# #SharpieGate: The Spread of Fake News Surrounding the 2020 American Presidential Election

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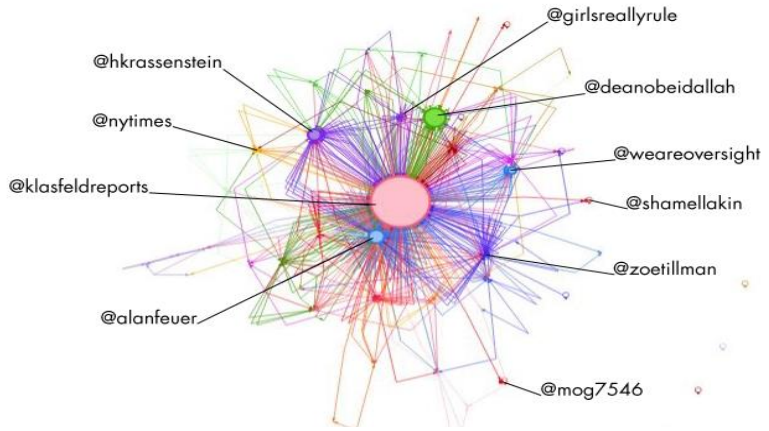
## 1. Background

- Immediately debunked claim that vote-scanning machines in Maricopa County, AZ unable to read ballots marked with sharpie led to #SharpieGate protests and government inquiry [1]
- Political misinformation on Twitter typically shared more quickly and by more people than true information [2]
- Hashtags most common feature for users to connect with each other in the larger network [3]

## 2. Questions

- Who are the most influential users that shared election fraud misinformation via #SharpieGate on Twitter?
- Are there any shared characteristics among these users (I.e., number of followers, account verification, etc.)?




| Username | Category | Verified | Joined | # Following | # Followers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| @klasfeldreports | Media Elite | Yes | July 2009 | 2,832 | 205.9k |
| @deanobeidallah | Media Elite | Yes | December 2008 | 8,340 | 112.3k |
| @alanfeuer | Media Elite | No | April 2009 | 1,393 | 29.4k |
| @hkrassenstein | Non-Elite | No | February 2018 | 5,329 | 193.3k |
| @weareoversight | Non-Elite | Yes | February 2017 | 425 | 106k |
| @nytimes | Media Elite | Yes | March 2007 | 902 | 48.3M |
| @zoetillman | Media Elite | Yes | June 2009 | 1,605 | 138.9k |
| @shamellakin | Non-Elite | No | March 2014 | 3,837 | 5,009 |
| @girlsreallyrule | Non-Elite | No | May 2012 | 54.3k | 327.1k |
| @mog7546 | Non-Elite | No | March 2011 | 37.8k | 47.8k |

*Table 1: User characteristics collected from the top 10 influencers in the #SharpieGate dataset.*

## 3. Methods

- Rtweet library: 10,174 tweets from 7,129 unique users
- Network analysis using PageRank to identify top ten influential users [4]
- Twitter users categorized as (1) media elite (2) political elite (3) non-elite [5]

## 4. Results

- Average account is ~ 9 yrs. in age, follows ~ 8k other accounts, and is followed by ~ 139k accounts (excluding @nytimes, a notable outlier)
- Opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld 2-Step Theory) are media elite and non-elites: potentially counter to widely held belief that the media and political elites shape public reactions to events

## 5. Next Steps

- Expand *n* value of accounts examined
- Different measures of influence (i.e. betweenness centrality)

[1] Tina Nguyen, and Mark Scott. 2020. "How 'SharpieGate' Went from Online Chatter to Trumpworld Strategy in Arizona." Politico, November 5, 2020. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/05/sharpie-ballots-trump-strategy-arizona-43437
[2] Lazer, David M. J., Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, et al. 2018. "The Science of Fake News." Science 359 (6380): 1094–96. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998.
[3] Enli, G., & Simonsen, C. A. (2018). 'Social media logic' meets professional norms: Twitter hashtags usage by journalists and politicians. Information Communication and Society, 21(8), 1081–1096. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301515
[4] Xu, Weiai W. (2019). COMM497DB: Insights from networks. Amherst, MA: https://rpubs.com/cosmopolitanvan/networks_497db
[5] Eady, Gregory, Jonathan Nagler, Andy Guess, Jan Zilinsky, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2019. "How Many People Live in Political Bubbles on Social Media? Evidence From Linked Survey and Twitter Data." SAGE Open 9 (1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019832705.

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