

It's Complicated: A Visual Exploration of the Political Landscape of Reddit

Demetrios Fassois, Tianyi Huang, Kade Keith
{dimifass, thuang97, kade}@stanford.edu
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ABSTRACT

We study data of posts and comments on Reddit to explore the nature of political discussions on the platform. We use a flexible graph folding algorithm to translate user behavior into relationships among subreddits, and provide a troll detection algorithm to remove potentially distracting contents. We present easy-to-understand visualizations to showcase our results, which suggest the existence of selective exposure.

DATASET

- 5 months of Reddit comments and posts
 - 3 from 2016
 - 2 from 2017
- Limited to activities in 211 politically relevant subreddits in the Reddit Politosphere
- 7,114,602 comments
- 559,977 posts
- Capped the # of comments/posts per subreddit to normalize for popularity when generating graphs

METHODS

Graph Folding

- Bipartate graph of users and subreddits, folded to generate subreddit graph where subreddits connected to common users are connected
- Conditions for edges to exist in bipartite graph configurable based on:
 - Choice of posts and/or comments
 - # of users in common
 - Filtering of troll-like contents

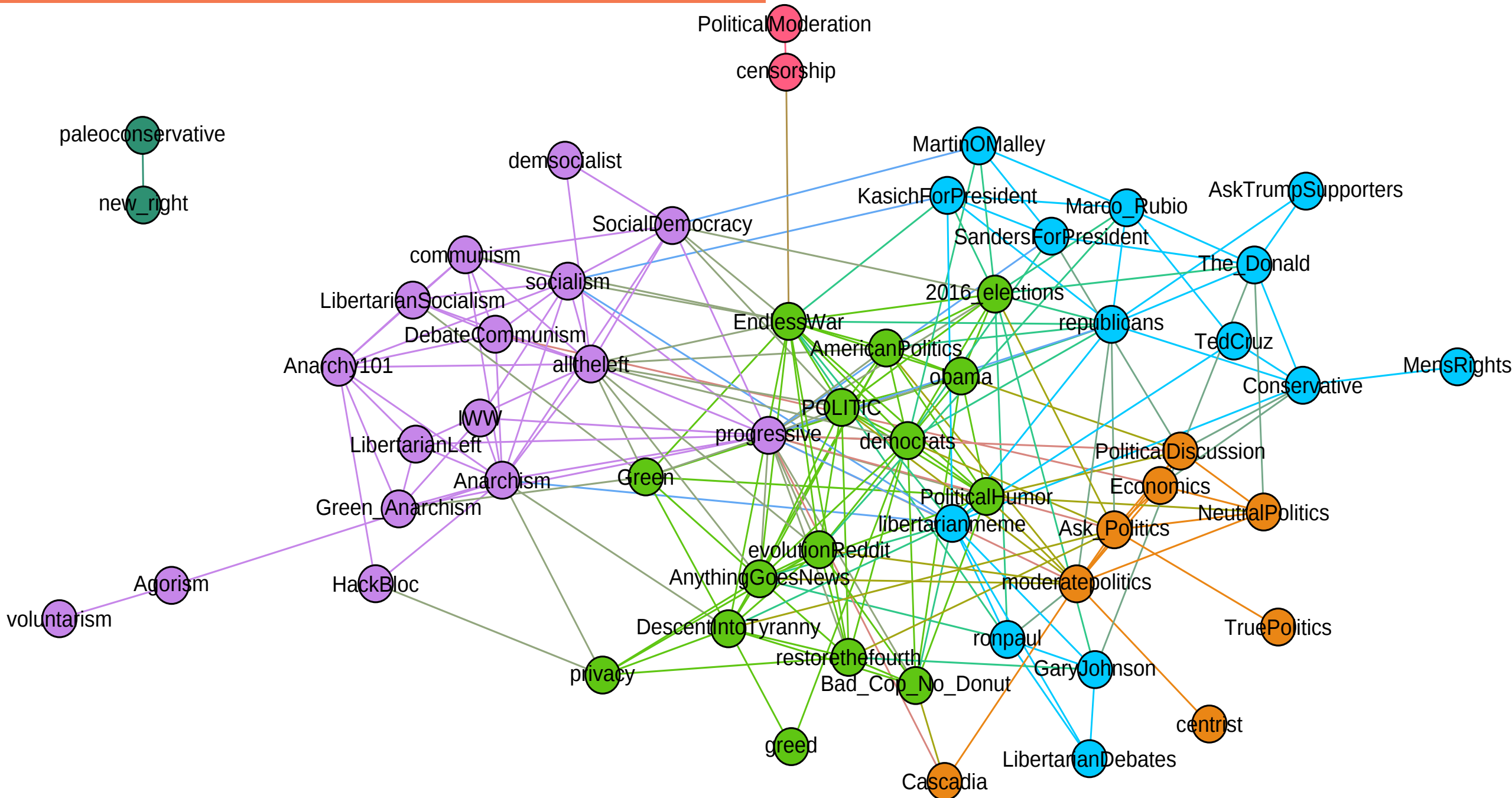
Troll Detection

- Gaussian Mixtures Model (GMM) to perform unsupervised clustering
- Identification of troll users based on both user activity and community response

Community Detection

- Louvain algorithm for clustering
- Visualization through Gephi

RESULTS



This is a 2016 graph - subreddits connected by 5 or more shared comments - considering 1000 comments per subreddit - trolls excluded. Subreddits that represent similar political inclinations (such as r/The_Donald and r/republicans, r/obama and r/democrats) are largely in the same cluster, and ones with dissimilar political inclinations are largely separated.

Based on their average features, we identify users in cluster 8 to be troll users who have low karma, and write comments that:

- Are short and receive low scores
- Are easily comprehensible without difficult words, but have low text standard
- Include profanity words, and are controversial

In the paper, we also present hypotheses on what other clusters represent.

Cluster	Comment karma	Link karma	Read ability index	Readability score	Reading ease	Difficult words	Text standard	Number of words	Score	Controversiality	Profanity
1	4114	572	8.29	6.49	64	2.98	6.03	18.79	2.82	0	0.01
2	21444	6626	93.15	15.81	-112.97	31.25	8.27	184.67	9.25	0.07	0.18
3	16338	1637	43.68	10.8	-7.24	15.37	8.94	88	3.74	0.02	0.12
4	1350168	6395765	2.35	4.4	69.31	1	2.8	11.3	-2	0.4	0
5	22878	3178	13.34	8.6	34.48	8.2	7.91	48.11	4.25	0.04	0.08
6	130045	122813	24.89	8.53	29.55	8.72	7.35	50.88	5.68	0.03	0.07
7	41886	9992	11.97	7.12	56.79	4.18	6.66	25.98	5.48	0.04	0.07
8	17890	4001	5.05	5.64	71.65	1.91	4.78	13.62	3.8	0.08	0.15

Graph	Score	Null Model Score	Difference
2016 Comments - Only trolls	0.579	0.369	0.210
2016 Comments - All users	0.521	0.242	0.278
2016 Comments - Exclude Trolls	0.652	0.353	0.298
2016 Posts	0.554	0.368	0.185
2017 Comments - Only trolls	0.514	0.477	0.037
2017 Comments - All users	0.428	0.368	0.059
2017 Comments - Exclude Trolls	0.413	0.309	0.104
2017 Posts	0.506	0.266	0.240

We compare our clustering results against manually curated categories by completeness score. Notice that:

- Difference increases in both years with troll detection
- Completeness scores significantly exceed their corresponding null model scores

These suggest successful troll detection and likely selective exposure.