From Jan. 6 to Justice for J6,
#CapitolInsurrectionHoax:
A network analysis of a right-wing hashtag

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Abstract
Using the hashtag #CapitolInsurrectionHoax on Twitter as a case study, this research examines how a specific alt-right narrative of January 6th evolved into a discursive network, and whether it remained marginalized or became mainstream in MAGA communities.

Keywords
strategy, network analysis, Twitter, Jan. 6, nationalism, polarization, MAGA, white supremacy

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The deadly Jan. 6 Capitol attack is one of the most pivotal moments in the history of the United States. It has so far epitomized the stark divide between President Joe Biden, who said the attack was an "insurrection (...) about white supremacy" (Biden, 2021), and former President Donald Trump, who framed the attack as a patriotic protest to save America from a rigged election (Bartiromo, 2021). The disagreement hinges on both the very facts that define the events and the representation that is subsequently constructed from them. Joe Biden's conflation of the MAGA movement with white supremacy offers an additional perspective on this logic, opening a new line of inquiry into the practical manifestations of this connection, as well as its impact on public opinion. In the run-up to the 2022 midterm elections, this is an opportunity to understand how
the discursive network surrounding the Capitol events is being structured on the right-wing continuum. This research examines how a specific alt-right narrative of January 6 evolved into a discursive network, and whether it remained marginalized or mainstreamed into MAGA communities.

The presentation will share the results of a case study that explores the circulation of the hashtag #CapitolInsurrectionHoax on Twitter. #CapitolInsurrectionHoax was started by Peter Brimelow on February 10, 2021, to promote a video produced by VDARE, the anti-immigration organization he founded in 1999. The choice of this identitarian group as the network's starting point is significant because it sits at the confluence of the MAGA movement and the white supremacist nebula (Hawley, 2017; Tischauser and Musgrave, 2020). The corpus consists of a dataset of 818 tweets posted between February 10, 2021, and September 10, 2021, prior to the Justice for J6 rally. This timeframe is consistent with the evolution of the hashtag over time and provides a useful context for the interpretation of the resulting dynamics.

Because the case study focuses on the circulation of a hashtag and the correlative dissemination of an idea, it involves both mapping a discursive network and understanding how the expansion of a particular idea can inform a network. In this respect, it can be described as exploratory research and relies on a quantitative approach which articulates network and content analysis. Consistently, the corpus was examined with Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) and Communalytic (Gruzd and Mai, 2022); the semantic analysis was conducted with Tropes (Molette and Landré, 1994); the resulting networks were visualized with Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). The main results were finally interpreted through the prism of theoretical contributions from information science and political science, including disinformation in a polarized political space (Frau-Meigs, 2019; Cohen, 2018).

The results show that the hashtag #CapitolInsurrectionHoax has evolved into a binary name network with clusters revolving around @vdare and @peterbrimelow on one end, and @EagleEdMartin on the other. The latter is an account of the Phyllis Schafly Eagles president, a staunch Trump supporter. Mapping the hashtag thus reveals the reality of a discursive network that connects the identitarian right to a MAGA group. The study highlights that influential alt-media, such as American Greatness, acts as a discursive bridge between the clusters and helps structure the narrative. This suggests that nationalist communities are embedded in a larger ecosystem that facilitates the propagation of conspiracy theories and creates links between otherwise unconnected nodes. In this case study, this dynamic proved effective in increasing the visibility of VDARE in Republican discourse. This phenomenon can be explained by the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1983).
This thematic coherence is supported by a networked content analysis. VDARE and Peter Brimelow set the tone for the conversation, with the most common themes coming from their tweets. However, the analysis also shows that this commonality is not based on white supremacist discourse. Rather, it is consistent with a populist construction of a hostile elite, in which Democratic officials are portrayed as guilty of political lies designed to criminalize supporters of Donald Trump. The sentiment analysis enabled by Communalytic logically demonstrates that this tactic does indeed elicit a negative emotional response and belongs to the phenomenon of negative partisanship (Abramowitz, 2019).

The semantic commonality, however, does not translate into a shared experience. A dynamic visualization will show that the network remains neatly divided into two barely connected clusters. While the hashtag seems to point to a shared representation of Capitol events, there is surprisingly no reciprocity between users, and the clusters are characterized by very low density. Indeed, while 475 unique posters propagated the hashtag, most content came from central nodes. In addition, there were only eleven independent users, and 93% of the total content was generated by three nodes. Of the 818 tweets, 160 (19.5%) are retweets of @vdare and 269 (33%) are retweets of @EagleEdMartin.
Overall, the far-right narrative of January 6th as a #CapitolInsurrectionHoax has gained limited traction. An analysis of its trajectory over time shows that its reach has been narrow, despite the sustained campaign led by two accounts with separate but complementary spheres of influence. After a three-month boom of 771 (95%) tweets between February and April, the hashtag was eventually restricted to @EagleEdMartin and slowly faded into oblivion. New hashtags were subsequently used to spread a counter-narrative to Jan.6.
The study of the hashtag #CapitolInsurrectionHoax confirms a common discourse between an identitarian organization and a vocal Trump supporter, but this connection has not developed into a mutual interaction between the communities. Nevertheless, it is a strong indication of the central role of alt-media, which has the potential to become a structuring force in the right-wing network. Future work will follow two lines of inquiry. Firstly, the central role of alt-media and the dynamics they generate will be explored through a comprehensive social network analysis. More specifically, we will explore the ways in which these discursive networks can help normalize white identity politics (Jardina, 2019) and infuse an agenda into the Republican Party. Furthermore, in the context of the Justice Department and House Select Committee investigations into the January 6th attack, it will be important to examine the narratives constructed around the convicted rioters who are now considered political prisoners by the alt-media (Kelly and Smith, 2021). This issue did not prove effective in rallying Trump supporters at the Justice for J6 rally, but it could become a founding myth and mobilize a new right-wing coalition.

References


