

Welcome or Not-Welcome: Reactions to Refugee Situation on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

For many European countries, in 2015 the refugee situation developed from a remote tragedy reported upon in the news to a situation they have to deal with in their own neighborhood. Driven by this observation, we investigated the development of the perception of the refugee situation during 2015 in Twitter. Starting from a dataset of 1.7 Million tweets covering refugee-related topics from May to December 2015, we investigated how the discussion on refugees changed over time, in different countries as well as in relationship with the evolution of the actual situation. In this paper we report and discuss our findings from checking a set of hypotheses, such as that the closeness to the actual situation would influence the intensity and polarity of discussions and that news media takes a mediating role between the actual and perceived refugee situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The refugee situation in Europe has rapidly developed in the past year and is further evolving making it a central topic in Europe. The high numbers of refugees in individual countries have created an unexpected readiness to help. However, it also raises fears and unsureness, imposes demanding societal challenges and triggers political developments. In each case, it has created a high level of attention and discussion on the topic in the News as well as in social media. While the perception of the refugee situation in the population is reflected in the News, this typically rather highlights reactions in the context of larger events than observing the evolution in a more continuous fashion.

Social media and especially Twitter have proven to be a useful source of information in the context of events [21]. In addition to the exchange of factual information they are also used to exchange opinions on political and societal topics, especially in the context of larger events. Thus, they can become good indicators for the perception of and opinion on events and evolving issues in the population. This has, for example, been shown for the US presidential election in [8]. The tweeting activity on refugee-related topics, therefore, provides a good basis for analysing the changing perception of the evolving refugee situation in Europe.

The reaction of the population to the arrival of large numbers of refugees in a country is not easy to predict or analyse. Social science offers a variety of theories for such intergroup encounter. The

realistic group conflict theory (RCT) [23, 12], for example, has the central hypothesis that real conflict in group interests between social groups causes intergroup conflicts. In [25] the authors stress the importance of group identity in addition to RCT. Other driving factors in intergroup relationships and conflicts are also prejudiced attitudes caused by intraindividual and interpersonal psychological processes (see, e.g., [1]). In addition to the variety of influential factors for inter-group behavior, it has to be considered that the population of a country is made up of a large variety of social groups differing in their political attitude, life situation, education, employment status, etc. Thus, for example, “real conflicts in group interests” - contributing to intergroup conflicts according to RCT - such as competition for employment will be perceived stronger by some social groups than others.

In our work we analyse refugee-related tweets to gain a better understanding of the perception of the evolving refugee situation in Europe. For this purpose we collected 1.7 Million tweets covering refugee-related topics from May to December 2015. To the best of our knowledge this is the first work, which analyses the current refugee situation and its perception based on Twitter data.

In more detail, we test a set of hypotheses considering the influence of the changing refugee situation on attention for the topic, critical to negative attitude towards the topic, and polarization of the discussion. Since other media such as online News play an important role as mediator between the actual refugee situation and the one perceived by the population, we also analyse the relationship between Twitter and online News activity based on the News dataset provided by the GDELT project. This dataset has, for example, been used in [17] to assess the coverage of climate change on Twitter and online News.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses related work followed by the presentation of our research hypotheses in Section 3. Subsequently, we describe the datasets in Section 4, followed by a description of the methods applied for processing the data to assess the analyses in Section 5. The actual analysis results are presented in section 6 and the paper concludes with a summary of findings and ideas for future work (Section 7).

2. RELATED WORK

Sentiment Analysis on Twitter. Due to its coverage and high level of opinionated content Twitter is frequently used as source for analysing opinions and feelings shared by people about different themes and topics. Research has leveraged the sentiments reflected in large-scale Twitter feeds for a variety of purposes, such as predicting the stock market [3], political alignments [5] and polls [9]. However, analysing sentiments on Twitter using traditional methods for sentiment analysis such as dictionaries is a challenging task [2], because Twitter messages are typically very short, may

contain positive and negative sentiment in the same tweet, use a different language than other text corpora and make use of special symbols such as emoticons. Some researchers have, therefore, exploited the special characteristics of Twitter for sentiment analysis.

In [20] the authors created a dictionary for emoticons for classifying tweets based on the employed emoticons. Further, they collected objective tweets from Twitter accounts of newspapers such as the New York Times and Washington Post to build a classifier for distinguishing tweets with positive, negative and neutral sentiments. Recent works on sentiment analysis also use the hashtags, another characteristic of Twitter, for identifying sentiments and opinions. In [26] hashtags are employed to predict the spread of ideas in Twitter, while in [29] the authors use hashtags to explore polarizing US political issues in Twitter. They compute the leaning of a hashtag by first identifying users that retweet a set of “seed users” with a known political leaning and then assigning each hashtag a fractional value corresponding to which retweeting users used it. They remove non-political hashtags by requiring hashtag co-occurrence patterns. Another study in [28] investigates the task of sentiment classification of hashtags instead of actual Twitter messages. For this purpose, the authors leverage the overall sentiment polarity of tweets containing a hashtag, hashtag co-occurrence relationship and the literal meaning of the hashtags in a graph model framework. In our work, we also exploit hashtags for sentiment classification basing the polarity of a hashtag on its literal meaning and its usage. However, since we are not interested in general polarity, but in polarity for a very specific topic, we decided to resort to high-quality classification of the relevant hashtags using human annotators.

Analysing Events through Online Media. Due to their accessibility and their ability for very dynamic reactions, online media including online news and social media are important sources for analysing events, their evolution, and their perception. In [27], for example, the authors analyse the effects of media type (Facebook vs. Twitter vs. online newspaper) and crisis type (intentional vs. victim) on the reactions to information about events, crisis in this case, using the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster as a use case. They show that the medium effects are stronger than the effects of crisis type. In [22] the authors investigate theoretical foundations of crisis communication by analyzing the effects of traditional and social media strategies on the recipient’s perceptions of reputation and by analyzing the effects or crisis responses on the recipient’s secondary crisis communications (e.g., sharing information and leaving a message) and reactions (e.g., willingness to boycott). The results indicated that the medium matters more than the message. In [14] the authors study global news coverage of disasters using data from the GDELT project, which provides a dataset with geolocated events of global coverage based on news reports from a variety of international news sources [15]. In their study on news coverage the authors examine predictor variables using a hierarchical multiple regression model. They found that population has a positive effect, while political stability is negatively correlated with global news coverage similar to previous research but they find strong regionalism in news geography. Similar to our work, the authors in [17] also analyse a longer-lasting crisis situation, in this case climate change, based on Twitter data. The authors compare the coverage of such events in online News and social media and identified a gap between what the online News covers and what the general public shares in social media. Our focus is more on understanding the change in perception of the long-lasting situation over time and we focus on a different topic, namely the refugee situation.

Events and Crisis in Twitter. The refugee situation in Europe

has developed a crisis like situation in many countries. Twitter has been previously used to analyse crisis or event related aspects. In [21] the authors use Twitter data to collect and communicate information about earth quakes in Japan faster than the announcements of the official meteorological agencies. Another challenge during crisis is to identify false information such as rumours. A quantitative analysis of tweets during the Ebola crisis reveals that lies, half-truths, and rumours can spread just like true news [13]. Spiro et al. [24] discussed different aspects of classical rumour theory in the context of 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill by analyzing the tweets during this event. The authors observed that an event with high media coverage is more likely to be re-tweeted, meaning that perceived importance is one major driver for the rumouring behaviour. In [19] the authors analyze a diverse set of crisis situations such as floods, earth quake and train crashes in Twitter and assess the usefulness of the data based on the information types and sources for population, agencies and other stakeholders. Our work adds in the line of crisis studies based on Twitter, introducing the refugee crisis as a new focus topic.

3. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The coverage of the refugee situation in the News suggests some trends such as changes in the mood of the European population towards an increasing critical attitude towards refugees, high attention of the population to the topic (triggered by News coverage as well as by refugee presence in country), and diverse perception of the topic in different countries (see e.g., UK and Germany). Our goal is to verify some of those trends using Twitter data. Based on this goal we have defined a set of research hypotheses, which we use for guiding the analysis of the Twitter data on the refugee situation. We have selected the following five hypotheses:

- Hypothesis I: The size and closeness of the refugee situation influences the intensity of perceiving and reflecting the topic;
- Hypothesis II: Media coverage acts as a mediator between the actual refugee situation and the reaction to it in the population;
- Hypothesis III: The critical attitude towards refugees increases with the number of refugees in the country;
- Hypothesis IV: The polarization of discussion on refugee situation increases with the number of refugees in the country;
- Hypothesis V: There are considerable differences in the perception between different countries over time;

4. DATASET

Twitter Dataset on Refugees. The basis of our analysis is a dataset of tweets related to the topic refugees. Building upon the ideas presented in [18], we used a multi-step approach for collecting our dataset. We first collect a focused core dataset via a small set of keywords related to the refugee situation. Subsequently, we use this dataset for harvesting a set of relevant hashtags, which we use to collect additional tweets. In the third step we combine the two datasets. Our process was designed in this way to keep the crawl focused, avoiding the addition of non-relevant content.

The focus of our collection process is on English and German content. With English, we expect to get a good overview on the over-all refugee-related content as 94% of the crawled tweets are in English. The explicit addition of German content is motivated by the fact that Germany is a key player as target country in the refugee situation in Europe. We, therefore, expect that this will give us a more complete picture. Furthermore, we use UK and Germany as core countries in our analysis.

Table 1: Twitter collection counts.

method	original	retweets	favorites	users
keywords	1,350,085	4,743,159	3,815,567	421,898
hashtags	444,280	1,814,994	1,409,028	139,657
combined	1,723,045	6,249,006	5,030,745	494,528

For collecting our dataset, we leveraged the Twitter advanced search service¹ in combination with the Twitter REST APIs. Our dataset generation begins with searching keywords relevant for the topic: *refugee(s)* for English and the equivalent words *fluechtling(e)* and *flüchtling(e)* for German. Using the selected keywords, we performed queries on the Twitter advanced search service to collect all public tweets containing any of these keywords from May 1, 2015 to December 31, 2015. The resulting numbers of tweets and unique contributing users are summarized in Table 1.

From our keyword search result, some tweets, which are relevant for the topic, might be missing just because they do not contain the selected keywords. To improve recall, we performed another round of crawl using additional hashtags. To keep our crawling process focused we decided to select only hashtags that contain the word *refugee* or the equivalent German word *fluecht* or *flücht* for the second phase of the collection process. We considered all hashtags with this pattern and comprise 99% of the selected tweets. We used the advanced search interface to harvest all the tweets containing any of the selected hashtags for the same time period as above. This helped us mitigate the gap that is created by constraining tweets to contain the words *refugee(s)* or their German translation. In addition, we didn’t have to supply the hashtags in advance.

Finally, in the third step, we combined all unique tweets and users from both the keyword search and hashtag search approaches. We used the Twitter REST API to gather the complete json of each of these tweets, and the extended information of the users. This way we obtain our final dataset (see Table 1).

Refugees Count. A *refugee*, according to the Geneva Convention on Refugees is a person who is outside their country of citizenship because they have well-founded grounds for fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and is unable to obtain sanctuary from their home country or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country. Such a person may be called an *asylum seeker* until considered with the status of *refugee*². We use the openly accessible data about asylum applications³ published by the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR as an approximation to the number of refugees. This dataset contains information about the number of asylum seekers per month, the country where the asylum application was made, and the country of origin of the asylum seekers. Such numbers can only be considered as an approximation for the real number of refugees in Europe, since they are typically incomplete and noisy. As [6] describes, the collection of accurate and consistent refugee statistics is an extremely difficult task. A wide range of practical obstacles hinder effective registration and counting. In addition, they might also be influenced by the interests of host countries, countries of origin, humanitarian agencies and other actors. For example, the two million Syrian refugees in Turkey are not counted as asylum seekers, but registered refugees. While the UNHCR publishes some data about registered refugees, it is not as comprehensive as the data on asylum seekers. We therefore decided to use the number of asylum seekers as a reference for assessing the size of the refugee situation in the individual countries in the course of 2015.

¹<https://twitter.com/search-advanced>

²<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee>

³http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/asylum_seekers_monthly

News Media Coverage. We use the dataset provided by the GDELT project⁴ to harvest information on news coverage on the refugee topic. The GDELT Project provides a very large, structured and annotated open spatio-temporal dataset covering online News. It contains more than 302 million records in more than 300 categories dating back to 1979 and is updated every 15 min. Since it uses several tens of thousands of news sources from all over the globe, it can be considered as a good source for assessing the news coverage on a topic at a given point in time. The GDELT project provides two types of raw datasets: (i) the GDELT Event Database that contains records of events described in the world’s news media and (ii) the GDELT Knowledge Graph, which consists of two parallel data streams, one encoding the entire knowledge graph with all of its fields and the other that records “counts” of a set of pre-defined categories. We use the later for our case. We looked at the GDELT category “REFUGEE” and take the subset of the daily snapshots, which covers the period May to December 2015. From this we have computed monthly numbers on News coverage on the topic refugees.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Location

Associating geo-location to tweets and users is an important task in order to understand the spatio-temporal development of a topic, in our case the reflection of the refugee situation in Twitter in different countries. There are two possible sources for location information, both imposing some challenges. First, tweets might be associated with geo-location reference. However, this information is scarce. Similar to results from other collections [10], only 1% of the tweets in our collection have geo-location associated with them. Second, Twitter users can put location information into their profile. However, this location field is typically noisy. To overcome these challenges, several approaches have been proposed to identify user location information in Twitter [4, 11, 7, 10]. The use of information from user profiles has been proven to provide the best results in terms of accuracy as presented in [16].

In our work we leverage the location information given by the user on their profile for geo-locating tweets, since we are mostly interested in where the user comes from and not so much in where the tweet was created. We download the extended information of all 494,067 users in our collection using the GET users/show REST API⁵. Users can put a short description in their profile with some basic information including location information. In our collection 494,067 (76.68%) users have a non-blank location field. However, we can not use this field directly for geo-location, because it is free text. This also means that not all content in this field points to a valid location, e.g., location = ‘wonderland’. Other problems include people putting multiple valid locations, e.g., location = ‘Berlin, san francisco’. We use Yahoo! place maker to disambiguate the location information. This way we found 301,542(61%) of the users with a unique country location. We use the ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 codes from Wikipedia⁶ to represent the countries in a standard unified way. These codes are also used in place of the names of the countries throughout the paper.

5.2 Polarized Tweets

Applying traditional sentiment analysis methods on a collection of Tweets is difficult due to the shortness and other characteristics

⁴<http://www.gdeltproject.org/>

⁵<https://dev.twitter.com/rest/reference/get/users/show>

⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISO_3166-1_alpha-2

of such microblogs. Similar to [29, 28], we use hashtags for identifying tweets that are opinionated with respect to the refugee situation. The advantage in comparison with more traditional forms of opinion mining is, that we can more precisely see the target of the opinion (not only if a tweet is opinionated).

We define the task of assigning a polarity to a hashtag to one of the three categories: critical (-1), neutral (0) or positive (1) by looking into sample tweets containing the hashtag in our collection and judging whether the majority of tweets are, respectively, mostly negative, neutral or positive towards the refugees, their coming to Europe and how this will influence the future of the tweet poster’s own country.

Since it is not feasible to annotate all hashtags, we selected top hashtags by volume, using hashtags that appeared in at least 500 tweets. These were 302 hashtags that contribute to more than 80% of the tweets in our collection. Not to miss out polarized hashtags in the long tail, we also include 200 hashtags that contain the word “refugee” and 100 hashtags that contained the equivalent German word “flucht”. These hashtags were selected by looking at the top 99% of hashtags containing their respective terms. All together, two users annotated 554 unique hashtags into the three predefined categories. The inter-annotator percentage agreement is 92%. For the hashtags the annotators disagreed, they jointly inspected the disagreements to generate a final consensus. The annotation results form the basis on which we build the grouping of tweets into negatively, positively and non-polarized tweets in Section 6. Here are some examples of the annotated hashtags:

Critical: #refugeecrisis #norefugees #nosyrianrefugees
#refugeesnotwelcome #norefugeeswelcome #nomorerefugees
#nomuslimrefugees #stoprefugees
Neutral: #refugees #syrianrefugees #refugee #syria #auspol
#cdnpoli #tcot #eunews #europe #migrants #germany #greece
Positive: #refugeeswelcome #aidrefugees #helprefugees
#refugeessafepassage #refugeelifematters #refugeeconvoy
#solidaritywithrefugees #wewelcomerefugees

5.3 Weighting

In most of our analysis, we experimented with various ways of counting polarized hashtags by countries. For example we counted original tweets only, incorporated retweets and favorites, or only counted unique contributing users. For most of the analysis, the results are similar in trend and would yield the same conclusion. For consistency, we stick with the count of original tweets, explicitly mentioning, where other numbers are used.

6. ANALYSIS

6.1 Awareness and Attention

For analysing Hypothesis I, we check how much attention is given to the refugee topic depending upon the size and closeness of the refugee situation. We use the number of European tweets per month on refugee topics as collected using the methods described in Section 4 and the method detecting the location described in Section 5.1 as a proxy for the attention given to the topic, i.e., the intensity with which the topic is perceived and reflected by commenting on it. Furthermore, we use the number of asylum applications of refugees coming to Europe in the respective months as issued by the UN as a proxy for the size of the refugee situation in the proximity of European citizens.

Figure 1 shows both the development of the number of refugee-related tweets per month for Europe together with the overall number of refugees coming to Europe on the same timeline. When looking at the refugee numbers, we see a strong increase in the

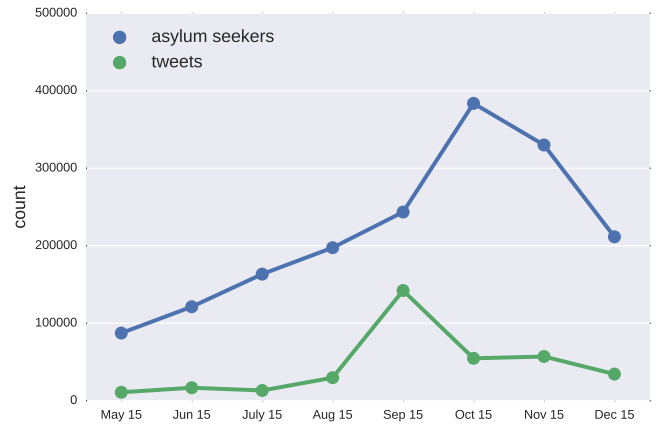


Figure 1: Twitter intensity (in terms of number of original tweets) and number of refugees (in terms of asylum applications of refugees coming to Europe) May to December 2015.

numbers starting from less than 87,000 in May, a peak of more than 380,000 in October and about 180,000 in December⁷. In addition, since more and more refugees are arriving for considering the “size” of the refugee situation, it also makes sense to look into the cumulative numbers, with strongly raising numbers amounting to more than 1.7 Mio by the end of the year.

If, in comparison, we take a look on the number of tweets, we see a peak in autumn 2015. However, the peak is already in September 2015, thus preceding the peak in the refugee numbers. In addition, the peak is followed by a fast decrease in attention although the refugee numbers (and especially the cumulative numbers) are still strongly increasing. This means that Hypothesis I cannot be fully supported by the evidence we found in the data. Although, overall the intensity of Twitter activity increases over the year, it shows a different peaking behaviour.

This suggests that there is an additional factor that influences the tweet activity on the refugee topic. News media is a candidate here, since it strongly influences the perception of the refugee situation by the population of a country. To check this secondary hypothesis, Hypothesis II, i.e., that media coverage acts as a mediator between the actual refugee situation and the reaction to it in Twitter, we compare the development of refugee-related Twitter activity and News coverage from May to December 2015 (see Figure 2).

The numbers on News coverage are based on the classification and dataset provided by the GDELT project (see also section 4). Looking at those two timelines, their development (besides the actual altitude) is strikingly similar. The development of news coverage and twitter intensity are strongly correlated, which supports our Hypothesis II of news as a mediator between the actual situation and its size, on the one hand, and the perceived importance of the issue, which triggers twitter activity, on the other hand.

6.2 Critical Attitude

For checking Hypothesis III we first analyse the development of critical to negative attitude towards refugees over time. We use the number of refugee-related tweets classified as *critical to negative* with the methods described in section 5.2.

Figure 3 shows the development of the percentage of critical tweets over time for Europe. There is no constant increase of the percentage of critical tweets over time, although the number of refugees grows every month during this period of time. Rather,

⁷The drop of refugee numbers in December is partially due to the fact that not all the refugee numbers for this month have been published yet.

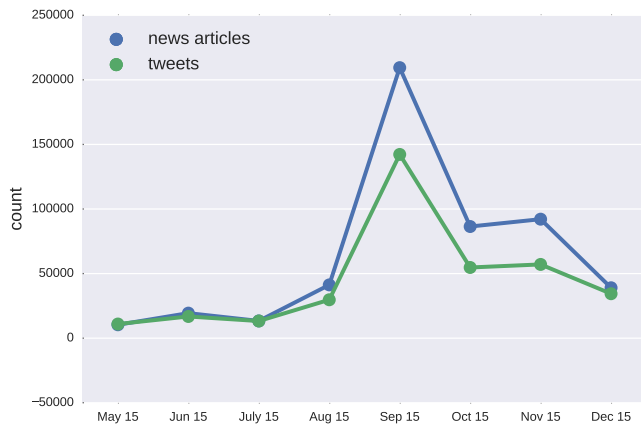


Figure 2: Twitter intensity in terms of tweets (number of original tweets) and News coverage (numbers of articles) May to December 2015.

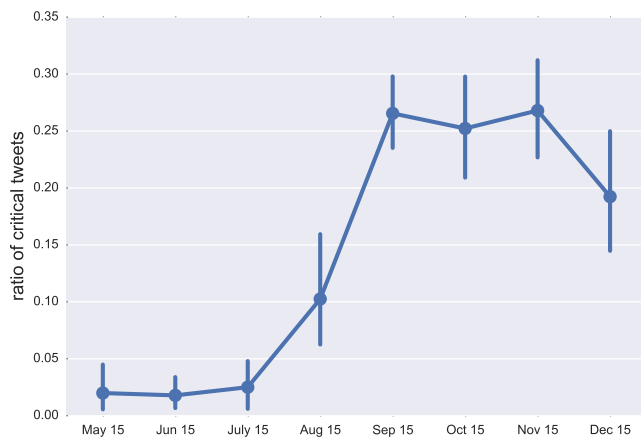


Figure 3: Percentage of Critical tweets to overall refugee-related tweets in Europe May to December 2015.

there is a strong increase in the share of critical tweets in early autumn (August/September), when the awareness for the refugee situation became very prominent, which reduces towards the end of the year. Thus, Hypothesis III cannot be fully validated by the data. However, the data shows that there is a strong increase in the rate of the critical tweets as part of the overall tweets in the considered time frame from less than 2% in May and June to 20% in December with peaks of more than 25% in September, October and November.

For a more detailed analysis, we looked into the data for selected European countries (see Figure 4). For this analysis, we selected the five countries with the highest number of asylum applications in the observation period. More precisely, we based our selection on the accumulated numbers from May to November 2015, because the December numbers had not yet been published by UNHCR for some of the European countries (such as UK, Austria and Italy). For the selected countries, we still observe the general trend. However, there is also considerable differences between the countries, especially in the actual percentage of critical tweets e.g. between Germany and Hungary.

Taking a closer look at actual refugee numbers in the individual countries, the situation is even more diversified. For Hungary, for example, the refugee numbers have dramatically dropped in October 2015 (from around 30 thousand in September to less than 500 in October) due to closing of borders. However, the share of critical

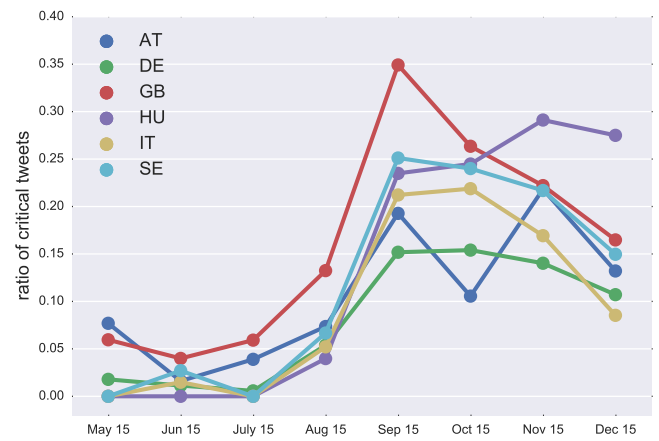


Figure 4: Percentage of Critical tweets to overall refugee-related tweets in selected Countries May to December 2015.

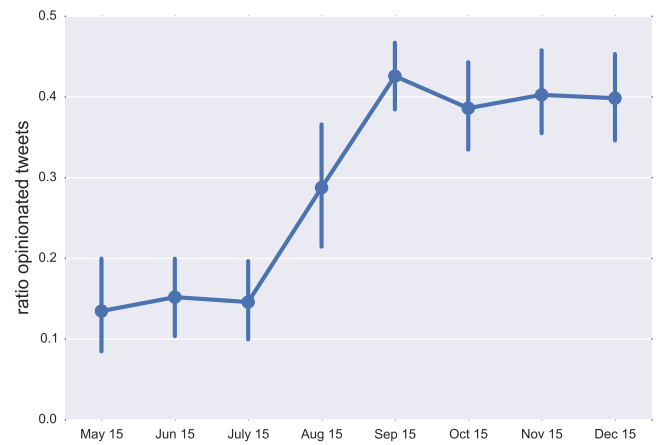


Figure 5: Percentage of Polarized tweets to overall refugee-related tweets in Europe May to December 2015.

tweets still increases until November with only a slight relaxation in December. Furthermore, the share of critical tweets is also not correlated to the actual number of newly arriving refugees in the countries. UK, for example, with rather low numbers of asylum applicants is having very high shares of critical tweets compared to other countries. In contrast, Germany with very high refugee numbers has a relatively low share of negative tweets. This results support hypothesis V that there are considerable differences between the countries.

As a variant of Hypothesis III, we check Hypothesis IV, that the discussion on the topic becomes more polarized with the increase in the size of the European refugee situation. For analysing polarized tweets we aggregated the count of positive and negative tweets (see Figure 5). We observe an increase in the percentage during the year from less than 15% to about 40% in December. We again observe a strong increase (a peak) in September as in the case of the previous hypothesis. However the percentage does not decrease afterwards. It stays on a high level until the end of the year.

If we look again on individual countries - using the same selected European countries as before - (see Figure 6), we see that for most countries there is an upward trend in the percentage of polarized tweets until the end of the year. However, there are some peaks probably due to national politics and local events. The only exception are Serbia, which shows a strong decrease in polarized tweets in December and UK, which shows a slight decrease. However, if

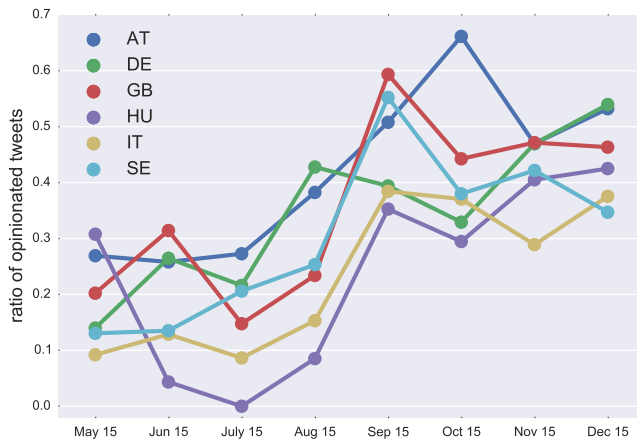


Figure 6: Percentage of Polarized tweets to overall refugee-related tweets for selected Countries May to December 2015.

we look at the refugee numbers for Serbia (in terms of new asylum applications) they also show a strong decrease in Asylum applications in the same time frame (from about 36k in November to 13k in December 2015). Similarly, for UK there is a moderate decrease in the refugee numbers from October to November (from nearly 5000 to about 3400).

Thus, to some degree the Hypothesis IV on an increase in polarized tweets with increasing number of refugees in the respective country can be confirmed by our data. With respect to hypothesis V also most countries follow a general upward trend, however, there are considerable differences between them if you compare the countries on the monthly bases (peaks). This confirms the hypothesis V for this study.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper we analysed the perception of the development of the refugee situation in Europe from May to December 2015 as it is reflected in Twitter. Starting from a refugee-related dataset, which we collected with a three step approach, we analysed a set of five hypotheses. In our analysis, we could confirm three of our hypotheses, namely the role of the News as a mediator between the actual and the perceived refugee situation, the general trend for an increase in polarized discussion with the increase in the number of refugees in a country and the diversity of countries in the perception of the refugee situation. The increase in Twitter activity and the increase of a critical to negative attitude with a growing number of refugees, as it is suggested by media, could not be fully confirmed.

The performed analysis raises a number of further questions, which could be analysed in future work. One of them is a deeper analysis of the situation in other countries besides Germany and UK, which would require to extend the dataset to more languages. Also the inclusion of the refugees' voices into the analysis would be very interesting. Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyse the trends for subgroups of the population, e.g., by gender or other demographic attributes getting deeper insights on the perception of the refugee situation in such groups.

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