FROM ISIS TO MAGA: PRO-TRUMP DISINFORMATION DURING THE TWITTER AFTERMATH OF THE 2017 TERRORIST ATTACKS IN FIVE MEGACITIES

DOI: 10.26341/issn.2241-4002-2024-5a-4-T02098

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Abstract
Elon Musk, the new owner of Twitter since October 27, 2022, and now X, waited less than a month after acquiring the social media company for $44 billion, to lift Donald Trump's ban from the platform: "The people have spoken," Musk the promoter of democracy tweeted, saying that 51.8% of more than 15 million Twitter users voted for the ban to be lifted.

Former President Donald Trump was suspended, due to the risk of incitement of violence, after his supporters stormed the US Capitol in Washington DC on 6 January 2021. Twitter is one of the most dominant platforms for political communication, and its prior use by Donald Trump supporters, considering recent historical events is, therefore, of significant interest.

This study critically investigates Twitter discourses on terrorist attacks in five megacities around the world (Paris, London, St. Petersburg, Manhattan, and Las Vegas) related to the group ISIS in 2017. The goal is to uncover social media's integral role in crisis discourses as enablers of societal reactions to disruptive events and developments.

The analysis deploys digital methods on a large Twitter corpus via the tool NodeXL. The analysis is two-fold: on one hand, it screens the networks of the entities participating in the different Twitter discourses; on the other, it maps the semantic networks for a tentative content-/framing analysis of recurring themes and arguments in the respective Twitter content.

Our study finds that the evolution of the populist far/alt right discourse and the development of Trump supporter networks on Twitter coincided with this spate of terrorist attacks, which in turn fed populist alt-right Trump supporters within an environment that enabled users to boost their social media power, discourse, and networks.

Key words: *political communication, megacities, terrorist attacks, social media*

Introduction

Elon Musk, the new owner of Twitter since October 27, 2022, waited less than a month after acquiring the social media company for $44 billion, to lift Donald Trump's ban from the platform: "The people have spoken," Musk the promoter of democracy tweeted, saying that 51.8% of more than 15 million Twitter users voted for the ban to be lifted. Former President Donald Trump was suspended, due to the risk of incitement of violence, after his supporters

stormed the US Capitol in Washington DC on 6 January 2021. Donald Trump declared his intention to run again for the US presidency in 2024, and in his disposal, he would have the platform Truth Social, owned by the Trump Media & Technology Group. Twitter is one of the most dominant platforms for political communication, and its prior use by Donald Trump supporters, in light of recent historical events is, therefore, of significant interest.

Meanwhile, between September 2014 and late August 2017 63 attacks that took place considered to be acts of jihadist terrorism (BBC, 29 August 2017): 'nine in Europe, plus Denmark and Sweden - along with the US and Canada… Regardless of country, most attacks were in large towns and cities - including Barcelona, London, Manchester, Paris, Nice, Berlin, Brussels, Stockholm and Orlando' (Vidino, 23 June 2017). Our study finds that the evolution of the populist far/alt right discourse and the development of Trump supporter networks on Twitter coincided with these wide spread terrorist attacks, which in turn fed populist alt-right Trump supporters with the ammunition to boost their social media power, discourse, and networks. To arrive at this finding, let us take each issue in turn.

Terrorist attacks often follow a similar formula: they tend to aim for urban, densely populated and globally recognizable spaces in order to have maximum symbolic impact. The disruption of daily life, the spread of fear as well as creating uncertainty and insecurity through spectacle appear to be the main aims of such attacks. Especially transnational terrorist groups appear to aim for 'soft civilian targets' (Polo 2020: 235). The frequency of religiously-politically motivated forms of terrorism increased globally in the aftermath of 9/11 and gained again momentum with the civil war in Syria and subsequent rise of the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL or ISIS) in 2014, while forms of attacks with a white-supremacist background also occurred in noticeable frequency.

The year 2017 saw a wave of attacks on different megacities and big cities; in that year radical group ISIS either conducted directly, inspired, and/or claimed responsibility for several attacks that severely disrupted public life and caused numerous fatalities: in April a suicide bombing killed 15 and injured over 60 in St. Petersburg, Russia. In August, the Levallois-Perret attack injured 6 in France; while not as costly in human lives as the preceding Paris Attack and Charlie Hebdo Attack in 2015, the Levallois-Perret attack caused considerable disruption. In September, the bombing of a train at Parson's Green in London injured another 30 people. A month later, the USA was targeted in the "New York City Truck Attack", resulting in 8 dead. An oddity is the Las Vegas mass-shooting in October 2017, for which ISIS claimed responsibility but had no actual connection to.

The Paris attack and Charlie Hebdo attack in 2015 are exemplary for this wave of terror towards the second half of the 2010s, while similar incident happened in e.g. the UK, Russia, Germany, Turkey, Nigeria and many other countries. During all of these different attacks, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp etc. served as communication tools for many "first responders", i.e. forms of crisis communication, the sharing of eye-witness accounts as well as real-time reporting and commentary. Individual users posted images or reactions from the ground or directly reacted to others' messages. Social media further became places where people in affected areas could report their current status as "safe" to quickly inform their contacts (e.g. Facebook introduced a function for this in 2018). Organisations also made heavy use of social media in these situations for forms of crisis communication and crisis management (Frandsen & Johansen 2017; Eriksson 2018); this is at least verifiable for authorities in the "global West". Here, government agencies use social media to inform the public about immediate threats and security measures, but also try to gain insights on a given situation via social media monitoring.

Thus, one could argue that social media platforms are extensions of the public sphere in regard to how they enable individuals and organisations to network and exchange information with each other. Especially in urban spaces, online platforms have indeed become extensions

for sites of social interaction, cultural activity, economic transaction, and political action. Social media contribute to the formation of 'networked citizenship' (Miller 2020), i.e., the expansion of political identity into digital networks. These networks are more than a mere extension of social life but are integral to the very fabric of modern society; they are a result of the circuitous interplay of available technologies and social adaptation and have become so ubiquitous that they are basically a foundational element in societal organisation (Couldry & Hepp 2015).

However, social media platforms are not neutral public stages and/or communication channels. Being "conscious" business entities, they actively determine the shape of interactions in their environments through carefully develop, deliberate designs. This raises important questions about their affordances, i.e., the opportunities given to users and the systems that govern these platforms, which play an integral role in how social media become sites for societal reactions to disruptive events and developments. Simply put: How do social media networks determine the shape and flow of communication on a disruptive event through their affordances and the underlying algorithms? What is the actual degree of variability across contexts and to what extent do resonances on social media follow recurring patterns? Most importantly, what are the most pressing ethical challenges in regard to access, representativity, polarisation, and societal impact?

The present study provides answers to these questions through a comparative-exploratory study of Twitter reactions on five attacks with a terroristic background that affected a number of megacities and big cities in 2017: St. Petersburg in Russia, Paris in France, London in the UK, as well as New York City and Las Vegas in the USA. The empirical analysis deploys digital methods on a large set of relevant tweets per attack (identified and sampled based on hashtags) via the tool NodeXL. The analysis is two-fold: on one hand, it screens the networks of the entities participating in the different Twitter discourses; on the other, it maps the semantic networks for a tentative content-/framing analysis of recurring themes and arguments in the respective Twitter content. The social media platform has gained a reputation for being one of the first places on which the most recent developments become accessible to a broader public; there is hardly an event that is not addressed on Twitter. Two descriptive research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How do terrorist attacks as highly disruptive crisis moments in urban centres resonate on Twitter?

RQ2: What are the salient similarities and differences between high-profile terrorist attacks and their respective Twitter commentary?

The comparison across the five cases should allow for a critical discussion of similarities and context-dependent differences. This eventually opens the path for formulating normative criticism on the role of social media platforms as systems of algorithmic affordances that mould public discourses on issues of urgent societal relevance. Despite their unique circumstances, variable sets of actors, historical roots, political-cultural conflicts, and impact, all terrorist attacks went through a largely similar discursive process on social media platforms. This process is determined by two factors: first, a technical one that concern their design, functionalities/affordances, and communicative structure. Second, an issue-specific one, as terrorist attacks are a transnational phenomenon with similar socio-cultural conflict constellations across regional/local contexts.

Crucially, although as we will show in the theoretical section below, there is emerging scholarship regarding the use of social media for disinformation (intentional coordinated inauthentic behaviour) and misinformation (spreading it unknowingly), particularly from 2016 onwards, during the US and other elections, this scholarship does not investigate the connections between alt-right mobilisation and anti-Islamic groups, networks and discourses developing and converging during the same period. In this article, we explain the premise of

the study into the Twitter terrorist attack aftermath against the population of five megacities, and zoom further into our key finding: the development of pro-Trump actors and discourses emerging during those aftermaths.

Theoretical Problem: "Crisis" Social Media Affordances for Polarisation and Disinformation?

While it is hardly deniable that social media platforms continue to shape public discursivity within and across most societies (with very few exceptions in countries such as North Korea), their role and influence is rather ambiguous concerning the formation of digital public spheres for several reasons related to their operational logic. To begin with, social media platforms should not be equated with a digital version of the idealised, democratic "town square/town hall"; that would be a description too simplistic and too naïve. The vast majority of dominant social media platforms are private ventures with hard business objectives, oriented towards investors and reflecting their companies' agendas (Smyrnaios 2018). These agendas can stand in direct opposition to, an admittedly context-dependent, public interest. The critical discussion of the impact of social media in e.g., election campaigns or as alleged facilitators of hate speech (most notably during the migration crisis since at least since 2011, but also during ethnic tensions in Burma and the COVID-19 pandemic, just to name a few incidents) as well as the perceived antagonism between social media companies and governments (e.g., congressional Facebook hearings in the USA) are some of the most obvious examples for these frictions.

The "public aspect" of social media platforms primarily concerns their potential reach of communication, which ranges from private (e.g., direct messaging, closed groups), through semi-public (e.g., communication in generally accessible public feeds or open groups of a certain size) to "public" in a broader sense (e.g., posts visible to millions). It is this potential and the relative ease with which different actors can exploit it for different communicative goals that makes social media so appealing and as a result relevant. They are in fact designed to facilitate different types of communication that were virtually separated from each other in the past. Social media platforms' affordances allow for these different types of communication that may reach a public dimension in scope, but they are not "public" as in forming a common good or somehow shared property of *the public.* "Affordances" determine here the different functions that social media platforms offer to their users, i.e., the options for communication of varying scales and for diverse purposes (private/social, cultural, economic, political). These affordances are data-driven, i.e., the design of a social media platform's interface is the outcome of dynamic processes that rely on continuous testing and analysing with the overall aim to optimise "user experience" in an endless feedback loop (van Turnhout et al. 2020). Social media may overlap with the affordances and functionalities of public spaces and public stages for communication from a pre-Internet age, but social media platforms are their own kind of entities that occupy a very influential, but also conflict-prone position in the public-private intersection.

Neither are social media platforms media outlets in any traditional sense. Recent debates on social media companies' responsibilities in regard to polarization, information disorder, alleged filter bubbles, advertising models etc. show that they have a strained relationship with news media organisations. Yet their impact on news media specifically and information behaviour of users in general is tremendous and continues to pose normative challenges in regard to what public discourse actually means in the digital age (Bruns 2017). In essence, social media platforms are systems of user-centred affordances, data-driven by largely automated algorithms that cater to personal interests based on extensive data analysis of previous interactions with the user through the interface. This constantly evolving interface

and its array of functions attract a large number of users, which again explains the scope that social media-based communication can reach. They are built to grow ever larger, so to say. Thus, while social media are neither actually public in any democratic sense nor claim to be news outlets themselves, they are important shaping factors for the public sphere and public information, including the news and functions of public monitoring of societal developments. News organisations rely heavily on social media platforms and try to exploit their affordances for their own goals (Diakopoulos 2019), while they also clash with social media companies over questions of information access, distribution, censorship so on and so forth.

Social media as systems of algorithmic affordances are vulnerable to different forms of abuse and manipulation. In recent years, issues of information disorder gained wider public attention through several high-profile cases in politics: the recurring challenges of misinformation, disinformation as well as digital propaganda (Ireton & Posetti 2018; Fuchs 2018) are at the centre of these incidents and often concern the highly controversial issue of "fake news" in diverse contexts. This can further facilitate the formation of fringe groups and catalyse radicalization, though the idea of hermetically closed echo-chambers/filter bubbles needs critical scrutinization (Bruns 2017) as contradicting findings imply that extreme fragmentation is not an inevitable outcome of social media-based political communication (Skjerdal & Gebru 2020).

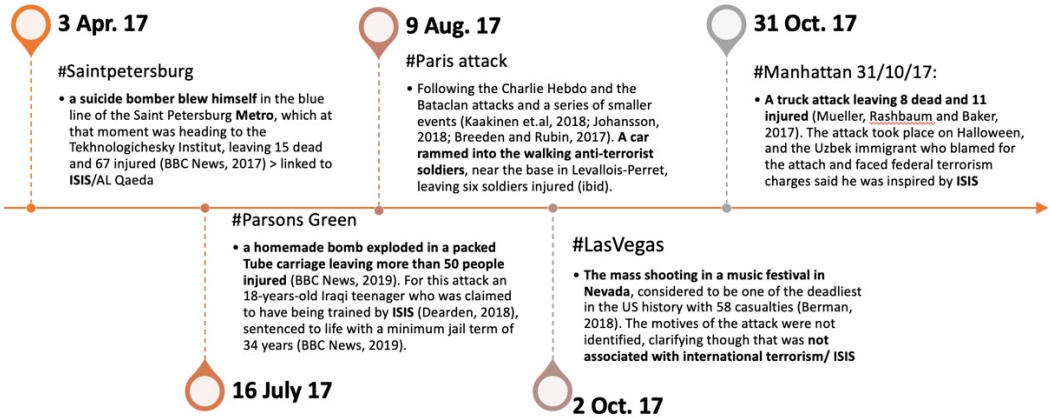
Another strongly associated factor is the ubiquity of bots, i.e., non-human agencies that automate content-creation, distribution, and amplification. Different politically motivated actors deploy such automated devices for steering discourses in a particular direction (often to create confusion) by exploiting the algorithmic affordances, i.e., the way social media systems determine topicality, relevance, and therefore visibility, for public communication within their platforms. Twitter is one of the most contested sites in this regard (Kollanyi et al. 2016), where bots and fake accounts are rather common, but not always immediately identifiable for human users. However, not all bots are employed with malicious intentions and they can serve relatively legit business objectives (e.g., amplification of information distribution, 24/7 customer service etc.), including the news (Lokot & Diakopoulos 2015). Taking these issues into account, in the following section, we discuss the digital methods used for this study.

Digital Methods

To begin with, a critical problem with social media data concerns representativity: even massive volumes of social media text and relevant (meta-)data may be biased in regard to the demographic groups who are actually represented (Hargittai 2020). Not all social groups make use of the same social media platforms for the same goals and to the same extent. Debates are dominated by specific demographics and insights are potentially limited to social groups who are prone to participate in social media activities and thus may dominate them. Observations are still useful for probing trends and mapping dynamics in the digital public sphere, but this networked communicative space might still be very exclusive due to factors associated with the digital divide.

The present data set is part of a research project that investigates the Twitter aftermath of twenty-five different terrorist attacks between 2015-2018. The following analysis narrows the angle down to ISIS-related attacks on mega cities and big cities in 2017. The selection criteria for the cases included the size in population of each city, starting with Paris (09/08/17) and London (16/07/17), as two indicative examples for the EU context, and moving to St. Petersburg (03/04/17), Manhattan (31/10/17) and Las Vegas (02/10/17), to gain insights on how Twitter operates in different contexts after a disruptive emergency event. The data collection focused on popular hashtags for each event and location, to increase the probability

for including relevant tweets in the sample (#Manhattan, #SaintPetersburg, #ParisAttack, #LasVegas, #ParsonGreen).



NodeXL served as the primary tool for retrieving data from Twitter, which "crawled" 10.000 relations for each hashtag that emerged right after each attack gained public attention. NodeXL id an add-in app that build on Microsoft Excel and includes options for automated as well as manual steps of network- and content analyses; it supports data collection, analysis, and visualisation (Hansen et al., 2011: 54). The present study focuses on social networks and semantic networks in order to gain an overview of dominant actors and discourses (content and dynamics). Social network analysis (SNA) is part of the broader field of network science, which supports the examination of human relationships (Hansen, Shneiderman & Smith, 2011).

NodeXL identifies the top items per network (which again are mapped out per selected/crawled hashtag); these include Top Domains, Top Hashtags, Top Users etc. The tool then provides visualisations for each network. By looking at the betweenness centrality (the number of shortest paths between any couple of nodes in the graphs that passes through the target node). and the most noticeable actors in terms of connectivity as well as how information travelled within the networks, the present analysis more closely investigates individual accounts and characteristics of dominant users. This step in particular was necessary for gaining insights into discursive practices related to information disorder (misinformation, disinformation etc.), propaganda, and trolling (Lundberg & Laitinen 2020).

After the calculation of the metrics of all the examined hashtags, then, the analysis concentrated on Social Network Analysis and the identification of top items in the networks. Here, presented with chronological order, the analysis focused on the most dominant actors, the main hubs through which the information travelled and spread in the network. To do so, after calculating the graph metrics, the analysis focused on betweenness centrality, pointing out the nodes which has a significant value regarding the structure of the network and how the information spread, bridging different clusters and nodes (Cherven, 2015, p. 195). According to Hansen et al (2011, p.40), betweenness centrality is a measure that provides an answer on how far away two vertices might be, or in other words, which is the shortest path between these two. Therefore, betweenness centrality is often considered being a bridge measure able to indicate the disruption of communication and spread of information in the case of removing specific nodes or vertices.

Then, the analysis concentrated on the nodes having the highest in-degree. As Hansen et al. explain the 'degree is the measure of the total number of edges connected to a particular vertex' and the 'in-degree is the number of connections that point inward at a vertex' (2011, p.40). These are the nodes which acted as hubs and around which different actors or clusters developed. On Twitter, that could be translated into interaction and retweets, thus the users

which retweeted someone's tweet, here are considered being inbound connections which contribute to the emerge of clusters.

Next, the analysis shifted focus on the discourse itself by identifying and visualizing semantic networks. Semantic networks are a popular approach for the study of natural language (Krippendorff, 2004) with the help of visualisations. They consist of nodes which represent concepts or clauses that are linked by various binary relationships (Krippendorff, 2004). This can reveal how different keywords and ideas connect and form public debates and discourses. In the present study, the semantic networks are formed by analysing the most popular, or most frequent, dyads of word; there are indicated by the calculation of metrics for each hashtag (with a threshold of 100 or more dyads occurring per hashtag). Eventually, by checking the frequency and the dyads of words which appeared more than 50 times per hashtag, a data visualisation in form of a semantic network was compiled (Friemel, 2008).

#Saintpetersburg (03/04/17): "Western civilization under threat" Disinformation Dominates

The first examined hashtag, #saintpetersburg, refers to the St Petersburg attack, which took place on the 3rd of April 2017, when a suicide bomber blew himself in the blue line of the Saint Petersburg Metro, which at that moment was heading to the Tekhnologichesky Institut, leaving 15 dead and 67 injured (BBC News, 2017). The suicide attack was characterised as terror attack and after investigations, 'Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad' was considered responsible for the attacks, while the organization was also accused of having links with ISIS (TASS Russian News Agency, 2017) and groups associated with Al-Qaeda (NYtimes.com, 2017). St Petersburg is one of the largest cities in Russia with the population reaching up to 5 million in 2018 (The Moscow Times, 2018).

We investigated the digital aftermath of the attack on Twitter and concentrating on the top items of the network, the dominant actors based on betweenness centrality, actors which acted as hubs, in terms of how information was spread included common users, social media influencers as well as media organizations.[1] A notable user among the one with high betweenness centrality, is a user who joined Twitter in October 2012 having more than 93k followers. The user is a second-generation migrant in US who is also a Trump supporter (#Latinos ForTrump, #PatriotsUnited). This account is linked to a YouTube video, uploaded in 2016, where the user shares his life story and also express his support to Trump campaign for the 2016 elections. Another account among those having high betweenness centrality, is a user who joined Twitter in November 2012 and is having 252.8k followers. This is a female user, who promotes the so-called RAIR foundation USA (Rise.Align.Ignite.Reclaim),[2] what here is described as an international movement of grassroots activists, providing a link of the website of the organization and a link for donations to the organization. The twitter account is linked to the website of the organization, spreading similar content and information. In both, the website and the twitter account, fake news or misrepresented and manipulated news are posted, presenting the western civilization under threat and migrants as the evil other. In this mix of fake news and misinformation, examples of conspiracy theories and extensive focus on conspiracy theories supporters is also observed. Both online spaces are mainly focused on anti-Muslim and racist discourse, while the posts focused both on US and Europe, - and even more on especially focusing on Germany, Netherlands and the UK. At the same time, the

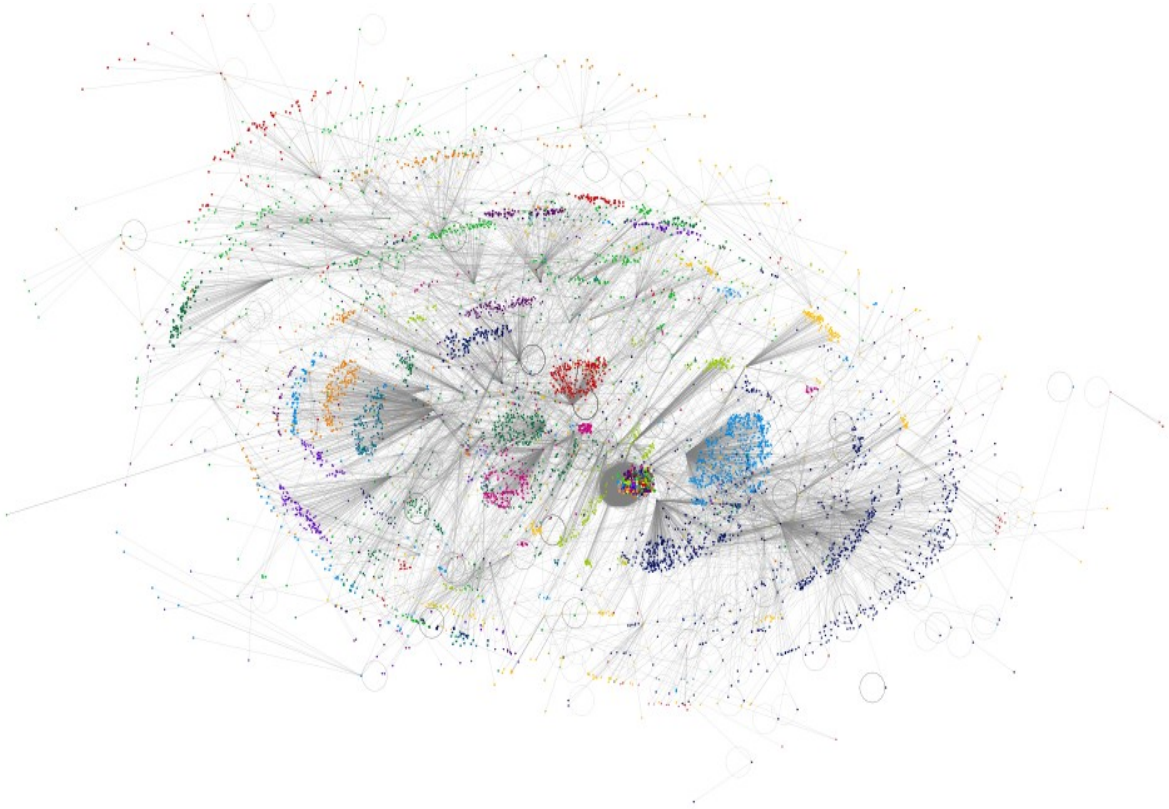
[1] Splendirina: 11415949.706; nobilibus: 8725767.674; rt_com 7288087.704; andersen_23: 4981040.794; hrtablaze: 4239086.787; amymek: 4236188.440

[2] https://rairfoundation.com/; https://twitter.com/AmyMek?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor ;

accounts if openly a Trump supporter, while the characteristics of the account (e.g., profile pic, name, posts, etc.) could raise questions on whether this is indeed a real account.

This offline identity of this user was revealed in a Huffington Post article (O'Brien, 2018), where O'Brien wrote about that the 'Trump's Loudest Anti-Muslim Twitter Troll', who was not a Russian bot as expected, but instead, a 'Shady Vegan Married Woman', who attracted – by the article – more than 200K followers, some of whom included high profile users and celebrities (ibid). The revelation of the real identity of the account, created a controversy regarding the impact that this had on the family of the user (Wilson, 2018), while soon a solidarity hashtag started spreading on Twitter.

IMAGE 1: #SaintPetersburg (03/04/17)



While the betweenness centrality indicated some significant nodes regarding the structure of the networks and the flow of information, next the analysis focused on the hubs or the source of information. Here we are looking on users who posted a tweet and that tweets became popular attracting interaction of other users, who reposted, or re-tweeted, the tweet developing a network of interactions, through which the information travelled. The users with the highest in-degree included media accounts, regular accounts (the public), political figures, as well as accounts which, due to the high number of followers could be understood as being social media influencers.[3] Apart from regular accounts (or the so-called public), media related accounts, accounts which appeared among the ones with the highest betweenness centrality, users related to politics were also included. Here the network developed around two different types of tweets and users, with the first one, and the majority of tweets, focusing on the first moments after the explosion in the underground providing information and visual material regarding the attack. Then, similarly, actors related to politics developed a slightly different discussion around the event. Here, Jack Montgomery who presents himself as 'editor at

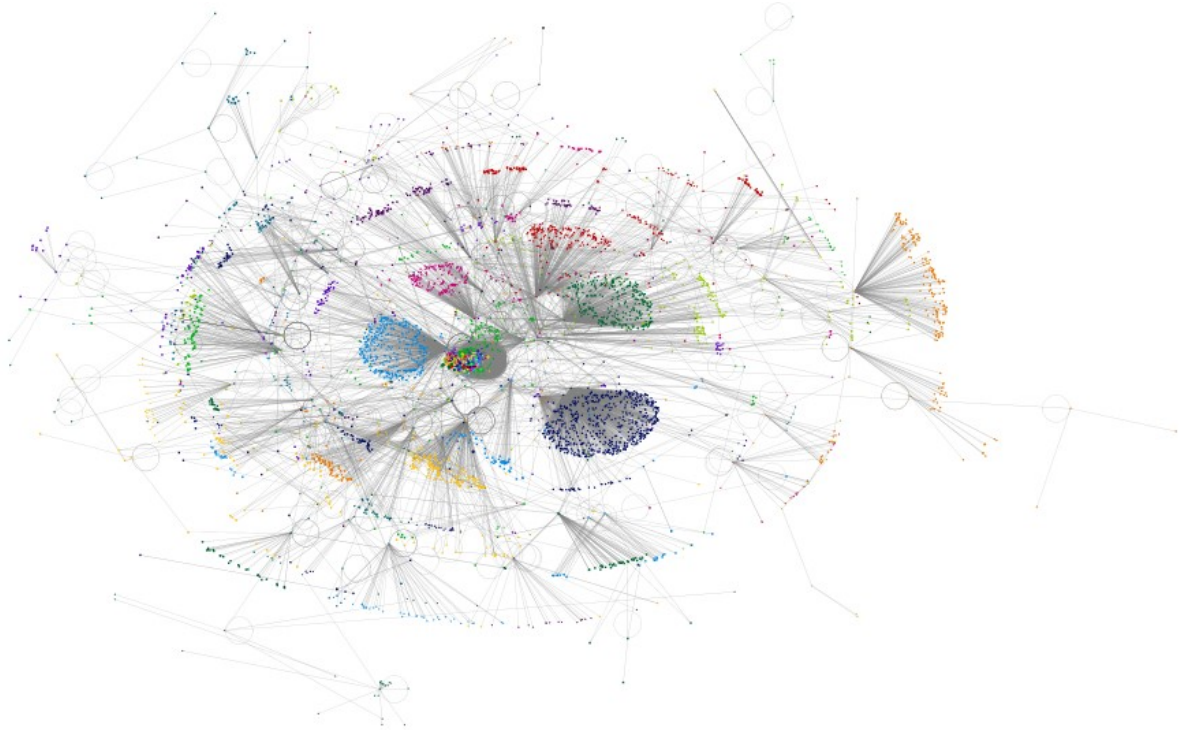
[3] Nobilibus: 598; andersen_23: 322; rt_com: 286; baby_milty: 267; amymek: 224; jackbmontgomery: 210

Breitbart News, and formerly Deputy Head of Communications at the Leave.EU campaign and an adviser to Nigel Farage ahead of his EU referendum debate with David Cameron' (Montgomery, n.d.) posted the tweet '@JackBMontgomery: Horrible news from St Petersburg. Lends urgency to Le Pen's call for Russia and West to join forces #SaintPetersburg.' and was later retweeted from more than 200 users.

#ParsonsGreen (15/09/17): "The Biggest Bitch in Britain" Dominates

The next examined case is the Parsons Green attack, which took place in London on 15 September 2017, when a homemade bomb exploded in a packed Tube carriage leaving more than 50 people injured (BBC News, 2019). For this attack an 18-years-old Iraqi teenager who was claimed to have been trained by ISIS (Dearden, 2018), sentenced to life with a minimum jail term of 34 years (BBC News, 2019).

IMAGE 2: London #ParsonsGreen (16/07/17)



Following the steps as described above and looking at betweenness centrality, users with a significant position in the network were mainly media related accounts and also the Metropolitan Police.[4] Some of the most and interesting accounts here include Katie Hopkins, a media personality and columnist known for her controversial, far-right, ideas, who presents herself on twitter as 'The Female Farage. Angry Ellen De Generes. The Biggest Bitch in Britain'. Next, another interesting account is one focusing on antimuslim discourse, presented on twitter as 'Imperfect Christian. Trying to follow the correct path - With the occasional blip along the way. Opposed to the Islamification of Britain.' and this account is extensively commenting on British politics and also, on religion. Other users here are media related accounts and, also, Metropolitan police.

[4] Skynews: 5085886.621; kthopkins: 4022426.923; bjennings90: 3964889.398; metpoliceuk: 2692252.353; tiger4me: 2416898.249; youcantitter: 2325481.661; olyduff: 2060087.812

#ParisAttack, (09/08/2017): US and UK Far Right Dominates

After the Charlie Hebdo attack (Johansson, 2018) and the Bataclan attacks, the 2015 attacks (Kaakinen et.al, 2018) followed, by a series of smaller events and the Levallois-Perret attack which took place on the 9th August 2017 (Breeden and Rubin, 2017). That was the sixth attack after the 2015 attacks, leaving six soldiers injured, when a car rammed into the walking anti-terrorist soldiers, near the base in Levallois-Perret (ibid).

Following the steps as described above, users with the highest betweenness centrality included a US politician, an American scholar, regular accounts (one suspended), and accounts related to the far-right in the US and the UK.[5] An interesting observation here is that the accounts that had a significant position regarding the structure the social network and the spread of information were accounts related to US and UK, rather than France. Such accounts found as common ground the far right and anti-Islamic rhetoric, while some could easily be considered not being real accounts.

IMAGE 3: #ParisAttack (09/08/17)

Starting with one of the three most significant examples, the account joined twitter in August 2009 and is having 59.5k followers. The profile pic, a cartoon-like female figure holding a gun, and the cover, Donald Trump and the American flag in the background, as well as the description of the account 'Legally immigrated & assimilated bcz I us #Trump fights with us to #MAGA v. #DemocratsHateAmerica #2A #Israel #BlueLivesMatter #ProLife #Nationalist'. The account is linked to a blog with the name of the user who here is presented as 'Catholic. Conservative. California.' The blog consists of only two posts, in the first the users is giving a background story of her family, which was originally coming from middle east. An interesting point which raised here is the distinction legal migration, which is accepted, and illegal migration. This reflects on the mainstream media discourse, as well as on the pseudo-debate on migration, as developed and expressed especially from the conservative

[5] Dvatw: 275206.013; craigcons: 237112.122; sefa_figure: 174071.816; lvnancy: 167126.756; ducktap54400020; 123208.034; biffyboy1970: 113116.941; grrrgraphics: 104502.504

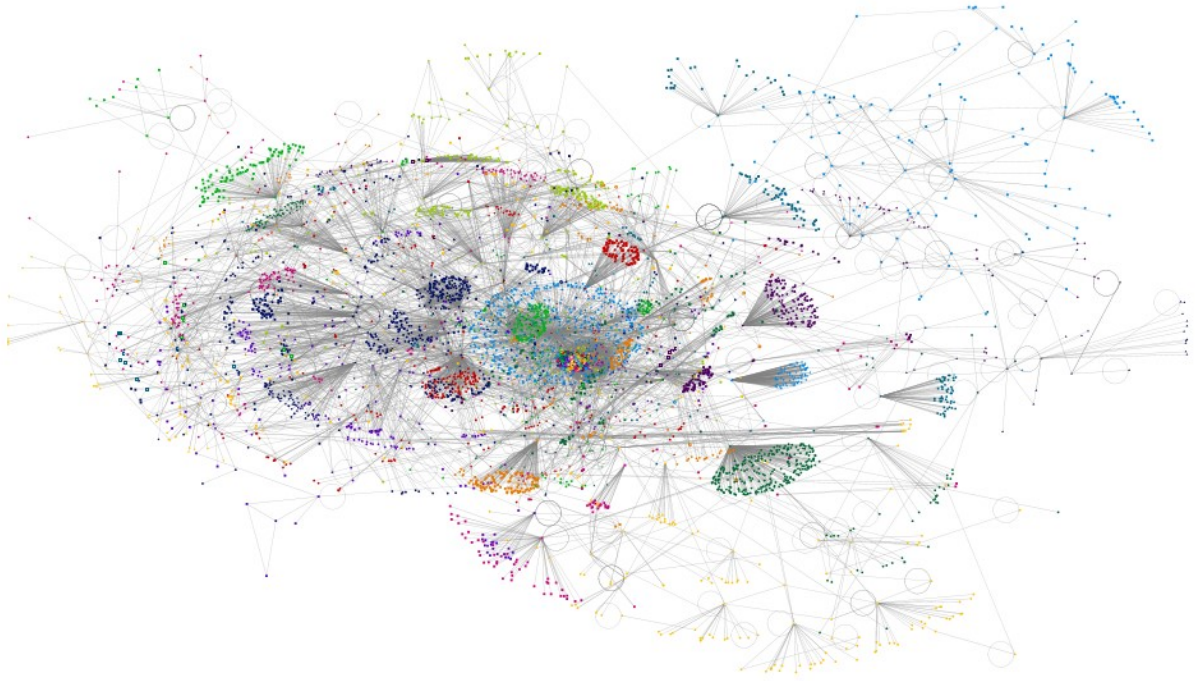
and far-right politics. The second post, concentrated on Islam, different historical events and ISIS.

Another account which falls under the same characteristics and rationale, is a user who is presented as 'A proud British Man @Forbritain member will retweet a lot @tommyrobinson supporter Brexit anti Islam Free Speech, love bacon #BritishIndependence'. The user of this account is using his full name, while the cover picture is a logo of the Brexit Party. This account now is private, but that was not the case when the data collected. It is interesting that this account is associated with far-right politics and once again, this is linked to anti-Islamic discourse, while another interesting observation is that such discourse founds a common ground across Europe. Thus, here US and UK users, are dominating the Twittersphere after the Paris attack. Next, another account from the US, having 194k followers. This is the account of a cartoonist, which is also linked to his blog, where he posts pro-Trump political cartoons. By the time of the data collection, the description of the account included the hashtag #MAGA, Make America Great Again, a hashtag which now both at the examined account and general in Twitter is replaced by the hashtag #KAG, Keep America Great. The latter was the 2020 Trump campaign slogan (Ruiz, 2018), denoting that great success of #MAGA, America now is Great Again, and the new Trump campaign is promising to continue working towards the same direction.

#LasVegas (02/10/2017): Donald Trump Dominates

The next examined case is the mass shooting in Las Vegas, which carried out in a music festival in Nevada, considered to be the deadliest in the US history with 58 casualties (Berman, 2018). In contrast to the previous examples, the investigation for this attack did not manage to identify the motives of the attack, making though clear that was not associated with international terrorism (ibid). Therefore, a study focusing on the attacks of 2017 and looking at megacities and large urban centres, this case could indicate additional uses and practices regarding Twitter use in different contexts.

IMAGE 4: #LasVegas (02/10/2017)



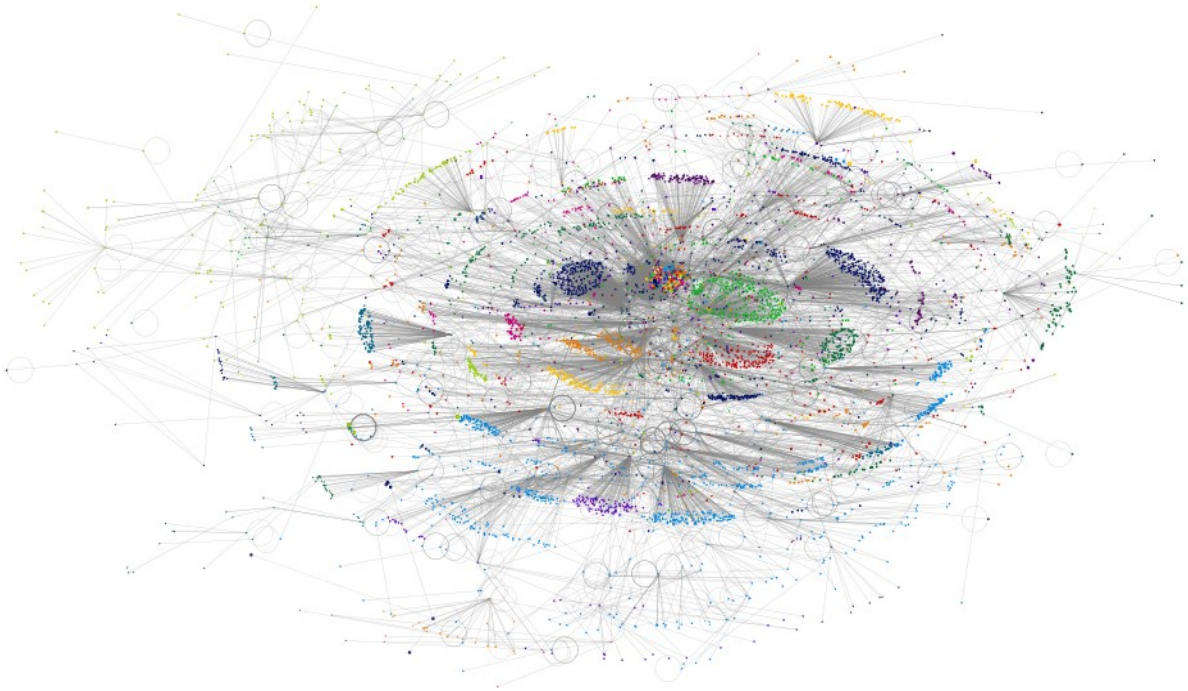
Looking at betweenness centrality, the users which had a significant position on the spread of information through the examined social network, includes two accounts of Donald Trump, Jennifer Lopez, media related accounts and also, regular users.[6] An interesting account, which also indicates a contrast to the other examined cases, includes a user, who presents himself online as 'Hey! Twitter family, This is Siddiq, 25 years old 1. Islam 2. Respect 3. Love 4. Peace #GE19 @jeremycorbyn'. This account is linked with a personal website, of general interest and topics, and could not be considered being fake based on the profile and cover pictures, or the posted information and followers.

#Manhattan (31/10/2017): Pro-Trump Accounts Dominate

The last examined case is a track attack that took place in Manhattan on the 31 October 2017, leaving 8 dead and 11 injured (Mueller, Rashbaum and Baker, 2017). Here, the accounts with the highest betweenness centrality included the Mayor of NY and media related accounts.[7]

Following the pattern observed above, here some of the accounts with the highest significance include pro-Trump accounts. The first one, is an account that created in June 2009 and is having more than 26k followers. This account is presented as 'Bitter&Clinger, Christian, Independent, Conservative. #TrumpTrain ᴜs #MAGA #Prolife ᴜs#Buildthewall #CruzCrew ᴜs#NRA #Trump2020 #Israelᴜs#KAG!', with the hashtags #MAGA and #KAG suggestion similarities with the accounts observed in the #ParisAttack, while other hashtags as #Trump202 and #Buildthewall giving a clear sign regarding the politics and ideology. The profile and cover pictures as well as the username and name of the account could easily raise questions regarding the authenticity of the account. At the same time, the account is linked with a website regarding Trump and the 2020 campaign.

IMAGE 5: #Manhattan (31/10/2017)



[6] Potus: 6318823.188; realdonaldtrump: 3590702.284; jlo: 3391667.571; siddiqbashar: 2933034.613; anupkaphle: 2866717.714; darasidious: 2865775.541; bbcbreaking: 2706071.117

[7] Billdeblasio: 468889.439; shad39: 463201.591; breakingnlive: 257199.277; jewhaditm: 235394.779; tarnoldnong: 220571.440

The next account with a significant position in the network, is an account presented as '#Israel #US #Rightist Politics~Law~Terror. Avid Reader, Rabid Tweeter. I Tweet, You Decide. "I love winning, man. It's like... better than losing."' This is a pro-Trump account, that joined Twitter in April 2014 and having 70k followers. While due the characteristics of the account (pics, name, etc) would raise questions on whether this is a real account a small search online indicated different picture of the user, suggesting that the account is constantly used since 2014, even if most of the tweets are commenting on the US politics. Finally, another interesting account is a research director on islamophobia and the American-Muslim relations, and co-author of the book 'Who Speaks Islam?'

Conclusion: The Ascent of Pro-Trump Supporters and Other Patterns in the Digital Aftermath of Terrorist Attacks

First, our study agrees with the premise that social media are an important site for conflict in the terrorism context (e.g., Kampf 2014; Hossain 2018; Shaban 2020; Duncombe 2020; Amble 2012). As Brown and Pearson (2018) state: '[s]ocial media serves as a public platform used to "influence" broad audiences of potential recruits, motivate members and sympathisers, and to inform the public and news organisations of terrorists' actions and ideas.' There they can find not only quick public exposure, but also mobilise (ideological) support (Torregrosa et al. 2019; Fraiwan 2020). Terrorist attacks are arguably the most visible, drastic, and impactful of these actions; organisations that carry them out are usually quick at claiming responsibility and exploiting their disruptive nature for maximum public visibility across all media channels, including digital platforms. In a sense, violent actions of grave material and human consequence become virtually instantaneously widely shared propaganda material. Terrorist groups make use of the same general affordances as any other type of social media users for digital communication and networking (Tundis et al 2020); however, it has become increasingly difficult for them to retain a permanent presence on the big social media platform, including Twitter (Financial Times 2017) and they rely on supporters, opponent and the (global) public at large to boost and maintain broader societal attention in digital networks. Given the disruptive nature and perceived as well as real harmfulness of terrorist attacks, this is relatively easy for them to achieve.

Second, resonances on terrorist attacks on social media are as diverse as the set of affected stakeholders and range from (alleged) eye-witness reporting, government communication (often through their security branches), real-time news coverage, and user reactions (including politicians and opinion leaders). However, they appear to follow a similar pattern in this respect: the attack initially emerges in a state of high uncertainty via above mentioned ad-hoc responses from the ground before media and governmental responses join the canon; a cycle of 'sense-making', 'sense-giving' and 'sense-breaking', i.e. the evaluation and inclusion of new information to adjust perceptions, kicks off (Mirbabaie & Marx 2020); a selection of "unique" hashtags are associated for the event(s); the discourse becomes increasingly but quickly dominated by elite users, i.e. individuals and organisations with considerable reach and visibility on social media (e.g. news outlets, "power users", politicians etc.). Emotional responses to disruptive events also go in parallel through an almost ritualistic discursive process on social media that follows similarly predictable stages as news media reporting (Kim & Cameron 2014): immediate shock/horror, compassion, grief, and anger as well as the formation of in-groups versus out-groups (Ezatti 2019) and a usually polarising allocation of responsibility. In the context of most forms of religiously motivated terrorism, questions of race/racism, cultural affiliation, and inclusion/exclusion are at the centre of the unfolding debates.

Third, our study agrees with Kwon et al. (2017) who show that geographic, social, and temporal proximity determine the framing of terrorist attacks on Twitter and observe that while there are overlaps between news media frames and audience frames, the latter are more prone to display 'proximity effects' (Kwon et al. 2017: 2) – they are closer to the ground, i.e., the affected places and people, and may contest e.g. governmental positions on public security (Downing 2020). Ulqinaku and Sarial-Abi (2020) further show in their analysis of over 154,000 tweets on 'eight major terrorist attacks' between 2016 and 2017 that 'individuals engage in more online anger-related emotions than online fear-related emotions when there is news about a terrorist attack' (2020: 3). Emotions cannot to be seen as separate from political statements. They go hand-in-hand with each other; emotional reactions are often highly politicised and may be picked up (i.e., retweeted) by individuals and organisations that share/support the expressed sentiment and related political position.

Fourth, we find that during "crisis" events, where affective polarisation already rules the platform, disinformation spreads as news, to advance political goals such as discrediting opponents, disrupting policy debates, influencing voters, inflaming existing social conflicts, or creating a general backdrop of confusion and informational paralysis (Bennett and Livingston, 2021). Diffusion and consumption of disinformation is driven by mechanisms such as "confirmation bias" and "motivated reasoning," leading people to believe information that confirms their own worldviews (Nickerson 1998; Robison and Mullinix 2015; Shin et al. 2017). Recent events, such as the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, demonstrated how disinformation can spread on social media (Bennett and Livingston, 2021), where diverse forms of "computational propaganda" flourished (Humprecht, Esser, and Aelst 2020; Howard et al. 2017). Elections in Europe have also experienced the invasion of bots, trolls and the spread of false information by strategic actors (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), while political distrust, xenophobic attitudes, and social polarization are rampant phenomena on social media networks (e.g., Heiss & Matthes, 2020 and 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Stier, Posch, Bleier, &Strohmaier, 2017).

Fifth, our study argues that there is a developing relationship between populist views, the exploitation of crisis events (such as terrorist attacks) and negative attitudes towards the media: a characteristic of populist rhetoric, with populism spreading as fragmented ideology (Engesser et al 2016); analysed comparatively from Facebook and Twitter across six countries (Ernst et al. 2017); with populist political communication on social media in Europe (Aalberg 2017); with fake news as a floating signifier of populism (Farkas and Schou, 2018); populist politicians delegitimizing journalists (Van Dalen 2019); mainstream media criticism in alternative far right media (Figenschou et al. 2019); paradoxical populism (Haller and Holt 2019) and the portrayal of media as the enemy of the people (Fawzi 2019; 2020); and with evident populist disinformation US and Netherlands (Hameleers, 2020).

Lastly, none of these different normative challenges and systemic vulnerabilities diminish the extent to which users' appropriate social media for communicating about issues that concern them to one degree or the other in the ways outlined above. If the goal is to understand how societies react to, make sense of, and adjust behaviour to disruptive events and their aftermath, it is virtually impossible to ignore discourses on social media platforms. During moments of crisis, social media become a primary site of contestation and source of information as situations of high uncertainty, and real as well as imagined risks and dangers, stimulate heightened communicative activity. A terrorist attack constitutes an ad-hoc, immediate crisis due to the inherent threat of physical harm on a not fully predictable scale; their highly disruptive nature indicates urgent societal relevance, which correlates with an elevated news value, and their immediacy - both temporally but also spatially for people in affected areas - leads to an almost instantaneous resonance on social media platforms (often before traditional news media pick them up). This in turn reveals which social groups are

activated by disruptive events and how they make use of social media's affordances during such an occurrence as well as in their immediate aftermath. Here, the revelation points to the following significant finding: the activation of reactive emotions and the polarisation brought on by the terrorist attacks fuelled pro-Trump support and the spread of dis and mis-information about the attacks boosted the discourse and social media power of a presidential candidate who then became the President of the United States.

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