
Predicting Terror Attacks
A Data Story

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January 18, 2019

1 Introduction

Analysing terror organisations and predicting terror attacks is a subject of interest for national security organisations. From data on terrorist relationships and terror attacks, this project aims to assess whether terrorist relationships can be viewed as a social network, and to try to predict terror attacks locations from some known features.

To help reaching these goals, graph theory and data analysis tools are used, as part of the course *A Network Tour of Data Science* at EPFL.

2 Exploring the Data

The data consists of two datasets: a relationships dataset describing relations between terrorists, and a terror attacks dataset documenting terror events by location and organisation.

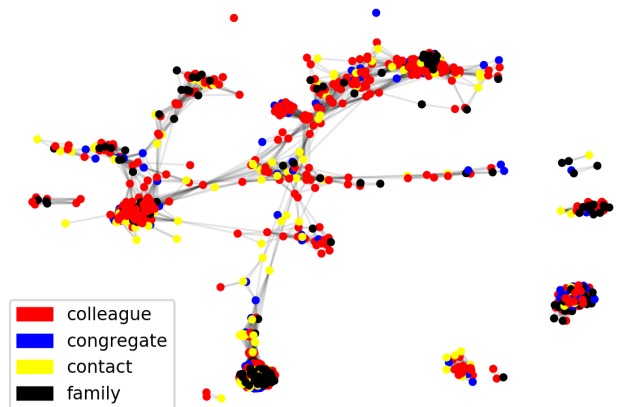


Figure 1: *Relationships dataset graph. The colouring of each node is related to its type of relation.*

The relationships dataset represents the line graph of a network of relationships between terrorists. Each node represents a relationship between two terrorists. Two nodes are connected if they share a common terrorist. The label of each node relates to the nature of the relation between the two terrorists. It is an element of {family, congregate, colleague, contact}.

The terror attacks graph is built by connecting two nodes (terror attacks) if they share a common location. An other graph can be built by also connecting two terror attacks if they are perpetrated by the same organisation. This graph is not studied here.

Multiple issues have been found in this dataset:

Broadness The dataset comprises attacks ranging from 1969 to 2005 and spanning the entire globe. Simple and relevant explanations for the graph formation or properties

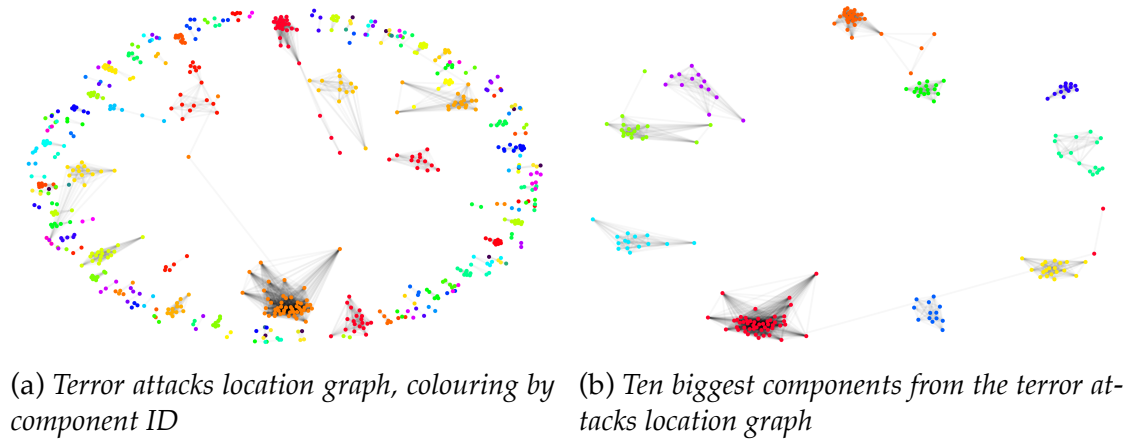


Figure 2: *Graphs from the terror attacks dataset*

are not likely to be found, since the mechanisms behind two different attacks can be entirely different.

Structure Half of the nodes are isolated, hence the topological information they carry in the graph is very limited. What is more, the construction of the graph implies a transitive relation inside connected components. Indeed, let a, b and c be terror attacks from the same connected component. Let “ $a \sim b$ ” mean that terror attacks a and b took place close to each other. Then

$$\text{If } (a \sim b \text{ and } b \sim c) \text{ then probably } a \sim c \quad (1)$$

This property translates into connected component that are almost complete – hence bearing little topological information.

Reliability As expected, errors have been found in the data. For example nodes `Djibouti_Youth_Movement_19900927` and `Armed_Islamic_Group_19950711` have been connected, whereas the first attack took place in Djibouti [3] and the second one in Paris [4]. Hence algorithms using the data must tolerate some error in order to avoid overfitting.

Incompleteness The dataset has been constructed from publicly available sources [1]. Because of the sensitivity of the data behind terrorist attacks and relationships, some of it is classified, making the dataset incomplete. Further properties of the graphs are discussed below.

3 Terrorist Relationships as a Social Network

In this section, the properties of the terrorist relationships line graph as a relational network is explored. As [1] mentions, an organisation needs interpersonal connection to function and studying the structure of the social organisation could allow to predict the evolution of terrorist organisations.

[2] found that on the basis of a study of an online social network, such a network could be well approximated by the line graph of a scale free network. Assuming that there exists a transitivity relation between nodes (see Equation 1) as one would expect in a social network, a scale free network corresponding to the relationships graph has been generated. Its line graph counterpart has then been compared to the relationships graph (see Figure 3 below).

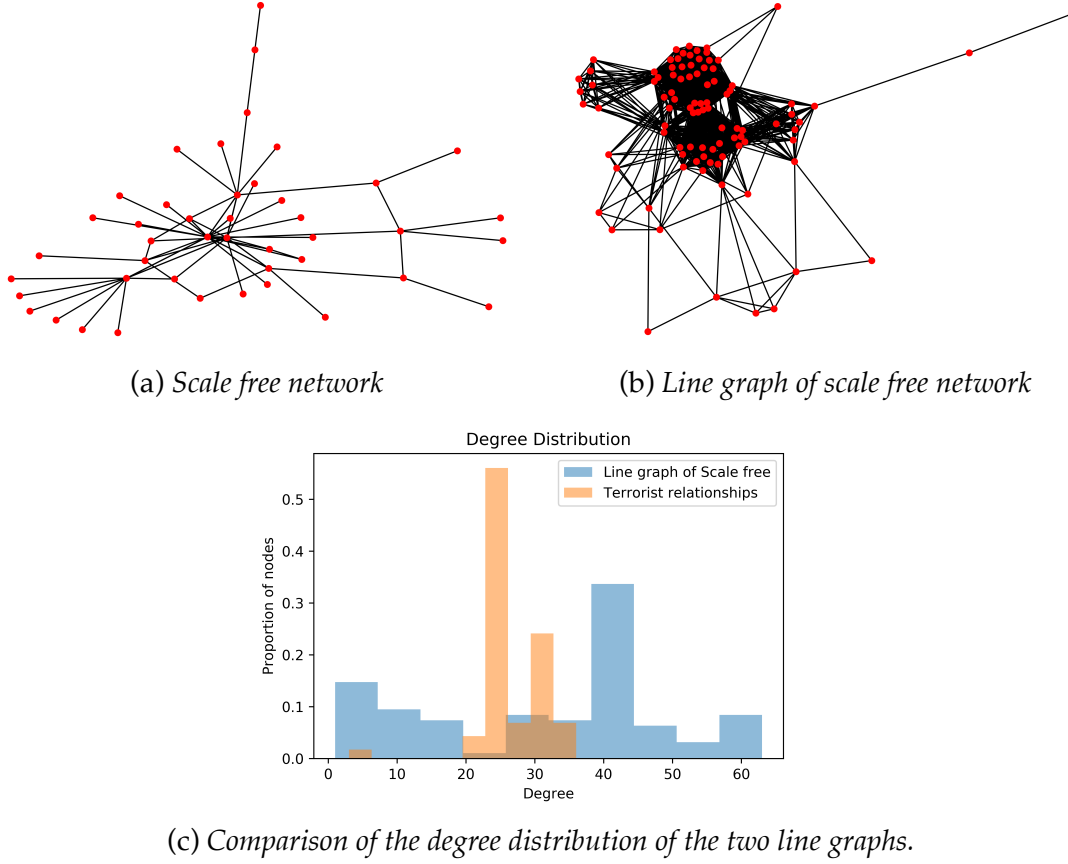


Figure 3: Comparison of a scale free network and the terrorist relationships network.

From the degree distribution comparison, we can conclude that the terrorist relationships network shows no significant similarity with a social network.

4 Predicting Terror Attack Location

The goal of this part is to predict the location of a terror attack based on its features and the history of previous attacks. The algorithm used for prediction is the following:

1. From the dataset, select the 10 biggest connected components (“component” in what follows).
2. Sort the dataset by date of terror attack.
3. At this point, a component represents a location, and the nodes are the terror attacks in chronological order.

4. Select one node per component that is strongly connected to the others, the “lead” node.
5. Find the lead node l^* that is the most strongly linked to the new node (i.e. the next terror attack).
6. The predicted location of the next terror attack is the location of the component l^* belongs to.

The determination of the lead node uses the features vector supplied with each node, and a weighting function w . Let w be the application that returns a weight for each pair of nodes (n_1, n_2) in the graph \mathcal{G} , defined as

$$w : \mathcal{G}^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^+ \quad (2)$$

$$(n_1, n_2) \mapsto f(|n_1 - n_2|) \quad (3)$$

where:

$$|n_1 - n_2| = \|\text{features}(n_1) - \text{features}(n_2)\|_2 \quad (4)$$

$\text{features}(n)$ is a binary features vector for each node n in \mathcal{G} and $f : \mathbb{R}^+ \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^+$ is the node distance weighting. Examples for f are given in Table 1 on page 5.

For each connected component, the lead node is determined as described below.

Algorithm 1: Finding the lead node of a connected component with weighted edges

Data: Connected component C

Result: Lead node n_l

Initialise $s(n)$ to zero. s is a dictionary mapping a score $s(n)$ for each node n

for each edge e from C do

Let $e = (n_1, n_2)$ and w be the weight of e
 $s(n_1) \leftarrow s(n_1) + w$
 $s(n_2) \leftarrow s(n_2) + w$

end

return $n_l = \arg \max_{n \in C} s(n)$

Finally, the prediction algorithm is presented below.

Algorithm 2: Finding the predicted location of the next terror attack

Data: Set of connected components $\{C_i^t\}$, $i = 1, \dots, 10$, and the features vector of the next terror attack n_{t+1} , i.e. $\text{features}(n_{t+1})$, at each timestep t

Result: Location prediction p_t at each timestep t

for each timestep t do

Compute the lead component $l(C_i^t)$ for each component C_i^t
 $p_t = \arg \max_{i=1, \dots, 10} w(n_{t+1}, l(C_i^t))$

end

4.1 Justification

The design of prediction algorithm is motivated by the following aspects:

- The labels are taken into account by weighting the edges. This allows to completely ignore label signals on the graph and simplify the analysis.

- The determination of one lead node per component allows to smoothen local variations inside a component, thus making the prediction algorithm more robust.
- The choice of one lead component per component is justified by the fact that connected components are almost complete.

4.2 Results

Running the algorithm aforementioned on the terror attacks dataset yields a prediction accuracy around $\frac{1}{2}$ (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: *Prediction accuracy for different node distance weightings f*

Weighting		Best skewness ζ	Accuracy
Gaussian:	$f(d) = e^{-d^2/\zeta} - e^{-1/\zeta}$	0.01	50.5 %
Log-Exponential:	$f(d) = e^{-d} \log\left(\frac{1+\zeta}{d+\zeta}\right)$	0.1	50 %
Linear:	$f(d) = 1 - d$	N.A.	47 %
Square:	$f(d) = \begin{cases} 1 & d < \zeta \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$	0.1	43 %

5 Conclusion

Analysing the terrorist relationships graphs showed that the network does not correspond to a scale-free network, which is typical for social networks.

The prediction algorithm yields reasonable results, given the flaws contained in the data and the compromises that had to be made (removal of isolated nodes, selection of a lead node).

References

- [1] B. Zhao, P. Sen, and L. Getoor, “Entity and Relationship Labeling in Affiliation Networks,” *Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on Machine Learning*, 2006.
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