Information Laundering and Counter-Publics:
The News Sources of Islamophobic Groups on Twitter

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Abstract

Which news sources do supporters of populist islamophobic groups and their opponents rely on, and how are these sources related to each other? We explore these questions by studying the websites referenced in discussions surrounding Pegida, a right-wing populist movement based in Germany that is opposed to what its supporters regard as islamization, cultural marginalization and political correctness. We draw on a manual content analysis of the news sources and the stances of Twitter users, to then calculate the overlap of sources across audiences. Finally, we perform a cluster analysis of the resulting user groups, based on shared sources. Preferences by language, nationality, region and politics emerge, showing the distinction between different groups among the users. Our tentative findings have implications both for the study of mass media audiences through the lens of social media, and for research on the public sphere and its possible fragmentation in online discourse. This contribution, which is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between communication scholars in Germany and journalists in Austria, is part of a larger ongoing effort to understand forms of online extremism through the analysis of social media data.

Keywords: *populism, islamophobia, Twitter, altmedia*

Introduction

Debates on controversial political issues, such as immigration policy and climate change, frequently revolve around the choice of news sources. Right-wing populists thrive on polarized discourses that allow them to mobilize their supporters in opposition to "politically-correct" liberal elites that are presumed to control the media (Allen, 2011, Daniels, 2009, Padovani, 2008). In such debates, mainstream and populist factions often draw on markedly different repertoires of news sources, leading some scholars to assert the existence of echo chambers shaped by ideological dif-

ferences (Pariser, 2011; Vicario et al., 2016). Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are particularly suitable to rally support for populist stances, as not all sources promoted through them conform with journalistic standards of careful sourcing, editorial balance, and factual accuracy.

In addition to the websites of traditional media organizations, such as private and public broadcasters as well as newspaper publishers, social media audiences draw on a range of non-traditional media actors that rely exclusively on the Internet. The ownership structure of many of these organizations is opaque. Many are supported by a variety of unusual sources of revenue, including reliance on direct state sponsorship, private patronage, and the free labor supplied by volunteer contributors. These actors increasingly disseminate information in foreign languages to reach audiences abroad. Examples for this strategy are *RT* (previously *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik*, both of which are financed by the Russian government, and *Epoch Times*, widely assumed to be influenced by Falun Gong, a group of spiritual practitioners with origins in China.

The aims of these actors include influencing the public agenda, for example by fostering support for the Russian government and opposition to the European Union, or promoting a socially conservative world-view in accordance with the teachings of Falun Gong, while some sites also seek to maximize advertising-based revenues through particularly incendiary headlines. In addition to these organizations, a number of other non-institutionalized sources of news and opinion, such as partisan blogs and populist grass-roots initiatives also feature prominently in controversial discourses on social media platforms. Taken together, the availability of these sources enables what Klein (2012) refers to as 'information laundering', that is, the legitimization of xenophobic and islamophobic attitudes through the guise of legitimate sources. Based on these observations, we formulate the following three research questions:

RQ 1: What is the role of traditional and non-traditional media sources in relation to mainstream and populist political stances on issues such as Islam and immigration?
RQ 2: How can the relationship between traditional and non-traditional media sources be described?
RQ 3: Which preferential clusters can be distinguished among users on the basis of the sources that they favor?

We approach these questions through an analysis of Twitter data surrounding Pegida, a right-wing anti-immigration movement centered in Germany. Pegida was founded in late 2014 to counter the alleged 'islamization' of German society. The movement holds regular weekly rallies in the city of Dresden framed as "evening walks" or "candlelight vigils". While Pegida's origins lie in Dresden, the group has made efforts to expand within Germany, the European Union and globally, with rallies in Eastern Europe, the UK and Australia. The movement relies heavily on Facebook for its organization[1], rallying support through its page, which also serves as a communication platform for sympathizers. Hundreds of comments are posted each day in relation to issues such as immigration, Islam, the EU, mainstream political parties and politicians, mainstream (liberal) media, gender politics, and other manifestations of what is perceived as a political agenda of cultural liberalism that excludes dissenting views (for a preliminary analysis of the commenting practice, see Stefanowitsch & Flach, 2016). The communication on social media (which represents only a partial picture of Pegida's supporters) is characterized by deep internal inconsistencies, for example with regards to its stance towards Russia. Many of its proponents are staunchly pro-Russian, while others, such as *Breitbart.com*, are sympathetic towards U.S.-style libertarianism and evangelical Christian groups.

Though Facebook is the core platform used by Pegida's supporters, Twitter is another important stage on which discourse related to Pegida takes place, though in a more ambivalent fashion. While on Facebook the ability of page owners to moderate content means that the discourse environment is controlled and dissenting views can be suppressed, this does not apply to Twitter. On Twitter, a search for Pegida inevitably leads to both supporting and opposing views. The hashtag #nopegida captures tweets from opponents, while the hashtag #pegida and the search term pegida both lead to matches that are opposed and to those that are supportive. Capturing both discourse and counter-discourse surrounding the movement, while not ideal to characterize its inner communication, is helpful in order to contrast the sources that supporters of Pegida draw

upon with those cited by its opponents (see Burnap & Williams, 2015, for a broadly similar analysis of the UK).

Research on islamophobia and racism online

To better understand the Twitter discourse surrounding Pegida, it is instructive to first review the issues of islamophobia and racism online more generally. Oboler (2008) studies the rise and fall of an anti-Semitic Facebook group that in 2007 attracted close to 50,000 members. Allen (2011) discusses the roots of islamophobic movements in the UK, describing particularly the rise of the English Defense League (EDL) as a melting pot of several in some cases ideologically incompatible groups. Allen (2011, p. 280) refers to the milieu within which the EDL thrives as "disparate, diverse and divergent". Tracing the rise of the British National Party in the early 2000s, the author points out that targeting Islam may have had legal advantages over aggressively targeting race, because of precedence in the application of hate speech laws written to combat ethnic discrimination. The 7/7 terror attacks further bolstered the appeal of islamophobic campaigns for right-wing groups such as the BNP and the EDL. Allen (2011) highlights the role of Facebook for the otherwise loosely-knit organization of the EDL. The EDL has since then partly merged with Pegida UK, signaling a convergence into a pan-European islamophobic movement, at least in terms of its external communication. As the author furthermore points out, the EDL cultivates the image of a multicultural movement that departs from the stereotype of right-wing chauvinism. It has a division for gay members, whose protection from islamist repression it claims to cherish. This 'innovative' (Allen, 2011, p. 288) means of presenting itself as a positive civic movement is another commonality with Pegida, as is the tendency to replace biological racism with cultural racism, which argues that insurmountable differences separate the Northern European, Judeo-Christian identity from a middle eastern Muslim identity.

Social media, and particularly Twitter, is a popular scene of conflict in polarized discourses on race and religion. Chaudry (2015) draws up a 'hate map' of the United States using racist tweets. Awan (2014) presents an analysis of islamophobic Twitter discourse in the wake of the May 2013 Woolwich attacks. The author notes that on September 11, 2013, the hashtag #FuckMuslims was trending in the UK and relates the case of Steve Littlejohn, who personally threatened Salma Yaqoob, a member of the British Parliament, in response to an appearance on BBC Question Time. The author coded 500 tweets posted between January 2013 and April 2014 under the hashtags #Woolwich, #Muslim, and #Islam, and classified their authors by several characteristics, distinguishing between trawlers, who harass people that profess to be Muslims, disseminators

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[1] We study Facebook in another component of our project, but focus entirely on Twitter in this analysis. For the relevance of Facebook for far-right groups in Europe, see Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández (2016).

who repost material supplied by others, professionals who have large followings and act as multipliers, as well as five additional types. While these categories do not apply to our study directly, it is important to note that distinguishing users by their discourse behavior is instructive to understand the communicative ecology of Twitter for xenophobic movements. Arwan (2014) specifically addresses hate speech and threats in relation to these movements, and links threatening acts to cyber trolling and online abuse. Similarly, Williams and Burnap (2016) fit a regression model to discover the determinants of hateful tweets following the Woolwich event. They find a hateful tone to be less common in tweets with links (most often linking to a popular media source) and argue that a relative lack of sources explains the prevalence of sources in non-hateful messages.

Theoretical backdrop: information laundering

For our analysis of information sources in Twitter communication on Pegida, we adopt the theoretical concept of information laundering proposed by Klein (2012). Klein describes the Internet's considerable appeal for hate groups. It brings together disparate individuals with opinions that are not widely accepted and who feel suppressed by mainstream society. In addition to being a cheap vehicle for spreading propaganda directly to a mass audience, enabling connections between like-minded individuals and providing a cost-effective organizational infrastructure for such fledgling groups, social media and the Internet also enable a variety of information sources that hate groups can rely on to achieve legitimacy (Burris, Smith & Strahm, 2000). As Klein (2012, p. 430-431) argues:

> The parameters of what is considered ''trusted information'' have widened in the virtual world, primarily because the drivers of that content are an anonymous and unrestricted public that are far less scrupulous about the kinds of the facts they publish. Principally, one might argue that despite the false perceptions of what is believed to be trusted information in cyberspace, true knowledge is what really matters in any medium. But, *for hate groups especially, perception is reality*[..] racist movements have managed to successfully tap into the new wave of online politics, blogs, search engines, and social networks, *in order to build the greater illusion of legitimacy and conventional support* for their causes.

Information laundering, following Klein, is the successful redressing of racist ideology in the guise of legitimate information, achieved by relying on the same forms, appearances and labels that give traditional information their societal legitimacy. Propaganda, as the author outlines, only resorts to fabrication under ideal, i.e. societally repressive circumstances. Following Jowett and O'Donnell's (2012) propaganda model, Klein distinguishes between "black", "white" and "gray" propaganda: North Korea's regime can communicate through "black" propaganda, which relies on large-scale public deceit and ignores the facts. In communication that employs "gray" propaganda, "the source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is uncertain" (Jowett & O'Donnell's, 2012, p. 20). "White" propaganda, by contrast, is largely concerned with building trust in the source, and blurring the line between persuasion and information, resulting in messages that appear reasonably truthful (see also Daniels, 2009). The author presents a number of right-wing websites, e.g. *Stormfront*, *The Institute for Historical Review*, and *Metapedia*, which follow this model (Bowman-Grieve, 2009, De Koster & Houtman, 2008). Built to persuade users of their trustworthiness, these sites are not overtly xenophobic, but instead create an alternative media ecology to counter what their creators perceive as a politically correct mainstream (cf. Atton, 2006).

Methodological frame: counter-publics

The successful construction of "white" propaganda – and consequently the building of trust and momentum for a counter-public – depends on the ability to link to different sources. From a methodological perspective, these links are digital objects that mediate the dynamics in a networked public sphere (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Benkler, 2006). Beside URLs that link to resources on the web, Twitter's APIs return a number of other objects such as hashtags, photos, and mentions of other users (Gaffney & Puschmann, 2013, Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013). These contribute fundamentally to the algorithmic construction of a networked public sphere. Building on the idea of object-centered sociality (Knorr-Cetina, 1997; also Engeström, 2005, Suchman, 2005), we can thus speak of "object-centered counter-publics". To understand the phenomenon of online counter-publics, it is necessary to investigate the "digital social objects" that constitute and maintain them (see also Marres, 2012, Rogers, 2013).

Methods and data

We collected 140.000 tweets under the hashtags #pegida and #nopegida, as well as the search term "pegida" for a one-month period in January 2016, relying on DMI-TCAT (Borra & Rieder, 2014). We then extracted all hyperlinks and aggregated the results by hostname (eg. twitter.com), applying k-cores filtering (or graph degeneracy) with a setting of k = 10 to reduce the size of the network to its key actors (cf. Seidman, 1983). The resulting filtered user-website network contained 680 users and 234 hostnames

connected by 10.867 edges. Figure 1, visualized with Gephi using a force-based layout, shows this network with three modularity-based clusters. We manually coded the websites, assigning each to one of five categories (see Table 1). We furthermore coded the users as Pegida supportive, Pegida opposed, or unclear. We excluded sources and accounts in neither German or English from manual coding. Next we calculated the degree of overlap in audiences between all sources, i.e. the percentage of users that each site shares with every other site. Finally, we conducted k-means clustering on the Twitter users, using the overlap in sources as our measure of similarity (Zumel & Mount, 2014, p. 190). In effect, after initially exploring the general relationship between information repertoires and attitudes towards Pegida (RQ1), we qualified information sources by the users that refer to them (RQ2) and the users by the sources they rely on (RQ3). Our coding approach follows the protocol of mass media content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), but the data was not categorized by multiple coders, limiting the generalizability of the results.

Results

The results of the first step of our analysis, describing the general relationship between information repertoires of users and attitudes towards Pegida, are summarized in Table 1, while Figure 1 shows the user-website graph.
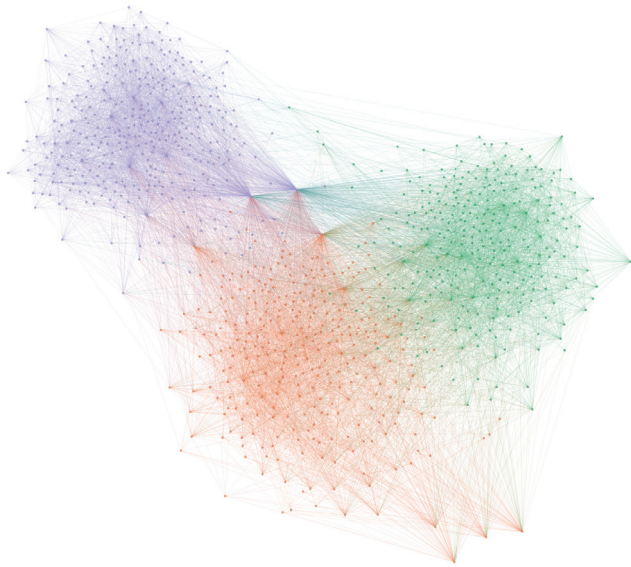

Figure 1: User-site network. Modularity clusters: blue= pro-Pegida UK, red = pro-Pegida GER, green = con-Pegida GER.

The results of the first step of our analysis, describing the general relationship between information sources and attitudes towards Pegida, are summarized in Table 1.

Websites \ Users	Pegida supporters	Pegida opposers	unclear/ NA
Traditional media organization website	34.3	65.0	46.1
Non-traditional or partisan media organization website	21.3	2.8	16.3
Personal or group blog	15.0	2.8	8.8
Political party, politician, or NGO website	5.4	4.0	4.4
Social media platform or aggregator	22.7	17.7	21.1
Unclear/NA	1.3	7.6	3.3
	100%	100%	100%

Table 1: Citations of sites among users (%) by stance (n = 913).

The most important finding in this step of the analysis is that non-traditional media sources and blogs are favored by the supporters of Pegida, while traditional news sources are favored by its opponents. All groups rely on traditional news sources to a relatively large extent, but while this category is by far the most popular one for Twitter users opposed to Pegida (65% of all sources), the same is not the case for supporters of the movement (34.3% of all sources). Jointly Pegida supporters link to non-traditional or partisan media organization and to personal or group blogs more frequently than they link to the conventional news media (36.3%). Non-traditional sources such as *Breitbart.com*, *RT*, *Sputnik* and *Epoch Times* are ten times as popular among them as they are among Pegida's opponents. Blogs are also considerably more popular, and social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, are somewhat more popular.

The results of the second step of our analysis, in which we assessed the overlap among popular sources by users that share them, are presented in Table 2.

Website 1	Website 2	User overlap (%)
twitter.com	youtube.com	42.7
twitter.com	facebook.com	36.6
barenakedislam.com	themuslimissue.wordpress.com	33.8
youtube.com	facebook.com	33.3
breitbart.com	barenakedislam.com	32.7
barenakedislam.com	newobserveronline.com	31.4
themuslimissue.wordpress.com	newobserveronline.com	31.1
kleinezeitung.at	salzburg24.at	30.8
breitbart.com	themuslimissue.wordpress.com	30.6
breitbart.com	newobserveronline.com	29.9
joostniemoller.nl	hln.be	29.0
youtube.com	breitbart.com	28.7
breitbart.com	pegidauk.org	28.5
sz-online.de	dnn.de	28.5
breitbart.com	rt.com	27.9
dnn.de	lvz.de	27.5
telegraaf.nl	joostniemoller.nl	27.5
twitter.com	breitbart.com	27.2
pegidauk.org	bbc.co.uk	26.5
dnn.de	mdr.de	26.2
welt.de	epochtimes.de	26.1
telegraaf.nl	hln.be	26.1
corbisimages.com	sechel.it	26.1
tagesspiegel.de	faz.net	25.5
facebook.com	epochtimes.de	25.4
facebook.com	welt.de	25.0
stuttgarter-nachrichten.de	suedkurier.de	25.0
fr.sputniknews.com	francais.rt.com	25.0
freie-radios.net	refugeeswelcome.blogsport.eu	25.0

Table 2: overlap of news sources with each other by user shares (>=25%, n = 10.867). Blue = traditional mainstream media organization, orange = non-traditional or partisan media organization, yellow = personal or group blog, purple = political organization, politician, or NGO, green = social media platform/aggregator, gray = unclear or NA.

In the second step of our analysis, we assessed the similarity of sources based on shared audiences. Websites share repertoires of users that link to them on Twitter, while users can in turn be characterized on the basis of the sources that they rely upon. Table 2 shows those pairs of sources that have an overlap of 25% or more of users. Unsurprisingly, social media sites top the list, pointing to their role as type of "common ground" or universally accepted information source, though obviously the pages and accounts linked to inside them make the decisive ideological difference. Secondly, islamophobic attack blogs, such as *The Muslim Issue* and *Bare Naked Islam* share large audiences. Thirdly, non-traditional media sources such as *Breitbart.com* and *Epoch Times* intersect with these sources and with both political groups (Pegida UK) and established newspapers on the right end of the ideological spectrum (*The New Observer* and *Die Welt*). The overlap percentage is suggestive of linguistic, national and regional preferences, in addition to political leanings. For example, the French editions of *Sputnik* and *RT* overlap considerably, as do Dutch-language sources in both the Netherlands and Belgium. The German regional newspapers *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* and *Südkurier*, and *Dresdner Neue Nachrichten* and the public broadcaster *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk* also overlap regionally. An important advantage of relating sources in this way is that we are able to make inferences about unknown sources from known ones. The overlap of the *Epoch Times* with mainstream newspaper *Die Welt* and the affinity of readers of the *New Observer* for islamophobic blog makes subtle affinities of readers tangible that could not be otherwise observed.

Thirdly, we present the result of the inductive cluster analysis (via k-means) of users according to the sources that they share in Tables 3a and 3b.

Cluster #1 (n=96): German centrist national media	Cluster #2 (n=78): German local and regional media	Cluster #3 (n=41): German left-wing national media
twitter.com youtube.com tagesspiegel.de spiegel.de	twitter.com dnn.de facebook.com lvz.de tagesspiegel.de sz-online.de youtube.com mdr.de	twitter.com tagesspiegel.de facebook.com taz.de dnn.de spiegel.de zeit.de neues-deutschland.de sueddeutsche.de mdr.de huffingtonpost.de youtube.com faz.net meedia.de tagesschau.de augenzeugen.info sz-online.de deutschlandfunk.de welt.de
Cluster #4 (n=3): German automated news aggregators	**Cluster #5 (n=158): German non-traditional center-right media**	**Cluster #6 (n=37): German conspiracy theory/right-wing media**
twitter.com dnn.de facebook.com tagesspiegel.de sz-online.de youtube.com mdr.de mopo24.de spiegel.de faz.net ...	twitter.com facebook.com youtube.com epochtimes.de welt.de	twitter.com youtube.com facebook.com epochtimes.de welt.de pi-news.net focus.de jungefreiheit.de presseportal.de tagesspiegel.de de.sputniknews.com linkis.com compact-online.de unzensuriert.at mopo24.de michael-mannheimer.net spiegel.de faz.net sz-online.de krone.at

Table 3a: Distinctive sources in k-means clusters of users sharing German-language-sources (x >= 0.45).

Cluster #7 (n=88): UK right-wing social sharing	Cluster #8 (n=102): UK islamophobic blogs
twitter.com youtube.com breitbart.com facebook.com rt.com pegida.trendolizer.com linkis.com	themuslimissue.wordpress.com twitter.com youtube.com barenakedislam.com newobserveronline.com breitbart.com dailymail.co.uk
Cluster #9 (n=50): UK Pegida and EDL support	**Cluster #10 (n=25): UK right-wing populist media**
breitbart.com youtube.com pegidauk.org twitter.com bbc.co.uk barenakedislam.com tommyrobinson.co.uk blogs.spectator.co.uk birminghammail.co.uk facebook.com ibtimes.co.uk thegatewaypundit.com	twitter.com youtube.com breitbart.com themuslimissue.wordpress.com newobserveronline.com dailymail.co.uk barenakedislam.com rt.com pegida.trendolizer.com pegidauk.org facebook.com linkis.com sputniknews.com express.co.uk bbc.co.uk

Table 3b: Distinctive sources in k-means clusters of users sharing English-language-sources (x >= 0.45).

Tables 3a and 3b show the result of a k-means clustering of users (*k* = 10), using the overlap in sources as our measure of similarity and the most common sources within each cluster as our output (*x* >= 0.45). Sources are associated by language, geography, their political leanings and their preference of more mainstream media organization or more nontraditional news sources. The first two features, while unsurprising, are noteworthy because the ability to transcend language barriers is more characteristic of new actors, such as *RT*, *Sputnik* and *Epoch Times* than it is of established media actors. Secondly, political leanings are less clearly reflected in the network structure than expected. Both left and right wing factions rely on non-traditional sources and social media, but a particular mix is favored by supporters of Pegida. Lastly, based on the coding, the opponents of Pegida outnumber the supporters for German, while they are essentially absent from the English-language discourse. This is likely to be a function of the brand's spread into the UK, rather than an accurate measure of opposition. Users cluster together according to

their preference for particular sources. Clustering as applied in Tables 3a and 3b shows the internal divisions in these factions. In addition to their preferences, the clustering also enables us to quantify the respective audiences. The German mainstream and liberal media spectrum is roughly comparable to the center-right voices combined with right-wing and conspiracy theory proponents.

Discussion

The Twitter network that we have described largely reflects the established political spectrum for Pegida-opponents in German-speaking countries, ranging from more conservative to left-leaning sources. On the side of Pegida supporters, a wide variety of actors from libertarian pro-US and pro-Israel sources to pro-Russian and anti-Western sources appear. Conspiracy theories on issues such as climate change, feminism, alleged political correctness, as well as anti-Muslim, anti-immigration and anti-globalization sentiments intermingle. Globalization as an issue is particularly illustrative for the lack of internal ideological coherence found among the supporters of Pegida, betraying it as a populist and nativist movement (cf. Caiani & Wagemann, 2009).

Our analysis has several limitations. Twitter data offers the advantage of seeing the breadth of the discussion surrounding Pegida, but users who are highly active may be overrepresented in the discourse. Twitter also offers a skewed picture by virtue of its user demographics, as it is used by a relatively small portion of German Internet users (Tippelt & Kupferschmitt, 2015). We only assessed a single month of data. Furthermore, we provided only cursory justification for our choice of parameters in the content analysis and the k-means clustering[2]. We do not distinguish between functionally different reasons for linking, nor do we provide a more detailed analysis of the content of different sources. Finally, we cannot rule out that bots contributed to the activity that we have observed.

Analyzing ideological factors in more detail to discover source affinities is necessary in future research. This also holds true of the sampling period and the dynamism of sources – *Breitbart.com* and *Epoch Times* clearly establish themselves as sources of choice for a pan-European Pegida movement over time, occupying a niche that was previously largely vacant. We also aim to combine content analysis and network analysis of users, websites and individual news items, to systematically assess their interdependent relationship, and take into account additional languages in order to better grasp the pan-European dynamics of right-wing populism.

Conclusion

From its inception onwards, the Internet has been utilized as an instrument for communication and coordination by right-wing hate groups (Burris, Smith & Strahm, 2000, Schafer, 2002, Whine, 1999). Beyond the study of such groups, our research also has implications for analysts and data journalists. From the perspective of data analysts at news organizations, the methodology we have used helps to position an organization's audience within a broader picture. This can inform the choices of editors. Furthermore, our method can also be used to identify competitors that might not be visible through other means. Such actors frequently do not conform with established journalistic standards, for example by foregoing rigorous fact-checking and using attention-grabbing headlines, and they deliberately redraw the map of what is politically acceptable and normal within a locally configured political discourse.

Second, from the perspective of data journalists and social media managers at news organization, the presented approach offers a reproducible method form tracking ongoing online debates. When it comes to the analysis of social trace data, the methodologies of data journalists and communication researchers have communalities. With further development, many of the steps we have taken can be automated. The methods presented here support investigations of the practices and debates of ad-hoc publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) and issue publics (Marres, 2012).

Finally, counter-speech has an important role to play in social media discourses related to racism (Skinner, 2007). There is reason to assume that right-wing populist movements that rely on social media and use islamophobic rhetoric as a rallying point will continue to proliferate, especially in Europe, where anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments are running high (Williams, 2010, Zúquete, 2008). Further research on this troubling development is therefore critical.

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[2] Parameter estimation methods for determining the optimal *k* (Zumel & Mount, p. 192-194) suggest either two or three clusters as optimal values, however, the fact that the data set contained sources in different languages complicates this picture and led us to model with *k* = 10.

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