Who Are the Opinion Leaders Online? A CASE Study of the Immigration Debate on Twitter in Sweden

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Abstract.

In Sweden, immigration critical alternative voices have managed to establish themselves as new players in the representation of the truth in a way that challenges mainstream voices. The selected issue in this study was “Ensamkommande flyktingbarn”. It means "unaccompanied refugee children". If refugees are below 18 years old and coming alone they are considered "unaccompanied refugee children". Many claim they are below 18 years old which is hard to prove against since they have no documentation or papers. Twitter has become a very important social media for political debates and discussions especially for those “alternative voices”. This study attempted to ask the following questions: Regarding the debate, who created the ‘alternative truth’ on Twitter? How did they present the ‘alternative truth’ on Twitter? Data was collected on 27th September and 16th October 2017 separately. The research finds out that opinion leaders in the debate from September to October in 2017 were the voices of ordinary people. Even though those opinion leaders may have used media links to support their arguments, the most popular domain/used link was “twitter”. There are two implications of this result: (1) Twitter replaced traditional media outlets and became the most influential “anti-immigration” voice itself; (2) People use twitter to become their own alternative media and ordinary people can be very influential in this topic.

Keywords: immigration critical voices; opinion leaders; populism; social network analysis; twitter

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1. Introduction

According to an interview by local news in Sweden, Ruben Brunsveld, the Director of the Stockholm Institute for Public Speaking (StIPS), argued that the fear of being labelled "politically incorrect" keeps Sweden's main political parties from engaging in an honest debate about integration and plays into the hands of the far-right, anti-immigration Sweden Democrats. Swedish comedian Henrik Dorsin in an interview with the Local also claimed that "Sweden is the most politically correct country in the world". "You can't say anything in Sweden without offending people, and that creates a very tense environment". Not only political elites but also the main stream media are scared of being politically incorrect. For example, Holt (2017) interviewed Vavra Suk, the editor-in-chief of Nya Tider which is considered an immigration critical alternative media in Sweden. Vavra Suk said "Sweden is different and that is because Sweden has very extreme media that is very politically correct and with a narrow corridor of opinions". All interviewees by Holt believed that the statistics and facts are deliberately presented in a misleading way in order to "create a smokescreen", especially related to the topics of immigration's long-term costs and immigrant crime.

Both media scepticism and conspiracy theories gave explanations to why people distrust the mainstream media. The information or knowledge of main stream media was produced mainly by the 'political elites', journalist elites' and the experts of all areas. When the stories were so coherent in the media and people feel some discrepancies between their personal experience of reality and the reality portrayed in the media, they start to challenge the stories or knowledge of the main stream media.

Media skepticism is defined as the degree to which individuals tend to disbelieve or discount the picture of reality presented in the mass media (Cozzens& Contractor, 1987). They also pointed out that media skepticism is caused in part by the process by which individuals are confronted with discrepancies between their personal experience of reality and the reality portrayed in the media (Cozzens& Contractor, 1987). Conspiracist claimed that the elite holds not just secret power, but secret knowledge –which should be challenged (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). This thought tend to be supported by those cynical about politics in general (Miller, Saunders & Farhart, 2015; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010) – particularly minorities and the underprivileged (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel, 2007). They often reverse the power-relations between the in-group and the out-group.

The relationship between media skepticism and the mainstream news media was furthered defined by Tsfat. Tsfat (2003) refers media skepticism to a negative feeling and mistrust of mainstream news media as a whole rather than of a particular medium. Some studies have suggested that the public has become increasingly skeptical about news media reports (Liebeskind, 1997; Moy & Pfau, 2001). When one feels discrepancies between the mainstream news media and the real life, especially when he/she perceives himself/herself belonging to the minority group, he/she may suspect that there is secret power and knowledge, which the elite holds.

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In the context of Swedish politics and the assumptions of media scepticism and conspiracy theories, do the opinion leaders in the traditional media still keep their status on Twitter? Thus, the research questions of this study are: who are the opinion leaders on Twitter regarding the immigration issue? Do the traditional media still get the most link citations? Are the political elites and journalist elites the most important opinion leaders online? If not, who are the most influential opinion leaders online? Can Twitter be an alternative media itself?

To be able to determine the opinion leaders, we need to know how the alternative voices flow first. Gladwell (2000) pointed out they begin their life cycle as politically and socially marginal and radical counter propositions to established 'mainstream' cognition. By transgressing the widely accepted boundaries between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' premises or prescriptions, they are essentially attempting to remap these established cognitions and subvert the mainstream 'frames' that support them. In so doing, they invariably acquire adherents –people who are essentially 'early adopters', willing to accept and make the suggested transgression (Gladwell 2000: 30–87).

Early adopters are most likely to be the opinion leaders according to Rogers the diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 1983). Rogers also pointed out that the opinion leader occupies a position called a "bridge" in the social network, a link from inside the group with the outer world. The opinion leader is both an initiator of change and a subject of group acceptance. To define opinion leaders more precisely, Burt (1999) pointed out that opinion leaders are "opinion brokers" who carry the social boundaries between groups. They are not people at the top of things so much as people at the edges of the things, not leaders within groups so much as brokers between groups. The opinion leaders may also function as weak ties in the social network. Weak ties are often denounced as generative of alienation (Wirth, 1938) are here seen as indispensable to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities; strong ties, breeding local cohesion, lead to overall fragmentation (Granovetter, 1973: 1378). To sum up, it is necessary to find out opinion leaders to understand how the alternative voices flow on the social network. The opinion leaders can be the leaders within a group in the social networks. However, more importantly, they can also be the ones who build the bridges between different groups.

2. Methods

The selected issue in this study was "Ensamkommande flyktingbarn". "Ensamkommande flyktingbarn" is an important debate topic in Sweden. It means "unaccompanied refugee children". If refugees are below 18 years old and coming alone they are considered "unaccompanied refugee children". Many claim they are below 18 years old which is hard to prove against since they have no documentation or papers. Twitter has become a very important social media for political debates and discussions especially for those "alternative voices". Data was collected two times on 27th September and 16th October 2017 separately. NodeXL, a Microsoft Excel application add-in for network overview that provides support for social

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network analysis and visualization, was used to collect the datasets from Twitter, based on the “ensamkommande flyktingbarn” keyword. No variations of the key word were included to keep

the consistency of the data. Hashtags were included in the keyword search. In order to capture a complete network of users, NodeXL was used to retrieve the most recent 18,000 Twitter users who posted a message using each keyword, and the content of their most recent tweet in which the keyword was used. Twitter, unlike some other social media platforms, does not keep an open archive of all posted messages. Data older than 14 days was not available. The first twitter data (data A) was collected between 14th to 27th September. 87 vertices were found in the network. The second twitter data (data B) was collected between 3rd to 16th October. 203 vertices were found in the network.

Several major clusters were identified algorithmically using the method Clauset-Newman-Moore. This algorithm uses modularity as a property of a network to create a division of that network into communities. The operation of the algorithm involves finding the changes in modularity (Q) that would result from the join of each pair of communities, choosing the largest of them, and performing the corresponding join. It measures when the division is a good one, in the sense that there are many edges within communities and only a few between them (Clauset, Newman & Moore, 2004). After different clusters were identified, several key measurements were compared to determine the key opinion leaders. According to Wasserman and Faust (1994), degree, betweenness, eigenvector and closeness are all measures of an actor's prominence in a network.

3. Results

3.1 Cluster analysis of data A

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Figure 1 The social network of data A

Source: Huang 2019

Table 1 Summary of 9 different clusters

Group	Group Type	Top domains	The content of top URL, if any (translated from Swedish to English)	Top Hashtag
G1	Scale-free			let the young stay(Swedish: låt de unga stanna)
G2	Core-periphery			N/A
G3	Core-periphery	Twitter.com		N/A

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G4	Core-periphery	stockholmdirekt.se	"unaccompanied refugee children are bribed to silence - with iphones"	N/A
G5	Outliers	urskola.se twitter.com nyatider.nu		urskola svpol laatdeun
G6	Core-periphery	Twitter.com	Surely you cannot have missed the debate about age testing of "unaccompanied refugee children" who turned out to be adults in many cases	
G7	Core-periphery	Twitter.com	"And at the same time you think it is reasonable and ethical that Sweden spends 1 million SEK per year for ONE unaccompanied refugee child"	N/A
G8	Core-periphery	Twitter.com	"Each year 2 million children are sold into the global sex slavery. The children that are affected are scarred for life. Children are not for sale"	N/A
G9	Core-periphery		"Each unaccompanied refugee child costs the state 1900 sek per day. Many of these children have no reason for asylum and are also lying about their age"	N/A

Source: Huang 2019

Table 2 Different measurements of influence

Rank	Account	Betweenness Centrality	Account	PageRank	Account	Indegree
1	anderssonnulla	1235.000	anderssonnulla	12.264	anderssonnulla	40
2	Elinludis	275.000	elinludis	6.788	Elinludis	24
3	Vistarinteut	78.000	anitaisthlm	3.757	anitaisthlm	7

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4	Anitaisthm	42.000	lejfo	2.378	Nogodis	2
5	Lejfo	12.000	frokensverige	1.919	mazonebox	2
6	frokensverig e	6.000	hallen_a	1.459	vistarinteut	1
7	Kidahl	2.000	kidahl	1.459	imprimatur7	1
8	h_jnsn	2.000	h_jnsn	1.459	davidlinden1	1
9	hallen_a	2.000	nogodis	1.298	Annieloof	1
10	korpkvadet	0.000	mazonebox	1.298	Arnstad	1

Source: Huang 2019

Table 3 *Top five opinion leaders*

Account	Background	Followers
Anderssonulla	Political elites	6931
Elinludis	Political elites	2300
Anitaisthm	A group of people	649
lejfo	Ordinary people	18
Frokensverige	A group of people	4203
كافرة		

Source: Huang 2019

Table 4 *Top domains in the agenda*

Domains	Count
twitter.com	10
nyatider.nu	1
urskola.se	1
stockholmdirekt.se	1

Source: Huang 2019

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3.2 Cluster analysis of data B

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Figure 2 *The social network of data B*
Source: Huang 2019

Table 5 *Summary of different clusters*

Group	Group type	Top domains	Top URL	Top Hashtag
G1	Core-periphery	Twitter	SD (Swedish democrats) in Malmö wants that "unaccompanied refugee children" who have lied about their age will be forced to pay back wrongly paid welfare	N/A
G2	Core-periphery		<p>1. Afghan refugees who swindled £87,000 in benefits by pretending to be CHILD MIGRANTS jailed</p> <p>2. 24,3 billions/year totally 121,4 billion SEK so far to so called "unaccompanied refugee children" How many of these are lying about their age?</p>	svpol sd2018 val2018
G3	Core-periphery	expressen.se	Confirmation leader (leader of church activity for children) sentenced for sexual harassment	N/A
G4	Core-periphery	Twitter.com	Arif M who has the role as spokesperson for the group "Afghan unaccompanied refugee children" was sentenced for sexual harassment of a 14 year old girl	N/A
G5	Core-periphery			N/A
G6	Core-periphery	Worldpress.com	Unaccompanied refugee child is prosecuted for a group rape in front of the audience	N/A
G7	Core-periphery			N/A
G8	Core-periphery	Twitter.com	Hello, @nabizadehse - maybe should take down website from 2012 where	N/A

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			you are writing that you are born January 31, 1994 (1372-11-11)
G9	Core-periphery	gp.se	Then the big brother committed suicide and gave his little brother a chance to stay in the new country Sweden.
G10	Core-periphery	aftonbladet.se	The teenage boy, who is an unaccompanied refugee child, describes that he felt disgusted and afraid during the event, and that he during the police interrogation feels bad to talk about it again.

Source: Huang 2019

Table 6 Different measurements of influence

Rank	Account	Betweenness Centrality	Account	PageRank	Account	Indegree
1	nyasputnik	19157.500	nyasputnik	39.289	nyasputnik	92
2	egorputilov	6504.000	egorputilov	12.456	egorputilov	29
3	Bbiiddee	3918.500	bbiiddee	6.826	Bbiiddee	16
4	persikan32	3100.000	persikan32	5.326	maximilianmaxi8	5
5	poa_karlsson	3040.000	wille003	2.378	Callenathanson	4
6	Texotx	1754.167	maximilianmaxi8	2.356	thomasmoller64	4
7	Pizzedof	1679.167	callenathanson	2.168	klassisk_lib	3
8	i_am_lothbrok	1679.167	thomasmoller64	2.104	Keloteiram	3
9	bikerhogg	977.500	inger711	1.931	Mktcash	2
10	maximilianmaxi8	793.000	clubracer_swede	1.919	Evilswedishgirl	2

Source: Huang 2019

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Table 7 *Top five opinion leaders*

Account	Background	Followers
Nyasputnik	Antiimmigration, right wing group. In the introduction: is said: "Sweden belongs to Swedish. Unclear if it is created by a person or a group of people	1258
Egorputilov	Journalist of Samhällsnytt	2557
Bbiiddee	An ordinary person	989
persikan32	An ordinary person	1484
wille003	An ordinary person	446

Source: Huang 2019

Table 8 *Top domains in this agenda*

Domains	Count
twitter.com	18
gp.se	4
wordpress.com	4
op.se	3
aftonbladet.se	1
expressen.se	1
di.se	1
svenskdan.se	1

Source: Huang 2019

4. Discussions and conclusions

Total ten opinion leaders were found in Data A and B. Only two of them belong to political elites. One of them is a journalist who works in the alternative media. Other opinion leaders are "ordinary people". It has become evident again that Twitter has become a platform for ordinary people. Even ordinary people can become opinion leaders. Twitter itself has afforded a potential for post truth politics for people to search information and express their opinions. Besides, the knowledge of elites was not necessarily the top spread content anymore. People no longer

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trusted the knowledge produced from the elites and main stream media. Data A and Data B together gave a picture of different voices on Twitter about the debate of “ensamkommande flyktingbarn”. Both in Data A and B, different clusters formed a “filter bubble” which implied different clusters seldom connect to each other. It is a very dangerous situation since the perspectives from immigration critical alternative voices and main stream voice were so divergent. They couldn’t communicate or debate with each other. Moreover, it showed that the cluster density of alternative voices was higher than those of main stream voices. It implied that the interconnections between people in the alternative voices were tighter than those of the main stream voices. The cluster types in data A, with G1 a “scale-free” type and G5 an outlier type, other groups formed the core-periphery types. The cluster density of G1 was also much lower than other groups. It implied that the interconnections of G1 were looser than those of other groups. Since G1 held the “let the young stay” perspective, people may have felt more politically correct to use this hashtag without too much concern. Meanwhile, other groups formed a core-periphery structure which suggested that the main information and power came

from a single person. People formed connections through a specific person. In other words, the person had great power in this cluster. Regarding the content of the clusters, most of the “different voices” focused their discussions about the “fake” refugee children, “the cost” they brought to the society and reports that the refugee children were involved in “sexual harassment” cases. Other voices provided stories about “the love between siblings” and the “right” for the young children to stay.

Besides, the opinion leaders in the debate from September to October in 2017 were the voices of ordinary people. Even though those opinion leaders may have used media links to support their arguments, the most popular domain was “twitter”. There are two implications of this result: (1) Twitter replaced traditional media outlets and became the most influential “anti-immigration” voice itself; (2) People use twitter to become their own alternative media and ordinary people can be very influential. In other words, the most influential immigration critical alternative media is not the traditional media outlet. Instead it is the ordinary people and groups of people that together with Twitter formed a loud alternative voice of the immigration critical alternative media.

Among the most commonly used hashtags, this study found out that some key opinion leaders discussed the agenda in connection to the Swedish 2018 election. Some key opinion leaders not only connected this agenda to the election by using the hashtag “svpol”, “val2018” but also showed their support to the right wing party Swedish democrats by using the hashtag “sd2018”. These opinion leaders already started to try to influence the public opinion and called for action in the next elections.

There are some limitations. First, unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden is an ongoing discussion without a specific timeline to investigate. The data retrieved between September to October 2017 may not be rich enough. Future research is suggested to collect more data across a longer timeline or to find a specific event to collect the data. Besides, to use the hashtag as the method to collect tweets may miss some important tweets. Third, the method to use unaccompanied refugee children as the key hashtag may create some bias since people who use

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this keyword may have the pre-existing attitudes which are in favour of immigration-critical perspectives. Lastly, twitter can only provide 14 days historical data. To overcome some limitations, Python is suggested to employ for the data collection next time.

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