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‘FAKE NEWS’ AND OTHER PROBLEMATIC INFORMATION: STUDYING DISSEMINATION AND DISCOURSE PATTERNS

Daniel Angus

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Axel Bruns

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Edward Hurcombe

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Stephen Harrington

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Sofya Glazunova

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Sílvia Ximena Montaña-Niño

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Abdul Obeid

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Souleymane Coulibaly

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Simon Copland

School of Sociology, Australian National University

Timothy Graham

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Scott Wright

Monash University

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Ehsan Dehghan
Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Panel Introduction

Encompassed by the disputed term ‘fake news’, a variety of overtly or covertly biased, skewed, or falsified reports claiming to present factual information are now seen to constitute a critical challenge to the effective dissemination of news and information across established and emerging democratic societies. Such content – variously also classifiable as propaganda, selective reporting, conspiracy theory, inadvertent misinformation, and deliberate disinformation – in itself is not new; however, contemporary digital and social media networks enable its global dissemination and amplification, by human and algorithmic actors (Woolley & Howard 2017), ordinary users and professional agents, outside of, in opposition to, or sometimes also in collusion with, the mainstream media (Shao et al. 2017; Vargo et al. 2017).

Various political, commercial, and state actors are suspected to have exploited this ‘fake news’ ecosystem to influence public opinion, in major votes ranging from the Brexit referendum to national elections, and/or to utilise discourse around ‘fake news’ to generally undermine trust in media, political, and state institutions.

However, ‘fake news’ and associated phenomena remain “underresearched and overhyped” (Dutton 2017): in spite of considerable attention in mainstream and scholarly debate, much of the focus on ‘fake news’ in its various forms remains superficial, spectacular, anecdotal, and conceptual; it draws only on a limited evidence base and is difficult to fully disconnect from ideological disputes. Leading projects such as *Hamilton 68* (GMF 2017) and *Hoaxy* (Indiana University Network Science Institute 2017) attempt to visualise the distribution of ‘fake news’ (and the role of social bots therein); the University of Oxford’s Computational Propaganda Project (Woolley & Howard 2017) offers a number of major country-specific analyses of the dissemination of mis- and disinformation through social media; Bounegru et al. (2017) outline a collection of methodological approaches to researching ‘fake news’; and major reports for online security centre TrendLabs (Gu et al. 2017), the Council of Europe (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017), and NATO Strategic Command (2017) highlight the potential threat from ‘fake news’.

Supported by a major project funded by the Australian Research Council, this panel brings together a number of perspectives that combine systematic, large-scale, mixed-methods analysis of the empirical evidence *for* the global dissemination of, engagement with, and visibility of problematic information in public debate with the study of the public discourse *about* ‘fake news’, and the operationalisation of this concept by politicians and other societal actors to downplay inconvenient facts or reject critical questions. In combination, these five papers produce a new and more comprehensive picture of the overall impact of ‘fake news’, in all its forms, on contemporary societies.

The first paper in this panel presents the results of a major study that investigates the sharing of links to some 2,314 suspected sources of 'fake news' and other problematic information in public Facebook spaces, from 2016 to 2020. It examines the networks of content sharing that emerge between these public pages and groups, and their sources, and studies the longitudinal dynamics of these networks as interests and allegiances shift and new developments (such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the US presidential elections) drive the emergence or decline of dominant themes in mis- and disinformation.

The second paper maintains a focus on Facebook, but focusses specifically on the sharing of one particular source of problematic information: the Kremlin-backed outlet *RT* (previously known as *Russia Today*). Examining the sharing of links to *RT*'s six major language editions, the paper investigates the positioning of *RT* within these diverse language communities and finds that the outlet variously forms alliances with left- as well as right-wing outsiders in order to disrupt the political status quo.

The third paper presents another single-source study, but shifts attention to the conservative news channel *Sky News Australia*. Previously a little-watched pay-TV news operation, *Sky News Australia* has recently pivoted towards an aggressive and highly successful digital influence strategy that has now positioned it as an important source of alt-right propaganda and conspiracy theories, well beyond (and no longer predominantly focussing on) a domestic Australian audience.

The remaining two papers in this panel examine the discursive operationalisation of the term 'fake news', rather than the dissemination of problematic information itself. The fourth paper investigates how the label 'fake news' is used in Australian political debate, by whom, and in what contexts. It finds that Donald Trump's use of the term to attack critical media coverage in the US has found an echo in Australia, too, especially amongst populist and far-right political actors.

The final paper also examines the broader discourse surrounding the 'fake news' concept, and shifts our attention towards the use of this term (in its various translations) in Russian and Iranian public debate. Drawing on Twitter data, it shows that Russian- and Farsi-language debates predominantly operationalise the term 'fake news' to criticise the existing regime, but also segment into a number of distinct discourse communities that are allied in their position to the regime but distinct in their own political agendas.

In combination, then, these five papers present a substantive collection of innovative approaches to the 'fake news' concept, exploring the dissemination of problematic information itself at larger and smaller scales as well as examining the operationalisation of the *idea* of 'fake news' in pursuit of specific ideological aims.

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Paper 1

'FAKE NEWS' ON FACEBOOK: A LARGE-SCALE LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF PROBLEMATIC LINK-SHARING PRACTICES FROM 2016 TO 2020

Daniel Angus

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Axel Bruns

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Edward Hurcombe

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Stephen Harrington

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Introduction

'Fake news' has been one of the most controversial phenomena of the past five years. Usually referring to overtly or covertly biased, skewed, or falsified information, the term has become a byword of what some see as a new, polarised, 'post-truth' era. 'Fake news' was blamed for the apparently unexpected results of the 2016 Brexit vote as well as the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Booth et al., 2017), and has continued to be held responsible for influencing and distorting public opinion against political establishments and minority communities around the world. Concerns have centred especially on the role of fringe and hyperpartisan outlets using major social media platforms such as Facebook to spread mis- and disinformation. Well beyond the 'dark web', such platforms now serve as hosts of and vectors for problematic information, spread by malicious actors with political and economic motives.

In response, researchers have begun to examine the dissemination of 'fake news' and other mis-, dis-, and malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) on such platforms, seeking empirical evidence to support or counter these concerns. However, such research has tended to focus either on specific news events, such as the 2016 U.S. election (e.g. Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), on certain actors, such as state-backed disinformation campaigns (e.g. Bail et al., 2019), or on specific mechanisms of dissemination, such as the use of algorithms and automation in producing and disseminating false information (Woolley & Howard, 2017).

By contrast, there have been comparatively few comprehensive, systematic investigations of the dissemination of, and engagement with, 'fake news' at scale; fewer still have taken a longer-term, longitudinal approach. This is due largely to the considerable methodological challenges that such approaches face. This paper addresses this gap, presenting initial findings from major project that builds on and

significantly advances previous work by conducting a large-scale, mixed-methods analysis of the empirical evidence for the dissemination of, engagement with, and visibility of ‘fake news’ and other problematic information in public debate on major social media platforms.

This first study centres on Facebook, examining link-sharing practices for content from well-known sources of problematic information. We draw on data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook; conduct a large-scale network mapping and analysis exercise to identify the key patterns in the dissemination network for ‘fake news’ content; and complement this analysis with computational and manual content analysis to identify the key thematic and topical patterns in different parts of this network.

Constructing the Problematic Link-Sharing Network

Drawing on several lists of suspected sources of ‘fake news’ that have been published in recent years by various scholarly projects (such as *Hoaxy*: Shao et al., 2016) and in the related literature (including Allcott et al., 2018; Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2018; 2019; and Starbird et al., 2017), since 2016 we have compiled and iteratively updated the Fake News Index (FakeNIX), a masterlist of Web domains that have been identified as publishing problematic information.

We use this masterlist to systematically gather all posts on leading social media platforms that contain links to content on these domains, to the extent that the platforms’ Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) permit this; for Facebook, this utilises the Facebook-operated social media data service CrowdTangle. For ethical and privacy reasons, CrowdTangle is limited to covering posts on public pages, public groups, and public verified profiles only; it does not provide information on the circulation of FakeNIX links in private groups or profiles on Facebook, nor on URLs posted in comments. While this is a notable limitation, and our study can therefore only observe the *public* sharing of such content on Facebook, it is nonetheless possible to extrapolate from this to the wider *private* posting and on-sharing of such links in those Facebook spaces that we are unable to observe directly.

We thus use the current list of 2,314 FakeNIX domains to gather all posts from public spaces on Facebook that contained links to content on these domains and were posted between 1 Jan. 2016 and 31 Dec. 2020; this process is ongoing at the time of submission, and expected to result in a dataset of several tens of millions of public Facebook posts.

From these, we intend to construct two bipartite networks that connect Facebook pages and groups to the URLs they shared. These operate at two levels of specificity: the article level (taking into account the specific article URL, e.g. *site.com/article.html*), and the domain level (stripping the article details and using only the domain, e.g. *site.com*). The domain-level analysis will reveal which sites act as strong attractors for a diverse array of Facebook communities, or as central hubs for major clusters, while the more sparsely connected article-level network will enable us to examine the emergence of sub-networks that form around shared topical interests, such as specific conspiracy

theories or ideologies. All graphs are constructed using the Gephi open-source graph modelling package (Bastian, Heymann, & Jacomy, 2009).

Further, the long-term longitudinal nature of our dataset provides an opportunity for us to repeat this analysis for distinct timeframes within the five-year period covered by our data. This will reveal the stable or shifting allegiances between Facebook communities and their problematic information sources, driven both by internal dynamics (such as ideological splits or interpersonal animosities) and by external developments (such as elections, scandals, or other news events).

Finally, we will complement this study of the network dynamics with additional computational and manual analysis of our data. This will highlight changes in the dominant themes of 'fake news' and other problematic information within our overall dataset, and within the specific clusters that emerge in our network of pages and content, and provide further explanation of the sharing dynamics observed over the five turbulent years covered by our dataset.

Preliminary Results

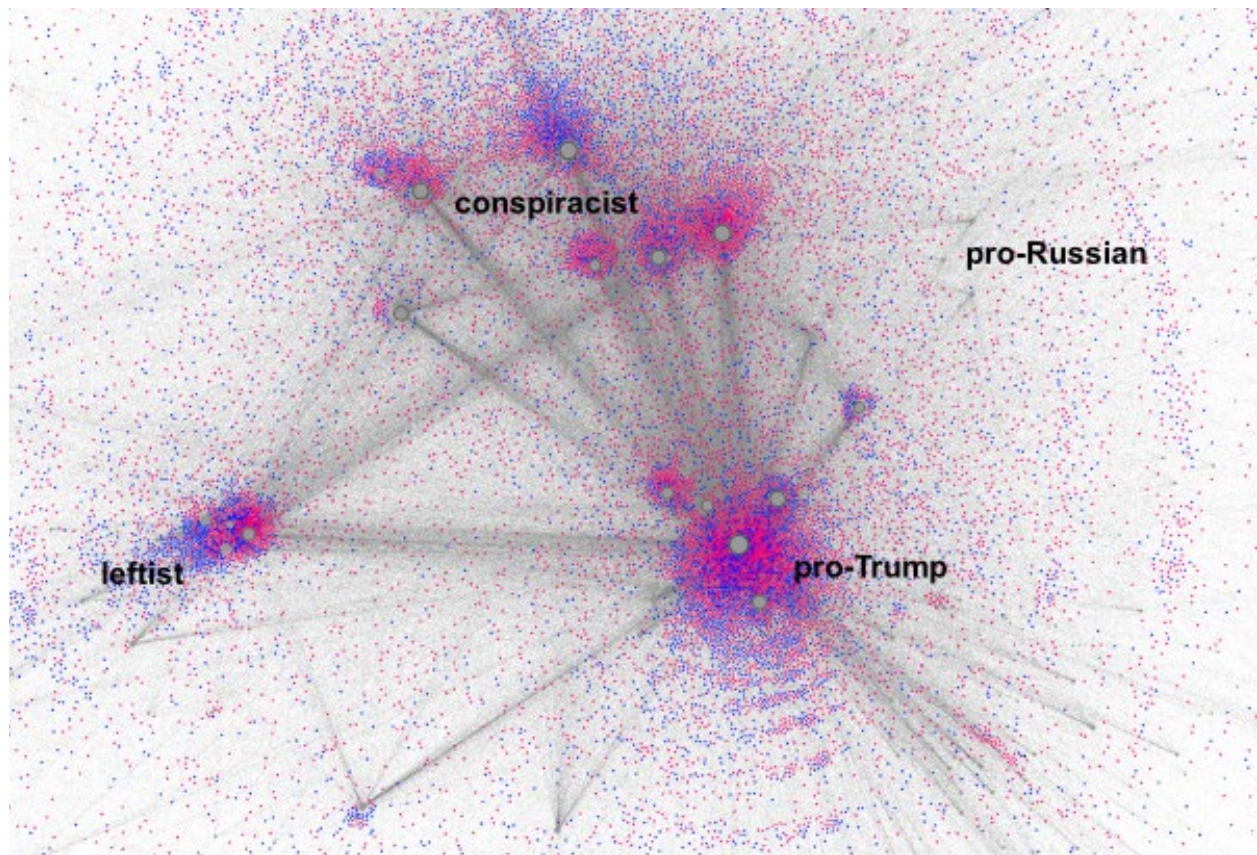


Fig. 1: Preliminary bipartite visualisation of networks between Facebook pages (blue) or groups (red) and a subset of the FakeNIX domains shared in their posts (grey), 2016-20

A work-in-progress analysis of a subset of the full dataset, covering a random selection of all FakeNIX domains, demonstrates the utility of our approach (fig. 1). At the domain level, the bipartite network between Facebook pages or groups and the content they

shared reveals a distinct set of patterns. Central to the network is a cluster of Facebook pages and groups that frequently shared links to pro-Trump and/or far-right US outlets such as *Breitbart*, *InfoWars*, and *RedState*; to the left is a considerably smaller cluster of left-leaning pages and groups that frequently shared outlets such as *Politicus USA* or *Addicting Info*.

Above these hyperpartisan clusters, and substantially connected with both of them, are collections of pages and groups that frequently engage with conspiracist outlets such as *GlobalResearch.ca*, *Collective Evolution*, *Activist Post*, or *Geoengineering Watch*. To their right, and (in this incomplete dataset) as yet with limited connection to the major parts of the network, are foreign influence operations such as the Russian-backed *RT* and *Sputnik News*, and the Bulgarian-based *Zero Hedge*. There are also some notable differences in the use of Facebook platform affordances: leftist content and links to *Collective Evolution* appear to be shared more by Facebook *pages* (shown in blue), while pro-Trump content and most conspiracy theory materials are more likely to circulate in *groups* (red). It remains to be seen whether these trends hold true for the full dataset.

In our further work with the full dataset, we also intend to examine the longitudinal dynamics of these networks, with particular focus on how Facebook's moderation approaches and other external interventions have affected the activities of specific clusters. We expect, for instance, that pandemic-related conspiracist content will emerge as a significant factor in 2020, alongside problematic content addressing the US Presidential election and its aftermath.

Acknowledgment

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Paper 2

RT ON FACEBOOK: THE REACH OF PRO-KREMLIN PROPAGANDA ACROSS LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

Sofya Glazunova

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Sílvia Ximena Montaña-Niño

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Edward Hurcombe

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Abdul Obeid

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Souleymane Coulibaly

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Axel Bruns

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Introduction

This paper explores the digital audiences of pro-Kremlin media outlet *RT* (formerly known as *Russia Today*) across six languages: German, Spanish, English, Russian, French, and Arabic. *RT* is a Russian, state-owned, multi-lingual television network that broadcasts to 700 million people across more than 100 countries. *RT* has become an instrument of Russia's geopolitical positioning in global media, acquiring characteristics of legacy global broadcasters such as *CNN*, *Al-Jazeera*, and the *BBC*, while at the same time asserting itself against Western domination in the global public sphere. It achieves these purposes through the tactical dissemination of Kremlin strategic narratives to specific foreign audiences, recently amplified by social media (Crilley et al. 2020).

Some studies have already examined prominent narratives that *RT* promotes around the world including conspiracy theories (Yablokov 2015), mis/disinformation (Cull et al. 2017), antisemitism (Rosenberg 2015), islamophobia (Lytvynenko & Silverman 2019) and others. This research has been largely limited to English and, to a lesser extent, Spanish-speaking content, whereas *RT* broadcasts in at least four other languages with significant global audiences including French, Arabic, Russian, and German. Studies on *RT* Spanish found that in Latin America the outlet serves as a soft power tool against the United States' sphere of influence, makes alliances with Argentinian and Venezuelan state television (Rouvinski 2020), and in Spain promotes pro-independent content in the Catalanian *procés* on Facebook (López-Olano & Fenoll 2019). From a comparative perspective, *RT Spanish* was found to promote far-left views in Latin America, whereas

the French and German versions champion the far-right (De-Pedro & Iriarte 2017). These differences in regional political content are not necessarily contradictions for *RT*. Instead, they reveal how *RT* consistently situates itself as an “outsider”: the positionality of this outsider status, therefore, seemingly key to both *RT*’s geopolitical goals and its appeal as a news source for diverse audiences.

Extant research tends focus on the broadcast versions of *RT* as they are available via terrestrial or cable broadcast services. However, *RT* also attracts significant audiences to its multilingual online platforms, whose content is further disseminated widely via *RT*’s own social media accounts, and through on-sharing by its diverse international audience. While existing studies have largely analysed geopolitical goals through examining *RT* content, less have researched what audiences seek from and do with *RT* (Crilley et al. 2020) – that is, the ways in which this “outsider” appeal operates in practice. This paper investigates this engagement with *RT* content on a leading social media platform – Facebook – across the six key languages served by the television network. We do so by assembling a multilingual research team that is able to analyse these sharing patterns in the language of the content being shared, and against the backdrop of the sociopolitical settings that prevail in each of the language communities.

Methods & Findings

For the purposes of this research, we gathered data from CrowdTangle on all posts in public Facebook spaces (public pages, public groups, and verified profiles) that contained links to *rt.com* URLs, for the period of 1 October to 31 December 2020. This resulted in a dataset of 207,801 unique posts from 26,452 unique Facebook pages, groups, and profiles, containing 59,394 unique *rt.com* URLs. Fig. 1 breaks down this dataset across the six *RT* language versions we examine; it shows, in the first place, that *RT Spanish* URLs circulate at nearly twice the volume of the next largest language version, *RT English*, but that the number of unique public spaces on Facebook that share such content is nearly identical for the English and Spanish editions. Meanwhile, *RT*’s Russian-language content circulates far less widely, and only within a comparatively small set of public groups rather than pages. These diverging patterns already point to substantial differences in the sharing practices for *RT* content across these different language communities.

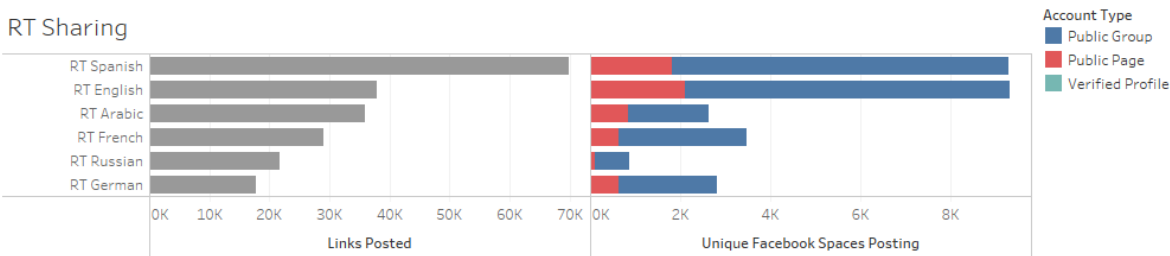


Fig. 1: Sharing of RT URLs per language community

Further, we have created a preliminary visualisation of these sharing patterns as a hybrid network containing both the Facebook spaces and the *RT* URLs they link to (fig. 2). This shows, first, a natural tendency to form clusters based on shared language; further, however, there are also some structural divisions within individual clusters (especially in the Arabic cluster, which may reflect political differences amongst Arabic-speaking communities), as well as connections across clusters that result from *RT* content in multiple languages being shared on the same Facebook spaces (with sharing of Spanish and English content especially prevalent).

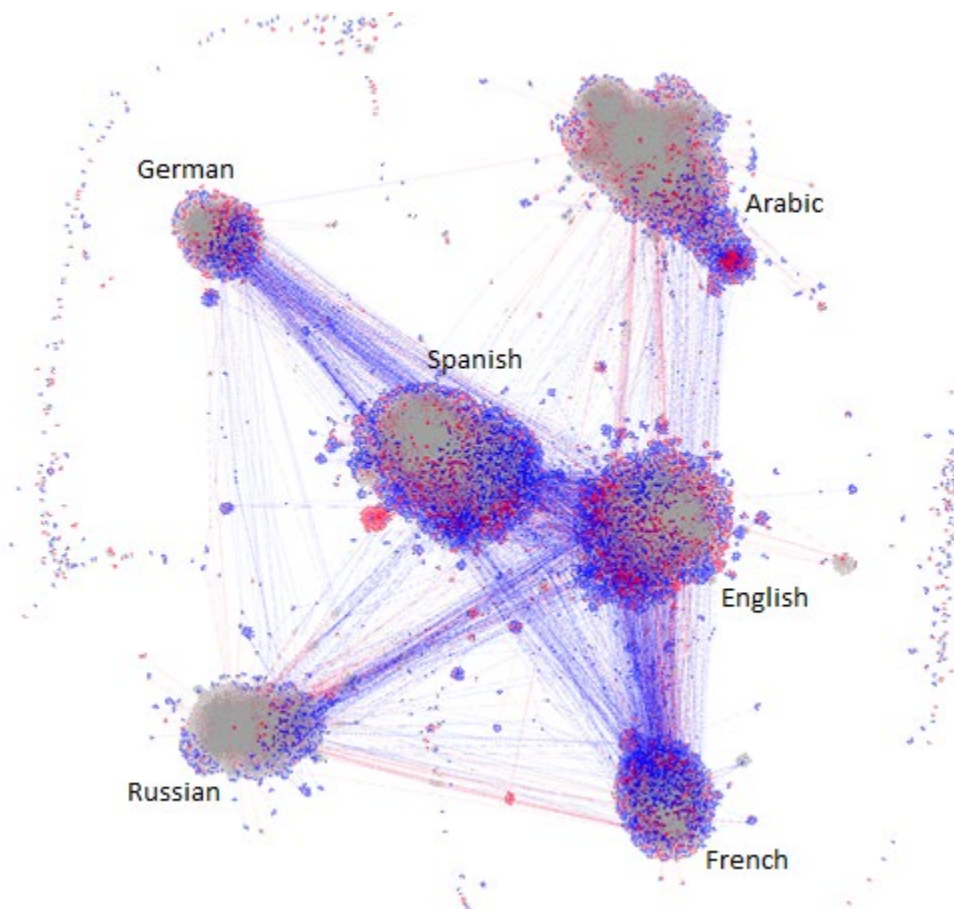


Fig. 2: Bipartite network of RT URL sharing patterns (blue: groups; red: pages; grey: URLs)

This network analysis informs our further manual review and coding of the data. A preliminary analysis of the most active Facebook spaces in each language community points clearly to considerable ideological variance across the language communities, and confirms the observations of earlier studies that Spanish-language sharing of *RT* URLs largely supports leftist political perspectives, while sharing in German, for instance, connects strongly with far-right and conspiracist ideologies. Even such widely diverging political stances are united in their explicit opposition to the prevailing political establishment in each country or region (i.e., the centrist German government or the predominantly right-wing administrations in Latin America), and – except in Russia itself,

of course, where it is staunchly pro-Putin – *RT* content can thus be understood as generally fomenting opposition and resistance to the status quo.

Next steps

Our full paper will present this manual coding and analysis of thematic and ideological patterns in *RT* content sharing across these different language communities in detail. In particular, we will examine the dominant topics in widely shared articles in each community, investigate how they are operationalised by page and group owners to further their own political agendas, and analyse the further response (in terms of likes, comments, and shares) from the followers of these Facebook spaces.

In a further extension of our network analysis, we also intend to reduce the hybrid, bipartite network between spaces and URLs to two mono-partite networks, to investigate a) any thematic patterns that may emerge, even across language communities, from a pure network of URLs that are frequently shared together in Facebook spaces, and b) any more distinct sub-clusters defined by common interests or ideologies, within the larger language-based clusters, that may arise from a pure network of Facebook spaces connected by similar URL sharing practices.

Taken together, these further analyses enable us to develop a detailed perspective of the take-up of *RT* content in aid of various political arguments on Facebook around the world, and thus provide a valuable new insight into how *RT* projects Russian soft power. Most importantly, this paper shifts attention towards the social media footprint of *RT*, which past studies of its own terrestrial and cable broadcasting activities have largely ignored.

Acknowledgment

Data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

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Paper 3

FROM CABLE NICHE TO SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS: INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH *SKY NEWS AUSTRALIA*'S BRAND OF 'NEWS'

Simon Copland
School of Sociology, Australian National University

Axel Bruns
Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Timothy Graham
Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

The Strange Case of *Sky News Australia*

The Australian cable news channel *Sky News Australia* has charted an unusual trajectory in recent years. Operated by controversial conservative media magnate Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, and broadcast on its Australian pay-TV network Foxtel, the channel has long been regarded as comparatively unsuccessful: even in the context of the already limited audience footprint of Foxtel itself, it has struggled to attract a regular viewer base of significant size, and was ridiculed at times for being watched mainly in Qantas airport lounges (where it is the default news station by contractual arrangement) and ministerial offices (where it is seen as a reflection of Murdoch's own political views; J. Wilson, 2020b).

Such popular disinterest has persisted even despite – or possibly because of – the channel's bifurcated content strategy, presenting as an ordinary news channel during daytime hours and transitioning to an opinion-dominated format featuring a selection of well-known conservative commentators in the evenings. Described by its detractors as "*Sky News after Dark*" (Dixon, 2020), the latter has been shown to be heavily skewed towards viewpoints that favour the conservative Liberal and National parties in the current Australian government over their Labor and Greens opposition (Stapleton, 2019). *Sky News after Dark* also hosts a range of right-wing conspiracy theories, including content questioning the origins of the coronavirus, challenging the legitimacy of the 2020 US Presidential Election, and arguing that organisations such as the UN and World Economic Forum are engaged in a secret global government agenda called "the Great Reset" (Davies, 2021).

Yet this content strategy has largely failed to attract additional viewers to the *Sky News Australia* channel: one week into his tenure as the latest anchor in the evening line-up, for example, veteran talk radio host Alan Jones managed to attract fewer than 60,000 pay-TV viewers to his show. This compares poorly, for instance, with an audience of more than ten times that number for the daily free-to-air current affairs programme 7.30 on the national public broadcaster ABC, or the more than one million viewers tuning in to each of the major commercial channels' nightly news bulletins (Dyer, 2020). Other

members of the After Dark line-up – often similarly arch-conservative radio hosts, opinion columnists, and former politicians and advisors – have tended to attract audiences only at levels similar to that for Jones’s show.

But such unimpressive pay-TV audience ratings, which Sky claims to have improved substantially during Australian COVID-19 lock-downs in 2020 (Cheik-Hussein, 2020), obscure a considerably more significant development elsewhere: Sky News Australia’s content is shared and consumed increasingly widely in digital form, via social media. As of April 2021, its YouTube channel had 1.42 million subscribers, and its videos had been viewed more than 856 million times, well ahead of the 1.32 million subscribers and 525 million views attracted by leading Australian public broadcaster *ABC News*. Engagement with its Facebook content exceeds that with the content posted by other Australian news providers (C. Wilson, 2020). Conspiracy theory content often receives the greatest viewership on the platform (Davies, 2021).

A Digital Strategy with Global Ambitions

This outsized level of attention and engagement results from a digital content strategy whose ambitions extend well beyond Australia: inspired perhaps by the success of another News Corporation property, *Fox News* (Muller, 2021), *Sky News Australia* has pivoted strongly to publishing content – often featuring its ‘After Dark’ hosts – that speaks not only to conservative and right-wing audiences in Australia, but also addresses their fellow travellers at an international level. In doing so, it is increasingly also seen to be endorsing conspiracy theories and other mis- and disinformation embraced by the US and international far right (J. Wilson, 2020b). Perhaps to further bolster this international appeal, controversial ‘alt-right’ influencer Lauren Southern has now also been added as a regular *Sky News* on-air contributor (J. Wilson, 2020a).

With *Sky News Australia* thus increasingly positioning itself as a digital influence operation with global interests – resembling to some extent a commercial mirror image of the state-owned Russian news channel *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) – this paper investigates the global reach of its digital content. To do so, we draw on a novel combination of advanced digital research methods. First, using the Digital Methods Initiative’s YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015), we identified the 20,000 *Sky News Australia* videos posted on YouTube in 2020, and we intend to continue collecting all further YouTube videos posted to mid-2021.

Second, in order to better assess the range and diversity of audiences attracted by and engaging with that content, we are systematically querying the social media data access platform CrowdTangle for any Facebook posts that include links to these YouTube videos. For ethical and privacy reasons, CrowdTangle only provides such data for public pages, public groups, and public verified profiles on the platform, and we are thus unable to assess the further circulation of these videos in closed groups or between non-public user profiles, yet this limited insight into the *public* circulation of *Sky News Australia* videos on Facebook is nonetheless sufficient for developing a valuable perspective on the thematic interests, ideological positioning, and geographic location of the pages, groups, and verified profiles that share *Sky News Australia* video content, and for identifying patterns in the specific content they choose to share.

Early Results and Further Steps

Preliminary analysis of Crowdtangle data for a subset of the list of 20,000 YouTube videos posted in 2020 already highlights a number of key patterns, and demonstrates the utility of our approach. Using a random sample of 20% of the videos, fig. 1 depicts a hybrid network between Facebook pages (in blue) and groups (in green), and the videos they have shared (in red); it reveals several overlapping interest groups engaging with *Sky News Australia* content. On the right, two widely shared videos promote conspiracy theories about President Biden and his son Hunter (one of them claims to present an exclusive report about Hunter Biden's laptop, and is shown to be the most widely shared video in this dataset by the large halo of pages and groups surrounding it); other somewhat less widely shared videos in this region of the graph similarly provide critical coverage of Biden's campaign and administration. Towards the centre, several key videos criticise the World Health Organisation for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, promote hydroxychloroquine as a possible remedy, and link the pandemic with conspiracy theories about the 'Great Reset'.

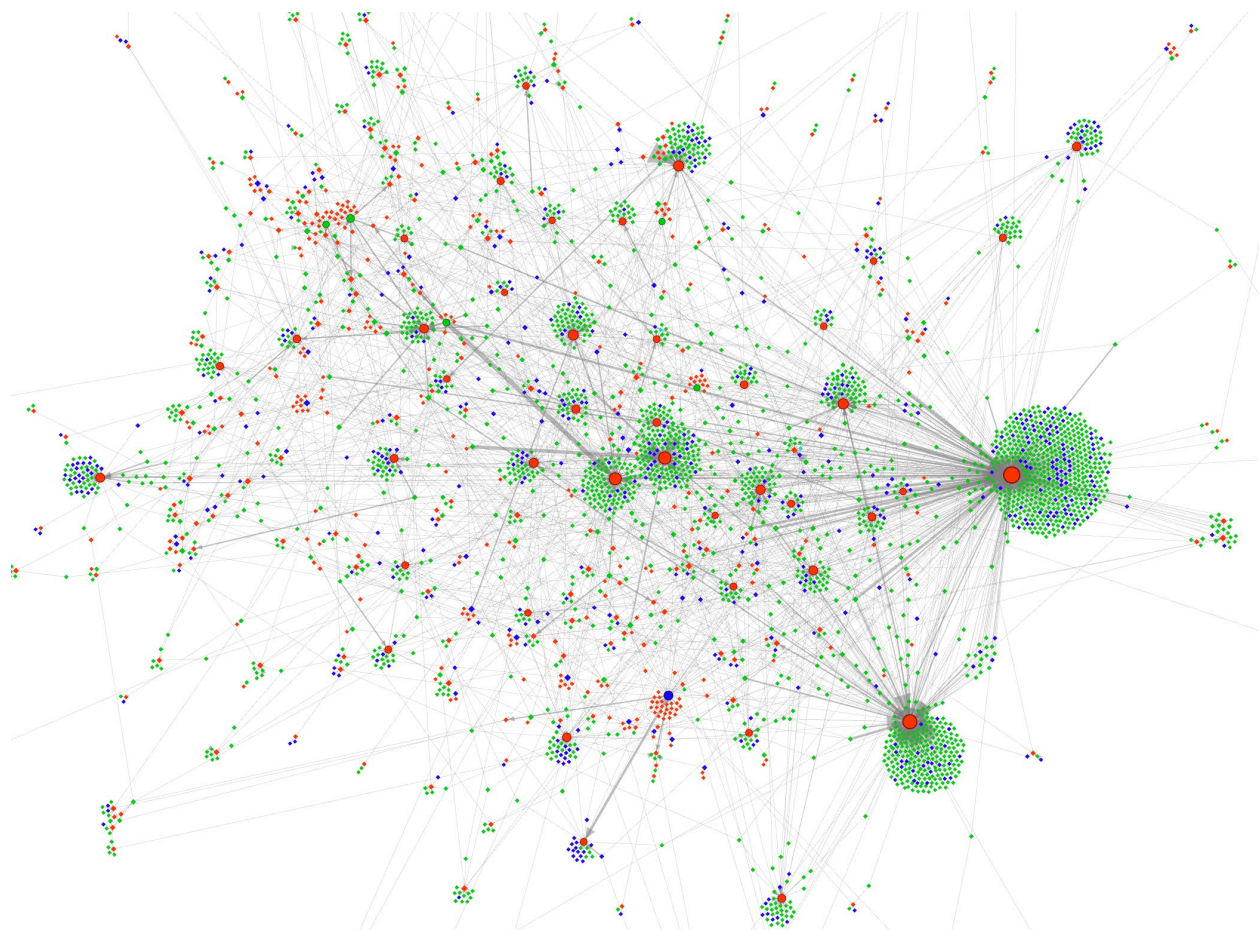


Fig. 1: Hybrid network between Sky News Australia videos (red) and the Facebook pages (blue) and groups (green) that share them, for 20% of the total list of YouTube videos.

On the left, a selection of considerably less popular videos address more domestic Australian themes, including government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and

Australia's increasingly testy relationship with China. Here, too, the balance between pages and videos changes: while elsewhere individual videos are shared by large numbers of pages and groups (shown as a single red video node surrounded by a multitude blue page and green group nodes), in this part of the network a small set of public groups (including the far-right 'Wake Up Australia') have shared a substantial number of videos (shown as multiple red video nodes surrounding a single green group node). This suggests a committed but narrow audience for *Sky News Australia* videos in the Australian Facebook community, while there is broader but potentially more casual sharing of its content at an international level.

For the full paper, we will extend this analysis to our entire dataset of *Sky News Australia* videos, and conduct a comprehensive analysis of the clusters in this content sharing network to determine the key attributes – such as shared thematic interests, political positioning, or geographic location – that define them. This will build on a mixed-methods computational and manual analysis of page and group descriptions as well as of the textual content of the posts in which *Sky News Australia* videos are shared. Further, we will also extrapolate the likely reach of these videos beyond the pages and groups that have initially shared them, by taking into account available data on the Facebook reactions, comments, and shares received by each post sharing a video.

In combination, this analysis develops a substantially more comprehensive picture of the social media footprint of *Sky News Australia*, offering significant new insights about its role in disseminating heavily ideologically coloured and potentially problematic information.

Acknowledgment

YouTube data collected via the Digital Methods Initiative YouTube Data Tools. Facebook data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

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Paper 4

BEYOND 'FAKE NEWS'? A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF HOW AUSTRALIAN POLITICIANS' ATTACK AND CRITICISE THE MEDIA ON TWITTER

Scott Wright
Monash University

'Fake news' has rightly been described as a two-dimensional phenomenon (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Most research has focused on the first dimension: actual or *genres* of fake news – mis/dis/malinformation and the like (see e.g. Bakir and McStay 2017; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). The second dimension identified by Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) is the use of fake news as a *label* in which legitimate news and journalism is described as fake. The use of fake news as label has received much less scholarly attention. Research has largely focused on the US, and former President Trump's tweets in particular, finding that his tweets contain extensive attacks on the media and journalist (Ott 2016; Brummette et al. 2018; Kreis 2017; Ouyang and Waterman 2020; Meeks 2020) often to deflect from other issues (Ross and Rivers 2018). Studies of the use of fake news as a label outside of the US are rare (Farhall et al, 2019; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Waisbord and Amado 2017). We cannot assume that the discourses and strategies deployed by politicians beyond the US, or between political leaders and the broader base of elected representative, are similar. It might be that they attack the media in different ways that are simply not captured by a narrow focus on fake news as a label (e.g. Brummette et al. 2018), or that they have a more positive relationship with the media. Furthermore, most studies have focused solely on recent events, making it hard to understand how practices have changed over time. Given these gaps and challenges, this paper answers two research questions:

1. How do Australian politicians engage with the media on Twitter, and how has this changed over time?
2. How do Australian politicians attack and criticise the media, and how has this changed over time?

To answer the research questions, this paper adopts a longitudinal research design, deploying content analysis to analyse how 26 Australian politicians engaged with, and attacked and criticized, journalists and the media on twitter from 2011 to mid 2018. Initially, all of their tweets were collected. They were filtered using 88 keywords that relate to Australian media and more general terms such as news, mail, TV, radio and press. After duplicates were removed there were 45,612 tweets. A further significant manual cleaning process was conducted to remove tweets that were not actually related to media (e.g. 'lovely sky', 'e-mail'), leaving a final sample size of 7,053 tweets. A three-part content analysis was applied to these tweets.

First, the type of media was coded. This included 43 specific media outlets, with other outlets added to a not in the list category and mentions of individual journalists having

its own category. Second, the media were coded for whether they were local or regional, national or international. Finally, the function of each tweet was coded. A separate code frame was deployed to analyse the different forms of criticism and attack. Again, this was a combination of deductive and inductive coding.

The paper finds that the use of fake news discourse is relatively limited and largely propagated by a small group of sometimes populist, back-bench Liberal and far-right PHON politicians – and not by Prime Ministers and other political leaders. While politicians have largely *not* adopted a discourse of fake news, there is a correlation between Trump’s election in 2016 and significant increases in other forms of attacks and criticism of the media - particularly allegations of bias and criticisms of production standards. This is dominated by the same hard right politicians, but there is a discernible, if small, increase in criticisms and attacks more generally – though often this is meta-journalistic discourse (Carlson 2009). The dominant form of engagement with journalists and the media on Twitter can be summarised as broadly respectful, functional, and at times even convivial, friendly banter. Shaped by national political systems and cultures – and Trump himself – it seems that the Australian case is in many ways very different from the US one (Meeks 2020). However, Trump’s attacks on the media – and coverage of this - may have helped to normalise a more critical and confrontational tone between Australian politicians and the media, particularly (but not solely) amongst populists and the far-right.

Another interesting finding of this study is that attacks were generally focused on the ABC, and particularly its political coverage and a perceived urban bias, while often praising its rural and crisis reporting. Conversely, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, whose mastheads account for around 70% of print circulation alongside Sky News, Foxtel and News.com.au, was rarely subjected to criticism and attack. This finding adds further evidence to a significant ongoing public debate in Australia, about the relations between media organisations and politicians. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has described a “culture of fear” about criticising News Corp because of its dominant position (cited in Simons 2020). In 2020, Rudd launched what became the most successful e-petition in Australian history, calling for a royal commission into media diversity – though it was widely framed as being about the power of News Corp and Rudd used the hashtag #MurdochRoyalCommission. The petition text directly attacked the power of News Corp, arguing that people were “intimidated into silence” by its power. While the context is different, the findings support earlier studies which have found that Australian politicians attack the ABC while largely ignoring commercial media (Griffen-Foley 2003).

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Paper 5

DEPLOYING FAKE NEWS DISCOURSES IN NON-DEMOCRATIC SETTINGS: THE ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN AND PERSIAN TWEETS

Ehsan Dehghan

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Sofya Glazunova

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

With all its “definitional ambiguity” (Schapals 2018), the concept of ‘fake news’ has been increasingly employed in political discourse globally. Although some works have classified forms of fake news (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, Tandoc et al. 2018, Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019), majority of studies have focused on Anglo-Saxon and/or democratic contexts. Additionally, a large body of literature has examined fake news discourses of the political elite, media, or the far right.

Digital technologies are important for non-democratic regimes, and “marginalized or weaker (political) actors” (Spaiser et al. 2017) in them, particularly due to their ability in empowering minority groups. In these settings, fake news discourses become part of the struggles over establishing one’s political ideology. Pro- and anti-establishment forces join social media—organically or coordinated—to discredit the enemy. As such, fake news discourses become a floating signifier (Farkas and Schou 2018), “overflowed with meaning” (Torning 1999 p.301), and deployed strategically by the different sides.

This study addresses several gaps in fake news discourse studies: by looking at non-democratic, non-Western contexts of Russia and Iran, we examine how social media users in these contexts deploy this discourse in their everyday communication. We draw from a mixed-methods approach, leaning on social network and discourse-theoretical analyses.

Methodology

We queried Twitter’s API and collected Russian and Persian tweets containing keywords and hashtags related to fake news, including ‘fake news’, ‘disinformation’, ‘propaganda’, ‘media lies’, and the like. It is not expected that ordinary users differentiate between technical definitions of these terms. Therefore, we included all these terms in our collection.

Our collection (25 August to 25 September 2020) yielded approximately 100,000 Russian and 10,000 Persian tweets. Given the restrictions in accessing Twitter in Iran, the lower number of tweets was expected. We did a language-based, rather than geographical data collection, so our dataset also includes tweets by the diaspora of these countries, and tweets from linguistically similar contexts (e.g., Belarus, Ukraine, Afghanistan). We employed a community detection algorithm (Blondel et al. 2008) to

identify clusters in the retweet networks, then qualitatively examined the accounts and tweets in each cluster.

Russian Tweets

There is clear polarization between the pro- and anti-Kremlin clusters in the Russian retweet network (figure 1). The pro- Kremlin cluster includes ordinary users and public figures such as journalists and politicians. Our qualitative analysis of tweets in this cluster shows that the users show approval of the political elites and their decisions. Discursively, these users position themselves in direct inimical antagonism towards the Russian and Western opposition.

The anti-Kremlin cluster, however, is not as homogenous. It includes a range of domestic and international actors (particularly from Ukraine and Belarus), all expressing their antagonistic position against Kremlin via the deployment of fake news discourses.

The various historio-political events discussed in the tweets by both clusters discursively invoke fake news discourses to blame the enemy for the dissemination of disinformation. During our data collection, two major events occurred: the poisoning of the political activist Alexey Navalny and the unrest in Belarus following the presidential election. Both events were widely discussed in the tweets, with each cluster accusing the other of spreading fake news. Our analysis shows that these discursive communities form organically to create alliances and express their opposition to the antagonist. Of course, even in the case of these alliances, communities generally form around opinion leaders. Other topics specific to the historical and political contexts, such as the Soviet and LGBT propagandistic discourses were also present among discussions.

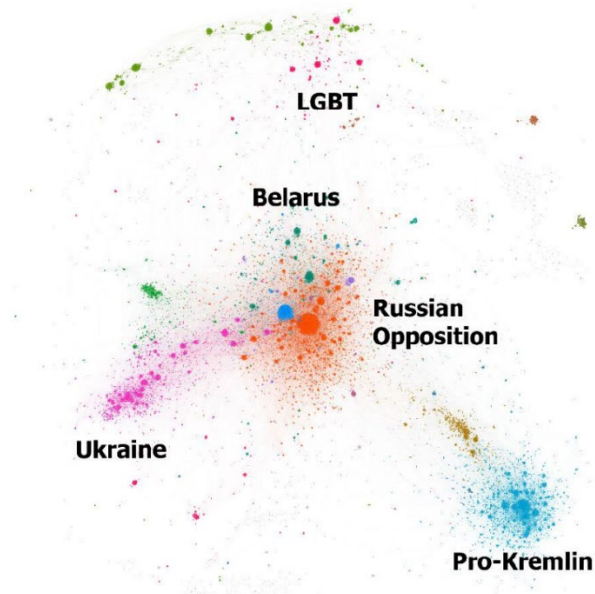


Figure 1: Russian Retweets Network

Persian Tweets

The Persian retweet network also shows strong polarization, particularly between the pro- and anti-regime actors (figure 2). Like the Russian case, the pro-regime cluster stands at a relatively isolated and disconnected position in relation to the rest of the network.

Within the pro-regime cluster, fake news discourses are deployed to attack the antagonists, namely Western media and Western-based Persian satellite TV channels. To a lesser degree, the moderate government of Iran is also a target of attacks, as the users in the pro-regime cluster generally hold a more conservative discourse.

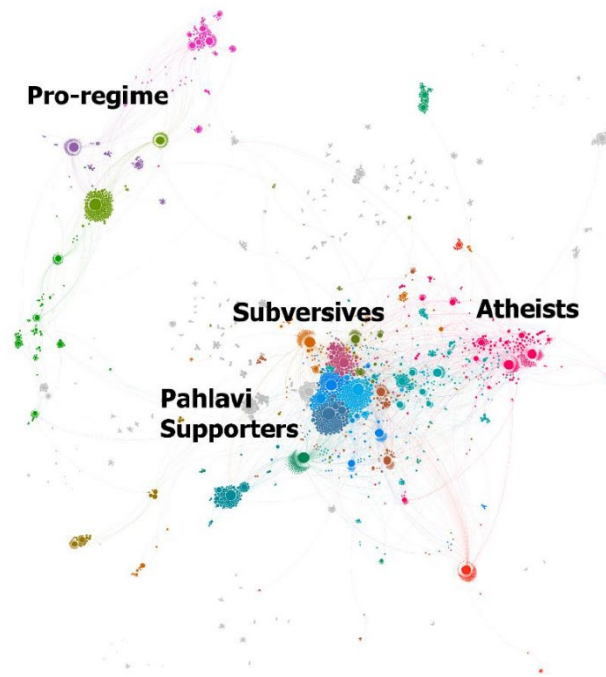


Figure 2: Persian Retweets Network

The anti-regime cluster, like the Russian network, is not as monolithic and homogenous as the pro-regime one. We identified three main sub-clusters in this network. One prominent sub-cluster is the community of users that self-describe as ‘subversives’. The term ‘subversive’ has been frequently used by the government to refer to protesters and has now been reappropriated by dissident Twitter users to self-describe as citizens who want a fundamentally different regime, rather than reforms. Tweets in this cluster associate various events with the Iranian regime’s discourses and label any narrative by the Iranian government as ‘fake news’ or ‘regime propaganda’.

Another relatively large anti-regime cluster is what we identified as ‘Pahlavi supporters’. This community actively promotes a return to the Pahlavi monarchy system before the 1979 revolution. Like the other cluster, this community strategically employs fake news discourses to discredit the Iranian government. Finally, a smaller anti-regime cluster often represents its antagonism from an anti-religion, atheist discourse. This ‘atheist’

cluster generally opts for a secular form of government and frames its narrative from an anti-hijab perspective.

Summative Remarks

Although the contexts of Iran and Russia are quite different, our analysis shows a coherent and consistent pattern in how fake news discourses are employed and deployed by non-elite users in non-democratic settings. In this regard, two main points are important.

Firstly, our findings show that fake news discourses are employed as a discursive strategy to discredit and attack an antagonist. In this sense, users do not necessarily differentiate between the specific terminology in scholarly work, and often interchangeably use these terms to achieve the same discursive aims. Terms such as fake news, propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, or lies are equally used by users against an antagonist.

Secondly, the findings of this study challenge a monolithic understanding of the conflicts and discourses in the region. Traditionally, contexts such as Russia and Iran are represented in a dichotomous fashion, often presenting the internal conflicts in terms of regimes vs the opposition. However, there is no single opposition camp in these contexts. Rather, what we observed is a networked discursive alliance between various antagonistic groups.

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