

Visual Analysis of Conflicting Opinions

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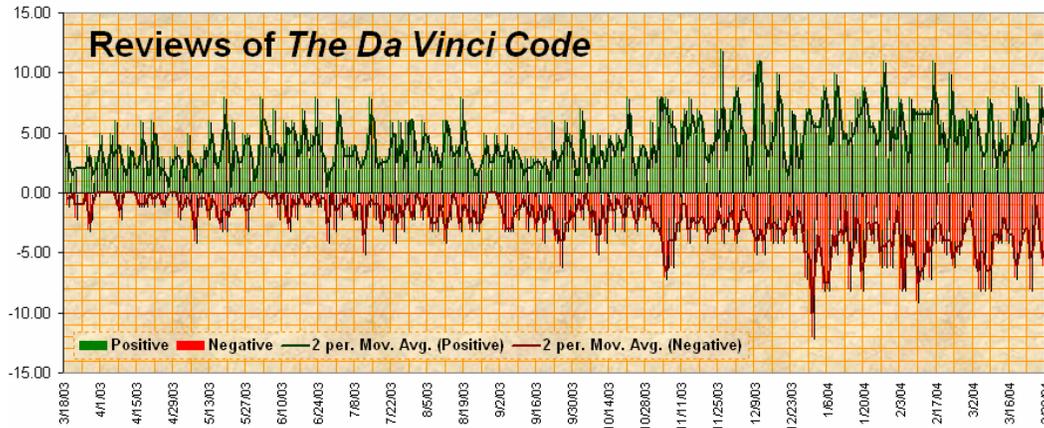


Figure 1: Conflicting reviews of *The Da Vinci Code*: 1,738 positive (green) and 918 negative (red).

ABSTRACT

Understanding the nature and dynamics of conflicting opinions is a profound and challenging issue. In this paper we address several aspects of the issue through a study of more than 3,000 Amazon customer reviews of the controversial bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*, including 1,738 positive and 918 negative reviews. The study is motivated by critical questions such as: What are the differences between positive and negative reviews? What is the origin of a particular opinion? How do these opinions change over time? To what extent can differentiating features be identified from unstructured text? How accurately can these features predict the category of a review? We first analyze terminology variations in these reviews in terms of syntactic, semantic, and statistic associations identified by TermWatch and use term variation patterns to depict underlying topics. We then select the most predictive terms based on log likelihood tests and demonstrate that this small set of terms classifies over 70% of the conflicting reviews correctly. This feature selection process reduces the dimensionality of the feature space from more than 20,000 dimensions to a couple of hundreds. We utilize automatically generated decision trees to facilitate the understanding of conflicting opinions in terms of these highly predictive terms. This study also uses a number of visualization and modeling tools to identify not only what positive and negative reviews have in common, but also they differ and evolve over time.

CR Categories and Subject Descriptors: H.3.1 [Information Storage and Retrieval]: Content Analysis and Indexing—

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Keywords: Visual analytics, conflicting opinions, terminology variation, decision tree, predictive text analysis, sense making.

1 INTRODUCTION

Understanding the nature and dynamics of conflicting opinions is a far-reaching and challenging issue. Contradictory opinions exist in a diverse range of domains, including science, engineering, sociology, politics, and international relations. Critical challenges are identifying the basic premises of arguments, assessing the credibility of available evidence, understanding the context and background of a particular position, and tracking the development of how various opinions interact with a broader context of information over time. The ability to accomplish these tasks effectively and efficiently has a direct impact on people's understanding, interpretation, and decision making activities. While detecting trends and dynamics of change attracts an increasing interest, fundamental challenges remain at both macroscopic and microscopic levels due to the dynamic and complex nature of our perception and cognition. Recently, visual analytics has rapidly evolved to meet the need for national security, emergency and disaster preparedness and response, and more traditional science and technology indicators, paradigm shifts in scientific knowledge domains [1].

Reviews of a controversial bestseller book such as *The Da Vinci Code* carry the hallmark of conflicting opinions. Reviews made by readers from a diverse range of perspectives provide a valuable source of insight in terms of how people form their opinions and what influences their opinions.

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of positive and negative reviews of *The Da Vinci Code* on Amazon.com between March 18, 2003 and March 30, 2004, the first year of the publication of the book. Although it is obvious that positive reviews consistently outnumbered negative ones, arguments and reasons behind these reviews are not apparent.

Understanding conflicting book reviews has implications far beyond books, ranging from opinions on merchandise, electronic devices, information services, to opinions on wars, religious, and environmental issues. Advances in this area have the potential of making substantial contributions to the assessment of the underlying credibility of evidence, the strength of arguments, diverse perspectives, and expectations.

In this paper, we present a study of positive and negative reviews in order to identify technical challenges and improve our understanding of contradicting opinions. Choosing this topic has distinct advantages: no prior domain knowledge required, easy to interpret and evaluate results, potentially extensible applications to other genres. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first introduce related work and existing approaches. Then we describe key concepts and major components of our approach, followed by methods and results of this study. Finally, we identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach.

2 RELATED WORK

Several areas of research are relevant, in particular, text mining, information diffusion and tipping points, sentimental analysis of movie reviews, sense-making and visual exploration [2].

The role of invisible colleges in the diffusion of scientific knowledge has been the subject of a variety of research. For example, co-citation analysis studies thematic changes in scientific literature by relying on citation links as an indexing mechanism [3]. Researchers in the text mining and information exploration communities have also studied ways to identify influential papers without the presence of references [4]. A well-known system for visual information exploration is IN-SPIRE¹. One of the fundamental challenges is making sense of a high dimensional thematic space and dealing with the complexity that exceeds human perceptual and cognitive capabilities. For instance, Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) is a powerful dimensionality reduction method. However, empirical evidence shows that it requires as high as 300 latent concepts for LSA to correlate with human judgments of similarities between texts. Understanding the structure of a 300-plus dimensional abstraction remains a challenge to text analysis as well as visualization [5].

Detecting emergent patterns in an open and information rich environment becomes increasingly important as the speed of information diffusion increases. A technical challenge is how to piece together fragmented information and form a big picture. A recent example in this area is BlogPulse [6], which aims to discover trends in weblog entries. BlogPulse relies on the extraction of key phrases, person names, and key paragraphs from weblog texts. BlogPulse identifies a key phrase if the phrase occurs more frequently on a day than its average frequency over the past two weeks.

Understanding the thematic evolution in texts has been studied from several perspectives. ThemeRiver [7] depicts thematic flows over time in a collection of articles. The thematic changes are shown along a time line of corresponding external events. A thematic river consists of frequency streams of terms; the changing width of a stream over time indicates the changes of term occurrences. The occurrence of an external event may be followed by sudden changes of thematic strengths. Kaban and Girolami [8] introduced a probabilistic method based on latent variable models for unsupervised topographic visualization of evolving textual information. Their method can be seen as complementary tool for topic detection and tracking. They applied their method to the study of a chat-line discussion data set. The data is produced in Internet relay chat rooms.

Sentiment analysis is a closely related topic, which aims to identify underlying viewpoints based on sentimental expressions in texts. Pang and Lee [9] presented a good example of classifying movie reviews based on sentiment expressions. Pang and Lee used text-categorization techniques to identify sentimental orientations in a movie review and formulated the problem as finding minimum cuts in graphs. In contrast to previous document-level polarity classification, their approach focuses on context and sentence-level subjectivity detection. The central idea is to determine whether two sentences are coherent in terms of subjectivity. It is also possible to locate key sentimental sentences in movie reviews based on strongly indicative adjectives, such as *outstanding* for a positive review or *terrible* for a negative review. However, such heuristics should be used with considerable caution because there is a danger of overemphasizing the surface value of such cues out of context.

A more recent study [3] describes the design and use of a system to support humanities scholars in their interpretation of literary work. The system integrates text mining, a graphical user interface and visualization. Users can interactively read and rate documents found in a digital libraries collection, prepare training sets, review results of classification algorithms and explore possible indicators and explanations. Their approach is complement to ours in terms of user tasks supported. In this study, we focus on automated approaches to capture essential lines of arguments or debates from a body of unstructured text without human intervention.

The majority of relevant research is built on the assumption that desirable patterns are prominent. Although this is a reasonable assumption for patterns associated with mainstream themes, there are situations in which such assumptions are not viable, for example, detecting rare and even one-time events and differentiating opinions based on their merits rather than the volume of voice.

In this article, we introduce a complementary approach to aid visual analysis of conflicting opinions. Specifically, we build on research in terminology variation and combines with predictive text analysis and interactive visualization techniques to support the understanding, interpretation, and verification of conflicting information from a diverse range of perspectives. We apply this integrative approach to the analysis of customer reviews of *The Da Vinci Code*. And we expect to identify what differentiate positive and negative reviews of the book and temporal dynamics of the development of various themes.

3 TERMINOLOGY VARIATION

Terminology variation is a key issue in computational terminology [10]. It focuses on symbolic relations between terms and how they can be related through several types of variations and transformations [11].

3.1 Linguistic Operations

Term variation refers to the transformation of a term to a conceptually related term through linguistic operations such as morphological, syntactic, and semantic operations (See Table 1). Identifying semantic variants requires extra sources of information of semantics, such as, WordNet [12]. Selecting variation relations is a term filtering process because terms are selected only if their variants of some types can be found in the corpus, including co-occurrence variants. Identifying term variations enables us to capture the actual state of knowledge in a given domain. This in turn promotes in-depth and microscopic knowledge discovery and knowledge evolution study.

¹ <http://in-spire.pnl.gov/>

Table 1: Linguistic operations underlying term variations.

Operations	Term	Term Variation
Morphological (spelling)	page-turning suspense	page turning suspense
Syntactic (adding a modifier)	secret society	ancient secret society
Syntactic (adding a head word)	clever plot	clever plot <u>twist</u>
Syntactic (changing a modifier)	renowned Harvard professor	famous Harvard professor
Syntactic (changing a head word)	secret <u>book</u>	secret <u>agenda</u>
Semantic (synonymous)	ingenious plot	<u>clever</u> plot

3.2 TermWatch

The TermWatch system is originally designed to depict topics from scientific and technological literature [13, 14]. It combines linguistic analysis with a scalable clustering algorithm in order to visualize important topics contained in a text corpus. This symbolic lexico-syntactic approach is particularly suitable for clustering multi-word terms, which rarely re-occur in text. Such terms often lead to very large and sparse matrices that are difficult to handle by existing statistical approaches to clustering which rely on high frequency information.

TermWatch comprises three components: a term extractor, a relation identifier, and a clustering module. All the data are stored in a MySQL database. Term extraction in TermWatch utilizes LTPOS². Then, terminological variations between terms are identified. These identified term variants are subsequently clustered with a hierarchical clustering algorithm called *Classification by Preferential Clustered Link* (CPCL).

The CPCL algorithm operates in two stages. First, conceptually related terms are grouped together. These terms share a common head word, but have different modifiers as in terms *ingenious plot* and *clever plot*. Such groups of terms are linguistically related through a subset of the term variation types called COMP. These components typically include spelling variants, WordNet semantic variants, and modifier variations.

In a second stage, these components are iteratively clustered based on the second subset of term variation types called CLAS. CLAS relations typically indicate a considerable change from one term to another, for example, the change of a head word from *secrete book* to *secrete agenda*. The clustering is based on the number of variations across the components and the frequency of the variation type.

CPCL avoids the well-known chain-effect drawback of single link clustering without losing its intuitiveness and computer tractability. It has been shown that this variant of hierarchical clustering preserves its main ultrametric properties [15]. The clustering algorithm is implemented using a straightforward $O(E)$ procedure called *Select Local Maximum Edge* (SLME) [16].

TermWatch supports optional associations based on term co-occurrence. Co-occurrence links can be combined with any subset of the variation relations. This makes TermWatch a comprehensive platform that combines statistical and symbolic criteria for text data analysis at the microscopic level. Clustering results can be accessed either via an integrated visualization package aiSee³ for domain topic mapping or through an interactive hypertext interface.

² http://www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~mikheev/tagger_demo.html

³ <http://www.aisee.com>.

The properties of term variation clusters generated by TermWatch have influenced the choice of a visualization tool. Foremost is the fact that it generates undirected graphs whose layout is determined from the strength of external links between clusters. Since connected components are clustered instead of individual terms, it is necessary to be able to unfold a cluster and reveal its terms. The aiSee visualization package was integrated to the system. The output of the clustering module in TermWatch is automatically formatted in the *Graph Description Language* (GDL) for aiSee visualization. Each cluster can be unfolded to reveal its internal structure in terms of its connected components and the most active variants. The user can explore and examine the most salient features of a cluster.

4 A VISUAL ANALYTIC APPROACH

We introduce a visual analytic approach to analyzing conflicting opinions and their temporal dynamics. In particular, we demonstrate the application of this approach to a study of positive and negative customer reviews of *The Da Vinci Code*.

The procedure consists of several steps: data collection, term variation analysis, time series visualization of term variants, classification based on selected terms, and content analysis (See Figure 2).

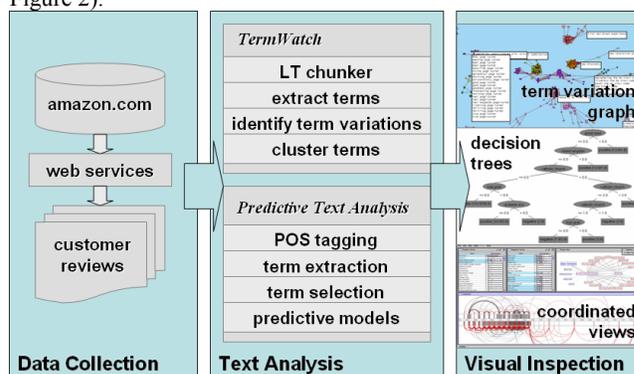


Figure 2: The overall structure of our approach.

This procedure is designed to address some of the common questions concerning conflicting opinions. *The Da Vinci Code* is a controversial bestseller. What made *The Da Vinci Code* a bestseller? Which aspects of the book are favorably reviewed? Which aspects are criticized? More generally, will we be able to apply the same technique to other bestsellers, movies, cars, electronic devices, innovations, and scientific work? Ultimately, what are the reasons and tipping points behind a success, a failure, a controversial issue, or conflicting information from multiple sources?

4.1 The Customer Review Corpus

Customer reviews of *The Da Vinci Code* were retrieved from Amazon.com using Amazon's web services (AWS). Amazon customer reviews are based on a 5-star rating system. 5 stars are the best and 1 star is the worst. In our study, reviews with 4 or 5 stars are regarded as positive reviews. Reviews with 1 or 2 stars are deemed as negative. Reviews with 3 stars are not used in this study.

The average length of positive reviews is approximately 150 words and 9 sentences, whereas negative reviews are slightly longer, 200 words and 11 sentences on average. These reviews are generally comparable to news and abstracts of scientific papers in terms of their length (See [13] for an example of a corpus of scientific abstracts).

Table 2: Statistics of the Corpus.

Corpus	Reviews	# Chars (mean)	#Words (mean)	#Sentences (mean)
Positive	2,092	1,500,707 (717.36)	322,616 (154.21)	19,740 (9.44)
Negative	1,076	1,042,696 (969.05)	221,910 (206.24)	12,767 (11.87)
Total	3,168	2,543,403	544,526	32,507

4.2 Decision Trees

The reasons we introduce the use of decision trees in our approach are twofold. First, we would like to verify the ability to predict the categories of reviews with a small set of selected terms. Second, we expect decision trees to function as an intuitive visual representation for analysts to explore and understand the role of selected terms in categorizing conflicting opinions. The construction of a decision tree is particular suitable for our purposes. If we use selected terms to grow a decision tree and use the review categories of positive and negative as leaf nodes, the most influential terms would appear towards the root of the tree. One would be able to explore various alternative ways to reach positive or negative reviews.

In order to put the predictive power of our decision trees in context, we generate additional predictive models of the same data with other widely used classifiers, namely the naïve Bayesian classifier and support vector machine (SVM) classifier. We expect that although decision trees may not give us the highest prediction accuracy, it should be a worthwhile trade-off given the interpretability gain.

We use the following procedure. Reviews are first processed by part-of-speech tagging. Noun phrases are extracted with stopwords removed and the last word of each term stemmed. We include adjective as part of the phrases to capture emotional and sentimental expressions. Log likelihood tests are then used to select terms that are not purely high frequent, but influential in differentiating reviews from different categories. Selected terms represent an aggressive dimensionality reduction, ranging from 94.5~99.5%. Selected terms are used for decision tree learning and classification tests with other classifiers.

We also explore the use of SVM to visualize reviews of different categories. Each review is represented as a point in a high-dimensional space \mathcal{S} , which contains three independent subspaces \mathcal{S}_p , \mathcal{S}_q , and \mathcal{S}_c : $\mathcal{S} = \mathcal{S}_p \oplus \mathcal{S}_q \oplus \mathcal{S}_c$. \mathcal{S}_p represents a review purely by positive reviews. Similarly, \mathcal{S}_q represents a review in negative review terms only and \mathcal{S}_c represents. In other words, a review is decomposed into three components to reflect the presence of positive review terms, negative review terms, and terms that are common in both categories. Note that if a review does not contain any of these selected terms, then it will not have a meaningful presence in this space. All such reviews are mapped to the origin of the high-dimensional space and they are excluded from subsequent analysis.

The optimal configuration of the SVM classifier is determined by a number of parameters, which are in turn determined based on a k-fold cross-validation [17]. This process is known as model selection. A simple grid search heuristic is used to find the optimal parameters in terms of the average accuracy so as to avoid the potential overfitting problem.

4.3 Improvise

Improvise [18] is a self-contained exploratory visualization software application, written in Java and freely available on the web through an open source license. In Improvise, analysts interactively build and browse visualizations consisting of

multiple coordinated views of their information. Visualizations can be rapidly modified and extended to develop hypotheses and exploit discoveries during ongoing visual analysis. In particular, Improvise provides precise control over how interaction affects the display of space, time, and abstract dimensions of information in and between multi-layer maps, scatter plots, parallel coordinate plots, tables, and other views.

An interactive visualization prototype constructed in Improvise allows exploration of time series identified by TermWatch. The main feature of this visualization is a variation on the basic two-sided arc diagram [19] in which additional time series information is displayed between the positive and negative sides. Several coordinated views allow brushing of positive and negative terms and dynamic filtering on time.

5 DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF CONFLICTING OPINIONS

Table 3 shows the statistics of the term extraction and variant clustering by TermWatch. We describe these results in more detail in the following sections.

Table 3: Multi-layered feature selection using TermWatch.

Review Categories	Terms	Classes	Components	Unique Features
Positive	20,078	1,017	1,983	879
Negative	14,464	906	1,995	2,018

Figure 3 helps to identify common characteristics of positive reviews of the book. For example, many reviewers found the book a page turner, with a wide variety of minor variations, such as an amazing page turner or an episodically page turner. It indicates that the popularity of the book is in part due to its gripping plots. The ability to group these terms together is a distinct advantage for reducing the complexity of the entire terminology.

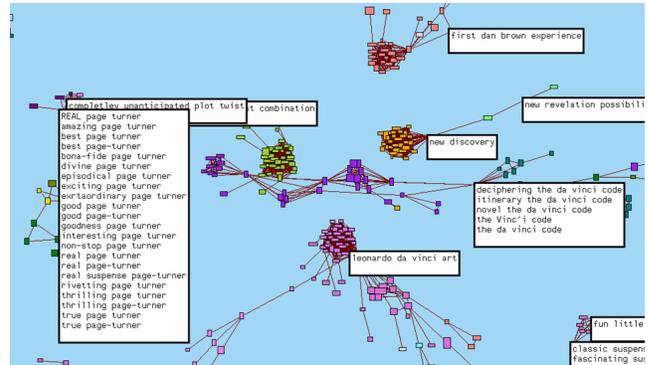


Figure 3: Terms extracted from positive reviews are clustered based on both syntactic and semantic relationships.

5.1 Analysis of reviews' thematic content

In-depth content analysis of terms in context is necessary to identify themes that differentiate positive reviews and negative reviews. The following analysis is conducted using TermWatch's navigational interface, which enables to access the complete list of terms in a cluster and the contexts in which they appeared in the corpus. A term variation network has three levels: clusters are shown at the highest level, then components, and finally terms at the lowest level.

5.2 Themes in Positive Reviews

The largest cluster labeled *leonardo da vinci art* in the network of terms associated with positive reviews is surrounded by the clusters *literary fiction*, *the complete dead sea scroll*, *harvard professor*, and *isaac newton*. The structure of this cluster is highly

the histogram generated for terms used in positive and negative reviews (See Figure 7).

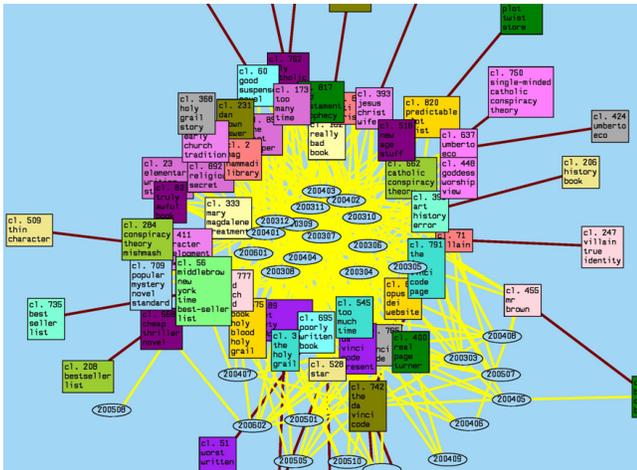


Figure 6: Nested term clusters of phrases found in negative reviews.

In contrast, the graph generated for the chronological analysis of term variants in negative reviews did not have a core; terms formed a circular shape instead (See Figure 6). There are many more links, however. Some of the themes portrayed by the clusters clearly have negative connotations, for example, *really bad book*, *poorly written book*, *truly awful book*, *catholic theory conspiracy*, *art history error*, *conspiracy theory mismatch*, and *thin character*.

An additional visualization tool is developed so that users can explore terms found in positive reviews alongside terms found in negative reviews in the same month. Positive reviews appear to have fewer terms than negative reviews, although there are more positive reviews than negative ones.



Figure 7: Terms extracted from positive reviews differ from terms in negative reviews monthly as well as overall.

Figure 7 shows a steady growth in the number of terms from negative reviews over the 13 months. However, such a steady growth is absent from the positive review timeline. It is our observation that positive reviews may need a few well-chosen adjectives to express their enthusiasm as well as commenting generally on the plot while negative reviewers have to do extensive research in order to challenge the book point by point. Thus, negative reviews, on the average, tend to be longer than positive ones. A similar observation can be made to the reviews of scientific papers, where negative reviews tend to be more detailed

than positive ones, but we are not aware of empirical data to verify this observation.

5.5 Coordinated Views of Terms

Figure 8 shows a screenshot of the coordinated views created by *Improvise*. In the modified arc diagram, shown in the lower half of the screen, increasing time is labeled from left to right along the center axis. The top half of the diagram shows terms used in positive review, the bottom half terms used in negative ones. Arcs connect months in which common terms appear. Arc thickness represents the number of common terms. Bar thickness shows the number of terms for each month, considered individually. (Bar thickness tends to be thicker than arc thickness, because some terms appear in only one month.)

Two multicolumn tables provide detail about positive and negative terms. For each term, a nested slider (navigationally coordinated with the arc diagram) shows the pattern of monthly occurrences as a simple time series. A graph shows selected terms as nodes (blue for positive, red for negative, magenta for mixed). Node size encodes total appearances of each term. Edges connect terms that appear the same month, with thickness representing the number of months in common. Selected terms are highlighted in red in the arc diagram. If the time filter checkbox is selected, the tables and graph filter out terms for months outside the time range visible in the arc diagram. Analysts can brush interesting terms in any of the views, explore patterns of term usage by panning and zooming over time, then drill down to compare temporal patterns for particular terms.

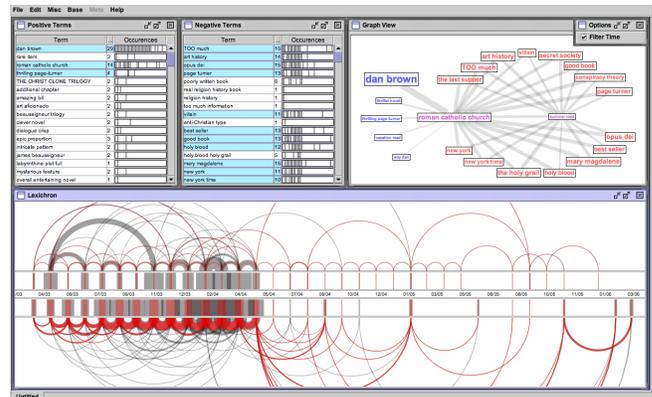


Figure 8: Coordinated views generated by *Improvise*.

6 PREDICTIVE TEXT ANALYSIS

The predictive text analysis of the book reviews serves two objectives: to validate the predictive power of selected terms and to provide a visual representation for analysts to explore and understand the role of these terms in reviews of different categories.

Table 5 summarizes the number of terms selected by log likelihood values and the accuracies of three classifiers with 10-fold cross-validation. The original set of extracted terms contains 28,763 terms. The dimensionality reduction rates range from 94% to 99.5%. In contrast, if we select terms based on their document frequencies (≥ 2), there will be 6,881 terms and the accuracy of classification if a C4.5 decision tree is 68.89%, which is below all the models with log likelihood tests. More importantly, decision trees (C4.5) are relatively stable in terms of 10-fold cross-validation accuracies (slightly over 70%), whereas SVM models are more than 80% of accuracy, which means the selected terms are good candidates to categorize these reviews. Classifiers used in this study are available in Weka [20].

relatively straightforward to identify the predominating themes of positive and negative reviews. For negative reviews, the heavy religious controversies raised by the book are signified by a set of persistent and variation rich terms such as *mary madgalena*, *opus dei*, and *the holy grail*, and none of these terms ever reached the same status in positive reviews. Much of the enthusiasm in positive reviews can be explained by the perspective that the book is a work of fiction rather than scholarly work with discriminating terms such as *vacation read*, *beach read*, and *summer read*.

To our knowledge this is the first visual analytics example of conflicting book reviews over an extensive period of time. We are encouraged by the initial results. This study has also identified challenges and research questions that need to be pursued further. For example, what insights would we gain if we were using traditional statistical-oriented and high-frequency-focused approaches? Are there potential biases introduced by exclusively focusing on term variation patterns? How does the term-level microscopic perspective complement with topic-level or domain-level macroscopic visualizations of the dynamics of thematic evolution?

In conclusion, we found the combination of term variation patterns, statistical tests of associations, predictive models, and various interactive visualization tools a promising and generic approach to visual analysis of conflicting views, especially in feature selection and handling low-frequency but critical connections. The use of various coordinated visualizations is necessary when multiple levels of abstraction and multiple perspectives are involved. Comprehensive evaluations of alternative approaches and thorough investigations of the applicability in a wider range of visual analytic tasks are among the most important issues to be addressed in further studies.

Acknowledgements

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<http://www.geovista.psu.edu/NEVAC/index.html>

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