

RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS: STRATEGIES AND TACTICS OF INFLUENCE

DR. MICHAEL J. JENSEN,¹ DR.
NIKOS SALAMANOS,²
DR. XINLEI HE,³
YANG CHEN,³
DR MICHAEL SIRIVIANOS²

1. UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

2. CYPRUS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

3. FUDAN UNIVERSITY

**THE SUPREME
ART OF WAR IS TO
SUBDUE THE ENEMY
WITHOUT FIGHTING.**

Sun Tzu



Donald J. Trump 

@realDonaldTrump



"The Supreme Art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." -- Sun Tzu

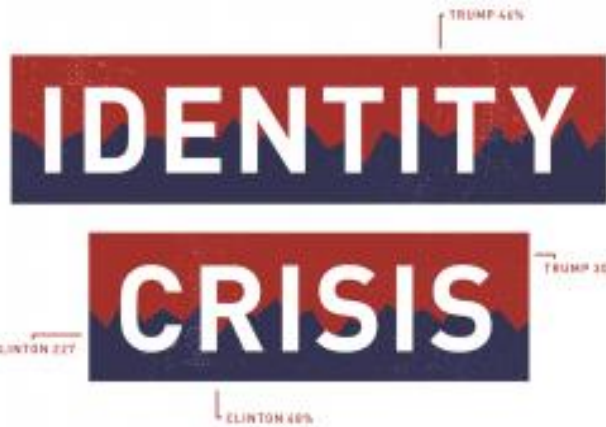
1:04 AM · Jul 18, 2012 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

3.5K Retweets **5.9K** Likes

"One of the most important books for understanding American politics today."

—EZRA KLEIN, VOX

CALIFORNIA
JOHN SIDES, MICHAEL TESLER,
NORTH CAROLINA
AND LYNN VAVRECK
OHIO



STRONGER TOGETHER
THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN
AND THE BATTLE FOR
THE MEANING OF AMERICA
MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

"THE BEST WAY TO THINK ABOUT HOW MUCH THE RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE AFFECTED THE OUTCOME OF THE 2016 ELECTION IS WITH SOMETHING BETWEEN AGNOSTICISM AND SKEPTICISM – AND PROBABLY LEANING TOWARDS SKEPTICISM."

"OF COURSE
THE RUSSIAN EFFORTS AFFECTED THE
THE OUTCOME....
TO CONCLUDE OTHERWISE
STRETCHES LOGIC, COMMON
SENSE, AND CREDULITY
TO THE BREAKING
POINT. LESS THAN
EIGHTY THOUSAND VOTES
IN THREE KEY STATES SWUNG
THE ELECTION. I HAVE NO DOUBT
THAT MORE VOTES
THAN THAT WERE INFLUENCED
BY THE MASSIVE EFFORT
BY THE RUSSIANS."



THE DENOMINATOR PROBLEM: THEORY OF INFLUENCE

"Given the billions if not trillions of tweets and posts on these media during the election campaign, Russian-sponsored content was an infinitesimal fraction." (Sides et al 2018)

Russia's interference constituted "tiny slivers of the total amount of posts, tweets, videos, and other engagements and uses of their respective sites." (Benkler et al 2018, 242)

"False information ... was far from the most shared ... a single false story would have needed to have a massive impact – equal to seeing a television ad 37 times." (Sides et al 2018)

□ Theory of Influence:

- Information has direct effects
- A message was received and changed a voting intention in a manner predetermined
- The message must be false to manipulate and deceive a voter about his/her strategic intentions in relation to a voting decision
- If an actor influenced a population be preponderate in volume and have a distinct message

THE DENOMINATOR PROBLEM: DIFFUSION

Diffusion of Influence Sept 1 – Nov 15, 2016

- 212 Election-related Tweets (Edgett 2019) of 18.2 B total tweets (excluding retweets)
- 2.12 milion tweets from IRA bots producing 454.7 million impressions (Edgett 2019)
 - 0.49% of all election-related tweet impressions – fewer than their share of the overall election tweets
- 175,193 "troll" tweets
 - 8.4% election related

The Russian effort ammounts to "tiny slivers of the total amount of posts, tweets, videos, and other engagements and uses of their respective sites" (Benkler et al 2018)

- This material was "viewed by a small number of diehard conservative news consumers" (Sides et al 2018)

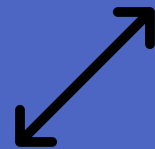
MANIPULATION BETWEEN TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD

“The vast majority of content promoted by Russian-linked networks is not, strictly speaking, ‘fake news’” (Schafer, 2018:4)

LOCATION,
LOCATION,
LOCATION (IN
THE NETWORK)



A small set of Influential Nodes Can Reach Many other Nodes Quickly – the number of actors seeding a message is not determinative



Even minor nodes can Connect with Major Nodes and Have a Substantial Impact on the Diffusion



Resonances with Existing Narratives can Fuel the Spread

This can include deeply embedded cultural narratives (e.g. David vs. Goliath, appeals to patriotism, etc)

ANALYTICAL
FOCUS:
TROLLING
ACTIVITY AND
ITS ROLE IN
CONTENT
PROPAGATION
AND
DIFFUSION

- Trolling has its roots in the practice of warfare
 - American pilots would taunt and bait less experienced North Vietnamese pilots flying comparably less advanced fighters into battles that they could not win. This process became known as “trolling for MiGs” and “early online discussion boards copied both the term and the technique” (Singer and Brooking 2018, 163).

INFORMATION WARFARE AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: CONSONANCE

- "Minimal Strategy:" Work with the Willing
 - Target "native networks and narratives that share an influencer's goals" (Clark 2017)
 - Create resonances whereby the influencer and the target are identified with one another by using the same symbols and ways of speaking (Burke 1969; Clark 2017; Helmus et al 2018)
 - Take action "to allow, enable, leverage, amplify, or empower such actors" (Clark 2017)
 - Use existing beliefs as a "fulcrum" by which to move other beliefs and induce actions (Burke 1969)
 - Trolls "tweet at President Trump" in "high volumes when they know he is online and they try to push conspiracy theories.... If he is to ... cite one of those, it just proves Putin correct." Such tweets can be "used as a lever against Americans" (Watts 2017)

EXPECTATIONS UNDER EACH MODEL OF INFLUENCE

	Direct	Consonance
Content	Primarily new	Primarily the same
Targets	Undecided voters and potential nonvoters	Organized opinion communities
Temporal	Initiate diffusion	Bandwagon with diffusion

DATA AND METHODS

- Twitter Streaming API:
 - 152,479,440 from 9,939,698 unique users collected September 21-November 7, 2016
- Twitter Dataset of State-sponsored trolling
 - 25,076,853 tweets from State-sponsored trolls (all of the public datasets through the end of July 2019) to flag state-sponsored trolls produced by 8,275 accounts
 - From these we can identify 35,489 tweets from 822 accounts
 - Almost 26,000 were Russian IRA tweets

	Non-trolls	State-trolls
Replies	12,942,628	160
Mentions	172,145,775	33,627

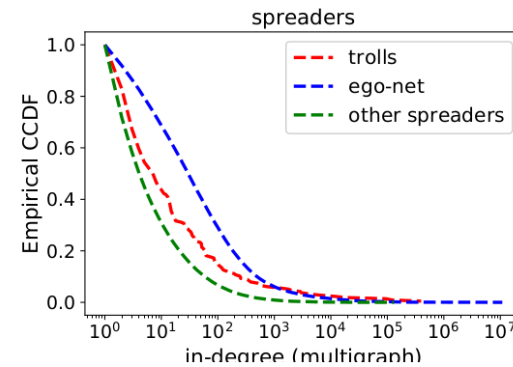
DATA AND METHODS: TWITTER CAMPAIGN STREAM CHARACTERISTICS

DATA AND METHODS

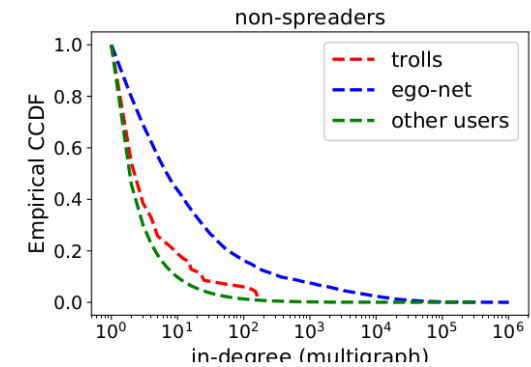
- Construct Ego-Network of connections between accounts based on their diffusion of URLs
 - Ego networks is temporally differentiated: For users j and k , if a URL is posted at time t and $t_k < t_j$ we take this as evidence that user j has been influenced by user k
 - Differentiate accounts
 - Spreaders:Accounts spreading a URL linked to by a troll
 - Non-spreaders:Accounts not spreading a URL linked to by a troll

IN-LINK DISTRIBUTION

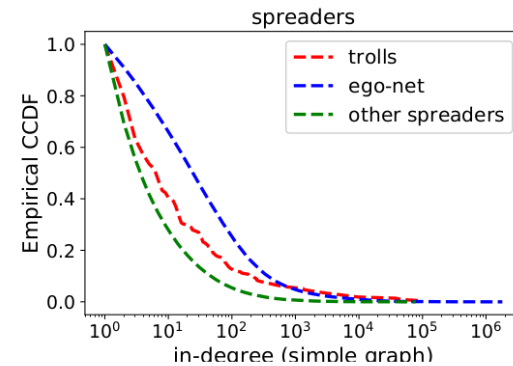
- Trolls are more visible than other users
- Troll ego-nets are the most visible in the network



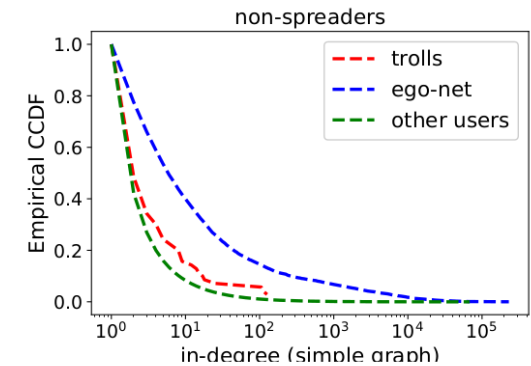
(a)



(b)



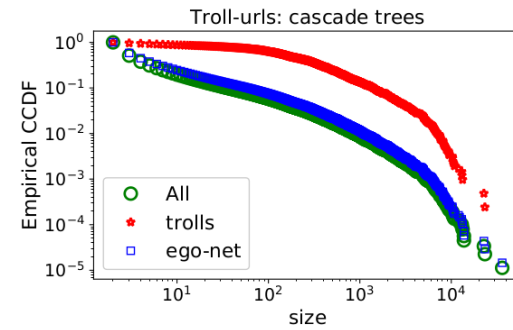
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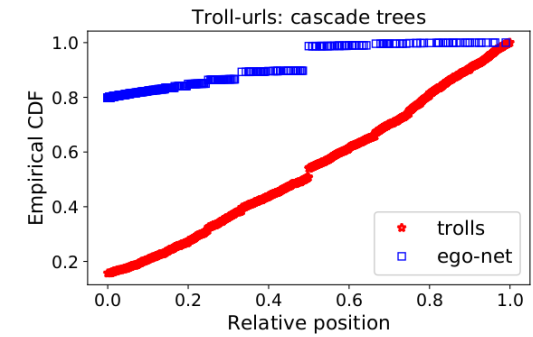
(d)

URL CASCADES

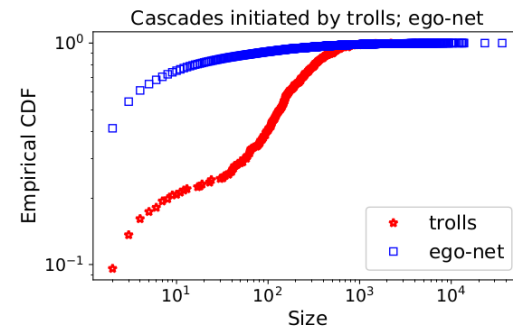
- 88,714 cascades from 5,084 URLs
- 4,125 cascades had at least one troll user
- 68,650 cascades had at least one member of the troll ego-network
- Trolls initiated 647 cascades while ego-net members initiated 54,758



(a)



(b)



CONCLUSIONS

- Trolls tend to engage with influential figures online
 - Trolls mostly resonate with other accounts rather than seed unique content
 - Shows they are primarily invested in forming relationships
 - They have effects through the communities they engage by connecting the communities with which they are consonant to themes directing them where they wish to go
- Theoretical contribution: these findings indicate an alternative approach to voter (de)mobilization that does not involve traditional theories of information and persuasion