Making sense of microposts: (#Microposts2014) named entity extraction & linking challenge

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ABSTRACT

Microposts are small fragments of social media content and a popular medium for sharing facts, opinions and emotions. They comprise a wealth of data which is increasing exponentially, and which therefore presents new challenges for the information extraction community, among others. This paper describes the ‘Making Sense of Microposts’ (#Microposts2014) Workshop’s Named Entity Extraction and Linking (NEEL) Challenge, held as part of the 2014 World Wide Web conference (WWW’14). The task of this challenge consists of the automatic extraction and linkage of entities appearing within English Microposts on Twitter. Participants were set the task of engineering a named entity extraction and DBpedia linkage system targeting a predefined taxonomy, to be run on the challenge data set, comprising a manually annotated training and a test corpus of Microposts. 43 research groups expressed intent to participate in the challenge, of which 24 signed the agreement required to be given a copy of the training and test datasets. 8 groups fulfilled all submission requirements, out of which 4 were accepted for the presentation at the workshop and a further 2 as posters. The submissions covered sequential and joint methods for approaching the named entity extraction and entity linking tasks. We describe the evaluation process and discuss the performance of the different approaches to the #Microposts2014 NEEL Challenge.

Keywords

Microposts, Named Entity, Evaluation, Extraction, Linking, Disambiguation, Challenge

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the first Making Sense of Microposts (#MSM2011) workshop at the Extended Semantic Web Conference in 2011 through to the most recent workshop in 2014 we have received over 80 submissions covering a wide range of topics related to mining information and (re-)using the knowledge content of Microposts. Microposts are short text messages published using minimal effort via social media platforms. They provide a publicly available wealth of data which has proven to be useful in different applications and contexts (e.g. music recommendation, social bots, emergency response situations). However, gleaning useful information from Micropost content presents various challenges, due, among others, to the inherent characteristics of this type of data:

   i) the limited length of Microposts;
   ii) the noisy lexical nature of Microposts, where terminology differs between users when referring to the same thing, and abbreviations are commonplace.

A commonly used approach for mining Microposts is the use of cues that are available in textual documents, providing contextual features to this content. One example of such a cue is the use of named entities (NE). Extracting named entities in Micropost content has proved to be a challenging task; this was the focus of the first challenge, in #MSM2013 [3]. A step further into the use of such cues is to be able not only to recognize and classify them but also to provide further information, in other words, disambiguating entities. This prompted the Named Entity Extraction and Linking (NEEL) Challenge, held as part of the Making Sense of Microposts Workshop (#Microposts2014) at the 2014 World Wide Web Conference (WWW’14).

The purpose of this challenge was to set up an open and competitive environment that would encourage participants to deliver novel or improved approaches to extract entities from Microposts and link them to their DBpedia counterpart resources (if defined). This report describes the #Microposts2014 NEEL Challenge, our collaborative annotation of a corpus of Microposts and our evaluation of the performance of each submission. We also describe the approaches taken in the participants’ systems – which use both established and novel, alternative approaches to entity extraction and linking. We describe how well they performed and how system performance differed across approaches. The resulting body of work has implications for researchers interested in the task of information extraction from social media.

2. THE CHALLENGE

In this section we describe the goal of the challenge, the task set, and the process we followed to generate the corpus of Microposts. We conclude the section with the list of the accepted submissions.
2.1 The Task and Goal
The NEEL Challenge task required participants to build semi-automated
systems in two stages:

(i) generally known as Named Entity Extraction (NEE) – in which
participants were to extract entity mentions from a tweet; and

(ii) known as Named Entity Linking (NEL), in which each entity
extracted is linked to an English DBpedia v3.9 resource.

For this task we considered the definition of an entity in the general
sense of being, in which an object or a set of objects do not necessarily
need to have a material existence, but which however must be
classified as an instance of a taxonomy class. To facilitate
the creation of the gold standard (GS) we limited the entity types
evaluated in this challenge by specifying the taxonomy to be used:
the NERD ontology v0.5 [16]. To this we added a few concepts
from the DBpedia taxonomy. The NERD taxonomy was not
considered as normative in the evaluation of the submissions, nor for the ranking.

This is a deliberate choice, to increase the complexity of the task
and to let participants perform taxonomy matching starting from
the distribution of the entities in the GS. The list of classes in the
taxonomy used is distributed with the released GS.

Beside the typical word-tokens found in a Micropost, new to this
year’s challenge we considered special social media markers as entity
mentions as well. These Twitter markers are tokens introduced with a special symbol. We considered two such markers: hashtags, prefixed by #, denoting the topic of a Micropost (e.g. #londonriots, #surreyriots, #osloexp), and mentions prefixed by @, referring to Twitter user names, which include entities such as organizations (e.g. @bbcworldservice) and celebrities (e.g. @ChadMMurray, @AmyWinehouse).

Participants were required to recognize these different entity types
within a given Micropost, and to extract the corresponding entity
link tuples. Consider the following example, taken from our annotated corpus:

Source (tweet text):
RT @bbcworldservice police confirms bomb in Oslo #oslexp

The 2nd token (the mention @bbcworldservice) in this Micropost
to the primary international broadcaster, the BBC World Service; the
7th token refers to the location Oslo; while the 8th token (the has-
tag #oslexp) refers to the 2011 Norway terrorist attack. An entry to
the challenge would be required to spot these tokens and display
the result as a set of annotations, where each line corresponds to a
tab-separated entity mention and entity link:

We also consider the case where an entity is referenced in a tweet
either as a noun or a noun phrase, if it:

a) belongs to one of the categories specified in the taxonomy;
b) is disambiguated by a DBpedia URI within the context of the
tweet. Hence any (single word or phrase) entity without a dis-
ambiguation URI is disregarded;
c) subsumes other entities. The longest entity phrase within a Mi-
cropost, composed of multiple sequential entities and that can be
disambiguated by a DBpedia URI, takes precedence over its
component entities.

Consider the following examples:

1. [Natural History Museum at Tring]:
2. [News International chairman James Murdoch]’s
evidence to MPs on phone hacking:
3. [Sony]’s [Android Honeycomb] Tablet

For the 3rd case, even though they may appear to be a coherent
phrases, since there are no DBpedia URIs for [Sony’s Android
Honeycomb] or [Sony’s Android Honeycomb Tablet], the entity phrase is split into what are the (valid) component enti-
ties highlighted above.

To encourage competition we solicited sponsorship for the winning
submission. This was provided by the European project LinkedTV5,
who offered a prize of an iPad This generous sponsorship is test-
ament to the growing interest in issues related to automatic ap-
proaches for gleaning information from (the very large amounts of)
social media data.

2.2 Data Collection and Annotation
The challenge data set comprises 3,505 tweets extracted from a collec-
tion of over 18 million tweets. This collection, provided by the
Redites project6, covers event-annotated tweets collected for the
period 15th July 2011 to 15th August 2011 (31 days). It extends
over multiple notable events, including the death of Amy Wine-
house, the London Riots and the Oslo bombing. Since the NEEL
Challenge task is to automatically extract and link entities, we built
our data set considering both event and non-event tweets. Event
tweets are more likely to contain entities; non-event tweets there-
fore enable us to evaluate the performance of the system in avoiding
false positives in the entity extraction phase.

Statistics describing the training and test sets are provided in Ta-
ble 1. The dataset was split into training (70%) and test (30%)
sets. The training set contains 2,340 tweets, with 41,037 tokens
and 3,819 named entities; the test set contains 1,165 tweets, with
20,224 tokens and 1,458 named entities. The tweets are relatively

1http://nerd.eurecom.fr/ontology/nerd-v0.5.
3Note that the annotated result returns tokens without the social
media markers [# and @] in the original Micropost.
4In this example “dbpedia:” refers to the namespace prefix of a
DBpedia resource (see http://dbpedia.org/resource)
5http://www.linkedtv.eu
6http://demeter.inf.ed.ac.uk/redites
Table 1: General statistics of the training and test data sets:

*Posts* refers to the number of tweets in a data set; *Words* to the unique number of words; *Tokens* refers to the total number of words; *AvgTokens/Post* represents the average number of tokens per tweet; *NEs* denotes the unique number of NEs; *totalNEs* the total number of NEs; and *AvgNEs/Post* the average number of NEs per post. We computed *AvgTokens/Post* and *AvgNEs/Post* as the standard deviation from the mean (mean ± standard deviation).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dataset</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Words/Tokens</th>
<th>AvgTokens/Post</th>
<th>NEs</th>
<th>totalNEs</th>
<th>AvgNEs/Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>train</td>
<td>2,340</td>
<td>12,758/41,037</td>
<td>17.54±5.70</td>
<td>1,862</td>
<td>3,819</td>
<td>3.26±3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>test</td>
<td>1,165</td>
<td>6,858/20,224</td>
<td>17.36±5.59</td>
<td>834</td>
<td>1,458</td>
<td>2.50±2.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

long in both data sets; the average number of tokens per tweet is 17.54±5.70 in the training, and 17.36±5.59 in the test set. The average number of entities per tweet is also relatively high, at 3.26±3.37 for the training and 2.50±2.94 for the test dataset. The percentage of tweets without any valid entities is 32% (775 tweets) in the training, and 40% (469 tweets) in the test set. There is a fair bit of overlap of entities between the training and test data: 13.27% (316) of the named entities in the training data also occurs in the test dataset. With regard to the tokens in the original tweets with hashtag and mention social media markers, a total of 406 hashtags represented valid entities in the training, with 184 in the test set. The total number of valid entity mentions was 133 in the training, and 73 in the test data set.

The annotation of each Micropost in the training set gave all participants a common base from which to learn extraction patterns. In order to assess the performance of the submissions we used an underlying gold standard (GS), generated by 14 annotators, who had different backgrounds, including computer scientists, social scientists, social web experts, semantic web experts and linguists.

The annotation process comprised the following phases:

1. **Phase 1.** Unsupervised annotation of the corpus was performed, to extract candidate links that were used as input to the next stage. The candidates were extracted using the NERD framework [15].

2. **Phase 2.** The data set was divided into batches, with three different annotators to each batch. In this phase annotations were performed using CrowdFlower. The annotators were asked to analyze the NERD links generated in phase 1 by adding or removing entity-annotations as required. The annotators were also asked to mark any ambiguous cases encountered.

3. **Phase 3.** In the final stage, consistency checking, three experts double-checked the annotations and generated the GS (for both the training and test sets). Three main tasks were carried out here: (1) cross-consistency check of entity types; (2) cross-consistency check of URIs; (3) resolution of ambiguous cases raised by the 14 annotators.

The complete data set, including a list of changes and the gold standard, is available for download with the #Microposts2014 Workshop proceedings, accessible under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

### 2.3 Challenge Submissions

The challenge attracted a lot of interest from research groups spread across the world. Initially, 43 groups expressed their intent to participate in the challenge; however only 8 completed submission. Each submission consisted of a short paper explaining the system approach, and up to three different test set annotations generated by running the system with different settings. After peer review, 4 submissions were accepted, and a further 2 as posters. The submission run with the best overall performance for each system was used in the rankings (see Table 4). The submissions accepted are listed in Table 2.

### 2.4 System Descriptions

We present next an analysis of the participants’ systems for theNamed Entity Extraction and Linking (NEEL) tasks. Except for submission 18, who treated the NEEL task as a joint task of Named Entity Extraction (NEE) and Named Entity Linking (NEL); all participants approached the NEEL task as two sequential sub-tasks (i.e. NEE first, followed by NEL). A summary of these approaches includes:

1. **use of external systems**;
2. **main features used**;
3. **type of strategy used**;

## Table 2: Submissions accepted, ordered by submission number, with team affiliations and number of runs for each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Runs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>UTwente</td>
<td>Habib, M. et al.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Max Planck</td>
<td>Amir, M. et al.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>IIT Hyberabad</td>
<td>Bansal, R. et al.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
<td>Chang, M.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Net7-Spaziodati-UPisa</td>
<td>Scaiola, U. et al.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>SAP</td>
<td>Dahlmeier, D. et al.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
iv) use of external sources.

Table 3 provides a detailed summary of the approaches used for both the NEE and NEL tasks.

The NEE task on Microposts is on its own challenging. One of the main strategies was to use off-the-shelf named entity recognition (NER) tools, improved through the use of extended gazetteers. System 18 approached the NEE task from scratch using a rule-based approach; all others made use of external sources. Some of these were Twitter-tuned and were applied for:

i) feature extraction, including the use of the TwitterNLP (2013) [13] and TwitterNLP (2011) [8] toolkits for POS tagging (systems 16, 20);

ii) entity extraction with TwiNER [10], Ritter’s NER [14] and TAGME [5] (systems 13, 16, 19).

Other external toolkits which address NEE in longer newswire texts were also applied, including Stanford NER [6] and DBpedia Spotlight [11] (systems 15, 20).

Another common trend across these systems was the use of gazetteer-based, rule-matching approaches to improve the coverage of the off-the-shelf tools. System 13 applied simple regular expression rules to detect additional named entities not found by the NE extractor (such as numbers, and dates); systems 15 and 18 applied rules to find candidate entity mentions using a knowledge base (among others, Freebase [2]). Some systems also applied name normalization for feature extraction (systems 15, 18). This strategy was particularly useful for catering for entities originally appearing as hashtags or username mentions. For example, hashtags such as #BarackObama were normalized into a composite entity mention “Barack Obama”; and “@EmWatson” into “Emma Watson”.

The NEL task involved in some cases the use of off-the-self tools, for finding candidate links for each entity mention and/or for deriving mention features (systems 13, 19, 20). A common trend across systems was the use of external knowledge sources including:

i) NER dictionaries (e.g. Google CrossWiki [17]);

ii) Knowledge Base Gazetteers (e.g. Yago [9], DBpedia [1]);

iii) Weighted lexicons (using e.g. Freebase [2], Wikipedia);

iv) other sources (e.g. Microsoft Web N-gram [19]).

A wide range of different features was investigated for the linking strategies. Some systems characterized an entity using Micropost-derived features with Knowledge base (KB)-derived features (systems 13, 15, 16, 19). Micropost-derived features include the use of lexical (e.g., N-grams, capitalization) and syntactical (e.g., POS) features, while KB-derived features included the use of URIs, anchor text and link-based probabilities (see Table 3). Additionally, features were extended by capturing jointly the local (within a Micropost) and global (within a knowledge base) contextual information of an entity, via graph-based features (such as entity semantic cohesiveness) (system 18). Further novel features included the use of Twitter account metadata for characterizing mentions and popularity-based statistical features for characterizing entities (systems 16, 18).

The classification strategies used for entity linking included supervised approaches (systems 13, 15, 16, 18, 19) existing off-the-shelf approaches enhanced with simple heuristics (e.g. the search+rules) (system 20).

3. EVALUATION OF CHALLENGE SUBMISSIONS

We describe next the evaluation measures used to assess the goodness of the submissions and conclude with the final challenge rankings, with submissions ordered according to the F1 measure.

3.1 Evaluation Measures

We evaluate the goodness of a system S in terms of the performance of the system to both recognize and link an entity from a test set TS. Per each instance in TS, a system provides a set of pairs P of the form: entity mention (e), and link (l). A link is any valid DBpedia URI\(^{11}\) that points to an existing resource (e.g. http://dbpedia.org/resource/Barack_Obama). The evaluation consists of comparing submission entry pairs against those in the gold standard GS. The measures used to evaluate each pair are precision P, recall R, and f-measure F1. The evaluation is based on micro-averages.

First, a cleansing stage is performed over each submission, resolving where needed, the redirects. Then, to assess the correctness of the pairs provided by a system S, we perform an exact-match evaluation, in which a pair is correct only if both the entity mention and the link match the corresponding set in the GS. Pair order is also relevant. We define \((e, l)_S \in S\) as the set of pairs extracted by the system S, \((e, l)_S \in GS\) denotes the set of pairs in the gold standard. We define the set of true positives TP, false positives FP, and false negatives FN for a given system as:

\[
TP = \{(e, l)_S | (e, l)_S \in (S \cap GS)\} \tag{1}
\]

\[
FP = \{(e, l)_S | (e, l)_S \in S \land (e, l)_S \notin GS\} \tag{2}
\]

\[
FN = \{(e, l)_S | (e, l)_S \in GS \land (e, l)_S \notin S\} \tag{3}
\]

Thus TP defines the set of relevant pairs in TS, in other words the set of pairs in TS that match corresponding ones in GS. FP is the set of irrelevant pairs in TS, in other words the pairs in TS that do not match the pairs in GS. FN is the set of false negatives denoting the pairs that are not recognised by TS, yet appear in GS. Since our evaluation is based on a micro-average analysis, we sum the individual true positives, false positives, and false negatives of each system across all Microposts. As we require an exact-match for pairs \((e, l)\) we are looking for strict entity recognition and linking matches; each system has to link each entity e recognised to the correct resource l.

From this set of definitions, we define precision, recall, and f-measure as follows:

\[
P = \frac{|TP|}{|TP \cup FP|} \tag{4}
\]

\[^{11}\text{We consider all DBpedia v3.9 resources valid.}\]
Table 3: Automated approaches used in #Microposts2014 NEEL Challenge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Named Entity Extraction (NEE)</th>
<th>External System</th>
<th>Main Features</th>
<th>NE Extraction Strategy</th>
<th>Linguistic Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 UTwente</td>
<td>TwiNER [10]</td>
<td>Regular Expression, Entity phrases, N-gram</td>
<td>TwiNER [10] + CRF</td>
<td>DB(^a) Gazetteeer [1], Wiki(^b) Gazetteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 IIT Hyderabad</td>
<td>RitterNER [14], TwitterNLP (2011) [8]</td>
<td>Proper nouns sequence, N-grams</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Wiki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 SAP</td>
<td>DBSpotlight [11], TwitterNLP (2013) [13]</td>
<td>Unigram, POS, lower, title &amp; upper case, stripped words, isNumber, word cluster, DBpedia</td>
<td>CRF</td>
<td>DB Gazetteer, Brown Clusters [18]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Named Entity Linking (NEL)</th>
<th>External System</th>
<th>Main Features</th>
<th>Linking Strategy</th>
<th>Linguistic Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 UTwente</td>
<td>Google Search(^c)</td>
<td>N-grams, DB links, Wiki links, Capitalization</td>
<td>SVM</td>
<td>Wiki, DB, WordNet [12], Web N-Gram [19], Yago [9]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 MaxPlanck</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Prefix, POS, suffix, Twitter account metadata, normalized mentions, tri-grams</td>
<td>entity aggregate prior + prefix-tree data structure + DB match</td>
<td>Wiki, DB, Yago [9]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 SAP</td>
<td>Search API (Wiki, DBSpotlight [11], Google)</td>
<td>Entity mention</td>
<td>Search+rules</td>
<td>Wiki, DB [1]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)DBpedia abbreviated to ‘DB’ [1]  
\(^b\)Wikipedia abbreviated to ‘Wiki’  
\(^c\)Google Search, https://developers.google.com/web-search/docs
with this type of progressively changing content. It also indicated that learning entity extraction and linking as a joint task may be beneficial for boosting performance in entity linking in Microposts.

We aim to continue to host additional challenges targeting more complex tasks, within the context of data mining of Microposts.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
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