

Project 7: Studying ISIS Twitter influence with social network analysis from the pro-ISIS fanboy tweet data

1st Niklas Saari

dept. Computer Science and Engineering

University of Oulu

Oulu, Finland

niklas.saari@student oulu.fi

Abstract—This document describes project work for the course Social Network Analysis in Spring 2021. Radical and extreme groups have taken social networks as part of their toolchain to spread propaganda messages, get attention, look support for their actions and recruit more members. One of the most brutal of these groups, ISIS, which is also designated as terrorist organization, has been forerunner on using these social platforms successfully. To possibly prevent future terror events, it would be important to study these social networks on how they are used by these radical groups. ISIS Twitter dataset of around 17 000 tweets was selected as dataset to identify important characters from the network, to construct communities and to see how the most influencers behave, who they are, and how they connect to other people. Further communities were constructed to see how networks behave internally.

Index Terms—Twitter, Social Network Analysis, Terrorism, Networks, ISIS

I. GROUP INFORMATION

This project has been done alone. The original project from the given project list was 7 with the title of "Analysis of ISIS Twitter dataset".

II. INTRODUCTION

Social networks have become part of the most people's everyday life. These networks, such as Facebook, Twitter or Reddit are base for many kinds of groups and people for communicating with each other. They are being used widely for expressing opinions or advertising services and for many other kinds of things. This has naturally risen special interest in radical and terrorism organisations because of the provided possibility for influencing different kind of people with a large scale. While the brutality of terrorism has become even more severe over recent time based on the data gathered by Global Terrorism Database and seen in Appendixes in the figure 3, this raises specific interest in terms of identifying and preventing possible future incidents.

Terrorism is identified to be especially brutal from Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), which is also known ISIS or Daesh. [1] Their usage of the social media is also known to be "probably more sophisticated than [that of] most US companies", [2] and has been one of their main campaigning

tactics in Syria and Iraq. Twitter has been their primal social network [3] so far. It is known that ISIS has been previously organising for example specific hashtag campaigns to get their topics trending and gain more visibility [3].

Because the social networks have begun to be in key role to motivate support for their actions, raise funds and even for recruiting foreign fighters with huge success [4] allowing organisation to reach worldwide recognition and impact, it is important to study how these networks are formed and what we could learn from them and how we could act based on this information.

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a process for studying social life by social structures which is constructed by relations and patterns formed by these relations. This is usually done with networks and applying the graph theory. [5], [6]

In this article we will focus particularly on the Twitter platform and for the Social Network Analysis of how ISIS has been using this specific platform to spread their propaganda and organizing recruitment. Twitter data of over 17 000 tweets of pro-ISIS fanboys has been used as dataset for this study.

We will try to identify major characters from the provided data, for example which characters have the most influence and what kind of networks they are constructing. This is evaluated based on different values specific for Twitter platform, such as usage of mentions, retweets or hashtags; how are different Twitter users using them.

We further try to estimate the sentiment of the tweets in terms of negative, neutral and positive and estimate the most frequent hashtags and their possible context and characteristics. Sentiments are finally plotted with ternary plots by different characteristics. Different kind of other graphs will be constructed to develop our understanding of underlying network. Social network is constructed by using hashtags, and their relations to other tweets based on their appearances.

This document is structured as following: in the section III the main problem has been described. In the section IV the exact details of the used dataset has been described. In the section V general methodology has been described and further continued in the section VI in more precise matter. The results are presented in the section VII and paper has been finally

concluded in the section VIII.

III. PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

The main problem is to study and tell how we can find specific communities from underlying dataset and identify interesting numerical values from the constructed network. Can we detect specific patterns or behaviours related to specific Twitter users, is there connection between them and how powerful their influence actually is? We further try to find a way to tell about what kind of messages they are distributing in overall. Dataset was not collected by itself, instead it was given in the project assignment.

IV. DATASET DESCRIPTION

Twitter dataset of tweets collected from pro-ISIS fanboys of all over the world has been used as a base for this study. This dataset was provided with the project assignment. Based on the same project assignment, the origin of the dataset is unknown, as it is stated to be published in dark web website. However, after doing some research, it seems that this dataset is probably collected by Fifth Tribe digital agency, and published originally on the *Kaggle*. [7] Data is under Creative Commons 0 (CC0) license and can be used without restrictions to the fullest extent allowed by law. Data was created originally with the intention of "to develop effective counter-messaging measures against violent extremists at home and abroad." [7]

Tweets are located during the period of 1st of June 2015 and 13rd of May 2016, which contains the November 2015 Paris attack as interesting point of event regarding the context of this study. Tweets are had been written with multiple languages, but in general they are in English. Their content is varying a lot; they could be text with varying context, external links to other places, images and videos or retweets.

Dataset contains total of 17410 different tweets by 112 different users, and was originally given in the newer Excel format (.xlsx). Following data columns can be found from the raw data:

- name
- username
- location
- number of followers
- number of statuses
- time (month/day/year 24-hour clock)
- tweet (multilingual)

Location is user supplied data and can be therefore anything.

A. Pre-processing of the data

As the initial dataset was given in Microsoft Excel Open XML (.xlsx) format, it required some conversion to be more suitable for processing with programmatically with selected programming language (Python in this case) and in general for easier handling and compatibility. Dataset was converted to basic .csv file format by using Python **pandas** [8] library with **openpyxl** [9] engine. Successful conversion was verified later by checking that there were no null data shells for columns which are considered as "important" and the amount of rows

matches with original and converted data. "Important" means in this context that every tweet should have at least username and tweet content to be meaningful.

The data has been on some cases further pre-processed as following to extract some specific information and features. This information is stored programmatically on the run-time-memory by creating specific Python class object to represent single line from the dataset data, which also contains extracted additional data. Extracting methods have been discussed in more detail on the section VI.

1) *Mentions*: Mentions of different users have been extracted from the every tweet based on the '@' symbol in tweet data. Twitter usernames are case-insensitive and therefore as an additional step, they are stored in lowercase to improve accuracy of the data and also to reflect real world behaviour when linking to other tweets. This is implemented by using specific regex patterns.

2) *Retweets*: Retweets are identified from the data based on 'RT' as first word in the tweet.

3) *Hashtags*: Hashtags have been extracted from the every tweet based on the '#' symbol in tweet data. Twitter hashtags are case-insensitive and therefore as an additional step, they are stored in lowercase to improve accuracy of the data and also to reflect real world behaviour when linking to other tweets. This is implemented by using specific regex patterns.

4) *Sentiment analysis*: Sentiment analysis is applied for every tweet in the dataset to describe the potential category in terms of *negative*, *neutral* and *positive*. Python package named as VADER Sentiment, which was originally presented in the article "VADER: A Parsimonious Rule-Based Model for Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Text" [10] has been used as tool for scoring the data for these categories. This is discussed in more details on the section VI.

B. Data verification after pre-processing methods

As there were many methods implemented for extracting information from the dataset, some testcases were applied and random data was selected to be sure, that extraction is working as expected. This was also applied for data conversion. Testing was implemented by using Python package **pytest** [11], and based on the limited test cases data is extracted as intended.

V. GENERAL METHODOLOGY

In general, the methodology on study is based on processing the Twitter dataset with Python programming language and selected existing libraries. Dataset was pre-processed at first to convert it to suitable format and further some methods are applied to extract features from the tweets, such as hashtags or mentions, as mentioned in the section IV.

NetworkX [12] is the main package used in the work. It is mainly used to "study structure" or other properties of potentially complex networks. In this scenario it is used to construct a network model based on appearing hashtags in Twitter tweets. Some properties have been measured from the constructed network to make conclusions based on that.

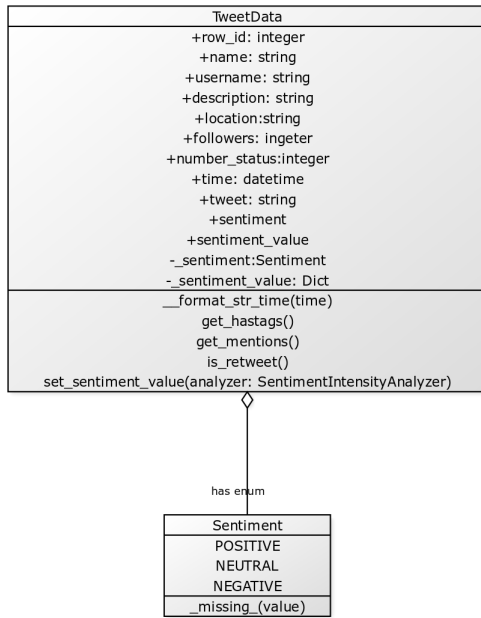


Fig. 1. Designed class for storing and handling the Tweet data

Matplotlib [13] is the main library used for drawing the visible graphs in this document.

Vader Sentiment [10] tool has been used to identify sentiment of the every tweet on some occurrences.

VI. DETAILED METHODOLOGY

This section is going through exact details of the process how data was handled and how results were finally obtained. Actual results are described later on the section VII.

A. Initial steps

To get started with the analysis our Twitter data, we are required to shape data suitable for our use case. This was briefly described in the section IV on "preprocessing" subsection. Data was converted into .csv format and loaded into program memory.

Initially, specific Python class was designed to allow ease access for tweet data and feature extraction. UML diagram can be seen in the figure 1. This class has build-in methods for extracting specific features from the tweet data and it converts values to suitable data types e.g. time into build-in Python time object. Methods include extracting hashtags, mentions and identification is the tweet retweet, and evaluation of possible sentiment value of it.

Sentiment analysis is used here to make mass analysis for all tweets to categorize every tweet for one of the NEGATIVE, NEUTRAL and POSITIVE semantic orientations. This is useful stat to generalize what kind message(s) individuals are tweeting.

Individual Twitter users will be sorted and handled separately by using different metrics: by use of the retweets, mentions and use of hashtags. Also, sentiments among all the tweets will be evaluated. VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary

for sEntiment Reasoning) tool [10] has been used for making the sentiment calculation. It was released in 2014 and has acquired fame from its efficiency and accuracy. By default, tool is producing four different values for provided input as results. Three of the values (pos, neu and neg) are pointing the portion of the three orientations, from range to 0 into 1, totalling to sum of 1. One is describing overall result (compound), which "is computed by summing the valence scores of each word in the lexicon, adjusted according to the rules, and then normalized to be between -1 (most extreme negative) and +1 (most extreme positive)."

Therefore, sentiment orientation is finally defined by compound value as following:

score \geq 0.05	Positive sentiment
score $>$ -0.05	Neutral sentiment
score \leq -0.05	Negative sentiment

This classification is implemented on the Sentiment enum in the figure 1. It is giving one of the three sentiment description for every tweet based on calculated compound value, automatically.

Ternary plots are used to describe the results, as they often can give clear visual evidence which variable from the three is thecontrolling one. During the assessment of class creation, it was observed that instancing SentimentIntensityAnalyzer from Vader tool is resource consuming, hence analyzer is instanced only once outside TweetData class and passed into object afterwards to significantly increase performance.

After we have loaded the .csv file, it is parsed in a such a way that from each row in the data, new instance of TweetData object has been created and list form them is formed. Further, this list is processed in such a way, that every Twitter user is separated to be part of the new <username>:USER_META dictionary object, which has following attributes; amount_tweets, amount_retweets, amount_mentions, amount_hashtags and all the tweets this user has tweeted. This gives us access by username for metadata and user-specific tweets.

Some specific functions have been additionally created that previously created dictionary can be easily sorted, based on it's key-value attributes and finally plotted with suitable graphs.

B. Visualising interesting information

At this point we already have access for many interesting information. We can plot and sort users based on their amount of tweets, amount of retweets, amount of mentions and by the amount of hashtag usages. Matplotlib Python package has been used for this.

We are also interested to know, whether power law is applying here, in the context of tweets by single user. Power law is known to be functional relationship between two quantities, where probability distributions are often "heavy-tailed". Pareto principle (80-20) is commonly used as rule to see if data fits under power law [14].

Probability distribution of power law can be seen as

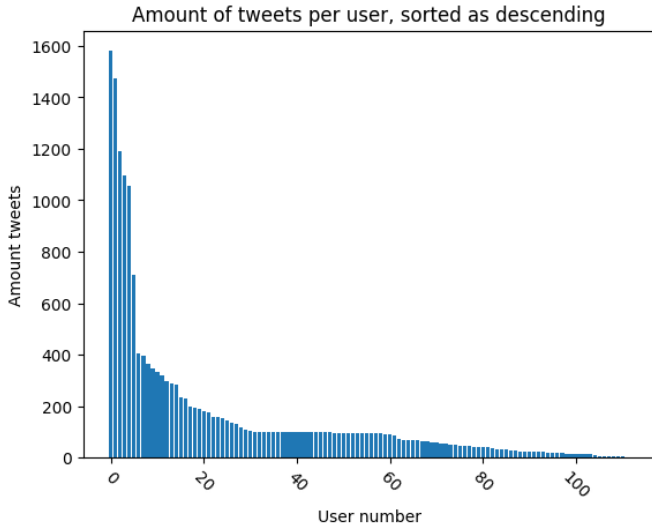


Fig. 2. Amount of tweets per user

$$p(x) \propto x^{-\alpha} \quad (1)$$

where α is a constant known usually as scaling parameter and x as quantity. Quantity x obeys the power law if it is drawn from this distribution. [15]

Following
Power law

C. Degree Centrality

Degree centrality is the sum of in-degree and out-degree. It is representing the amount of edges entering and leaving the nodes respectively. The most important nodes have the most direct connections with others under degree centrality. The value can be computed as,

$$C_D(v_i) = \sum_j A_{ij} \quad (1)$$

D. Betweenness Centrality

Betweenness centrality is another way to measure importance of nodes. It is describing the amount of the shortest path passing the node. Important nodes have high betweenness centrality, information is flowing through them, and they are connecting multiple nodes into the network.

$$C_B(v_i) = \sum_{v_s \neq v_i \neq v_t \in V, s < t} \frac{\sigma_{st}(v_i)}{\sigma_{st}} \quad (2)$$

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initial dataset contained more than 17 000 tweets and 114 different users. Distribution of the tweets per single user can be seen on the figure 2.

This data distribution seems to be quite "heavy-tailed" which is typical in power law theory, but for further clarification, it was fitted into probability distribution function.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

- A. Authors and Affiliations
- B. Identify the Headings
- C. Figures and Tables

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

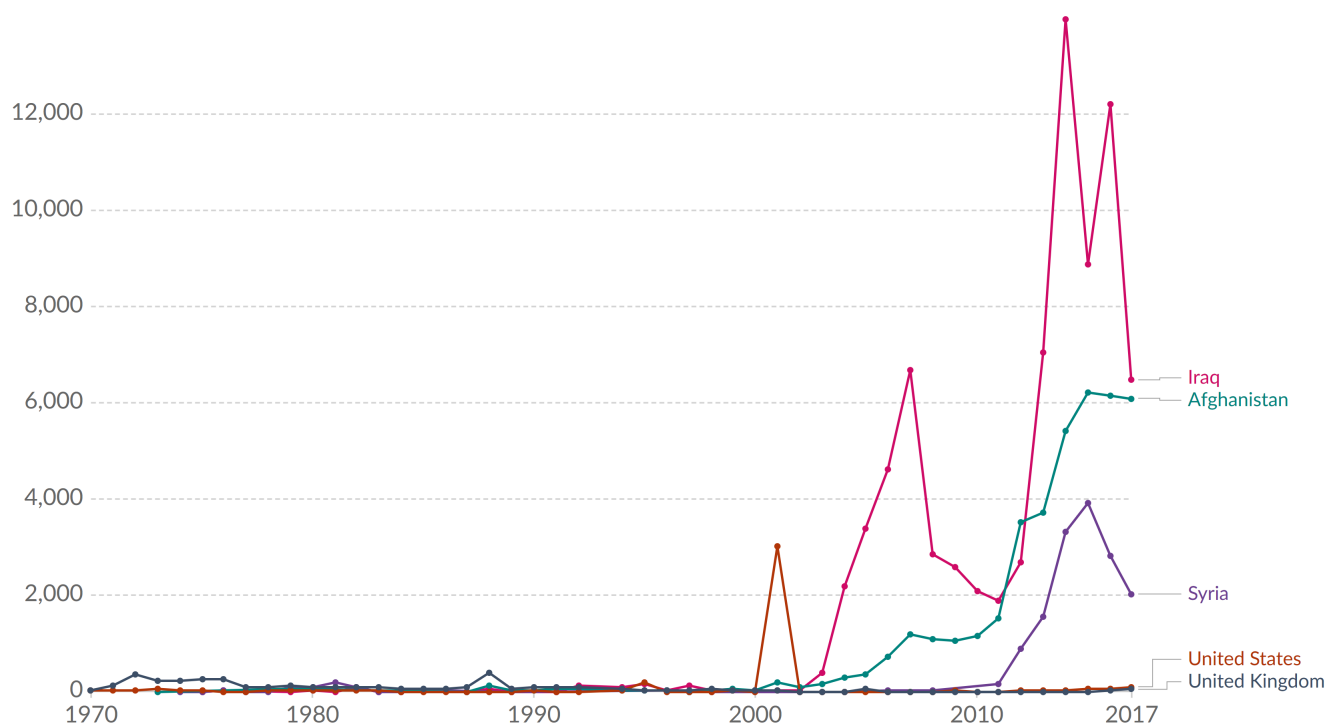
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APPENDIX

Deaths from terrorism, 1970 to 2017

Confirmed deaths, including all victims and attackers who died as a result of the incident.



Source: Global Terrorism Database (2018)

OurWorldInData.org/terrorism/ • CC BY

Note: The Global Terrorism Database is the most comprehensive dataset on terrorist attacks available and recent data is complete. However, we expect, based on our analysis, that longer-term data is incomplete (with the exception of the US and Europe). We therefore do not recommend this dataset for the inference of long-term trends in the prevalence of terrorism globally.

Fig. 3. Deaths from terrorism, 1970–2017.