

Qualitative Analysis of Twitter Data: The Case of Pastor Andrew Brunson  
*Análisis cualitativo de datos en Twitter: el caso del pastor Andrew Brunson*

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**Abstract:**

On 7 October 2016, the American Evangelical Pastor Andrew Brunson was summoned to a local police station in Izmir, Turkey. Brunson thought he would be receiving a long-awaited permanent residence card. He went to the police department on 7 October 2016. The police told him that he would be deported and referred him to the Immigration Bureau. While Brunson was awaiting deportation, on 9 December 2016, he was detained and formally arrested. This event caused a political crisis between Turkey and the United States (US) and also sparked discussions among Turkish Twitter users. These discussions provided an opportunity to qualitatively analyze Twitter data. This paper's quantitative data consists of 7,000 tweets posted by Turkish users related to Pastor Brunson. This study analyzes a subset of 364 tweets randomly selected from 7,000 tweets. The analysis suggests that a qualitative content analysis method is useful for understanding Twitter data. Additionally, it produced results that help us understand how Turkish Twitter users discussed the Brunson case.

**Keywords:**

Social media; Twitter data; Qualitative content analysis; Andrew Brunson; Turkey

**Abstract:**

*El 7 de octubre de 2016, el pastor evangelista estadounidense Andrew Brunson fue requerido en una comisaría de la policía local de Esmirna, Turquía. Brunson pensó que recibiría su esperada tarjeta de residencia permanente. La policía le dijo que sería deportado y lo mandó a la Oficina de Inmigración. Dos días después fue detenido y arrestado oficialmente. Esto causó una crisis política entre Turquía y EE.UU. y también provocó encendidos debates entre los usuarios turcos de Twitter. Estas discusiones nos ofrecen la oportunidad de analizar cualitativamente estos datos. Este artículo parte de los 7.000 tweets publicados por usuarios turcos relacionados con el Pastor Brunson, analizando una muestra de 364 tweets seleccionados al azar. El estudio sugiere que un método de análisis de contenido cualitativo es útil para comprender la comunicación en Twitter. Además, se han producido resultados que nos ayudan a entender cómo los usuarios turcos de Twitter valoraron el caso de Brunson.*

**Keywords:**

*Social media; Twitter; Análisis cualitativo de contenido; Andrew Brunson; Turquía*

**1. Introduction**

As Janetzko emphasizes (2017, p. 146), “social media means different things to different people”. Accordingly, hundreds of millions of people use social media as an essential communication channel and researchers the world over increasingly view it as an important source of social data. Social media is considered to be one of the most important research objects for scientists today. While there are a myriad of research methods for analyzing this data, content analysis has risen in popularity among social media researchers. In their literature review on journal articles between 2006 and 2012, which analyzed Twitter data, Zimmer and Proferes (2014) found that content analysis was the analysis of choice for the majority (74%) of the total 382 papers considered. Pennington (2017, p. 236) states that content analysis “can be performed either quantitatively or qualitatively.” Quantitative content analysis is a technique that allows for an objective and systematic study of the data. It enables researchers to classify data into meaningful categorizations. Qualitative content analysis, on the other hand, is a method that facilitates the production of qualitative insights from the data. According to Julien (2008, p. 120), qualitative content analysis reduces data to a form of which it is easier to make sense. Most obviously, in this analytical method, data is presented in words and themes, which makes it possible to compare and explain the results (Bengtsson, 2016).

Since social media data lends itself to computational analysis, it is beneficial for quantitative content analysis. In his literature review, which analyzes 53 journal articles examining the relationship between social media and social movements, Kıyan (2019) describes that almost half of the articles (47%) utilized the quantitative content analysis method. Social media data is also useful for qualitative content analysis. Scholars have adopted this method for the investigation of a wide array of phenomena. For instance, Bayrakturan *et al.* (2014) examined the use of Facebook by political parties and leaders in the 2011 Turkish General Elections, Stever and Lawson (2013) analyzed how celebrities use Twitter as a way to communicate with fans, Tremayne (2014) investigated the nature of Twitter messages regarding the Occupy Wall Street protests, and Laestadius *et al.* (2016) explored how electronic cigarettes are portrayed on Instagram.

This paper, examining Twitter data using the qualitative content analysis technique, focuses on a political crisis between Turkey and the US that surfaced in 2017 and deepened in 2018. The incident that led to the crisis was the arrest of the American Evangelical Pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey. This event skyrocketed Brunson’s popularity among Twitter users in Turkey. Turkish Twitter users discussed Brunson’s situation widely, using different hashtags throughout his arrest. However, the most intense discussions took place under the hashtag of #PapazBrunson (#PastorBrunson) on 12 October 2018 when Brunson was released. The quantitative data of this paper consists of 7,000 tweets produced by Turkish users under this hashtag. In this paper, a

subset of 364 tweets – randomly selected from 7,000 tweets – were explored. This analysis suggests that the qualitative content analysis method is useful for understanding Twitter data and in dissecting how Turkish Twitter users discussed the Brunson case.

The paper is organized as follows. The first and second parts deal with the chain of events that led to Andrew Brunson's arrest and the Twitter debate that ensued. The third and fourth parts describe data collection and data analysis processes. The fifth part presents the findings. In the sixth and last part, the results are discussed.

## **2. The Case of Pastor Andrew Brunson**

On 7 October 2016, the American Evangelical Pastor Andrew Brunson was summoned to a local police station in Izmir, Turkey. At the time, this did not seem out of the ordinary. Brunson had lived more than 20 years in Turkey's third largest city, where he was the pastor of a small protestant church. When Brunson received the summons, he thought it was a routine appointment to discuss his Turkish residency papers. He went to the police department on 7 October 2016. The police told him that he would be deported and referred him to the Immigration Bureau. While Brunson was awaiting deportation, on 9 December 2016, he was detained and formally arrested (Saymaz, 2016).

Why was Brunson arrested? The chain of events that led to the arrest of Brunson dates back to 15 July 2016 when Turkey witnessed a failed coup attempt. Turkey has experienced several military coups since 1960, but none has been as interesting as the most recent. On 15 July, in the early hours of the evening, uniformed soldiers closed off the main traffic routes and established strategic checkpoints in the largest cities in Turkey (particularly in Istanbul and the capital Ankara). Meanwhile, Turkish F-16 jets began to roar across the sky at a low level, just a few hundred feet above the rooftops, and bombs were targeted at strategically important buildings, including Turkey's Grand National Assembly. The coup plotters went on to hold several high-level army commanders hostage and, at midnight, announced on the Turkish army's official website and the state's official television channel, TRT, that they had seized power.

The coup attempt aimed to overthrow the government and unseat President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Yarar & Bozkurt, 2016). President Erdoğan was on holiday in Marmaris, a city on the southern coast of Turkey, when the coup attempt unfolded. As soon as Erdogan became aware of the coup, he was connected to CNN Turk, the CNN International Turkish affiliate, via FaceTime and gave the following message: "... I call on our people to gather in squares and airports... Let us gather as a nation in city squares... Those who attempted a coup will pay the highest price..." (BBC News Türkçe 2016). Immediately after this call, protests broke out in many provinces throughout Turkey. Following these outbursts, the coup attempt was suppressed within 24 hours. During the attempt, over 300 people were killed and around 1,500 injured. In the aftermath, the Turkish Government suspended or arrested around 10,000 security personnel due to their alleged connection with the plotters.

Brunson was arrested almost six months after the coup. According to the Turkish court that issued the arrest, the coup attempt had been organized by Fetullah Gulen, a Muslim

cleric who had been living in the US since 1990 and Brunson had contact with Gulen. The suggestion being that Brunson intentionally and willingly supported the coup (Ergin, 2018). The Court also deliberated as to whether Brunson spied on behalf of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is considered a terrorist organization in Turkey (Ergin, 2018). This arrest caused a political crisis between Turkey and the US. The relationship between Turkey and the US has always been tumultuous. The two countries have been at odds over the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960s, the Cyprus Operation in the 1970s and the US invasion of Iraq in the 2000s. Since Brunson was at the heart of a diplomatic dispute between Turkey and the US, this recent crisis seemed as important as the previous ones.

The most interesting developments in the Brunson crisis took place in the summer of 2018. On 18 July 2018, US President Donald Trump, via Twitter, demanded that Turkey release Brunson (realDonaldTrump, 2018). One week after Trump's tweet, the court in Turkey changed Brunson's arrest status to house arrest ("Turkish court rules to move," 2018). Just a day after this decision, US Vice President Mike Pence announced that the US would impose sanctions on Turkey if Brunson was not released ("US threatens to sanction Turkey," 2018). On 12 October 2018, the Turkish court retried and released Brunson, sentencing him to more than three years in prison. Thus, solving the crisis between the two countries.

### **3. Pastor Andrew Brunson and Twitter discussions**

The cost of the Brunson incident for Turkey was quite high. The dollar rose unprecedentedly in Turkey while the Turkish currency devalued extraordinarily. In the summer of 2018, when the crisis peaked, 1 US dollar was worth 6 Turkish liras. As the economic crisis deepened, Brunson's popularity in Turkey increased. Interestingly, one of the platforms where Brunson was discussed most was Twitter. With over 300 million users around the world, Twitter is one of the most popular online discussion platforms. It provides various communication features that support a high degree of interaction between users. For example, Twitter's hashtags facilitate conversation around specific topics in online discussions (Yang, Quan-Haase & Rannenber, 2017). According to Tran, Hwang and Nguyen (2018), users can easily find specific hashtags on Twitter, track the flow of messages for them in real-time and generate content for those hashtags. Turkish Twitter users discussed Brunson widely, using a variety of hashtags throughout his arrest. However, the most intense discussions took place on 12 October 2018 when Brunson was released. The hashtag #PapazBrunson was highly popular among Turkish users at this time.

## **4. Methodology and Data**

### *4.1. Data Collection*

There are several ways to retrieve data from Twitter (Mayr & Weller, 2017). The first is to use Web APIs (Application Programming Interfaces), which are capable of providing far more data than traditional methods such as questionnaires or interviews. The second is to use third-party applications. Third-party applications, like APIs, allow researchers

to collect data but have some limitations. For example, free versions of third-party applications allow only limited data retrieval. A third option for retrieving data from Twitter is to buy the data directly from the platform. This method is extremely costly but can be the most practical for researchers under certain circumstances. Twitter data was, in fact, free until 2011, at which time Twitter enacted policy changes which restricted access to data. Thus, Twitter data has become an expensive commodity that many researchers cannot afford (Felt, 2016).

The Twitter data for this paper was retrieved through Netlytic. ‘Netlytic’, as its creators indicate, ‘is a cloud-based text and social networks analyzer that can automatically summarize and discover communication networks from publicly available social media posts’ (Netlytic, 2019). It utilizes public APIs to collect data from Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Although Netlytic enables data to be collected from different social networking platforms, it performs best with Twitter data. For this paper, Tweets about Brunson were collected from the hashtag #PapazBrunson. Data collection commenced shortly after the Turkish court decision and continued for one week. The collection of Tweets per search was limited to a maximum of 1,000, due to Netlytic policies. A search was conducted for every 4 hours to expand the available data for this paper, which resulted in the collection of 25,000 total Tweets.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in three separate stages. During the first stage, the initial pool of 25,000 tweets underwent pre-examination and was subsequently reduced to 7,000 tweets deemed to be appropriate for analysis. In the second stage, a pilot study of 100 tweets was carried out to explore the Tweet’s contents. This initial content analysis produced six categories similar to those categories identified in Small’s (2011) study: subjective, judgmental, or informative or reporting, argumentative, polarizing, and not relevant. In the third and final stage of the analysis, 364 tweets were selected from the pool of 7,000 appropriate tweets based on a calculation of the 95% confidence interval and an error margin of 5%. The final selection of 364 tweets were then subject to qualitative content analysis according to the pre-formed categories described above.

### 5. Results

Table 1. Categories of tweets

Category	Description	Example
Subjective	A tweet that contains a personal comment	<u>Alperf79</u> : We’ll miss you, Pastor Brunson.
Not relevant	A tweet that is unrelated to the subject	melek_sahinn: Mr Tarkan Yavaş talks about the allegations made against Mr Adnan Oktar and the TBAV Community: There is no armed criminal

		organization”
Judgmental	A tweet that contains a judgmental comment	<u>Umut10sari</u> : Now that you would release Pastor Brunson, then why did you drag the country into crisis?
Informing or Reporting	A tweet that contains a link to news website and refers to the news about the subject	<u>MirSiyar</u> : Pastor Brunson's family lawyer: We are grateful to Trump, who has forced Turkey to release Pastor Brunson https://t.co/ez1iWz0mp6 via https://t.co/nHNojUnaFL @y_ozgurpolitika
Argumentative	A tweet that contains argumentative content which allows online discussion	<u>NuhanAkman</u> : Two questions: Pastor/Priest Brunson; 1- If he has been released on legal terms, then how will other people that are accused of similar questions be kept inside from now on? 2- If he has been released on political terms, then how can we talk about the 'independence of the judiciary'?
Polarizing	A tweet that contains swearing or insulting content	tahsin_kicirli: Spy Andrew Brunson, a lucky son of a [offensive word removed], was finally released.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the pilot study conducted at the second stage of the analysis. As mentioned above, this process produced six categories. The first of these categories is the Subjective category, containing user’s subjective comments. The tweet by Alperf79 (“We'll miss you, Pastor Brunson”) is an example of such a tweet. The second is the Judgmental category. These include users' judgmental comments. Umut10sari's tweet (“Now that you would release Pastor Brunson, then why did you drag the country into crisis?”) is an example a typical tweet included in this category. The third is the Informing or Reporting category, which includes tweets containing links to newspaper news. The tweet of MirSiyar (Pastor Brunson's family lawyer: “We are grateful to Trump, who has forced Turkey to release Pastor Brunson” https://t.co/ez1iWz0mp6 via https://t.co/nHNojUnaFL @y\_ozgurpolitika) is one such tweet. The fourth is the Argumentative category. These contain content that allows online discussion. For example, NuhanAkman's tweet (“Two questions: Pastor/Priest Brunson; 1- If he has been released on legal terms, then how will other people that are accused of similar questions be kept inside from now on? 2- If he has been released on

political terms, then how can we talk about the 'independence of the judiciary?'"). Fifth is the Polarizing category. Polarizing tweets contain profanity or insults. The tweet produced by tahsin\_kicirli (“Spy Andrew Brunson, a lucky son of a [offensive word removed], was finally released.”) is an example of a typical tweet included in this category. The sixth and final category is Not Relevant, which contains tweets that are not related to the subject. The tweet by melek\_sahinn (“Mr Tarkan Yavaş talks about the allegations made against Mr Adnan Oktar and the TBAV Community: There is no armed criminal organization”) is an example of such a tweet.

Figure 1. Distribution of the analyzed tweets by category (%)

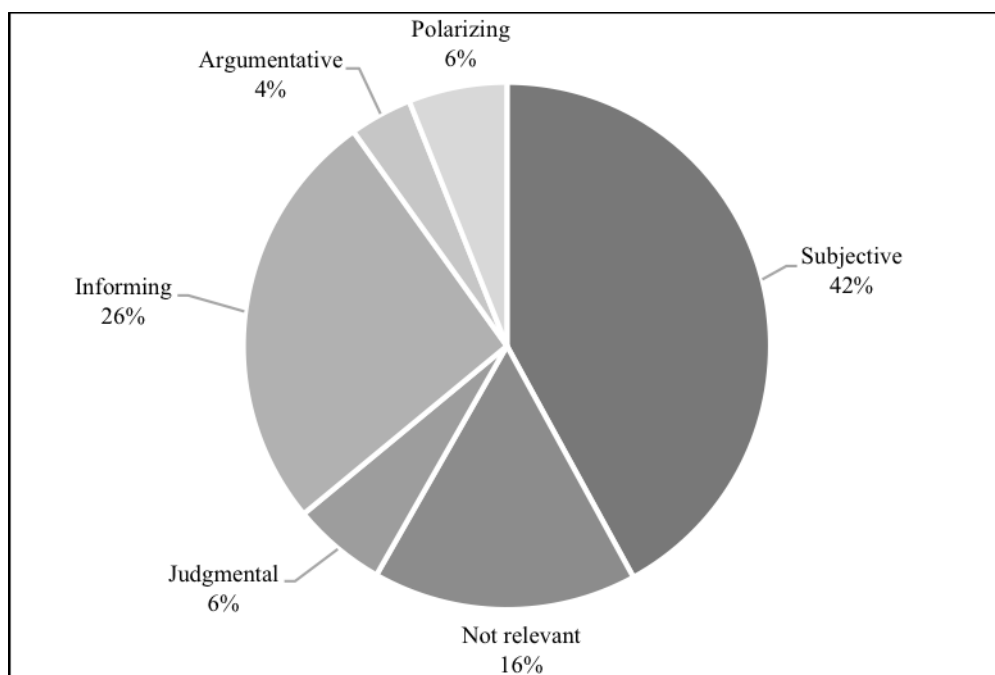


Figure 1 maps the results of the study performed in the second stage of analysis. As previously mentioned, 364 randomly selected tweets were qualitatively analyzed at this stage. This analysis produced some interesting results. Hereunder, the majority of tweets were found to be subjective. So much so that these tweets accounted for 42 percent (153 tweets) of all 364 tweets. Informing tweets were also in abundance, ranking second more numerous, totaling 26 percent (95 tweets) of all tweets. Not relevant tweets interestingly ranked third, accounting for 16 percent (59 tweets) of the total number of tweets. Polarizing (22 tweets) and judgmental (21 tweets) tweets were less abundant and accounted for only 6 percent each. Argumentative tweets ranked the lowest, representing only 4 percent (14 tweets) of all 364 tweets.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

It is important, in this context, to note that social media data is not homogeneous, but rather is heterogeneous. In other words, it consists of a variety of forms such as text, video, image and links. This feature of social media data enables researchers to conduct analyses using different methods. This paper exercised the method of qualitative content

analysis to deconstruct the online discussions surrounding the Andrew Brunson incident that unfolded on the Twitter platform and sparked a political crisis between the US and Turkey. Firstly, this analysis indicated that Twitter users produce subjective tweets (42%) far more frequently than argumentative tweets (4%). This dynamic suggests that Twitter users do not contribute to or produce content that advances online discussions. Instead, they tend to use Twitter to disseminate their personal views. Secondly, the analysis revealed that informing tweets (26%), which contain newspaper news links, occur in very high proportion. Newspapers desiring visibility among hashtag users partly mediates this effect. Newspapers share content with the intention of attracting Twitter users to their web pages via news links. Qualitative analysis of the tweets also demonstrated that Not Relevant tweets were fairly abundant (16%). This relatively high percentage could be the product of bot accounts. Not Relevant tweets, when examined closely, were found to contain meaningless messages. Lastly, the qualitative analysis of the tweets showed that the polarizing tweets (6%) occurred in relatively low but notable frequencies. Tweets with polarizing content can be easily found on Twitter. In particular relation to the subject of this research, such tweets are numerous because the Brunson incident caused an economic crisis in Turkey while, on the other hand, associating him with the July 15 coup attempt. This dichotomy lends itself to polarizing opinions which are then expressed on Twitter.

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