

# From Tweets to Turmoil:

## Decoding the Digital Landscape of the Capitol Invasion

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## Abstract

This research delves into the complex dynamics that preceded the Capitol invasion on January 6th, 2021, following the contentious 2020 U.S. Presidential election. The study examines the profound impact of media effects, platformization, and social network dynamics on shaping the narrative and motivations behind this pivotal historical event through a mixed-method approach combining discourse analysis and social network analysis. Specifically, this study centers on Twitter as the primary social media platform for analysis. The discourse analysis uncovered key thematic elements dominating discussions surrounding the Capitol invasion. Prominent themes included widespread claims of election fraud, strategic media framing, impassioned calls for action, the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and the systematic delegitimization of Joe Biden's presidency. These findings highlight the significant role of media narratives in mobilizing individuals towards tangible actions, underscoring the electrifying influence of digital discourse on societal mobilization. In the social network analysis segment, an in-depth exploration of retweet dynamics illuminated the flow of information within and across distinct clusters, revealing the substantial impact of digital platforms on shaping and reinforcing ideological biases. By integrating these critical insights with established concepts such as Agenda Setting, Framing, and the Echo-chamber Effect, the study advances scholarly understanding of the intricate interplay among media dynamics, network structures, and digital engagement that led to the consequential Capitol invasion. This comprehensive analysis sheds light on the cascading effects of media narratives and platform dynamics in orchestrating societal mobilization towards real-world ramifications, enriching scholarly discourse on the transformative influence of digital platforms in contemporary society. While providing substantial insights into the multifaceted realms of digital discourse and societal mobilization, this study suggests avenues for future research exploration. Expanding the analysis to incorporate various engagement metrics across a diverse range of digital platforms could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the broader media landscape. This holistic perspective may reveal how different platforms combat misinformation, uphold ethical standards, and

foster responsible digital discourse to cultivate a more enlightened online environment. The research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between media, networks, and digital platforms in shaping societal events, emphasizing the crucial roles they play in shaping public discourse and collective actions.

**KEYWORDS:** Capitol invasion, media effects, social network dynamics, digital discourse, societal mobilization.

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# 1. Introduction

"Big protest in D.C. on January 6. Be there, will be wild!" This provocative tweet from President Donald Trump on December 19th 2020 set the stage for a sequence of events that would come to define the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. Amidst the buzz of the potential comeback of former President Donald Trump, the United States finds itself at a crucial intersection, prompting a closer look at the events of the previous election cycle. Particularly, the unsettling Capitol invasion of January 6, 2021, marked by violence and a direct assault on American democracy, raises crucial questions about the blend of political rhetoric, social media dynamics, and the actions of passionate supporters.

Against the backdrop of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election - characterized by heightened political tensions and widespread claims of election irregularities - an unstable environment set the stage for the events that unfolded on January 6, 2021. Following the election, online discussions surged, fueling conspiracies and allegations. This pivotal moment, extending beyond the digital realm, posed profound challenges to democratic institutions and laid the groundwork for the Capitol invasion. The chaos that ensued resulted in the tragic loss of lives, numerous injuries, and violence against law enforcement (Levenson et al., 2021), leaving an enduring impact on the nation and prompting critical reflection on the role of social media in mobilizing and shaping the actions of fervent supporters.

Twitter, among other social media platforms, emerged as a central hub for discussions and coordination surrounding the events of January 6, 2021. However, the influence of social media on the Capitol invasion extends beyond the immediate buildup to the event itself. The proliferation of misinformation and the manipulation of public opinion, fueled by platforms like Twitter, played a pivotal role in shaping the broader narrative surrounding the 2020 U.S. Presidential election (Kasimov et al., 2023, p.19). President Trump's repeated claims of election fraud, disseminated through Twitter and other social media channels, sowed seeds of doubt and discord among millions of Americans. These claims, despite being widely debunked by reputable media sources (Kessler et al., 2021; Rubin, 2020), gained traction among certain segments of the population, leading to the widespread rejection of mainstream media as 'fake news' and the embrace of alternative narratives. However, Twitter made efforts to combat the spread of misinformation (Ortutay,

2021; Sanderson et al., 2021, p. 3). Twitter, for instance, eventually implemented measures to label and remove misleading content, including warnings on tweets containing disputed claims (Alonzo, 2020; Fowler, 2020). While these actions came amid mounting pressure and public scrutiny, they signify the platform's recognition of its responsibility to curb the dissemination of false narratives. Despite these efforts, Twitter's hands-off approach to content moderation, characterized by inconsistent enforcement of policies and a reluctance to take decisive action against misinformation, allowed false narratives to flourish unchecked in the critical period leading up to the Capitol invasion. This underscores the significant role of Twitter in fueling this assault on democracy, illustrating how online discourse can swiftly escalate into real-world crises with profound repercussions.

This transition from an online discourse to an offline upheaval underscores the critical need for a nuanced understanding of the mobilization processes that can lead to violence and tragedy. Existing scholarly discourse on the intersection of online discussions underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the mobilization processes that can lead to violence and tragedy. The events surrounding the Capitol invasion have undergone extensive analysis, with scholars, journalists, and legal experts grappling with the intricate dynamics that contributed to the unprecedented events of January 6, 2021 (Frenkel, 2021; Luceri et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2023). Both Ntontis et al.'s study (2023) and Kydd's research (2021) exemplify this by shedding light on theories surrounding the potential influences that led to the events of the Capitol invasion. Ntontis et al. (2023) focus on toxic leadership and the analysis of Donald Trump's speech, while Kydd (2021) delves into the prevalence of conspiracy theories and misinformation exacerbated through social media platforms. Building upon these insights, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of these theories by specifically examining certain media effects within the digital platform ecosystem, such as Twitter. By scrutinizing how certain media effects manifest on platforms and contribute to belief reinforcement and narrative amplification, this research aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics that may have played a role in mobilizing individuals toward real-world consequences during the Capitol invasion.

To initiate a thorough examination of the complex dynamics related to the Capitol invasion, attention should shift toward the fundamental concepts that form the basis of this investigation: media effects and platformization. Media effects refer to how media content influences audience attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (McCombs et al., 2014, p.782; Ophir et

al., 2021, p.476), while platformization denotes the gradual integration of online platforms into various aspects of our lives (Nielsen and Fletcher, 2023, p.1). These concepts provide a conceptual framework, offering a lens through which to comprehend the amplification of narratives and the mobilization of individuals. In the context of this study, platformization is not merely a broad phenomenon but a nuanced force that plays a role in shaping and disseminating information within the specific case of the Capitol invasion. Looking at the different kinds of media effects, the focus narrows to framing and agenda setting, acknowledging their pivotal roles in shaping public perceptions and influencing discourse (Coleman et al., 2009, p.147; Ophir et al., 2021, p.490). Framing involves the selective presentation of information to emphasize certain aspects, influencing the interpretation of events (Ophir et al., 2021, p.476), while agenda setting dictates the prominence and salience of issues within public consciousness (Coleman et al., 2009, p.147).

In order to investigate how online media discourse can become offline issues, I formulated the following research question: *"How did media effects play a role in shaping the narrative and motivations of the invasion of the Capitol, transforming an online discourse into an offline crisis, and how can these dynamics be explained through the frameworks of media effects and platformization?"*. To answer the research question, this thesis employed a mixed-method approach. The media effects of agenda setting and framing were explored through discourse analysis to understand the qualitative dimensions of content and motivations, and the analysis of how tweets flow through the network provided insights into the quantitative aspects of network dynamics.

By answering the above-stated research question, this inquiry hopes to contribute to scholarly debates in several fields. The exploration of platformization and media effects in shaping Capitol invasion narratives and motivations provides critical insights into the multifaceted dynamics that led to this unprecedented event. This research resonates with and contributes to the fields of media studies, political science, and digital communication. On a societal level, it deepens understanding of media-politics interplay, addressing real-world concerns in an era where social media influences public opinion, and uncovering the consequences of unregulated platformization is vital. The study, examining the role of digital platforms in political violence, aims to contribute to responsible platform use in shaping political narratives.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study relies on the integration of two crucial theoretical frameworks—media effects and platformization—providing a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the intricate dynamics, particularly in the context of online mobilization, behind the Capitol invasion. The interconnected analysis of these frameworks will contribute to a nuanced understanding of how online mobilization, influenced by media effects and platformization, played a pivotal role in the transition from an online discourse to an offline crisis. This section begins by discussing the concept of platformization, underscoring its role in shaping and disseminating information. Next, it delves into the concept of mobilization, understanding how online platforms mobilize individuals to translate concerns into real-world actions. To conclude, this section delves into media effects theories, spotlighting their role in shaping public perceptions.

### *2.1. Platformization of the public sphere*

To fully understand the concept of platformization and its implications, we need to explore the idea of the public sphere. The public sphere, as defined by Habermas, is a theoretical space where individuals come together to discuss and deliberate on matters of common interest (Wodak & Koller, 2008, p.21). This concept emphasizes open communication, critical debate, and the formation of public opinion in democratic societies. Traditionally, media such as newspapers and television have been pivotal in facilitating discourse within the public sphere. Habermas's notion of the public sphere has evolved significantly over time. Initially, it was characterized by face-to-face discussions in coffee houses and salons, which were central to the bourgeois public sphere of the 17th and 18th centuries (Wessler, 2019, p.13). This space allowed for intellectual debate and the formation of public opinion among the rising bourgeois class. With the advent of mass media in the 19th and 20th centuries, the public sphere transformed into a mass-mediated space where newspapers, radio, and television played crucial roles in shaping public discourse (Wessler, 2019, p.28). Habermas critiqued the mass media public sphere for turning citizens into passive recipients of information rather than active participants in discourse (Wodak &

Koller, 2008, p.31). This critique remains relevant as we witness another transformation with the rise of digital platforms.

The landscape of the public sphere has dramatically changed with the advent of digital platforms. This transformation is encapsulated in the concept of platformization. Platformization refers to the transformation and integration of online platforms into various aspects of our daily lives (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023, p.1). It encompasses the influence of digital platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube on the dissemination of information, communication, and social interaction (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023, p.3). According to Nielsen and Fletcher (2023, p.3), this integration significantly impacts how information is accessed and shared, with algorithms and platform policies shaping user experiences and content visibility. When considering the platformization of the public sphere, we are looking at the shift from traditional media to digital platforms as the primary spaces for public discourse. This transformation alters how discussions are initiated, conducted, and perceived. Online platforms have become the new public squares, where information flows rapidly, and public opinion is shaped in real-time. This shift is essential to understand contemporary issues of mobilization and influence.

These digital spaces facilitate interactions among users, enabling the rapid spread of ideas and narratives. However, they also introduce challenges such as the proliferation of misinformation and the creation of echo chambers, where users are exposed predominantly to content that reinforces their existing beliefs (Khosravinik, 2017, p.63). For instance, Twitter played a significant role during the Capitol invasion, illustrating how a social media platform can shape narratives and coordinate actions. The rapid spread of misinformation and inflammatory content on Twitter contributed to the heightened tensions leading up to the events of January 6th (York, 2022, p.1).

The platformized public sphere (de Winkel, 2023) operates within a relatively unregulated environment, raising questions about governance and accountability. Unlike traditional media, which are subject to journalistic standards and regulatory frameworks, digital platforms have fewer rules governing content and behavior (Schlesinger, 2024, p. 68). This lack of regulation has prompted critical discussions about the ethical and normative implications of platformization. De Winkel (2023, p. 149) argues that the platformized public sphere is marked by the monopolization of media spaces. Big Tech companies control key positions in the web infrastructure, encapsulating data flows and performing sphere

transgressions—moving into different societal sectors to expand their influence (de Winkel, 2023, p. 105). This dominance raises concerns about the democratic integrity of the public sphere, as platforms prioritize profit over public interest, leading to the commercialization of information and the colonization of public discourse.

Furthermore, the design and algorithms of platforms play a crucial role in shaping public discourse (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p.10). Information dissemination is rapid and widespread, but the accuracy and reliability of such information can be questionable. Deliberation occurs in fragmented, often polarized groups, where meaningful debate is challenged by the prevalence of like-minded clusters (Khosravini, 2017, p.63). Co-creation, the collaborative generation of content and ideas, is also mediated by platform dynamics (Poell et al., 2022, p.10). Online communities can collectively shape narratives and mobilize for causes, as seen in various social movements. However, this process is contingent on the visibility and amplification mechanisms of the platforms (Poell et al., 2022, p.8)

### **2.1.1. Normative Structures and Critical Discussions**

Understanding the ethical and normative implications of platformization is crucial for navigating the complexities of digital discourse, wherein normative structures serve as guiding principles for fostering fair and inclusive dialogue. Normative structures are essentially guidelines or rules that help us determine what is right and wrong in different situations (Di Bernardo, 1988, p. 101). In the context of the public sphere, these structures provide a set of principles for how discussions and conversations should take place in society. They ensure fairness, accuracy, and respect in dialogue. Originally put forth by philosopher Habermas, these normative structures serve as the foundation for ethical communication practices within the public sphere. Regarding platformization and this research, we are exploring how these rules or principles can be applied to ensure that discussions on digital platforms are fair, truthful, and inclusive for everyone involved.

Looking at the academic work of De Winkel (2023), Khosravini (2017) and (Poell et al., 2022), it seems there are three normative structures that are interesting to navigate the complexities of the platformized public sphere: rational-critical debate, equality of access and participation, and deliberative quality. Rational-critical debate emphasizes the need for informed and factual discussions (Blau, 2019, p.2), which is undermined when platforms

prioritize sensational content over accurate information. De Winkel (2023, p.20) highlights this issue by pointing out how Big Tech companies' control over media spaces can disrupt rational-critical debate, shifting the focus from fostering informed discourse to promoting engaging yet potentially misleading content. Equality of access and participation ensures that all individuals have equal opportunities to engage in public discourse (Gimmmler, 2001, p.5). This principle is compromised by the monopolization of media spaces (de Winkel, 2023, p.149) and the creation of echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives (Khosravinik, 2017, p.67). These dynamics marginalize alternative voices, leading to unequal participation in the public sphere. Deliberative quality pertains to the depth and inclusiveness of discussions (Dahlberg, 2007, p.4). The fragmented and polarized nature of online groups (Khosravinik, 2017, p.65) and the selective amplification of certain narratives by platform algorithms (Poell et al., 2022, p.6), undermine deliberative quality by restricting the range of viewpoints and reducing the depth of debate. The principle of equality of access and participation is closely linked to deliberative quality. When access to the public sphere is unequal, it restricts the depth and inclusiveness of discussions, ultimately affecting the quality of deliberation. Marginalizing or excluding certain voices due to unequal access diminishes the diversity of perspectives essential for meaningful deliberation. Thus, addressing disparities in access and participation is vital for nurturing a more robust and inclusive public discourse within the platformized public sphere.

Recognizing these disparities is crucial for understanding the limitations of online discourse and exploring avenues for improvement in promoting more inclusive and constructive dialogue on digital platforms. The Capitol invasion exemplifies how these dynamics can lead to significant real-world impacts, underscoring the importance of understanding the interplay of information dissemination, deliberation, and co-creation within platformized public spheres.

## **2.2. Mobilization**

Mobilization refers to the process of bringing people together to act towards a common goal, often facilitated through online platforms (Tilly, 2017, p1). In the context of the Capitol invasion, social media played a crucial role in transforming an online discussion into a significant offline event. Initially, conversations and debates about the 2020 U.S. Presidential election results and alleged fraud took place on platforms like Twitter,

Facebook, and Parler. These platforms became breeding grounds for conspiracy theories and calls to action, which eventually galvanized supporters of then-President Donald Trump to physically gather and storm the Capitol.

To understand why this happened we look at its core, and start exploring the concept of an Issue. An issue is a topic or problem that gains public attention and discourse (Crawford et al., 2001, p.4). Issues often arise from perceived grievances or injustices and can range from local concerns to national or global debates (Zhang et al., 2019, p.3). The formation of an issue involves the process by which certain topics gain prominence in the public sphere, driven by media coverage, public interest, and social dynamics (Boulianne et al., 2020, p.6; Zhang et al., 2019, p.2). In digital environments, this process is accelerated by the speed and reach of online platforms (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020, p.13).

So, the next question is, how does an issue that happens online through the reach of online platform turns into an offline issue? Issues can transition from online to offline realms through several mechanisms. One primary way is through the dissemination of information (Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2015, p.11). Social media platforms facilitate the rapid spread of content, enabling users to share information widely and quickly. Algorithms prioritize content that generates high engagement, often amplifying emotionally charged and sensational information (Khosravinik, 2017, p.64). This can create a feedback loop where users are continuously exposed to reinforcing narratives, solidifying their beliefs and motivating them to take action.

The Capitol invasion exemplifies this transition from online discussion to offline mobilization. The rapid spread of misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric on social media platforms contributed to the escalating tensions. Online discussions about election fraud, fueled by conspiracy theories, created a sense of urgency and injustice among Trump supporters. As these discussions intensified, they fostered a collective identity and shared purpose, culminating in the coordinated effort to storm the Capitol.

Understanding how issues form and transition from online to offline spaces requires a comprehensive look at the mechanisms of information dissemination, the role of algorithms, and the dynamics of online communities. Social media platforms enable the rapid spread of information, but they also create environments where misinformation can thrive. These factors contribute to the mobilization process, as seen in the Capitol invasion, where digital platforms played a pivotal role in shaping the events that unfolded.

### *2.3. Media Effects Theories*

We've explored how social media platforms serve as catalysts for the rapid dissemination of information, facilitating the formation of narratives and the mobilization of individuals. These processes elucidate how digital platforms contribute to the amplification of issues, extending their impact beyond online spaces and into the offline realm. Now, transitioning to the exploration of media effects theories, the focus shifts to how these platforms play a pivotal role in magnifying the significance of issues, ultimately influencing public discourse and shaping collective actions. This study specifically focuses on Agenda Setting, Framing, and the Echo-chamber Effect as key media effects, due to their significant relevance to the events surrounding the Capitol invasion. Academic literature and studies exploring the dynamics leading up to the Capitol invasion have consistently pointed to these theories as instrumental in shaping public discourse and perceptions (Campbell, 2024; Fantl, 2021; LaPlant et al., 2023; Zulli et al., 2022).

There are, however, several other media effects theories that were not included in this study. For example, Priming deals with the media's role in influencing the standards by which people evaluate political figures or events (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p.11), but it overlaps with the more direct focus of agenda setting and framing in this context. Another example is the Spiral of Silence theory, which suggests that individuals may be reluctant to express minority opinions (Tsfati et al., 2013, p.3). This theory was not included because it centers more on opinion suppression rather than content dissemination. These theories, while valuable, were not the primary focus here due to the specific emphasis on how social media directly influenced the Capitol invasion through the dissemination and reinforcement of particular narratives.

#### **2.3.1. Agenda Setting**

Agenda Setting refers to the process by which the mass media emphasizes certain issues more frequently and prominently, leading the public to perceive these issues as more important than others (Coleman et al., 2009, p.147). Simply put, when something is covered extensively in the news, people tend to see it as a significant issue. Although the agenda setting theory was originally formulated in the context of traditional mass media, it also

applies to today's complex systems of information dissemination, which include a multitude of social media platforms (McCombs et al., 2014, p.788).

Agenda setting is closely tied to the concept of issue formation. When the media repeatedly highlights a particular topic, it not only brings that issue to the forefront of public consciousness but also shapes the way the public discusses and understands it (Guber & Bosso, 2013, p.25). This process helps in the formation and solidification of issues, making them important topics of public discourse. Emerging agendas are now defined by a wider range of content and communication channels, including social media, where users can amplify certain issues through sharing and engagement, thereby influencing public perception and debate (Salman et al., 2016, p.408).

A pertinent example of agenda setting can be seen in the lead-up to the Capitol invasion on January 6th, 2021. One of the most prominent topics in the media during this period was the rumor of widespread election fraud in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election (Chaggaris, 2020; Mulcahy, 2020; Pazniokas, 2022; Seitz et al., 2021). Traditional media and social media platforms extensively covered these claims, leading many individuals to perceive election fraud as a critical and urgent issue. According to agenda setting theory, this heightened focus on election fraud helped make it a dominant subject on social media, thereby influencing public opinion and mobilizing individuals who believed the election results were illegitimate. This illustrates how agenda setting can play a crucial role in issue formation and subsequent mobilization, as evidenced by the events surrounding the Capitol invasion.

### **2.3.2. Framing**

Another media effect is Framing. Framing involves the deliberate highlighting of specific arguments, perspectives, and facts in the presentation of events and issues, which can shape how audiences perceive and respond to news (Ophir et al., 2021, p.476). By focusing on particular aspects of a story, the media can influence the interpretation and importance that the public assigns to an issue.

Framing is intrinsically linked to issues and issue formation. When the media frames an issue in a certain way, it can shape public understanding and discourse around that issue, effectively guiding the audience's perception and prioritization of the topic (Oxley, 2020, p.4). This process plays a crucial role in how issues are formed and maintained in the public

sphere, as the framing can highlight specific viewpoints and downplay others, thereby influencing public attitudes and responses.

An illustrative example of framing can be seen in the way right-wing media have framed immigration as a national security threat. By emphasizing the potential dangers and negative impacts of immigration, these media outlets have shaped public discourse to prioritize themes of security and protection over other perspectives, such as the economic or humanitarian aspects of immigration (Meeks, 2019, p.213). This framing has contributed to the formation and reinforcement of specific policy objectives and public attitudes within this online community, demonstrating the power of framing in shaping issue perception.

In the context of the Capitol invasion, framing played a critical role in shaping the narratives that fueled the events of January 6th, 2021. Right-wing media and social media platforms framed the 2020 Presidential Election results as fraudulent and illegitimate, repeatedly highlighting claims of election fraud and corruption (Bell, 2020; Fox News, 2020; Jaimungal, 2020). This framing contributed to the formation of a pervasive issue within certain online communities, driving the belief that action needed to be taken to save the democracy. This demonstrates how framing, in conjunction with agenda setting, can influence public perception and mobilization, leading to significant real-world consequences such as the Capitol invasion.

### **2.3.3. Echo-chamber effect**

Once individuals express interest in a particular topic, algorithms expose them to increasingly more content on that subject, leading to the formation of filter bubbles where they are selectively exposed to information aligning with their existing beliefs and preferences (Khosravinik, 2017, p.64; Zimmer et al., 2019, p.16). This personalized information environment contributes to the echo-chamber effect, a reinforcing cycle that solidifies like-mindedness within online communities (Khosravinik, 2017, p.64).

The Capitol invasion on January 6th, 2021, highlighted how these echo-chambers, shaped by personalized information environments, influenced participants' narratives and motivations. For example, the claim that "Antifa" – which is a left-wing organization - orchestrated the invasion, instead of the Trump supporters, spread rapidly within echo-chambers on social media platforms, where algorithms promoted content resonating with users' existing beliefs (Herndon, 2021, p.1; Kydd, 2021, p.11).

The concept of echo-chambers is highly relevant to issue formation. Echo chambers shape not only individual perspectives but also the flow of information within networks, influencing which issues gain prominence and how they are framed. In these networks, individuals are more likely to receive and share information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, creating a self-contained information ecosystem (Zimmer et al., 2019, p.4).

#### *2.3.3.1. Echo-Chamber effect and Social Media Networks*

Social media networks play a pivotal role in shaping the spread of information and the dynamics of collective actions, contributing significantly to the echo-chamber effect. The structure and dynamics of these networks reinforce existing beliefs within specific online communities (Cinelli et al., 2021, p.2). Research by Allcott & Gentzkow (2017, p.299) on the spread of fake news highlights how individuals tend to interact more with content that aligns with their beliefs, leading to the formation of echo chambers. This selective exposure to information marginalizes dissenting opinions and limits exposure to diverse perspectives, further amplifying users' existing beliefs.

Moreover, social media networks foster increased engagement and interaction within online communities. As more users join these platforms, the potential for interactions, discussions, and collaborations grows (Ellison et al., 2007, p.1145). This heightened engagement enhances the visibility of content and fosters a sense of community and belonging among users with shared interests or beliefs (Kane & Luo, 2018, p.3665). The interplay between social media networks and the echo-chamber effect underscores the complex dynamics of information dissemination and ideological polarization in digital spaces.

#### *2.3.3.2. Critique of Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers*

The concept of filter bubbles has been met with criticism in the academic world due to several reasons. One major concern is the oversimplification of complex information dynamics in digital environments. Filter bubbles suggest that individuals are isolated within homogeneous information bubbles, leading to a narrow worldview. However, research has shown that individuals are often exposed to diverse perspectives and information sources even within online spaces curated by algorithms (Talamanca & Arfini, 2022, p.26). Additionally, the extent to which filter bubbles actually influence individuals' beliefs and

behaviors is still debated. The study of Bakshy et al. (2015, p.1130) have found limited evidence of significant effects, suggesting that other factors, such as cognitive biases and social influence, play a more substantial role in shaping individuals' opinions and attitudes. Moreover, the term "echo chamber" has been criticized for its pejorative connotations, implying a passive reception of information rather than active engagement with diverse viewpoints (Bruns, 2021, p.34). Overall, while the concept of filter bubbles and echo chambers highlights important considerations about information exposure online, its explanatory power and practical implications remain subject to ongoing scholarly debate and scrutiny.

In the context of the Capitol invasion study, the examination of media effects theories—Agenda Setting, Framing, and the Echo-chamber Effect—proves essential. These theories offer a framework to understand how social media, as a dominant information source, can influence the perception and response of individuals to particular issues surrounding the Capitol incident. The interconnection of these three concepts sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the events surrounding the Capitol invasion, emphasizing the need for a holistic understanding of the digital landscape's impact on societal crises.

### 3. Methodology

This research investigates the lead-up events to the Capitol invasion in January 2021, focusing on Twitter data analysis. It comprises two dimensions: scrutinizing tweet distribution networks and analyzing the content dynamics within tweets. To ensure a robust examination, a mixed-method approach is employed. Quantitative analysis, drawing inspiration from Bamberger & Ang (2016, p.2), unveils overarching patterns in tweet flows. Concurrently, qualitative methods, guided by Cypress (2015, p.1), investigate the content, themes, and motivations behind individual tweets. This integrative approach not only cross-validates findings but also provides depth, context, and user perspectives crucial for capturing the multifaceted nature of online discourse in the complex realm of the Capitol invasion (Creswell, 2004, p.8). The combination of these analyses is anticipated to yield a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics surrounding this unprecedented event.

The methodology unfolds in a structured sequence. First a qualitative discourse analysis is conducted, delving into language use, framing, and agenda-setting within tweets. This phase is followed by employing social network analysis to extract quantitative insights from the intricate web of interactions within Twitter. The triangulation model integrates these methods, offering a comprehensive understanding of the digital dynamics leading to the Capitol invasion. To conclude the methodology section, the ethical considerations relevant to this research will be presented.

#### 3.1. *Discourse Analysis*

For the qualitative component of the research question, centering on understanding how media effects, including framing and agenda setting, played a role in shaping the narrative and motivations of the Capitol invasion, an in-depth approach is essential. Qualitative research, with its focus on rich, context-specific insights (Cypress, 2015, p.1), is particularly suited for uncovering the intricate interplay of media effects within textual content. This approach allows for a thorough exploration of how framing and agenda-setting mechanisms manifest in the language used, sentiments expressed, and narratives constructed within tweets. By delving into the qualitative depth, the study aims to

illuminate the ways in which these media effects operate within the digital discourse surrounding the Capitol invasion.

For this qualitative exploration, the method that is used is a discourse analysis. This approach is well-aligned with the research question, as it enables the examination of language use, framing devices, and agenda-setting elements within the Twitter discourse. Discourse analysis, with its emphasis on language as a social practice (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024, p.71), provides a robust framework for identifying and interpreting the underlying media effects that contributed to shaping the narrative and motivations of the Capitol invasion.

To identify clear instances of media effects related to framing, agenda-setting, and narrative construction concerning the Capitol invasion, tweets were selected based on their relevance. Up to 400 tweets were retrieved from Twitter – now called X - specific filters were applied to ensure relevance to the research on the events leading up to the Capitol invasion in January 2021. The filtering criteria included a predefined time period, spanning from October 23rd to January 6th, 2021, to capture tweets within the critical timeframe of interest. Additionally, terms and hashtags associated with the Capitol invasion and related themes, such as ‘#electionfraud’ or ‘#stopthesteal’, were used as filtering parameters. While prioritizing tweets with high engagement and visibility, efforts were made to include a range of voices and viewpoints. This dataset served as the focal point for examining the ways in which media effects are expressed within the digital conversations surrounding the Capitol invasion.

The analysis itself is facilitated in Excel. With the use of color coding, themes will systematically be organized for interpreting the qualitative data (Ose, 2016, p.6), and ensuring a rigorous examination of the textual content within the specific context of the Capitol invasion. The qualitative component of this research involves a comprehensive discourse analysis, focusing on three key aspects: framing analysis, agenda setting, and narrative analysis. Where the framing analysis identifies how events are portrayed within tweets, paying close attention to the language used to describe election fraud, democratic processes, and the Capitol invasion. This aspect reveals the perspectives and biases present in the discourse. Agenda setting examines which issues are emphasized in the tweets and how the prominence of these issues shifts over time, highlighting the evolving focus of the online conversation. Finally, narrative analysis explores the construction of overarching

narratives surrounding the election and the Capitol invasion, identifying key themes and motifs that emerge. This integrated approach provides a nuanced understanding of the media effects at play within the digital discourse.

The discourse analysis dissects the textual landscape, unraveling the expressions of media effects. Through this qualitative lens, the study aims to contribute a deeper understanding of how framing and agenda-setting mechanisms operated within the digital discourse, shaping the narrative and motivations associated with the Capitol invasion on January 6th, 2021.

### *3.2. Social Network Analysis*

To discern the underpinnings of how platformization contributes to the transformation of online issues into offline crises, a quantitative approach is deployed. Quantitative research serves as the methodological foundation due to its effectiveness in capturing complex phenomena through measurable variables and revealing overarching patterns within extensive datasets (Bamberger & Ang, 2016, p.2). This research, focusing on the digital dynamics leading to the Capitol invasion, finds its quantitative strength in the application of social network analysis through Gephi and Excel.

Social network analysis is a method recognized for its prowess in unveiling latent structures and relationships within networks. It is employed to scrutinize the flow of tweets and interactions during the specified timeframe (Abascal-Mena et al., 2015, p.8). This affords a holistic view of how information propagates and converges within the digital realm, providing a good perspective on the platformization processes that contribute to the evolution of online content into tangible societal crises.

For the social network analysis, a purposive sampling strategy is employed to select tweets that are indicative of the broader conversation and discussions surrounding the Capitol invasion. Criteria for inclusion involve identifying tweets that mention key terms such as 'election', 'fraud', and relevant hashtags. Additionally, retweets and user engagements will be considered to capture the flow of information within the network accurately. This approach ensures that the dataset chosen provides a comprehensive and relevant overview of the Twitter conversations surrounding the Capitol invasion. A dataset meeting these criteria is the VoterFraud2020 dataset from Abilov et al. (2021), comprising 7.6 million tweets and 25.6 million retweets from 2.6 million users. Covering Twitter

activities between October 23rd and December 16th, 2020, this dataset establishes a comprehensive foundation for quantitative inquiry, with a focused emphasis on the theme of voter fraud claims. Given the size of the dataset, a random sampling method was subsequently employed to extract a subset for analysis, while maintaining proportional representation across communities. Each community's sample size was determined based on the percentage of users and tweets it contributed to the original dataset. The details on these percentages can be found in Appendix B (p.69-70), which contains tables with data and percentages for reference and transparency in the sampling process. This approach ensured that the sampled dataset remained representative of the overall discourse surrounding the Capitol invasion while making analysis feasible within the constraints of a smaller sample.

In the context of the research conducted using the dataset from Abilov et al. (2021), the social network analyses delve into the intricate web of interactions among individual Twitter users, focusing on examining retweet patterns. This process aims to culminate in the creation of a network of users that reveals the connections and relationships between individuals. The primary objective is to extract meaningful insights into the role of platformization in influencing the dissemination of information, fostering mobilization, and shaping events leading up to the Capitol invasion on January 6th, 2021. The analysis will particularly focus on understanding how these communities spread information within and among each other, rather than specifically identifying new echo chambers as the primary goal. Since this would require a new dataset.

Additionally, Excel was used to generate a detailed Sankey table to visually represent the retweet dynamics observed among the identified communities. A Sankey diagram is a flow diagram where the width of the bands corresponds to the flow rate (Evkoski et al., 2021, p.8). This visual representation provides a comprehensive view of how retweets flow within and between the communities, offering valuable insights into the dissemination patterns and information exchange strategies employed. By delving into the dynamics of information flow and communication patterns through social network analysis and the creation of a Sankey table in Excel, the research endeavors to uncover the mechanisms through which content circulates within and between the distinct clusters. These analytical approaches shed light on the collaborative dissemination strategies and interconnectedness of online discourse surrounding the Capitol invasion, providing insights into information

propagation dynamics within the digital realm, including the potential role of echo chambers in shaping content dissemination patterns.

### *3.3. The Triangulation Model*

Triangulation is employed to integrate insights from both quantitative and qualitative data. This merging of social network analysis and discourse analysis, guided by the Triangulation Design Model, forms the foundation of this methodological approach. It allows us to navigate the intricate Twitter landscape surrounding the Capitol invasion, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the research problem (Thurmond, 2001, p.253).

Triangulating quantitative social network analysis with qualitative discourse analysis enhances the study's depth and breadth. Social network analysis uncovers macro-level patterns, identifying key connections points in the Capitol invasion discourse. Qualitative analysis delves into individual tweets, capturing nuanced content and media effects. Integrating both methods overcomes their respective limitations, ensuring a more holistic understanding of the Twitter landscape and the complex digital dynamics leading to the Capitol invasion.

### *3.4. Ethical considerations*

Ethical considerations in this study are paramount to ensure the responsible and respectful handling of Twitter data. To uphold privacy, all tweets are anonymized, rendering them untraceable to individual users, unless they are explicitly intended as public publications (Roberts, 2015, p.10). Tweets from prominent political figures, such as Donald Trump, will be considered within the scope of public expression due to their nature and visibility, and are therefore not anonymized (Laas et al., 2022, p.4). The focus will be solely on the content of tweets, and no attempts will be made to identify or reveal the identities of individual users. In addition to anonymizing tweets to protect user privacy, it is crucial to further ensure anonymity by removing any names and tags mentioned in the tweets. This step is essential in preserving the anonymity of individuals mentioned in the tweets and upholding ethical standards in handling Twitter data (Roberts, 2015, p.10; Webb et al., 2017,

p.342). Tweets are not considered participants in the research framework, eliminating the need for direct interaction or ethical approval for human subjects, provided that they are untraceable to individual users (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018, p.2). The anonymization process aims to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of Twitter users while allowing for a thorough examination of the digital discourse surrounding the Capitol invasion. This approach aligns with ethical guidelines for social media research, prioritizing the responsible and ethical use of publicly available data (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018; Laas et al., 2022; Roberts, 2015; Webb et al., 2017).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Discourse Analysis

The dataset for this analysis comprises tweets related to the Capitol invasion and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. Specifically, up to 400 tweets were selected for in-depth examination. These tweets were collected from October 23rd to January 6th, 2021, a crucial period leading up to the Capitol invasion. The analysis focused on tweets containing hashtags and terms such as #electionfraud, #stopthesteal, and other relevant keywords associated with the alleged election fraud and subsequent events. Given the objective of understanding how the narrative surrounding the Capitol invasion was shaped and identifying motivations for the event, the analysis predominantly concentrated on the perspectives of Republicans and followers of Donald Trump.

In this section, the results of the discourse analysis will be presented through several key themes that align with the media effects of agenda setting and framing. The themes are; Dominance of Election Fraud Allegations, Framing of Media and Information, Calls for Action and Mobilization, Systematic Blame and Conspiracy, and Illegitimacy of Biden's Presidency. Each theme will illustrate how specific narratives and motivations were shaped within the digital discourse leading up to the Capitol invasion. By organizing the findings in this manner, it will be demonstrated how these media effects influenced public perception and collective behavior during this critical period.

Furthermore, the analysis includes examples and screenshots of quotes from the tweets to provide concrete illustrations of the narrative elements and motivations observed. Additionally, a more extensive collection of screenshots showcasing relevant tweets can be found in Appendix A on pages 67 and 68, offering a comprehensive visual representation of the discourse surrounding the Capitol invasion as captured in the dataset.

#### 4.1.1. Theme 1: Dominance of Election Fraud Allegations

The overwhelming presence of election fraud claims in the tweets illustrates how this issue was set as a primary agenda. Republicans consistently emphasized the possibility of fraud, reinforcing its importance in the public discourse. Videos and testimonies circulated widely, attempting to substantiate these claims, while Democrats worked to debunk them, highlighting the polarized nature of the agenda setting.

For example, former President Donald Trump's Twitter activity during this period was dominated by tweets about election fraud. He frequently posted allegations, shared videos purportedly showing 'evidence' of fraud, and retweeted supportive statements from allies. His tweets on this subject also had high engagement and visibility, often garnering thousands of likes, retweets, and comments, which amplified their reach and impact.

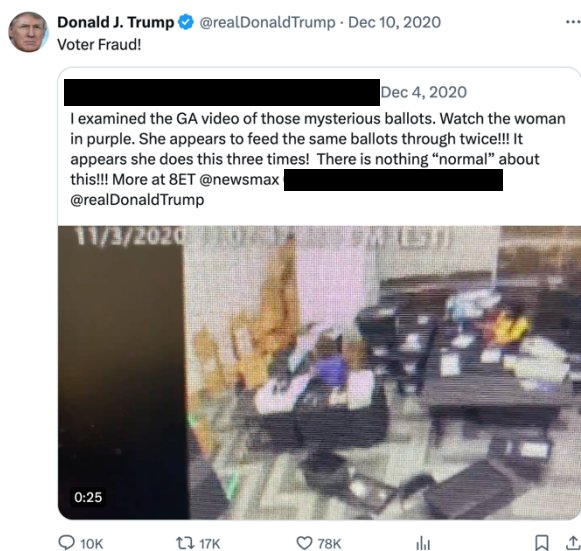


Figure 1: Screenshot tweet Dec 15, 2020

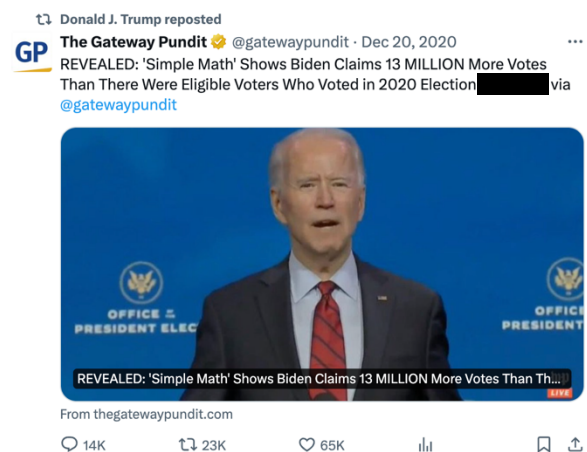


Figure 2: Screenshot tweet Dec 15, 2020

News articles shared on Twitter also contributed to the agenda setting. Numerous tweets linked to articles from conservative news outlets alleging widespread fraud, questioning the integrity of the election process, and calling for legal action. These news companies often aligned with Trump and the Republicans, providing coverage that



Figure 3: Screenshot tweet Dec 6, 2020

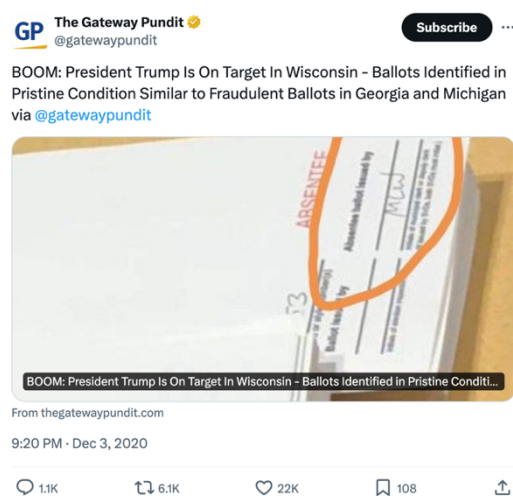


Figure 4: Screenshot tweet Dec 3, 2020

supported their perspectives and amplified their claims. Some examples of tweets are shown above in figures 3 and 4. Conversely, tweets from democratic users and media outlets aimed to disprove these allegations. Underneath, in figures 5 and 6, are examples of tweets from these media outlets.



Figure 5: Screenshot tweet Nov 20, 2020



Figure 6: Screenshot tweet Nov 24, 2020

The sheer volume of tweets discussing election fraud underscores its prominence. The hashtag #electionfraud or #voterfraud, along with #stopthesteal, became a rallying cry for those convinced of the fraud narrative (see figures 7, and 8). The persistent focus on these allegations helped cement the issue as a central topic in the public discourse, reflecting the agenda-setting power of social media platforms.

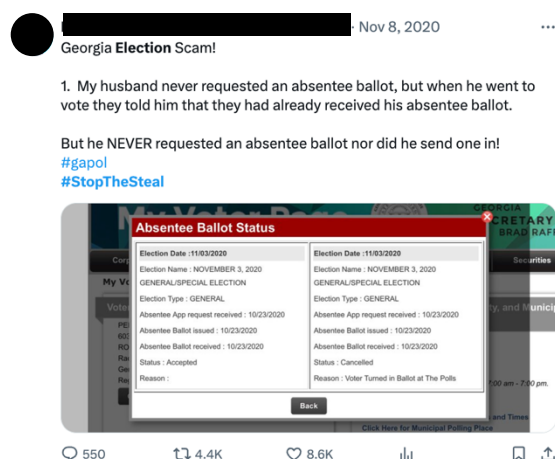


Figure 7: Screenshot tweet Nov 8, 2020



Figure 8: Screenshot tweet Jan 5, 2021

#### *4.1.1.1. Dominance of Election Fraud Allegations and the Public Sphere*

In the theory section, three normative structures were discussed: Rational-Critical Debate, Equality of Access and Participation, and Deliberative Quality. Focusing on the dominance of election fraud allegations in public discourse, it's clear these frameworks play a crucial role in understanding the dynamics of the public sphere. The impact of social media platforms amplifying the election fraud narrative is significant. It has led to a fragmented public sphere where opposing groups are entrenched in echo chambers, reinforcing their beliefs and becoming increasingly polarized. This fragmentation undermines the deliberative function of the public sphere, crucial for rational debate and consensus-building, essential for democratic processes. Instead, the dominance of election fraud allegations has fueled misinformation and distrust in the electoral system, posing challenges to democratic legitimacy and social cohesion.

Within this context, the normative framework of Rational-Critical Debate stands out. Sensational and misleading content surrounding election fraud disrupt rational-critical debate by overshadowing factual discourse, as observed by De Winkel (2023, p.41). This undermines informed decision-making and fosters citizen distrust. Additionally, the framework of Equality of Access and Participation is relevant. The monopolization of media spaces by specific narratives like election fraud allegations leads to unequal participation and marginalization of alternative voices, as highlighted by De Winkel (2023, p.45) and Khosravini (2017, p.67). This unequal access exacerbates polarization and challenges the democratic ideal of equal participation and representation.

#### **4.1.2. Theme 2: Framing of Media and Information**

A significant aspect of the tweets was the framing of media and information. Republicans, led by Trump, consistently framed mainstream media as untrustworthy, positioning their own narrative as the true and reliable source. This created a division where followers were encouraged to distrust any information not aligned with their views. Trump and other Republicans frequently labeled established media outlets like CNN, The New York Times, and others as "fake news", while promoting alternative news sources that echoed his claims of election fraud. For example, Trump repeatedly tweeted accusations against mainstream media for allegedly covering up the "truth" about election fraud. In one tweet, he stated, "The only thing more RIGGED than the 2020 Presidential Election is the FAKE

NEWS SUPPRESSED MEDIA. No matter how big or important the story, if it is even slightly positive for “us”, or negative for “them”, it will not be reported!" (Donald Trump, 2020). This framing positioned traditional news outlets as adversaries, undermining their credibility among his followers.

To reinforce this narrative, Trump and other Republicans frequently used statistics and confident assertions, despite lacking substantial evidence. Tweets often included percentages or figures meant to illustrate the supposed scale of fraud. An example is; "In Arizona, it turns out that 3% of the votes cast in the 100 count vote sampling were tainted or worse. This would be, if carried forward, approximately 90,000 votes more than we would need to win the State. Now we were granted a much larger sample to work with." (Trump, 2020). Even without concrete proof, the repetitive and assertive nature of these claims helped solidify them in the minds of supporters, since this specific tweet was liked more than 100.000 times and retweeted over 30.000 times.

Additionally, Trump's tweets would often highlight endorsements from media personalities and politicians who supported his views. For instance, he retweeted posts from commentators on Fox News and other conservative platforms who echoed his claims of a rigged election (see figures 9 and 10). This selective amplification of supportive voices further entrenched the framing that only media aligned with Trump were credible.



Figure 9: Screenshot tweet Dec 18, 2020

The framing strategy also extended to social media platforms themselves. Trump and his allies frequently accused Twitter of censorship and bias. An example could be: "Twitter just suspended this guy's account for testifying why he would never have certified Arizona's results with the mathematically problematic numbers in front of him. Does the Left



Figure 10: Screenshot tweet Dec 25, 2020

think they're just going to suppress and censor Biden's fake presidency to life?" (2020). This Tweet could have sought to delegitimize any actions Twitter took to label or remove misleading content about the election. And it also frames Twitter as a politically left-sided company.

#### *4.1.2.1. Framing of Media and Information and the Public Sphere*

The framing of media and information, particularly by political figures like Trump and his allies, significantly impacts the public sphere. By consistently labeling mainstream media as untrustworthy and promoting alternative narratives, they create a divisive environment where followers are encouraged to distrust any information not aligned with their views. In this context, two particularly relevant normative structures are Rational-Critical Debate and Equality of Access and Participation. The framework of Rational-Critical Debate emphasizes the importance of informed and factual discussions, yet political figures like Trump consistently promote alternative narratives and discredit mainstream media, overshadowing factual discourse. This erosion of rational-critical debate undermines the integrity of public discourse within the public sphere. Additionally, the selective framing of media platforms and the unequal amplification of certain voices challenge the principle of Equality of Access and Participation. By promoting alternative narratives and labeling mainstream media as untrustworthy, political figures create an environment where followers are encouraged to distrust information not aligned with their views, thus marginalizing alternative perspectives and undermining the democratic ideal of equal participation in public discourse.

#### **4.1.3. Theme 3: Calls for Action and Mobilization**

The tweets by Trump and his supporters often included calls for courage and action, framing the situation as a battle that required active participation to rectify the perceived wrongs. Trump frequently used language that evoked a sense of urgency and impending crisis, such as stating that the country needed "courage & wisdom"(Trump, 2020) to fight the alleged election fraud. This framing presented the situation not just as a legal or political dispute, but as a moral imperative that demanded immediate and decisive action. Examples of this can be seen in Trump's tweets where he urged his followers to fight and stop the

steal. "WE HAVE JUST BEGUN TO FIGHT!!!" (Trump, 2020), and "I Can Be a Part of the 'Surrender Caucus' or I Can Fight for Our Country" (Trump, 2020), are tweets that give example to this and suggest a combative approach to addressing the election results. Again, these tweets often received high levels of engagement, with thousands of retweets and likes, indicating that this call to action resonated with a large number of his supporters.

In addition to Trump's direct appeals, his supporters amplified this rhetoric by organizing and promoting rallies and events on social media. Hashtags like #FightForTrump and #MarchForTrump became rallying cries, uniting his followers around the common cause of contesting the election results (see figures 11 and 12). The tweets frequently featured language that framed participation in these events as a patriotic duty, further motivating individuals to act. The culmination of these calls for action was evident on January 6th, when thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington, D.C., eventually leading to the storming of the Capitol. The narrative constructed through Trump's rhetoric and the broader Twitter discourse had effectively mobilized a significant number of individuals to physically manifest their discontent, demonstrating the powerful role of digital platforms -or in this case Twitter - in translating online mobilization into real-world action.

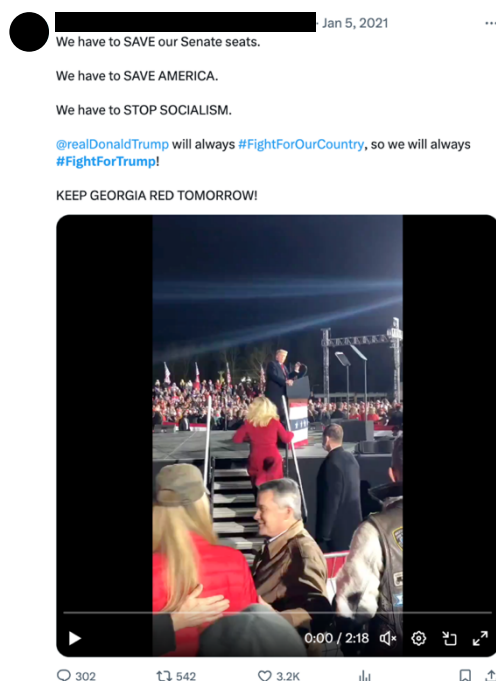


Figure 11: Screenshot tweet Jan 5, 2021



Figure 12: Screenshot tweet Nov 14, 2020

#### *4.1.3.1. Calls for Action and Mobilization and the Public Sphere*

The tweets by Trump and his supporters, characterized by calls for courage and action, framed the situation as a moral imperative demanding immediate and decisive action to rectify perceived wrongs. This sense of urgency and crisis, evoked through language emphasizing the need for courage and wisdom, motivated followers to contest the election results and actively participate in rallies and events organized on social media. The culmination of these calls for action was evident on January 6th, with the storming of the Capitol, highlighting the powerful influence of digital platforms in translating online mobilization into real-world action.

Within this context, the normative structure of deliberative quality in the public sphere is particularly pertinent. The fragmented and polarized nature of online discourse, exacerbated by selective amplification of certain narratives and calls for action, undermines the depth and inclusiveness of deliberation. The dominant framing of the situation as a moral imperative for immediate and decisive action can hinder meaningful debate and consensus-building, essential for democratic processes. Moreover, the mobilization of individuals to physically manifest their discontent, as seen in the storming of the Capitol, underscores the need to address disparities in access to and quality of public discourse. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a more robust and inclusive digital discourse that upholds democratic principles and promotes informed decision-making. By promoting a deeper engagement with diverse perspectives and facilitating constructive dialogue, digital platforms can play a pivotal role in nurturing a more deliberative public sphere.

#### **4.1.4. Theme 4: Systematic Blame and Conspiracy**

The tweets often framed the election results as part of a broader conspiracy involving voting machines and Democratic officials. This narrative suggested a coordinated effort to deny Trump his victory, further fueling distrust and anger among his supporters. By continuously pointing to supposed irregularities and fraud, Trump and his allies created a pervasive sense of injustice and betrayal.

For example, Trump frequently tweeted about Dominion Voting Systems, alleging without evidence that their machines were rigged to favor Joe Biden. He claimed that these machines had switched votes from him to Biden, a theory that was widely debunked but

nonetheless gained traction among his followers. Tweets such as "(...) Dominion Machines shifted 2-3% of Trump Votes to Biden. Far more votes than needed to sway election." (Trump, 2020) exemplified this tactic, presenting these claims as factual information.

Supporters echoed these sentiments, often retweeting and sharing similar accusations against Democratic officials (see figures 13 and 14). Claims that dead people had voted, that non-citizens were casting ballots, and that ballot counters were part of a vast conspiracy appeared frequently in the data.

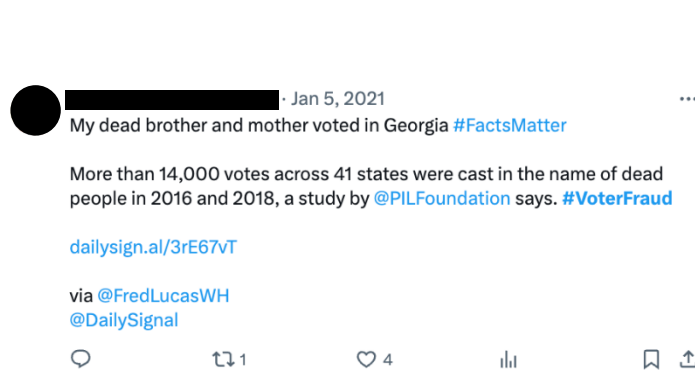


Figure 13: Screenshot tweet Jan 5, 2021



Figure 14: Screenshot tweet Nov 12, 2020

News articles and videos shared on social media platforms played a crucial role in propagating these conspiracy theories. For instance, numerous tweets linked to conservative news outlets and opinion pieces that detailed alleged evidence of fraud, despite their lack of credible sources or verifiable facts. These articles were often presented as investigative journalism, giving them an air of legitimacy that resonated with the audience predisposed to distrust mainstream media.

The framing of the election as part of a grand conspiracy not only delegitimized the electoral process but also demonized those perceived as responsible for the alleged fraud. This included not only Democratic officials and election workers but also Republican figures who did not support Trump's claims. The rhetoric often involved personal attacks and accusations of betrayal, deepening divisions within the political landscape and among the American public (see figures 15 and 16).

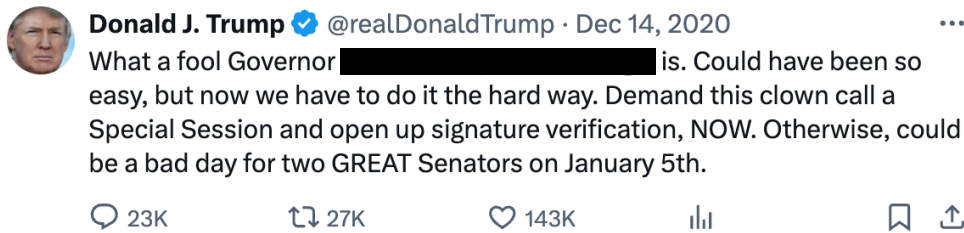


Figure 15: Screenshot tweet Dec 14, 2020



Figure 16: Screenshot tweet Dec 15, 2020

Overall, the systematic blame and conspiracy narratives played a critical role in shaping the mindset of Trump's supporters, contributing to the heightened emotions and eventual mobilization that culminated in the Capitol invasion. These narratives reinforced a worldview where the fight against the alleged fraud was seen as a fight for truth and justice, justifying extreme measures in the eyes of many.

#### *4.1.4.1. Systematic Blame and Conspiracy and the Public Sphere*

The systematic blame and conspiracy narratives surrounding the election results significantly impact the public sphere, particularly in shaping the mindset of Trump's supporters. By framing the election as part of a grand conspiracy involving voting machines and Democratic officials, Trump and his allies create a pervasive sense of injustice and betrayal, fueling distrust and anger among their followers. Within this context, the normative structure of Rational-Critical Debate in the public sphere is particularly relevant. This framework emphasizes the importance of informed and factual discussions, yet the propagation of unfounded conspiracy theories undermines the integrity of rational-critical debate by prioritizing sensational claims over verifiable facts.

Moreover, the framing of the election as part of a conspiracy not only delegitimizes the electoral process but also demonizes those perceived as responsible for the alleged fraud. This contributes to the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and deepens divisions within the political landscape and among the American public. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a more robust and inclusive digital discourse that upholds democratic principles and promotes informed decision-making. By promoting a deeper engagement with diverse perspectives and facilitating constructive dialogue, digital platforms can play a pivotal role in countering the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories within the public sphere.

#### **4.1.5. Theme 5: Illegitimacy of Biden's Presidency**

The framing of Joe Biden as an illegitimate president was a pervasive theme in the tweets analyzed, underscoring a steadfast refusal to accept the 2020 election results. This narrative was heavily promoted by Trump and his supporters, who consistently portrayed Biden's victory as fraudulent and undeserved. This theme perpetuated the belief that Donald Trump was the rightful winner, thereby contributing to the continued division and unrest.

Trump's tweets frequently declared the election to be "stolen" and "rigged," explicitly stating that he was the legitimate winner. For example, Trump tweeted, "NO WAY WE LOST THIS ELECTION!" (Trump, 2020) and "How can you give an election to someone who lost the election by hundreds of thousands of legal votes in each of the swing states. How can a country be run by an illegitimate president?" (Trump, 2020). Such declarations

could have been designed to sow doubt about the integrity of the electoral process and delegitimize Biden’s presidency from the outset.

Supporters echoed these sentiments, often using hashtags like #NotMyPresident and #StopTheSteal. These tweets depicted Biden as a usurper who had unlawfully taken power, which resonated strongly with Trump’s base. The repetition of these messages reinforced the perception of Biden’s presidency as invalid, fostering an environment where many felt justified in resisting the election outcome (see figures 17 and 18).



Figure 17: Screenshot tweet Jan 4, 2021



Figure 18: Screenshot tweet Jan 5, 2021

This framing led to increased hostility towards those who accepted or supported Biden’s presidency, including Republican officials who certified the election results or spoke against Trump’s claims. These individuals were often labeled as traitors or part of the alleged conspiracy, further deepening the political divide. For example, the following tweet of Trump; “These are two RINO Republicans who fought against me and the Republican Party harder than any Democrat. They allowed states that I won easily to be stolen. Never forget, vote them out of office!” (Trump, 2020). This exemplified the pressure placed on officials to align with Trump’s narrative, illustrating the powerful influence of this framing.

In summary, the theme of Biden’s illegitimacy as president was a critical element in the digital discourse surrounding the 2020 election and the Capitol invasion. By continuously framing Biden’s presidency as fraudulent, Trump and his supporters created a powerful and persistent narrative that undermined confidence in the electoral process, fostered division, and contributed to significant political and social unrest. This narrative not only questioned

the legitimacy of the election outcome but also fueled actions and attitudes that perpetuated instability and conflict.

#### *4.1.5.1. Illegitimacy of Biden's Presidency and the Public Sphere*

The pervasive framing of Joe Biden as an illegitimate president underscores a steadfast refusal to accept the 2020 election results, contributing to continued division and unrest within the public sphere. Trump and his supporters consistently portrayed Biden's victory as fraudulent and undeserved, perpetuating the belief that Donald Trump was the rightful winner.

Within this context, the normative structure of Deliberative Quality in the public sphere is particularly relevant. This framework emphasizes the depth and inclusiveness of discussions, yet the persistent framing of Biden's presidency as illegitimate fosters hostility towards those who accept or support his presidency, further deepening the political divide. By labeling individuals who certified the election results or spoke against Trump's claims as traitors or part of a conspiracy, this narrative undermines the principle of deliberative quality by stifling dissenting voices and restricting the range of viewpoints. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a more inclusive and constructive digital discourse that upholds democratic principles and promotes informed decision-making. By promoting a deeper engagement with diverse perspectives and facilitating constructive dialogue, digital platforms can play a pivotal role in countering the spread of misinformation and divisive narratives within the public sphere.

#### *4.2. Social Network analysis*

Through this analysis, the aim is to deepen our understanding of how these online communities interact, and influence the broader narrative landscape. The research highlights the presence of a distinct political division within these communities, with one cluster (Community 0) vehemently challenging voter fraud claims and the remaining clusters (Communities 1, 2, 3, and 4) promoting such assertions. This spatial and ideological delineation offers a microcosmic view of the polarized nature of online discourse, mirroring broader societal divides. Furthermore, the concept of echo chambers is a central theme in this examination, providing insights into how communities amplify their beliefs and restrict

exposure to opposing viewpoints. By analyzing retweet dynamics through a Sankey Graphic, this study also investigates the flow of information within and across these communities, offering a nuanced perspective on how digital interactions shape and reinforce ideological echo chambers.

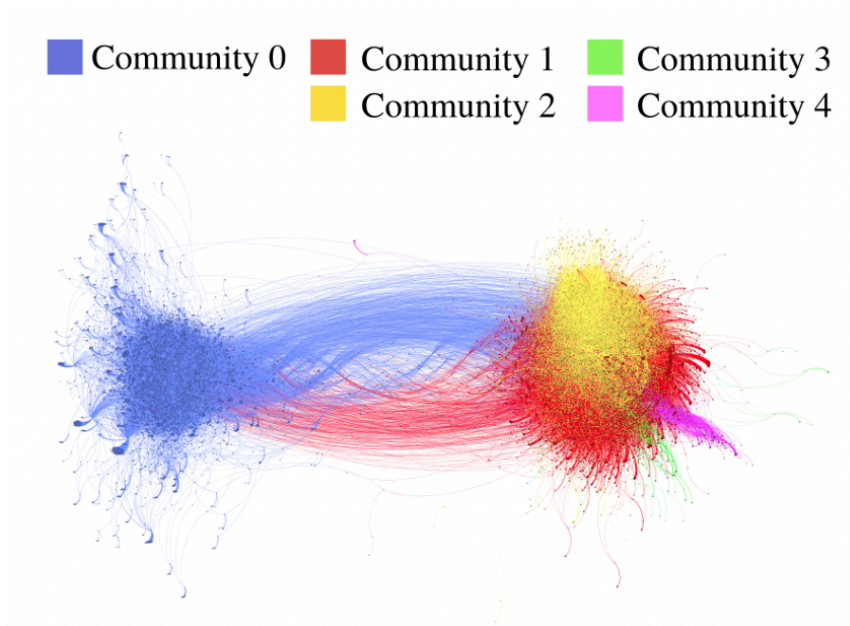
First the communities identified in the dataset of Abilov et al. (2021) will be discussed, and insights will be visualized with relevant graphs. Following this, we will examine the dissemination of information by analyzing the retweets among these communities. Throughout the section, each topic will be connected to the echo-chamber effect and its implications for the public sphere.

#### **4.2.1. Communities**

In the research of Abilov et al. (2021), they delved into the dynamics of online communities within a dataset, uncovering the presence of five distinct community clusters within the context of the Capitol invasion. To elucidate the relationships and connections between these communities, a network analysis was employed, visualizing the results through the tool Gephi. The visualization, as depicted in figure 19, provided valuable insights into the cohesive structures and potential interconnections among the identified communities, offering a clearer understanding of how information flows and interactions manifest in the digital realm.

The four communities from the research are named from community 0 to 4. Community 0 stands out as a focal point in the network, comprised of accounts that exhibit a tendency to challenge and counter claims related to voter fraud (Abilov et al., 2021, p.3). Moving to Community 1, we encounter a cluster that aligns more closely with promoting assertions of voter fraud. Users within this community seem dedicated to amplifying and endorsing claims that support the existence of fraudulent activities related to voting processes (Abilov et al., 2021, p.3). Community 2 emanates as a significant component of the promoter cluster, and is even deeper embedded within the realms of advocating for voter fraud claims compared to community 1 (Abilov et al., 2021, p.3). Its members play a crucial role in supporting and disseminating narratives that align with the overarching themes of the promoter cluster. Community 3 presents a unique facet within the network, characterized by users predominantly tweeting in Japanese (Abilov et al., 2021, p.4). This linguistic diversity adds an intriguing layer to the network dynamics, showcasing a distinct

subgroup with its own communication patterns and content focus. Lastly, Community 4 emerges as a distinct entity within the network, with a majority of users communicating primarily in Spanish (Abilov et al., 2021, p.4). This Spanish-speaking community adds a layer of linguistic and potentially cultural diversity to the network, contributing to the multifaceted nature of information dissemination within the system.



*Figure 19: Retweet graph colored by communities, from the Abilov et al., 2021 paper*

In figure 19 we see a clear distinction of the left-leaning detractor cluster, prominently represented by Community 0, and the right-leaning promoter cluster, comprising Communities 1, 2, 3, and 4, within the network visualization highlights a stark political division. Community 0, aligned with detractors, primarily embodies left-leaning viewpoints (Abilov et al., 2021, p.4), characterized by a predisposition to challenge and oppose voter fraud claims. On the opposite end, the promoter cluster, encompassing Communities 1, 2, 3, and 4, leans towards right-leaning perspectives (Abilov et al., 2021, p.4), advocating for and amplifying narratives supportive of voter fraud claims. By positioning the promoter communities on the right and the detractor community on the left within the visualization, this spatial arrangement metaphorically mirrors the broader political spectrum. The inherent polarization in political ideologies is distinctly illustrated as promoter users, located on the right side of the visualization, tend to align with right-leaning perspectives, while detractor users, situated on the left, gravitate towards left-leaning

viewpoints. This spatial delineation not only reflects the ideological stance of each cluster but also emphasizes how these political leanings guide the narrative discourse and information dissemination dynamics surrounding voter fraud claims within the network.

#### *4.2.1.1. Communities and echo-chambers*

Expanding upon the analysis of the communities and their political leanings, figure 19 shed light on how these distinct clusters within the network contribute to the formation and perpetuation of echo chambers. The clear separation between the left-leaning detractor cluster and the right-leaning promoter cluster, as visualized in figure 19, serves as a microcosm of the broader echo chamber effect prevalent in online discourse.

The alignment of individuals in Community 0 towards left-leaning perspectives and those in Communities 1, 2, 3, and 4 towards right-leaning viewpoints exemplifies how like-minded users gravitate towards supportive narratives while actively challenging dissenting opinions. This selective exposure to information that reinforces existing beliefs, coupled with the amplification of specific narratives within each cluster, creates an environment where individuals are more likely to be entrenched in their ideological silos, reinforcing confirmation biases and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

By positioning the promoter communities on one side and the detractor community on the other within the visualization, the spatial arrangement not only illustrates the political divide but also underscores how these distinct echo chambers perpetuate the echo-chamber effect. This phenomenon intensifies the polarization of political ideologies, as individuals within each cluster engage with content that affirms their beliefs, further solidifying their ideological perspectives and narrowing the scope of information they encounter within their respective echo chambers.

#### *4.2.1.2. Communities and the Public Sphere*

The exploration of echo chambers within the platformized public sphere underscores critical implications for the broader landscape of public discourse and engagement. As digital platforms shape and influence information flows, the prevalence of echo chambers highlights the pressing need to uphold normative structures that foster open, fair, and inclusive dialogue within these spaces. The findings regarding echo chambers in the

platformized public sphere call attention to the normative structure of deliberative quality. Fostering depth, inclusiveness, and engagement in discussions is essential for combating the polarizing effects of echo chambers and promoting a more meaningful and diverse exchange of ideas within digital platforms. By prioritizing deliberative quality, platforms can work towards nurturing constructive dialogue and enhancing the richness of public discourse in the digital realm.

In addressing the implications of echo chambers for the public sphere, focusing on deliberative quality can serve as a foundation for fostering a more robust, fair, and equitable digital discourse environment. This emphasis on meaningful dialogue and engagement with diverse perspectives is essential for countering the divisive impacts of echo chambers and cultivating a space for constructive exchange within the evolving landscape of digital communication.

#### 4.2.2. Sample dataset visualization

In order to provide a more focused analysis while maintaining the representability of the broader dataset, a sample dataset was derived from the research conducted by Abilov et al. (2021). This sample dataset encapsulates key characteristics and distributions

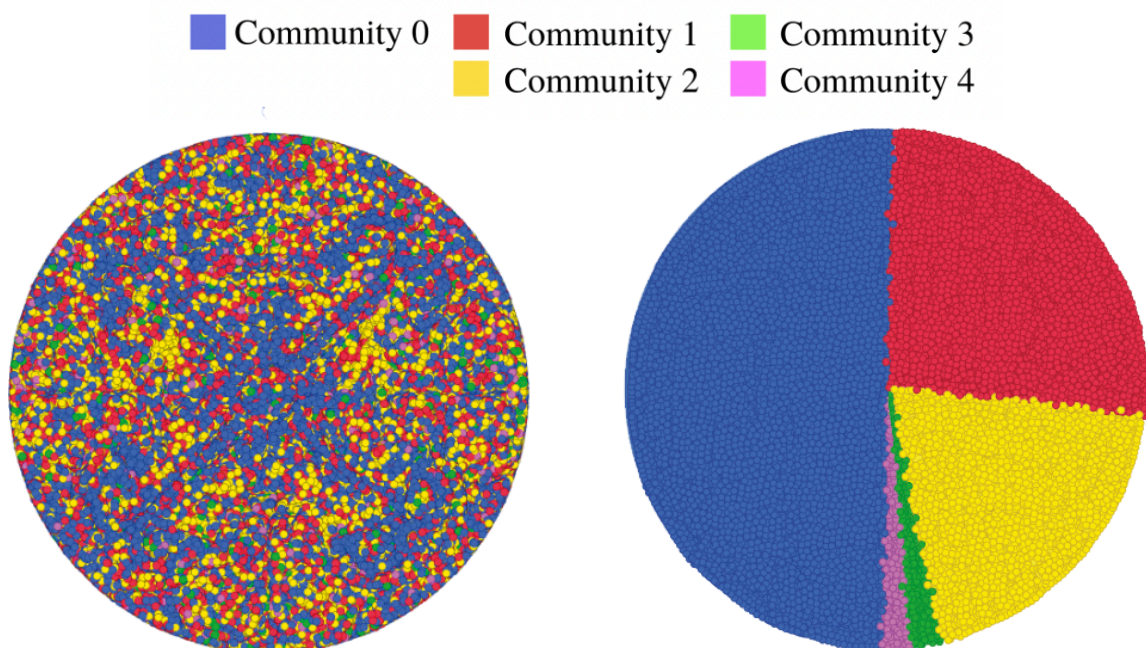


Figure 20: Network graph that visualizes sample of dataset

observed in the original dataset, ensuring that proportions and community structures remain consistent even though with a reduced volume of data.

Visual representations of this sample were created using a network graph in Gephi (see figure 20). The network graph features two circles: the left circle representing the dataset as a whole, with numerous colored dots intermixed to reflect the community diversity. Each dot signifies a tweet and its connection to a specific community cluster within the dataset. The right circle, on the other hand, features a circular diagram where the colors are grouped together, illustrating the composition of each community as a percentage of the total dataset. For more detailed information regarding the percentages within the sample dataset, refer to the data presented in Appendix B (p.69-70). This sample dataset was utilized for creating a Sankey chart (see figure 21) to further visualize the flow and connections between different community clusters within the dataset.

#### **4.2.3. Retweets within the communities**

Within the realm of retweets, a detailed analysis has been conducted to delve into the dynamics of information dissemination. From the sample of the original dataset provided by Abilov et al., 2021 (see figure 21), a thorough analysis of retweet dynamics was conducted. A detailed examination included the creation of a comprehensive retweet Sankey Graphic using ChartExpo in Excel, highlighting the interconnectedness among the five distinct communities. Notably, the visualization accurately reflected the original percentages of tweets per community, showcasing the flow of tweets across these communities and illustrating the dissemination of information in a compelling manner.

The dataset includes user community labels and additional community-based metrics detailing the retweet counts by each community for individual tweets. For a given tweet, the retweet count by each community represents the total amount of retweets it accrued from users within community X. This visual representation, the Sankey Graphic, offers a compelling narrative by mapping out the retweet interactions among the five communities. It provides valuable insights into the patterns of information flow, showcasing how tweets traverse from one community to another. The flow of retweets signifies the propagation of content, offering a glimpse into each community's influence and reach in shaping narratives and amplifying specific messages within the online discourse landscape.

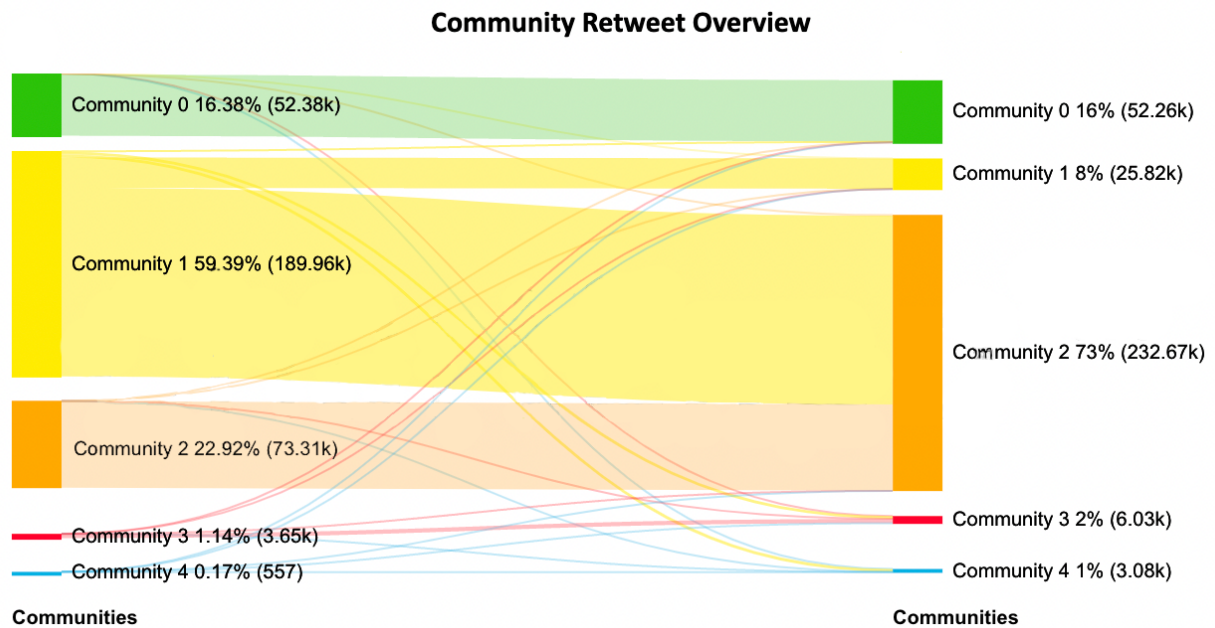


Figure 21: Flow of retweets shown in Sankey Chart made by ChartExpo in Excel.

Upon analyzing the Sankey chart, intriguing patterns emerge regarding the flow of retweets across communities. In Community 0, a significant portion of retweets remains internal to the community. This phenomenon may be attributed to their unique status as the sole detractor community within the dataset, showcasing a tendency for retweets to circulate predominantly within their ranks, reflecting their stance on voter fraud claims. In contrast, Community 1 stands out for receiving a substantial number of retweets from Community 2. This inter-community dynamic is noteworthy, considering that both communities share a promotion-oriented sentiment, albeit Community 2 leaning slightly towards a more far-right ideology. The exchange of retweets between these communities hints at a shared promotional fervor, with Community 1 notably garnering the highest retweet count overall, signaling an active engagement with content dissemination. Interestingly, it is notable that Community 1 does not engage in retweeting tweets from Community 2. This could potentially be attributed to the perceived divergence in ideological extremities, with Community 1 possibly distancing itself from the more extreme-right leaning tendencies of Community 2. Community 2 predominantly exhibits a self-contained retweet pattern, with a notable preference for internal circulation. Given their extremist tendencies, this insular behavior within their own community aligns with their distinct ideological positioning. Moving to Community 3 and 4, both communities, characterized by

non-English predominance in their tweets, demonstrate a notable internal retweet dynamic. The preservation of retweets within these language-specific communities can be attributed to the linguistic and potentially cultural context in which their content is primarily communicated.

The observations from the Sankey chart underscore the nuanced interplay of retweet dynamics across diverse communities, shedding light on the intricacies of information sharing, ideological orientations, and linguistic contexts within the digital sphere.

#### *4.2.3.1. Retweet Dynamics and echo-chambers*

The analysis of the retweet dynamics among different communities, as revealed by the Sankey chart, provides valuable insights into the presence of echo-chambers within the digital sphere. Community 0, primarily retaining retweets within its own boundaries, exemplifies a characteristic echo-chamber effect where information predominantly circulates within a specific group that shares similar viewpoints. This insular behavior aligns with the tendency of echo chambers to reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to dissenting perspectives, as seen with the detractor stance on voter fraud claims. The notable exchange of retweets between Community 1 and Community 2, despite their shared promotion-oriented sentiment, hints at the interconnectedness between these communities. However, the lack of retweeting from Community 1 to Community 2 reflects a potential echo-chamber boundary, where divergence in ideological extremities could be restricting information flow between the groups. Community 2's preference for internal retweet circulation aligns with the characteristics of an echo chamber, emphasizing the reinforcement of extremist ideologies within a closed network. This self-contained pattern further solidifies the echo-chamber effect, where like-minded individuals amplify and perpetuate shared beliefs within their isolated community. In contrast, Community 3 and 4, with non-English predominance in their tweets, exhibit internal retweet dynamics reflective of language-specific echo chambers. The preservation of retweets within these linguistic communities underscores how language and cultural contexts can contribute to the formation and sustenance of echo chambers.

The circulation of information through retweets, as depicted in the Sankey chart (see figure 21), underscores the presence of echo chambers characterized by information

predominantly circulating within specific communities. This pattern reveals how retweet dynamics contribute to reinforcing ideological orientations and information sharing patterns within the digital sphere, potentially facilitating the formation of online echo chambers. This observation highlights how the tendency for retweets to remain within the same community or ideological standpoint serves as a mechanism for reshaping and reinforcing shared messages within closed networks, reflecting the potential onset of online echo chambers.

#### *4.2.3.2. Retweet Dynamics and the Public Sphere*

The analysis of retweet dynamics among diverse communities and the identification of echo chamber effects within the digital sphere have significant implications for the public sphere. Globally, the presence of echo chambers, as observed through the circulation of information predominantly within specific communities, underscores the polarization and insulation of discourse within online spaces. Echo chambers limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, reinforce existing beliefs, and restrict the breadth of information available. This phenomenon poses a challenge to the public sphere's foundational principles of open dialogue, diverse participation, and the exchange of ideas, potentially hindering the formation of well-informed public opinions.

When considering normative structures, the observations regarding retweet dynamics and echo chambers emphasize the importance of principles such as equality of access and participation and deliberative quality. Ensuring equal opportunities for individuals to engage in public discourse, despite the presence of echo chambers, becomes crucial in maintaining a diverse and inclusive public sphere. Additionally, fostering deliberative quality, which involves promoting informed and meaningful discussions while counteracting the impact of echo chambers on the depth and inclusivity of dialogue, is essential for upholding the integrity of public discourse. By addressing disparities in access, promoting diverse participation, and nurturing a deliberative environment, the public sphere can mitigate the divisive effects of echo chambers and foster a more robust, inclusive, and constructive digital discourse landscape.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

This research explores how media effects, shaped the narratives and motivations leading to the Capitol invasion on January 6th, 2021. Set against the backdrop of the contentious 2020 U.S. Presidential election, the study examines the pivotal role of Twitter in amplifying claims of election fraud and mobilizing individuals towards real-world actions. The central research question is: "How did media effects shape the narrative and motivations of the Capitol invasion, transforming an online discourse into an offline crisis?" Using a mixed-method approach, the study conducts a qualitative discourse analysis to understand the content and motivations behind the tweets and visualizes tweet flows for network analysis.

The conclusion section of the dissertation is organized into distinct segments. Firstly, it delves into the outcomes of the discourse analysis, emphasizing the key takeaways from the examination of communication patterns and content. These insights are linked back to the theoretical framework discussed in section two (p. 10-19) and further linked to the concept of the public sphere. Secondly, it presents the results of the network analysis, elucidating the connections and relationships among different communities within the study. Once again, these findings are linked to the established theory and the concept of the public sphere. Subsequently, it addresses the triangulation of findings, wherein the results from various methodologies and analyses are compared and combined to formulate comprehensive conclusions that address the research question. Lastly, the section discusses the limitations of the study and offers recommendations for future research, acknowledging any research process constraints or data analysis shortcomings. It also suggests areas for further exploration or improvement within the field of study.

### 5.1. Conclusion Discourse Analysis

The discourse analysis revealed that the dominant narrative of election fraud, perpetuated primarily by Trump and his supporters, significantly shaped public discourse and contributed to the mobilization of individuals. This narrative was amplified through high-engagement tweets, widespread sharing of conspiracy theories, and coordinated efforts to delegitimize mainstream media. The framing of election fraud as a critical issue not only dominated the agenda but also fostered a sense of urgency and injustice among

Trump's followers. This intense focus on alleged fraud and the subsequent call to action played a crucial role in motivating the events that culminated in the Capitol invasion. During the analysis, five key themes were identified: Dominance of Election Fraud Allegations, Framing of Media and Information, Calls for Action and Mobilization, Systematic Blame and Conspiracy, and Illegitimacy of Biden's Presidency.

The discourse analysis unveiled how the narrative of election fraud, primarily propagated by Trump and his supporters, significantly influenced public discourse and mobilized individuals. This narrative, amplified through high-engagement tweets and widespread sharing of conspiracy theories, framed election fraud as a critical issue dominating the agenda. Republicans consistently emphasized the possibility of fraud, reflecting its prominence in public discourse with hashtags like #electionfraud and #stopthesteal. At the same time, Trump and his followers framed mainstream media as untrustworthy, advocating alternative news sources to support their claims and accusing social media platforms of bias. Calls for action and mobilization were prevalent in Trump's tweets, urging his followers towards active participation in rectifying perceived wrongs. The urgency conveyed through urgent language positioned the situation as a moral imperative, culminating in real-world action on January 6th. Additionally, the systematic blame and conspiracy narratives surrounding the election results suggested a broader effort to deny Trump his victory, spotlighting distrust and anger among supporters. Claims regarding Dominion Voting Systems and other allegations contributed to an entrenched conspiracy narrative within his followers. Furthermore, the portrayal of Joe Biden as an illegitimate president by Trump and his supporters fueled division and unrest, perpetuating the belief that Trump was the rightful winner. This narrative, declaring the election as "stolen," undermined confidence in the electoral process and deepened political divides, showcasing the far-reaching implications of the contested election results. The culmination of these themes highlighted the intricate web of narratives, mobilization efforts, and conspiracy theories that shaped public discourse and escalated events leading to the Capitol invasion.

The discourse analysis conducted revealed a notable convergence with prominent media effects theories, particularly Agenda Setting and Framing. By closely examining the amplification of election fraud allegations and the deliberate framing of media narratives within the discourse, a clear link to the previously discussed theory emerges. Drawing on the Agenda Setting theory, the prioritization and repetition of certain topics within the

discourse underscore how media platforms wield significant power in directing public attention and shaping perceived importance (Coleman et al., 2009, p.147). In this context, the continued emphasis on election fraud claims through the proliferation of numerous tweets containing news articles, opinions, and discussions related to election fraud serves as a concrete and specific illustration of how the agenda setting theory operates in shaping public discourse. Furthermore, the concept of Framing theory offers valuable insights into how the specific portrayal and packaging of information within media content can influence public perceptions and interpretations (Ophir et al., 2021, p.476). The distinct framing of media narratives surrounding the election fraud allegations within the discourse, highlights the strategic construction of particular storylines and perspectives, ultimately shaping the way in which individuals engage with and make sense of the information presented. Trump's repeated accusations against mainstream media for allegedly concealing the "truth" about election fraud and labeling established news outlets as "fake news" is a clear example of how media narratives were framed to undermine the credibility of traditional sources.

This alignment between the empirical findings and media effects theories underscores the intricate relationship between media representation, public opinion formation, and the construction of alternative realities. Through the lens of these theories, the impact of digital platforms in mobilizing individuals and sustaining specific narratives becomes increasingly salient, shedding light on the complex interplay between media content and the collective understanding of social and political events.

#### **5.1.1. Discourse and the Public Sphere**

The various themes identified in the discourse analysis have significant implications for the public sphere, notably impacting key normative structures. The dominance of election fraud allegations and systematic blame and conspiracy narratives disrupt rational-critical debate by prioritizing sensational and misleading content over factual discourse, while the framing of media and information by political figures like Trump fosters distrust in established media and amplifies selective narratives, further overshadowing factual discourse. The distortion of discourse through these narratives aligns with the concept of platformization, which underscores the integral role of digital platforms like Google, Facebook, and Twitter in shaping public discourse (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023, p.3). The

dissemination of such narratives on digital platforms can exacerbate misinformation and influence public opinion, thereby distorting the quality of discourse within the platformized public sphere. This highlights the significant impact of digital platforms on the shaping of narratives and information dissemination in contemporary public discourse.

Additionally, the selective framing and amplification of certain narratives observed in the discourse analysis also pose challenges to the principle of equality of access and participation in public discourse. This phenomenon can be situated within the context of platformization, where digital platforms wield significant power in shaping the accessibility and visibility of information (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023, p.3). The monopolization of media spaces by specific narratives, such as election fraud allegations, can lead to the marginalization of alternative viewpoints and hinder equal participation in public dialogue, highlighting the complex interplay between digital platforms and democratic engagement within the public sphere.

Deliberative quality is also undermined, as calls for action and mobilization emphasize immediate, emotionally charged action over reasoned debate and consensus-building, and the framing of Biden as an illegitimate president fosters hostility towards dissenting voices, stifling inclusive and constructive dialogue. This distortion of discourse aligns with the challenges posed by platformization and the digital public sphere, where fragmented and polarized discussions as discussed by Khosravini (2017, p.63), hinder meaningful deliberation.

## *5.2. Conclusion Social Network Analysis*

The social network analysis conducted as part of this study focused on visualizing and analyzing the community clusters identified by Abilov et al. (2021) within the digital discourse surrounding the Capitol invasion. Community 0 emerged as the primary detractor, countering claims of voter fraud, while Communities 1, 2, 3, and 4 propagated the fraud narrative. The visualizations provided insights into how these communities operated within echo chambers, reinforcing their existing beliefs through retweet dynamics and limited exposure to opposing viewpoints. The Sankey Graphic visualization further highlighted the flow of information within and across these communities, emphasizing the role of social media in both amplifying and insulating ideological positions.

The analysis revealed that information dissemination within online communities exhibited characteristics aligning with the echo-chamber effect theory, as elucidated by studies such as Zimmer et al. (2019) and Allcott & Gentzkow (2017). By exploring the distinction between detractors questioning voter fraud claims and promoters advocating such assertions, a deeper understanding of their retweet dynamics emerged. Detractors predominantly engaged in internal retweet activities, circulating information within their community, thus reinforcing collective skepticism towards fraud allegations in line with the self-reinforcing nature of echo chambers. Furthermore, the interaction between promoters within and across communities, such as the nuanced relationship observed between Community 1 and Community 2, showcases how mutuality and ideological alignment contribute to echo-chamber effects. The preference for self-reinforcement through internal retweet activity, as evident in Community 2, underscores the principle of echo chambers where like-minded viewpoints are shared within the same group, supported by the study of Khosravini (2017, p.64). Moreover, the influence of linguistic and cultural factors on information dissemination, highlighted by strong internal retweet dynamics in language-specific communities like Community 3 with Japanese tweets and Community 4 with Spanish tweets, emphasizes the role of language barriers in potentially limiting the exchange of diverse ideas within these echo chambers.

### **5.2.1. Retweet Dynamics and the Public Sphere**

Within the results, a clear affirmation of the echo-chamber theory emerges, evident in individuals predominantly interacting within their echo-chambers and engaging with content reinforcing their existing beliefs through retweets, as illuminated by the analysis of retweet dynamics. This observation aligns with the normative structure of rational-critical debate, emphasizing factual discussions and critical analysis, as outlined by Blau (2019, p.2). However, the insular behavior seen in retweet patterns contradicts these principles, inhibiting diverse perspectives and impeding well-rounded discourse. Transitioning to the normative structure of equality of access and participation, explored by Gimpler (2001), the limited exposure to diverse viewpoints and the marginalization of dissenting voices within these insular networks raises challenges in fostering inclusive engagements across various perspectives. Likewise, the restricted exchange of retweets across communities, analyzed through the Sankey chart, reveals limitations in diverse viewpoints and meaningful

discussions, as discussed by Dahlberg (2007). Promoting inclusivity, informed dialogues, and engagement with a spectrum of perspectives is vital to overcome these limitations and enhance the quality of public deliberation and public discourse.

### *5.3. Triangulation of findings*

In aligning the findings with existing literature explored in the theory section, the study intertwines critical theories of media effects - Agenda Setting, Framing, and Echo-chamber Effect - and platformization to illuminate the intricate dynamics that culminated in the Capitol invasion. The resonance with academic discourse reveals a consistent thematic thread reflecting the interplay between media narratives, network dynamics, and digital mobilization in shaping societal events.

The Capitol invasion on January 6th was a culmination of various intersecting factors, notably influenced by media dynamics, polarization, and radicalization. Twitter played a crucial role in disseminating and amplifying narratives surrounding election fraud, shaping public perceptions, and fueling individuals towards extreme actions. The propagation of conspiracy theories and misinformation eroded trust, deepened divisions, and instigated doubt that contributed to the intensity of the events. Polarization and the prevalence of echo chambers further aggravated these issues, creating environments where extreme viewpoints were nurtured, and dissenting voices were not only marginalized but often actively silenced, such as through the Republican narrative of discrediting reputable media sources as 'fake news' writers. The reinforcement of like-minded perspectives within these echo chambers led to a reinforcement of existing beliefs and a limited exposure to diverse viewpoints. Retweet dynamics that prioritize engagement inadvertently perpetuated this isolation by amplifying content that resonated with pre-existing beliefs, solidifying ideological alignment and intensifying animosity towards opposing perspectives. Within these echo chambers, radicalization found fertile ground as individuals were repeatedly exposed to increasingly polarized and distorted narratives. The narratives surrounding election fraud, media distrust, and systemic blame not only fueled suspicions but also cultivated a sense of urgency and moral outrage among certain groups. This heightened emotional rhetoric, combined with urgent calls to action framed by influential figures, propelled individuals towards mobilization and active involvement in what they perceived as

a fight against perceived injustices. The urgency and moral imperatives embedded within these narratives validated extreme measures as a perceived response to what was believed to be a fraudulent election.

In scrutinizing the research question regarding the influence of media effects on the narrative and motivations behind the Capitol invasion, the integration of insights with theoretical frameworks unveils a complex web of dynamics. Media dynamics, encompassing social media platforms and traditional news outlets, played a pivotal role in disseminating information and shaping public perceptions before the crisis. Network structures, observed through the clustering of like-minded groups and echo chambers on Twitter, influenced how narratives were reinforced within distinct online communities. Digital engagement, characterized by online interactions, sharing of content, and mobilization efforts, highlighted the active participation and receptivity of individuals in shaping collective actions that transitioned the discourse from digital realms to real-world consequences. This comprehensive analysis underscores the critical interplay of media dynamics, network structures, and digital engagement in driving the narrative shifts and motivating the events leading to the Capitol invasion on January 6th.

This integrated analysis showcases the significant impact of media dynamics, network structures, and digital engagement in shaping the narrative shifts and motivations that culminated in the unprecedented events at the Capitol. It underscores the complex relationships between media influences, online community dynamics, and real-world outcomes, highlighting the multifaceted nature of how digital discourse can translate into tangible actions with far-reaching consequences.

#### *5.4. Discussion*

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge by delving into the intricate interplay of media effects, polarization, and digital engagement in shaping the narrative and motivations behind the Capitol invasion. By conducting a nuanced discourse analysis and social network analysis with a focus on retweet dynamics, the study offers fresh insights into how online discourse, particularly on Twitter, played a pivotal role in amplifying narratives of election fraud and mobilizing individuals towards real-world actions. By bridging critical theories of media effects, such as Agenda Setting and Framing, with empirical data, this research sheds light on how digital platforms influence public

perceptions and drive collective actions during significant socio-political events. Furthermore, the study uncovers the impacts of echo chambers and platformization, providing valuable implications for understanding the complexities of digital engagement and the dissemination of information in the contemporary media landscape.

While the retweet dynamics within detraction and promotion groups align with the echo-chamber effect framework, it's essential to recognize that these observations, while suggestive, do not definitively prove the presence of echo chambers. To establish a more concrete understanding, further in-depth analysis is necessary to explore the diversity of perspectives accessed by individuals within these groups. Investigating how information exposure varies and assessing the extent of ideological isolation could provide a clearer picture of the potential existence of echo chambers within the studied communities.

Moreover, the study's focus solely on retweet data may limit the depth of analysis conducted. Introducing additional engagement metrics such as likes and comments could yield more nuanced insights into the nature of interactions between different community groups. Understanding the patterns of user engagement beyond retweets could shed light on the levels of active participation, sentiment towards shared content, and the overall dynamics of information dissemination within these online networks.

Additionally, despite the valuable insights gained from focusing on Twitter, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this platform-centric approach. Recognizing that each social media platform presents unique characteristics and influences user behaviors differently is crucial for understanding the specific dynamics highlighted within the context of Twitter, rather than as a representation of all digital spaces collectively. Emphasizing additional engagement metrics beyond retweets, exploring multiple social media platforms beyond Twitter, and assessing the strategies platforms employ to combat misinformation can enhance insights into digital discourse dynamics and inform recommendations for fostering a more informed and responsible online environment.

Additionally, it's crucial to consider potential biases present in the datasets, variations in user behavior that may arise from different contextual events or timeframes, and the impact of algorithmic curation on content visibility and user engagement.

In addition to retweet data, incorporating additional engagement metrics such as likes and comments could offer a more comprehensive understanding of user interactions

within different community groups. By exploring a wider range of user engagement patterns, researchers can gain deeper insights into the levels of active participation, sentiments towards shared content, and the overall dynamics of information dissemination within online networks.

While focusing on Twitter provides significant insights into specific aspects of digital discourse, future studies could benefit from expanding the analysis to include other platforms like Parler and Reddit. Investigating multiple platforms can reveal distinct characteristics and user behaviors that influence information sharing dynamics differently, providing a more holistic view of digital engagement across various online spaces.

It could be valuable for future research to delve into how different platforms address the spread of fake news and maintain normative structures to mitigate misinformation. Understanding the strategies and measures platforms implement to prevent the dissemination of false information and promote responsible content sharing can offer crucial insights into enhancing digital discourse and fostering a more informed online environment.

Building upon the discourse analysis revealing strong support for Trump, further exploration into the reasons behind this enduring allegiance can offer valuable insights into digital political loyalty. The pervasive and unwavering backing for Trump, evident in the data, shapes discourse and mobilization dynamics on narratives like election fraud. Delving into the factors fueling this allegiance, such as historical narratives, ideology, leadership appeal, media influence, group identity, and emotional connections, can unveil the complexity of political loyalty in digital spaces.

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# Appendix A – Discourse Analysis

## 1. Screenshots Extra Tweets

### Tweets Theme 1:

Extra tweets regarding Trump showing and telling there has been election fraud:



**Donald J. Trump** @realDonaldTrump · Dec 14, 2020  
WOW. This report shows massive fraud. Election changing result!

**Detroit Free Press** @freep · Dec 14, 2020  
BREAKING: Judge orders release of report examining Antrim County vote tabulators freep.com/story/news/pol...

42K

36K

153K



**Donald J. Trump** @realDonaldTrump · Dec 20, 2020



**The Immaculate Deception: 2020 Election Irregularities**

	ARIZONA	GEORGIA	MICHIGAN	NEVADA	PENNSYLVANIA	WISCONSIN
Outright Voter Fraud	✓	✓	*	✓	*	✓
Ballot Mishandling		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Contestable Process	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Equal Protection Clause Violations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	*
Voting Machine Irregularities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	*
Significant Statistical Anomalies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Biden "Victory" Margin	30,457	11,779	154,188	33,596	81,660	20,682
Possible Illegal Ballots	>100,000	>400,000	Unknown	>100,000	>600,000	>200,000

FOX NEWS channel  
0:18 / 7:05  
From Team Trump (Text TRUMP to 88022)

4.5K 14K 55K

Extra tweets regarding media siding with Trump and telling there has been election fraud:

### One America News

**One America News** @OANN  
Subscribe

How compromised was the 2020 election? Dominion Voting Systems has had a history of problems. Stolen laptops, "switched" votes, Clinton ties, Antifa CEOs, undeniable data!

Join One America's [redacted] for this exclusive investigation! #OANN



ONE AMERICA NEWS INVESTIGATES  
with CHANEL RION  
'DOMINION-IZING' THE VOTE  
SATURDAY DECEMBER 5TH  
10PM ET | 7PM PT

9:09 PM · Dec 3, 2020

1K

4.1K

16K

47

### Breitbart News

**Breitbart News** @BreitbartNews · Jan 5, 2021

Members of President Donald Trump's campaign and grassroots groups from around the country will gather in Washington, DC, on Wednesday for the March to Save America on the White House lawn.



Trump Supporters Gathering in D.C., Mayor Claims Violence Coming


From breitbart.com

106

297

1.5K

Extra tweet regarding the hashtag #voterfraud:



[redacted] · Nov 4, 2020

Needlessly and purposefully delaying the counting of ballots until after Election Day is strong evidence of malintent. #VoterFraud

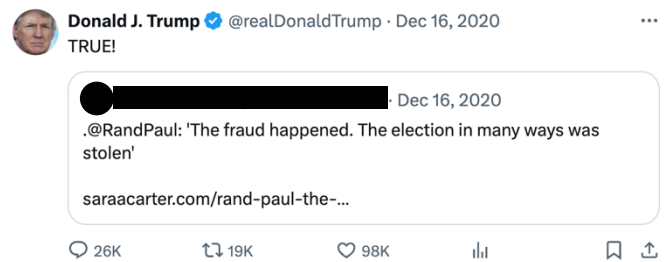
539

5.9K

19K

## Tweets Theme 2:

Extra tweets regarding praising people and retweeting people:



## Tweets Theme 3:

Extra tweet regarding the hashtag #FightforTrump :



## Appendix B – Social Network Analysis

### Tables Sankey Chart

Community	Total Tweets	Percentage
0	1 199 587	20,41%
1	644 219	10,96%
2	3 982 990	67,75%
3	27 699	0,47%
4	24 191	0,41%
	5 878 686	100%

Table 1: Number of Tweets in dataset

Community	Total Tweets	Percentage
0	20 333	20,13%
1	11 687	11,57%
2	68 168	67,48%
3	487	0,48%
4	345	0,34%
	101 020	100%

Table 2: Number of Tweets in sample dataset

Community	Community tweets	Retweets community 0	Retweets community 1
0	20333	51604	575
1	11687	39	25570
2	68168	733	158972
3	487	3	2377
4	345	6	2461

Community	Retweets community 2	Retweets community 3	Retweets community 4
0	84	0	0
1	182	23	10
2	72806	92	69
3	111	3539	0
4	131	0	478

Table 3: Number of reweets per community

Community 0	Community 0	51604
Community 0	Community 1	39
Community 0	Community 2	733
Community 0	Community 3	3
Community 0	Community 4	6

Community 1	Community 0	575
Community 1	Community 1	25570
Community 1	Community 2	158972
Community 1	Community 3	2377
Community 1	Community 4	2461
Community 2	Community 0	84
Community 2	Community 1	182
Community 2	Community 2	72806
Community 2	Community 3	111
Community 2	Community 4	131
Community 3	Community 0	0
Community 3	Community 1	23
Community 3	Community 2	92
Community 3	Community 3	3539
Community 3	Community 4	0
Community 4	Community 0	0
Community 4	Community 1	10
Community 4	Community 2	69
Community 4	Community 3	0
Community 4	Community 4	478

Table 4: Input ChartExpo for Sankey Chart

### Tables Gephi

Community	Users	Percentage of total
0	860976	50,70%
1	437783	25,78%
2	342184	20,15%
3	33857	1,99%
4	23414	1,38%
	1698214	100%

Table 5: Number of users in dataset

Community	Users	Percentage of total
0	177127	50,72%
1	90032	25,78%
2	70313	20,13%
3	6958	1,99%
4	4815	1,38%
	349245	100%

Table 6: Number of users in sample dataset

## Appendix C – Use of Generative AI Tools

### Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

#### Student Information

Name: Roos Rodewijk

Student ID: 584681

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Tim de Winkel

Date: June 26 2024

Declaration:

#### Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically **Grammarly for grammar checks, and ChatGPT with helping me understand Gephi and how to code the data in Gephi, and finding synonyms for specific words**, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☒ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature:



#### Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have

Date of Signature: 26-06-2024

enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

### **Ethical and Academic Integrity**

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. D. ...', written over a horizontal line.

Date of Signature: 26-06-2024

#### Examples of prompts used in ChatGPT:

1. ChatGPT helped me explain how to code data for Gephi and which buttons to click to get to the desired graph. An example of a question that I asked Chat GPT was: I have data of tweets, in which community this tweet is located, and how many times the tweet was retweeted by other communities. How do I code the data to make it work in Gephi?
2. When writing my thesis, I used ChatGPT to help me come up with synonyms for certain words. Examples are: What could be a synonym for perpetuated? What is a synonym for extensively? What other words can I use for "In order to"?