to spread their own abject disease, and thereby to produce more copies of themselves. The zombie metaphor has very little to do with Ebola, but understanding Ebola as a zombie threat neatly fits into a pre-existing American cultural fascination and anxiety. There are many even more outrageous examples of conceptual metaphors engaged in tweets that use the word Ebola or the hashtag #Ebola. Ebola patients, in American tweets from late 2014 or early 2015, are often compared to vermin, criminals and slaves.

Apparently the epidemic in West Africa sparked associations among groups of American Twitter users

with cultural images and narratives that were not directly connected to Ebola, but which the news of the outbreak did trigger. Some – obviously manipulated – images of Ebola patients supposedly arisen from the dead 'went viral' on social media, to such an extent that they seemed more contagious than the virus itself. That says something about the cultural context in which the news of the epidemic was received, but it also says something more general about how events in the world find a place within the fabric of pre-existing narratives, and how those events in turn can bring particular, previously dormant discourses back to the forefront.

Although intertextuality – the 'conversation' between older and newer literary works – has been studied extensively, the process of how events in the present can revive discourses and narratives from the past has not been studied a great deal. Particularly in the field of social media historical analogies and metaphors that crop up often seem very far-fetched, or even random, but

they are nonetheless very powerful. The same mechanism is visible in social media discourses elsewhere, for instance with regard to the current refugee crisis in Europe. Expressions like 'a tsunami of refugees' and other flood metaphors suggest that the refugee situation is like a natural disaster, in which Europeans are at risk of drowning. Such images, and the narratives based on the frame suggested by the metaphor, have real political implications for the way in which individuals, institutions, and the international community respond to events in the present.

The NWO Rubicon project, which I am currently conducting at the University of Giessen, maps these Ebola metaphors and narratives on Twitter, and figures out how they work. I first aggregate tweets that mention 'Ebola', from the period that the Ebola scare in the US peaked and then let a computer sort these tweets based on the other words in the tweet. This shows what the most prevalent combinations are, and many of these are indeed metaphors that contribute to particular narrative frameworks.

For instance, an often retweeted 'joke' – "What did your last slave die of? Ebola." – creates a baffling connection between two seemingly completely different issues. It suggests that Ebola specifically targets Black West Africans, as did transatlantic slavery centuries ago. Most enslaved African Americans in the United States had originally been captured or bought in West Africa, where the Ebola epidemic occurred in 2013-15, but there is obviously a massive time gap between the abolition of slavery in 1863 and the Ebola epidemic. The seemingly illogical association between dying of Ebola and dying as a slave is only legible if we accept the notion that, like slavery, Ebola can only afflict West Africans. This frame implies that the white Twitter user, who is posing in the tweet as a slave owner, is protected against the disease by their whiteness. Other tweets that refer to slavery go even further, suggesting for example that the threat of an Ebola epidemic is a form of revenge from West Africans to punish the United States for its slavery history. Or they urge African Americans to be grateful for their transatlantic slavery past, because they would otherwise have contracted Ebola.

While I am sure such tweets – especially if they have had a wide reach – are telling about what could be termed the cultural imagination of particular groups and networks in the United States, it is hard to assess precisely how to weigh them and how to understand Twitter expressions in general. It is tempting to see Twitter as a giant repository of often crude, off-the-cuff thoughts and comments, allowing a peek into the collective unconscious. But even leaving aside

the question whether such a thing exists, Twitter is also a medium that, like other media, influences what is communicated through it. It invites particular observations or jokes more than others, and its elusive algorithms steer what is seen most often. While it is called a 'social' medium, it really is – like other supposedly social media – a commercial medium with its own commercial, and as part of that hidden, logic.

However, in the now emerging Trump era, it is crucial both to understand Twitter as a medium, and to grasp the ways in which it reflects, and perhaps generates, cultural narratives around events in the present that re-

appropriate older cultural memories and metaphors. However wrong or offensive Trump's and others' tweets may be, they represent a force in current-day society that is extremely powerful, and needs desperately to be better understood. —

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Edited by

J. M. Kelder, S.P.L de Jong, A. Mouret

Photography:

Rob Overmeer

Design:

Just, Leiden

Print:

Puntgaaf drukwerk, Leiden

**A Luris publication.
Leiden 2017.**

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