POLITICAL DISINFORMATION SEEMS TO BE EVERYWHERE, BUT HOW CAN WE COMPARE?

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A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CROSS NATIONAL RESEARCH BASED ON THE US MIDTERM ELECTIONS, THE DANISH GENERAL ELECTIONS, ~~AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS~~

Call it the 'Boris-Trump' Effect?

- A recent Guardian article (Quinn, 2019) reported that Boris Johnson, current British PM and former Mayor of London, was scheduled to appear in court on allegations that he "lied and misled" the public during the Brexit debate.

- Of course, our own President Trump is currently mired in an ongoing scandal that has triggered an impeachment inquiry. This is in addition to his ongoing "fake news" allegations and "alternative facts" campaigns.

- While these charges themselves have not (yet) led to substantial disciplinary actions for either Johnson or Trump, they are emblematic of just how pivotal all sorts of actors - **including government officials and public figures** - can drive the spread of disinformation to potentially influence not only public debate but also the outcome of campaigns and policy decisions.

In the Danish context...

- It could be argued that Rasmus Paludan, leader of the political movement Stram Kurs (Hard Line), is imitating the same populist playbook of distorted facts, scapegoating, extreme nationalism, and violent racism.

- Of course, Trump recently was rebuked by current Danish PM Mette Frederiksen of the Social Democrats on the proposed sale of Greenland.

And so, with this background in mind:

- We begun to monitor and examine social media output in three unique political contexts in order to focus and develop a better understanding how much and what types of disinformation are entering into these unique but interrelated political arenas, and to categorize which actors are actively cultivating or squelching disinformation.

- Presenting here today our preliminary findings on the 2018 US midterm elections and the 2019 Danish general elections.

- Building on previous research, we leverage the Digital Methods Initiative - Twitter Collection and Analysis Toolkit (DMI-TCAT) to collect and model social media data to identify influential users and disinformation sources and flows around these campaigns.

What do we hope to find?

Objective 1 – Network analysis of hundreds of thousand of social media posts that mention the campaigns to construct models that measure which users are most influential in these discursive online spaces;

Objective 2 – Human / machine coding to sort users into categories and examine those groups as sources of disinformation;

Objective 3 – Comparisons of findings from each of the unique political contexts to better model and understand disinformation as a global phenomenon.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND: DMI-TCAT

- The Digital Methods Initiative - Twitter Collection and Analysis Toolkit allows media researchers to collect Tweets off the STREAM API (the so-called "gardenhose" access to Twitter) and then process the data for network analysis and visualization in Gephi or Excel/SPSS (or similar).

- With this software, social data in the millions of units is quickly and easily sorted by algorithms to find users or items of importance on Twitter.   Important to point out that the DMI-TCAT does not provide full firehose access to all historical tweets.

- Rather, it returns a generally representative sample of content from the public streaming application programming interface (API; cf., Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013; Groshek & Tandoc, 2016).

- It is free and customizable for anyone wishing to use it (see https://github.com/digitalmethodsinitiative/dmi-tcat)

Samples from separate DMI-TCAT installations

US midterms

- Oct. 11 - Nov. 11, 2018
- 156,641 tweets from 99,750 distinct users
- Search terms: #2018midterms, #election, #midterm, #november2018 OR #vote2018
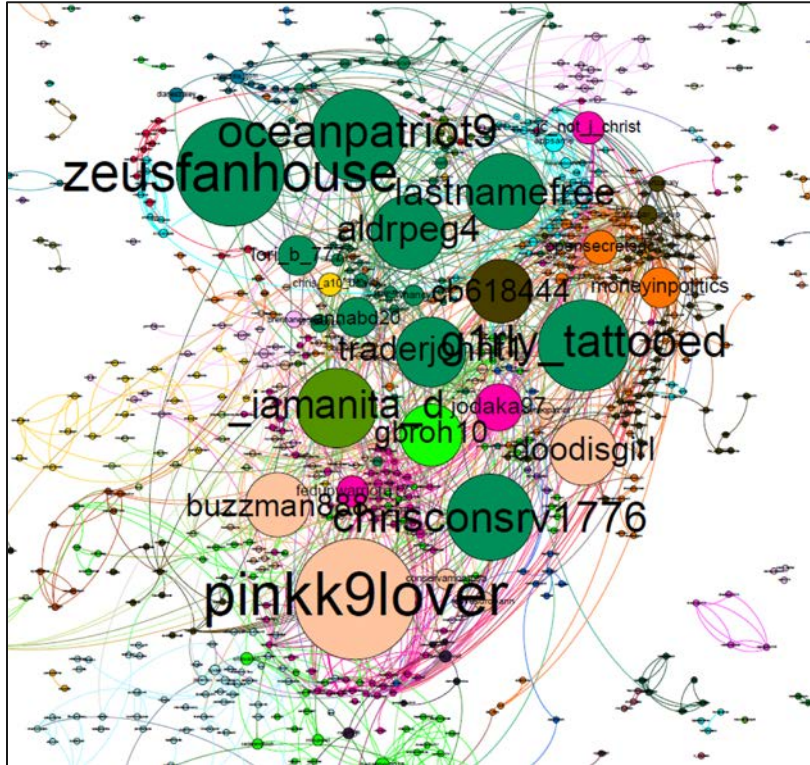
Danish general elections

- May 5 - June 5, 2019
- 38,127 tweets from 8,662 distinct users
- Search terms: #ft19, #ft2019, #ftvalg, #ftvalg19, #ftvalg2019, #fv19, #fv2019, #valg19 OR #valg2019

Methods and analytic procedures

- 'Influential' users were identified and sized using the betweenness centrality algorithm that measures the role of users in sharing information.
  - These rankings were used to select the 'top 100' accounts for each of the samples, which were then manually coded into expert, media, citizen, and political party (cf. citations)
  - User were also coded for likelihood of being a real user or a bot, political leanings, and more specific role in organizations (as relevant).
- Users were also sorted by color into 'communities' using the modularity algorithm that was informed by their mentioning activity.
  - This maps, in some ways, the fragmentation and interaction of users or groups that may be ideologically or otherwise opposed.
- In addition, users were visually graphed and clustered using openord to approximate the structure of the network.

Findings - Objective 1 (Network Modeling)

US midterms: 1,500 users with 2,017 edges 9,461 edges
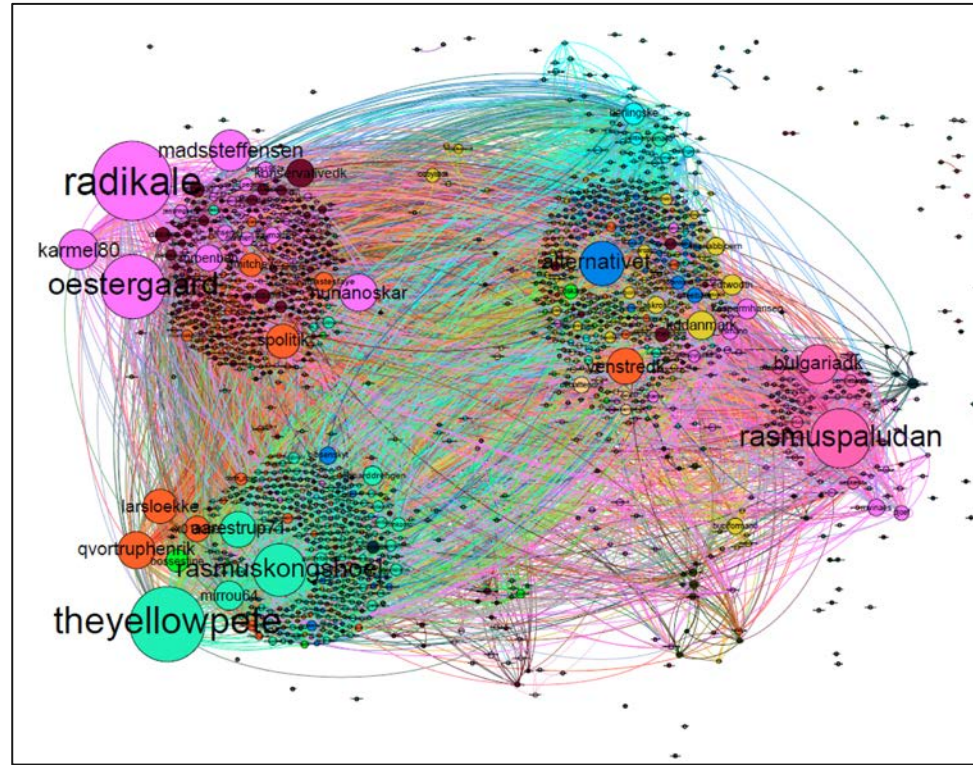
Danish general elections: 1,500 users with

Findings - Objective 2 (Categorization)

US midterms / of 100 'most influential' users

- 63% citizens
- 10% experts
- 10% media
- 6% political parties
- 11% deleted / suspended

Danish general elections / of 100 'most influential'

- 39% citizens
- 27% political parties
- 18% media
- 14% experts
- 2% deleted / suspended

Findings - Objective 2 in more detail

US midterms / of 100 'most influential' users

- 40% 'citizen' conservative bots
- 11% real users w/ liberal views
- 5% real users w/ conservative views
- 4% 'citizen' liberal bots
- distribution of other groups more divided

Danish general elections / of 100 'most influential'

- 23% real users w/ liberal views
- 18% politicians w/ near even ideology split
- 2% bots (explicit)
- distribution of other groups more divided

Findings - Objective 3 (Comparisons)

- Notably, networks were much more dense in Denmark, despite fewer posts and far less users suggesting more 'broadcasting' instead of engaging in the US

- Findings also suggest a cultural differences in use and interaction style, where politicians and media actors in Denmark are far more influential in communicating with other users

- In addition, there are drastic differences in user types across the two countries, particularly of non-human agents, which are dominant in the US and nearly absent in Denmark

- These findings don't prove disinformation flows (which we are still coding for) but do indicate a greater likelihood of the discursive space being amplified and tilting far to the right wing in the US
  - 14 of the top 15 most influential users in the US were right wing 'citizen' bot accounts

Findings - Objective 3 by comparing users

US midterms / the 'most influential' users

- https://twitter.com/pinkk9lover
- https://twitter.com/zeusFanHouse
- https://twitter.com/OceanPatriot9
- https://twitter.com/G1rly_Tattooed

Danish general elections / the 'most influential'

- https://twitter.com/radikale
- https://twitter.com/TheYellowPete
- https://twitter.com/oestergaard
- https://twitter.com/RasmusPaludan
  - *Now suspended*

Pathways to participation or misinformation?

- Results suggest that the ongoing evolution of networked gatekeeping has to a relative dearth of journalists and news organizations from participating in social media coverage on certain topics, in this case elections in the US and Denmark.

- While media organizations can still better leverage affordances in social networks such as @mentions and following, this study has (so far) demonstrated substantial differences across these contexts, with implications for the flow of mis/disinformation.

- On the whole, there seems to be a somewhat organic balancing out of viewpoints in Denmark, with far fewer automated accounts, and while 'citizens' are prominent gatekeepers in both nations, political parties are noticeably absent in the US context.

- Whether or not that could exacerbate misinformation is a standing question...

To conclude, for now....

- The affordance effects, where gatekeeping has been renegotiated by non-journalists, citizens, bots, political parties, and experts seems to be still be starkly divided and differently negotiated across these contexts.

- While the Danish general election seems more balanced in terms of left / right actors, there is no guarantee of squelching misinformation, and both spaces desperately demand more input by media organizations and journalists as expert cullers of facts - the 'crowd' can not do it alone and seems inclined to artificially shift debate, especially in the US.

- In short, as the field evolves, the demand for journalists that are posting on social media and asserting themselves more into the conversation is absolutely essential, and while platform regulation can be a public good, it is often too little and too late.

#THANKYOU!

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