SharpieGate: The Spread of Twitter Misinformation Surrounding the 2020 American Presidential Election

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1. Background

SharpieGate is rooted in the claim that vote-scanning machines in Maricopa County, AZ. were unable to read ballots marked by sharpie. Though this was immediately debunked by election officials, the scandal was considered an attempt to steal the election, which resulted in protests, lawsuits, and the term "sharpie gate" trending on social media platforms. [1]

Opinion Leaders are those who help disseminate information to the rest of the public. In the case of a Twitter network, these are the accounts of statuses that are retweeted many times. Following the curated flow of information theory, these accounts are likely to be those of the media or elites with expertise on the topic. [2]

2. Research Questions

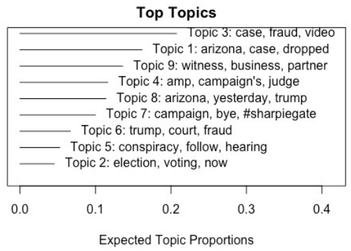
RQ1: What are the topics surrounding "sharpie gate" discussion on Twitter?

RQ2: How do opinion leaders within the network impact the conversation?

3. Methods

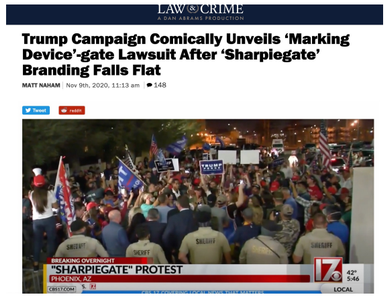
Dataset: I used the rtweet library to collect 10,174 tweets from November 10-20, 2020. In a separate analysis, I used network methods to identify the top opinion leaders within this dataset and found n = 53 users to be the most impactful. These accounts were labeled as "influencers" for the purpose of this analysis.

4. Results

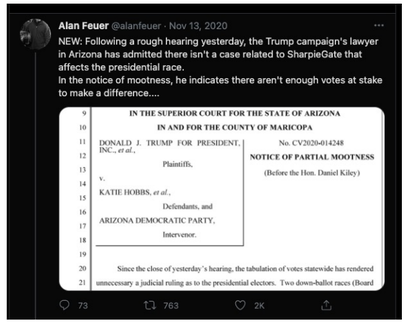


Topic Labels and Examples

The topic models themselves don't make a lot of sense– multiple use the word case, campaign, and Arizona. Looking at the top documents for each topic shows that instead of showing different conversations, they mostly link to the same tweet. For example, the most prevalent topic, topic 3, [twitter_voter_bye_follow_live-tweet] is a retweet stating "Follow the live-tweet at @LawCrimeNews" with a link to this article:

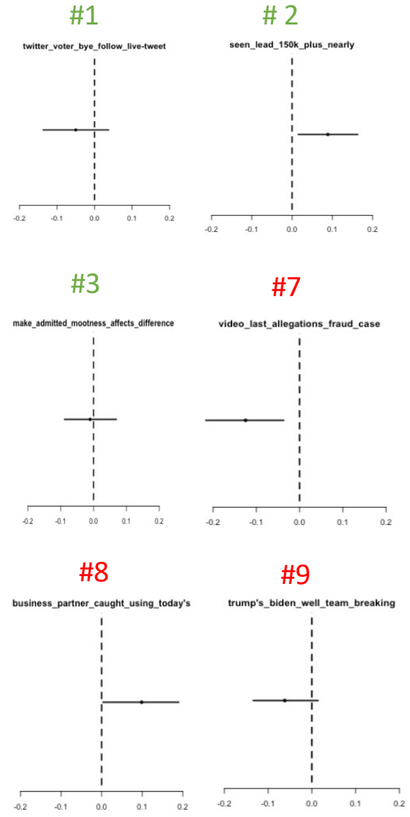


Topic 9, [make_admitted_mootness _affects_difference], links to this tweet:



Model Effects

I expected the top topics to be strongly associated with influencers, but this is not the case. The following are the top and bottom three topics:



5. Conclusion

My topic models themselves were not very enlightening (RQ1)– they ended up showing me popular tweets rather than sensible topics. However, the model effects show a surprising effect of opinion leaders on the model: they aren't guaranteed to be strongly connected to the most prevalent topics (RQ2). This unexpected effect is most prominent in the top topic, [twitter_voter_bye_follow_ live-tweet], where influencers ARE NOT strongly connected to the topic, and the second to last topic, [business_partner_caught_using_ today's], in which influencers ARE strongly connected to the topic.

6. References

[1] Tina Nguyen and Mark Scott. 2020. "How 'SharpieGate Went from Online Chatter to Trumpworld Strategy in Arizona." Politico, November 5, 2020.

[2] Thorson, Kjerstin, and Chris Wells. 2016. "Curated Flows: A Framework for Mapping Media Exposure in the Digital Age." *Communication Theory* 26(3):309-328.

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