

# The dissemination of alternative media content in right-leaning online communities

*Keywords: alternative media, online conversations, social media, stance classification, online communication*

## Extended Abstract

In this study, we explore the dynamics of conversations on Flashback, a Swedish online forum that has more than 1.5M registered users as of February 2023 and that claims to ensure freedom of speech and users' anonymity. Specifically, we focus on the "Immigration and integration" [Integration och invandring] subforum, where a large part of immigration-related discussions takes place. Flashback's case is especially interesting since previous research has demonstrated that biased and Islamophobic narratives are quite common on the platform (Kaati et al. 2022; Törnberg and Törnberg 2016). Using the dataset of 270k messages from the forum spanning the last election cycle in Sweden (2018-2022), we focus on the dissemination of links leading to right-wing alternative media as one of the potential drivers for the conversations on this subforum. In particular, our goal is to investigate the dissemination of such content on the subforum and to focus on the impact that such links (and, possibly, content in general) have on the dynamics of conversations and the users' evaluations of the immigration issue in Sweden. Namely, we do the following: a) explore the differences in user stances and structure of the conversations depending on the dominant type of content shared, and b) study the evolution of users' emotional states and subjective evaluations of the immigration issue on the macro- (forum) and meso- (conversation) levels.

Our ambition is to extend the existing evidence on the effect of alternative media content by looking at the problem in conjunction with the conversation dynamics. A conversation can be seen as a distinct type of online interaction different from, for example, retweeting or commenting on other users' posts. In particular, a conversation presupposes the consecutiveness of users' interactions: in order to take part in the conversation, a user needs to take into account the context and content of previous messages posted as part of the same conversation. One may suggest that the latter inevitably affects the way users perceive and react to the information provided as part of the conversation. With this respect, we draw on the literature on emotional group dynamics, and in particular, Randall Collins' interactional ritual theory (Collins 1993) that provides a framework to understand users' interactions on the forum and link sharing as specific types of social actions to achieve group solidarity and emotional synergy.

Further, we aim to contribute to the existing research by investigating the patterns of alternative media content dissemination *inside* an already segregated and fringe right-leaning environment, which is especially relevant given the proliferation of such online communities. This is important since the existing research has primarily favoured online platforms where participants tend to have heterogeneous views. However, in the environments such as Flashback, users may be more susceptible to such content. Finally, the direct outcomes of alternative news content sharing beyond general sentiments and network clustering may be difficult to evaluate. However, with this respect, we provide a contribution by using a custom stance classification model, which makes us able to identify how users' evaluations of the immigration topic change in the course of interactions with alternative media content and other users.

Our methodological approach consists of a combination of text and network analysis methods. In particular, we reconstruct conversations from the discussion threads using a network-analytic approach. First of all, we create conversation networks from the post pairs based on a) users' quotes of other users' posts, and b) posts' temporal alignment. We then identify a range of conversations' temporal and structural properties. Secondly, to understand the dynamics of users' stances (evaluations) on the immigration topic, we use a machine learning model specifically trained on data from the same forum. To classify the resources into the mainstream (established) and alternative, we extract all user's links to third-party sources and classify the most frequently shared media sources as belonging to either of the "mainstream" (established), alternative or "other" media categories. Finally, we use a range of statistical tests, such as the Granger Causality test and Mann-Whitney U test, among others.

Our results indicate that, quite unexpectedly, links to alternative media (hereafter AM) comprise only a minor part of the links shared on the forum: only 13% of all conversations on the forum have at least one AM link shared. Likewise, of more than 14000 unique users in the dataset, only a small part (9%) is responsible for the dissemination of alternative media content. When it comes to the characteristics that differentiate conversations with AM links from those with mainstream ones, we detect substantial differences in user stances on the immigration topic. In particular, conversations with AM links indeed tend to have a higher share of negative messages. However, we also find that link sharing, irrespective of the link type, makes the conversations longer, with a higher number of nodes and edges (Mann-Whitney U test in both experiments,  $p < 0.05$  irrespective of the chosen threshold for the share of AM links in the conversations). Thus, one may suggest that linking to news media content, irrespective of its type, can serve as a factor to spark conversations and users' deliberations.

At the same time, we notice that both users' stances on the immigration topic and general sentiments remain rather stable throughout the conversations. We find no evidence for the hypothesis on the particular impact of AM content shared in the conversations on the users' sentiment or stance dynamics. However, using the Granger causality test on the subforum-wide data, we find some evidence for the relationship between the time series for *any* type of links shared in the conversations and the ratios of negative and positive messages, as well as average user sentiments ( $p < 0.05$  in the three cases). Thus, our main takeaway from the analysis is that any content, be it from alternative or mainstream media sources, seems to provide discussion topics and stimulate user activity, which is quite counter-intuitive since one would expect the platform's audience to favour the resources that provide what is considered as the alternative and counter-hegemonic view of the immigration topic.

## References

- Collins, Randall (1993). "Emotional Energy as the Common Denominator of Rational Action". In: *Rationality and Society* 5.2, pp. 203–230. DOI: 10.1177/1043463193005002005. eprint: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463193005002005>. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463193005002005>.
- Kaati, Lisa et al. (2022). *En studie i fördom: Om rasistiska stereotyper i digitala miljöer*. Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut. URL: <https://foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI-R--5198--SE>.
- Törnberg, Anton and Petter Törnberg (2016). "Combining CDA and topic modeling: Analyzing discursive connections between Islamophobia and anti-feminism on an online forum". In: *Discourse & Society* 27.4, pp. 401–422.