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# Connecting the (Far-)Right Dots: A Topic Modeling and Hyperlink Analysis of (Far-)Right Media Coverage during the US Elections 2016

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## ABSTRACT

The 2016 US election and the victory of Donald Trump are closely connected to a perceived rise of the far-right in the United States. We build upon public sphere and alternative media theory to discuss the relevance of alternative media for the US (far-)right and whether the election period and the candidate Trump allowed far-right alternative media to establish themselves in the (far-)right networked public sphere. We investigate whether it has come to a convergence of topics between the right and the extreme far-right. We analyze the topics nine right-wing outlets, ranging from *Fox News* to the Neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer*, covered in 2015/2016 during the US presidential election. We show through topic modeling of 21,919 articles how *Breitbart* established itself as a media outlet between the extreme far-right and mainstream right by both covering more extreme and more classic conservative topics. We show through time series clustering how *Breitbart* and *Fox News* converged in their coverage of Islam and immigration. Finally, we show through hyperlink analysis that the connection between the far-right and the mainstream right is mostly one-sided; while the alternative outlets link to more established ones, the established outlets mostly ignore the outlets from the far-right.

## KEYWORDS

Networked public sphere; alternative media; far-right; topic modeling; election; alt-right

## Introduction

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election came as a shock to many, both within the United States and worldwide. However, it was also celebrated: Republicans, conservatives, and members of the US far-right celebrated Trump's unlikely victory. Indeed, the 2016 election was a success story, not only for Trump, but also for *Breitbart*, the far-right news website that buoyed Trump nearly from the beginning of his campaign, and, consequently, rose with him in relevance and popularity throughout the election campaign (Bakir and McStay 2018; Benkler et al. 2017). But *Breitbart* was not the only far-right outlet that celebrated or profited from Trump. His victory was

celebrated in the (far-)right sphere: the conspiracy theory far-right site *Infowars*, for example, headlined “Liberals in Tears Following Devastating Hillary Defeat” and the Neo-Nazi *The Daily Stormer* wrote “Dear Liberals: This is Now the Era of Revenge.”

Against this background, the US presidential election was also about the far-right’s struggle for influence in the right-wing public as Trump brought the far-right fringe into the mainstream (Barkun 2017). Benkler et al. (2017) find that the rise of *Breitbart* and other far-right media outlets during the election can be explained with the US right-wing’s hyper-partisanship. And as Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen (2018, 2043) show in their study, partisan media and “fake news” media “are intricately entwined” and, as such, influence each other’s coverage. In other words, then, the success of these far-right outlets in combination with the hyper-partisanship and Trump as well as their susceptibility to misinformation might be a signal of the US right-wing’s radicalization—and for the far-right the needed discursive opportunity to reach a bigger audience (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012).

If we understand the run-up to the 2016 elections as a struggle for influence with Donald Trump and the elections as “discursive opportunities” (Koopmans and Olzak 2004) that allow for the radicalization of more established right-wing outlets, we would expect that to be seen in the coverage of (far-)right media outlets, e.g., based on the topics that they cover but also the attention that they give each other. To understand if it has come to an agenda alignment we look at the topics that the outlets covered throughout the 2016 US presidential elections over time and then conduct a hyperlink analysis to measure the distributed attention between the different outlets. We thus focus in our analysis on the networked setting of digital journalism (Waisbord 2019) and compare media outlets from the right-wing networked public sphere (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2019) with a background in traditional broadcasting (*Fox News*) or even print (*Washington Examiner*) with pure online-only alternative media outlets such as *Breitbart* or *Daily Stormer*.

Our empirical analysis helps to show how the election was an opportunity for the far-right to bridge the gap between far-right and right-wing mainstream with more easily accessible topics, while also promoting white nationalist core ideals. We understand this analysis against the background of public sphere and alternative media theory to highlight the struggle between far-right outlets like *Daily Stormer* and more right-wing mainstream outlets like *Fox News*. We broadly differentiate between right-wing that encapsulates center-right as well as right, and far-right that ranges from right-wing populist to more extreme anti-democratic actors (e.g., Forchtner, Kroneder, and Wetzel 2018). This paper is based on the assumption that media outlets are important voices of (counter-)publics (Ferree et al. 2002).

This paper is structured as follows: We first briefly outline our understanding of the networked public sphere and alternative media. We then present the case of the U.S. presidential election to then present our research questions. After discussing the method, we will present the results. We will then discuss our findings in the context of public sphere theory.

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of the public sphere has frequently been used to highlight the relationship between different communities and their struggle to make their messages heard

(e.g., Ferree et al. 2002). The internet has not only made it easier for groups to voice their opinions and reach other communities, but also made the struggle to compete with other voices more visible. This, then, led scholars to adapt the concepts of the public sphere to the internet age (e.g., Benkler 2006). We will use our understanding of the networked public sphere, to describe the relationship between the far-right and the “mainstream” right-wing in the United States. In line with public sphere theory (Ferree et al. 2002), we take media outlets as proxies for positions within the public sphere with alternative media aiming to extend the discourse.

### ***The Networked Public Sphere***

Public spheres have been described as networks even before the internet’s prominence. Habermas (1992/1996, 360) defines public spheres as a “network for communicating information and points of view.” These streams of communication are according to Habermas (1992/1996, 360) “in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions.” We believe that Habermas’ basic definition is a good starting point to understand the online public sphere. Many scholars followed Habermas’ idea and described the public sphere as a network of communication (e.g., Benkler 2006; Castells 1996).

Perhaps the most prominent concept of an online public sphere was established by Benkler (2006) with his idea of a networked public sphere, which is based on the internet’s decentralized, networked architecture. He emphasizes the internet’s potential for previously unheard voices to circumvent the mainstream media’s gatekeeping function in order to reach a bigger audience, and/or to connect with like-minded people. In their empirical study on the online debate on SOPA/PIPA, for example, Benkler et al. (2015) demonstrated that social media platforms, blogs, and other websites banded together to successfully influence the political agenda.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that the internet both allows for the formation of a more structurally stable public sphere around mainstream media sites (Gerhards and Schäfer 2010), while at the same time also allows for the formation of impromptu publics that form around issues, a hashtag, or an event. boyd (2008, 38) thus highlights that networked publics are “constructed through networked technologies” which can be characterized by an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.” boyd (2008) consequently suggests that an imagined collective is what users experience online and which makes them feel as if they belong to the community—a networked public. The networked public sphere is, then, a highly integrative concept that takes differently sized publics, that form around platforms or news outlets, into account and emphasizes through the network character, each public’s potential for a possible impact on the bigger mainstream public sphere. Especially alternative media outlets may challenge traditional media outlets and influence the public debate around an issue. These new alternative media outlets, then, could add to the networked public sphere “where power to set the agenda and frame political discourse was more widely distributed” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018, 342).

## **Alternative Media in the Networked Public Sphere**

Often, alternative media have been theorized and described as normatively preferable media that empower minorities, give a voice to the voiceless and aim for the extension of the public sphere (for an overview, see Atton 2002). Yet, the term alternative media is highly contested, with Atton (2007), for example, differentiating between professional journalistic and alternative non-journalistic activities. Rodríguez, Ferron, and Shamas (2014) note that scholars have used very different terms to describe similar phenomenon, while emphasizing different aspects. Rauch (2016) highlights that scholars' definitions usually differ with regard to organizational structures, processes, forms, and content. The understanding of alternative media is thus, amongst others, very much connected to where and how the media is being created and produced, if there's a monetary interest, what topics are being discussed or whether the communication is directed against something (e.g., an oppressive government). Rauch (2016) further argues that the differences between alternative media and classic media outlets have become less clear in liberal democracies like the United States due to an increasing professionalization. Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019) therefore include in their definition of alternative media the self-perceived role of alternative media as corrective of mainstream media outlets. We will discuss this below in the context of *Fox News*. However, and similar to Rauch (2016) and Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019) with their relational approach, we assume that alternative media is still a valuable concept—especially in the context of the US election which saw new and more extreme outlets gain in importance and influence. We thus want to briefly outline how we understand and conceptualize alternative media.

A popular point of criticism deals with the use of the word alternative; scholars, for example, criticize the fluidity of entities, which at one point may be labeled as mainstream, and at another point be considered alternative (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2008). We understand alternative media in a public sphere sense insofar as they aim to extend their debates and opinions into the mainstream through communication (Downey and Fenton 2003). We propose a more functional view of alternative media, which focuses less on the political standpoint and more on the functions of these media, i.e., promoting topics that are not being heard in and reaching the public sphere. First of all, alternative media are a reaction to the mainstream media (public sphere) (Negt and Kluge 1972/1993). They offer an alternative in contrast to the mainstream discourse which is based on their particular standpoints' exclusion from the public discourse which is also the main aspect of Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich's (2019) umbrella definition. And as Atton (2006) also highlights, far-right media can also be understood as alternative media. Secondly, we ignore the political standpoint of alternative media, at least in a first analytical step, as we are mainly interested in whether more extreme alternative media outlets like *The Daily Stormer* reach established outlets like *Fox News* with their topics. Third, we understand alternative media as "communicative spaces" (Toepfl and Piwoni 2015) within the networked public sphere that aim to extend the discourse and/or shift it towards their interest.

Against this background we understand alternative media to not primarily rely on advertising revenue, lack the established professional journalistic norms with regard to their relationship to facts and the truth (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001), and challenge

the established system and more specifically mainstream media (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Especially when applied to the US (far-)right definitions of alternative media can become problematic as established media like *Fox News* portray themselves as alternative media in contrast to the mainstream media (Aday 2010). However, as Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019) argue with their relational approach, self-perception is crucial and while *Fox News* obviously is a mainstream outlet on the organizational and societal level, on the micro-level (content) it offers alternative content and style with alternative content producers.

We posit that the right-wing media ecosystem in the US networked public sphere during the 2016 presidential election reflects a rise of alternative media. We therefore chose the US election as a case to contrast our theoretical assumptions with empirical research. To provide context for our findings discussed later, we will now give a brief overview of the US election and the US media landscape, as well as *Breitbart's* emergence in the right-wing media system.

## Case: US Elections 2016 and *Breitbart*

### *The US Online Media Ecosystem during the Election*

In the 18 months leading up to 2016's US presidential election, online media coverage of the event largely focused on horserace stories and scandals; fewer stories and news related to candidates' stances on substantive issues were produced (Patterson 2016). Benkler et al. (2017) analyzed the online media ecosystem during the 18 months leading up to the election. Based on ideology scores and sharing of users, they suggest that there is an asymmetric polarization of outlets on the right and the left; many outlets fill the space between the center and the left, whereas the right demonstrates clustering in the center and on the extreme right; few sources are in the "center-right" space. Indeed, except for *Fox News*, the right forms its own network largely separate from the rest of the network centered around *Breitbart* (Benkler et al. 2017). In a content analysis of the immigration coverage of 12 news outlets, Ogan et al. (2018) highlight how then-candidate Trump was able to set the media's agenda while his opponent Clinton was not able to get the same resonance with her topics.

Against this background, it is important to note that the far-right in the United States is generally assumed to be fragmented into different actors ranging from religious right to white supremacists (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012; Zhou et al. 2005). But even though generally fragmented, Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann (2012) suggest that there are discursive opportunities which the far-right could use to reach the US mainstream public sphere. Indeed, as Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen (2018) show, the US election proved to be such a discursive opportunity for misinformation sites. But while Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen focus on misinformation, we focus on the shared topics between nine different outlets on the (far-)right.

For our analysis, we wanted to represent some of the most read and vocal voices within the right. To do so, we oriented ourselves on the work of Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018, 284) and their list of the "Most popular media on the right." Based on the list that is based on shares and links, we picked *Fox News*, *Washington Examiner*, *The Daily Caller*, *Gateway Pundit*, *Breitbart*, and *Infowars*. To also include some of the

most radical voices, we picked *American Renaissance*, *Vdare*, and *Daily Stormer*. And while only *Vdare* made it into Benkler, Faris, and Roberts' lists, we chose *Daily Stormer* due to its notoriety as a Neo-Nazi site and *American Renaissance* which the Southern Poverty Law Center classifies as "white nationalist." It also has to be noted that Benkler, Faris, and Roberts measured user attention based on ideology scores; we, however, are interested in topics and whether they connect the alternative media outlets in our sample over time.

Since its inception in 1996 as a cable news channel, *Fox News* has traditionally been the center of the conservative news ecosystem and has had substantial impact for the Republican Party (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007). Aside from talk radio and Christian broadcasting, *Fox News* was a main source of news for conservatives in the 2012 election (Wicks, Wicks, and Morimoto 2014). Despite *Fox News'* historical might, at the center of Benkler et al.'s (2017) right-wing media network is newcomer *Breitbart*. Established in 2007, *Breitbart's* popularity relative to *Fox News* on the American public prior to the 2016 election may be negligible but Benkler et al. (2017) demonstrate that it is not just shared more frequently than *Fox News*, it is one of the most-shared media sources on social media overall. In addition, *Breitbart's* former executive chairman Steve Bannon even had joined the White House as Chief strategist after Trump's victory for a brief period of time. The rise of *Breitbart* is, perhaps, one of the most interesting stories in the run-up to the 2016 elections. As Davis (2019, 2) argues *Breitbart* is part of a "multifaceted online 'alt-right' 'communication world' that brings together the cultural logics of the culture wars, extreme forms of far right discourse, and troll culture, and that has growing influence at the very centre of global political power."

The *Washington Examiner* is a conservative newspaper and a cornerstone of the right's networked public sphere. As Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018, 284) highlight it is one of the most shared websites on the right. Similarly, *The Daily Caller* is a right-wing media outlet that was co-founded by *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson and which, similar to *Fox News* and *Breitbart*, is highly prominent within for the US right-wing (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). And while it can be considered to be more mainstream within the right-wing like *Fox News* or *Washington Examiner*, *The Daily Caller* also caters to the far-right. *Vdare* founder Peter Brimelow, for example, has written pieces for the outlet (SPLC - Southern Poverty Law Center 2017).

In contrast, the *Gateway Pundit* is what Laschever (2017) called a "partisan blog" and can be considered a source of misinformation (Grinberg et al. 2019). *Infowars* is Alex Jones' far-right conspiracy network that has a website, radio show, and video show. In their analysis, Grinberg et al. (2019) list *Infowars* in the category "spread falsehoods that clearly reflected a flawed editorial process." *Infowars* is currently embroiled in several lawsuits, including about the falsehoods Alex Jones promoted about the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. At the same time, then-candidate Donald Trump gave *Infowars* an interview in 2015; a move that highlights the network's influence.

*Daily Stormer* is an influential Neo-Nazi site (Marwick and Lewis 2017) that gained prominence after the far-right "Unite the Right" rally where a man drove his car through a group of counter-protesters and killed a woman, because the site got

de-platformed afterwards from web hosting several services, because the site mocked the victim. Similarly, and as pointed out above, *Vdare* is, according to the SPLC - Southern Poverty Law Center (2017), a “major hub for white nationalists and anti-Semites.” As Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018, 124) show *Vdare* is the “most widely linked and influential of the white-nationalist sites.” Finally, *American Renaissance* (Amren) is a far-right website. It differs from other far-right extremist sites like *Daily Stormer* or *Vdare* in that it does not promote anti-Semitism (SPLC - Southern Poverty Law Center 2019). With that having said, according to the SPLC - Southern Poverty Law Center (2019), *Amren* features “proponents of eugenics and blatant anti-black racists” on their website.

In sum, the nine outlets that we have picked are ranging from right-wing to extreme far-right. While not representative of all outlets on the right, we have picked outlets that both feature established “mainstream” outlets from the right, outlets that push misinformation and/or conspiracy theories, and outlets that are racist, and/or anti-Semitic.

## Research Questions

To understand the structure of the US (far-)right media ecosystem, ranging from far-right alternative media to conservative establishment, we have to look beyond social media shares (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) and focus on the topics that the US right-wing was discussed throughout the election period. As this study’s overarching research questions deal with the potential convergence of topics between more extreme alternative media and established media outlets, our first research question thus is:

*RQ1: What are the topics that the (far-)right media outlets cover during the 2016 election?*

This question is closely connected with our understanding of the networked public sphere and alternative media. We would expect a gap between the topics the established, commercial outlets (e.g., *Fox News* or *Washington Examiner*) that are dependent on advertising and the extreme alternative media outlets (e.g., *Daily Stormer* or *Vdare*) covered. At the same time, *Breitbart* or the *Daily Caller* are outlets that toe the line between established and alternative media both with regard to their dependence on advertising as well as their extreme positions (*Breitbart*, for example, is funded by the conservative Mercer family).<sup>1</sup> And as Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen (2018) suggest, alternative media might have an impact in a hyperpartisan networked public sphere.

We are thus interested in finding similar temporal patterns between different outlets, i.e., if and when it has to come to an agenda alignment; and between which outlets. As alternative media outlets will try to influence the mainstream’s agenda through counter-discourses, we are interested to see if a synchronous temporal connection exists between some of the outlets. That is, if there are topics that align with alternative media coverage.

*RQ2: Which topics are covered simultaneously by which outlets over time?*

In a final step, we want to emphasize the fact that references between alternative media outlets can happen on several layers within the networked public sphere. And while topics and their temporal character are very important, there are others that are

unique to the internet and thus digital journalism. More specifically, we are interested in *hyperlinks* and whether the outlets give each other attention by linking to each other in their stories; especially if the established media outlets “acknowledge” the potential influence of the alternative media. Going back to [Figure 1](#), we are interested to see the connections between the different outlets and how they relate to each other on a hyperlink level.

*RQ3: What are the linking patterns between different alternative media outlets?*

## Methods

To empirically answer these questions, we made use of the online database MediaCloud<sup>2</sup> that tracks over 25,000 online sources ranging from mainstream media outlets like *The New York Times* to far-right websites like *Daily Stormer*. Based on the work by Benkler et al. (2017) in which they identify the important right-wing websites by Facebook and Twitter shares as well as the work by Zhou et al. (2005) and Alexa scores<sup>3</sup> for the far-right websites, we then accessed the same database Benkler et al. (2017) used in their analysis and exported all 22,555 stories that were published online between 27 April 2015 and 9 November 2016 and that dealt with the US elections<sup>4</sup> for nine right-wing media outlets ranging from conservative to Neo-Nazi anti-democratic.

The case of the US elections and the underlying data was chosen for three reasons: (1) An event like the US elections (including the primaries) is a good opportunity for alternative media to latch onto candidates like Trump or to connect their topics with the overarching event, thus lending their topics relevance. (2) The success of Donald Trump in the primaries as well as his victory in the general elections and his connections to *Breitbart*, *Infowars* and the far-right show an unprecedented closeness between the far-right and the president of the United States. And (3) by using the same dataset as Benkler et al. (2017) we will also be able to both add to their research as well as validate their results.

As highlighted above, we chose nine (far-)right media outlets that range from mainstream right-wing to extreme far-right: *Fox News*, *Washington Examiner*, *The Daily Caller*, *Gateway Pundit*, *Breitbart*, *Infowars*, *American Renaissance*, *Vdare*, and *Daily Stormer*. The selection thus is on the idea to both account for the extremeness within the (far-)right and the professionalization and dependence on ads. After removing artifacts from the Media Cloud dataset, our corpus consisted of 21,919 articles ([Table 1](#)).

To answer the research questions, we imported the documents into R and conducted a structural topic model analysis (STM; Roberts et al. 2014) of the cleaned corpus with the package *stm* (e.g., removing stopwords). In general, STM is similar to other widely used topic model algorithms like Latent Dirichlet Allocation in the sense that an algorithm identifies overarching topics in a big dataset based on how frequent words are being used together in a document (e.g., Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003). Topic models consist of two parts: a topic-word distribution and a document-topic distribution. The topic probabilities for each document are normalized and sum up to one for each document. STM, in contrast to LDA topic models, assumes that there are other exterior factors that influence topics as, for example, time or outlets. STM thus gives



**Figure 1.** Topic distribution (average document-topic probability) for each outlet ( $N = 21,919$ ). Proportion of topics per outlet calculated with theta of topics in each document.

researcher the opportunity to account for metadata in the topic generation—in our case the type of outlet and the time. As STM allows for a manual selection of the number of topics, we compared variables like held-out likelihood or semantic

**Table 1.** Number of articles per outlet and their Alexa ranks in 2017 (last checked 23 June 2017) and 2015/2016. Past Alexa ranks were checked via Archive.org with the last available snapshot for our timeframe.

Outlet	Articles	US Alexa rank	
		2017	2015/2016
<i>Washington Examiner</i>	1721	1471	2090 (April '15)
<i>Fox News</i>	5086	59	51 (April '15)
<i>The Daily Caller</i>	9681	677	1028 (April '15)
<i>The Gateway Pundit</i>	447	1263	1834 (March '16)
<i>Infowars</i>	130	772	1291 (April '15)
<i>Breitbart</i>	4516	60	502 (April '15)
<i>Vdare</i>	222	17,582	20,150 (March '16)
<i>American Renaissance</i>	33	20,332	23,974 (April '16)
<i>Daily Stormer</i>	83	4920	18,983 (March '16)
Total	21,919		

coherence over 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, and 35 topics. We picked 20 topics as it offered a good balance between general and issue topics and showed a good semantic coherence compared to other models. We randomly selected 100 articles and automatically assigned the topic with a probability above 0.49 to the article. Two coders without specific training coded the topics. The intercoder-reliability score between the two coders and the topic model was with a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.67 acceptable for our case. When the more generic Republican topics are merged the alpha is even over 0.7. This is surprisingly high as most documents have a mix of topics (e.g., economy and republican primaries).

We then calculated a principal component analysis (PCA) with selected topics (i.e., topics that were both prominent enough and that dealt with issues and not horseshoe coverage) to map the different outlets and understand their similarities and differences. We first used the individual topic probabilities for all articles ( $N=21,919$ ) in the PCA to estimate our PCA model with the topics as variables. However, we did not visualize each of the over twenty thousand articles with the PCA, we just used them to estimate the model. With an existing PCA model the values of each dimension can be predicted for new "cases." As we are interested in the position of an outlet and not the position of a single article, we calculated for each outlet the mean score for the topic probabilities, i.e., the prevalence of a given topic for the general media outlet. We then used these mean scores for each outlet as a new "case" and predicted the position of the outlet in the two-dimensional space with the existing model. Next, we calculated time series for the selected topics and calculated the correlation between these series to form topic clusters. To answer RQ3, we scraped the embedded links of the 21,919 news stories in our corpus with R using the package *rvest*. Hyperlinks have been shown to be indicative of underlying structures within publics (Benkler et al. 2017; Kaiser and Puschmann 2017).

## Results

### ***What Are the Topics that the (Far-)Right Media Outlets Cover during the 2016 Election?***

In RQ1 we asked what topics (far-)right websites were discussing during the 2016 US election and how much these discussions were similar or different from each other.

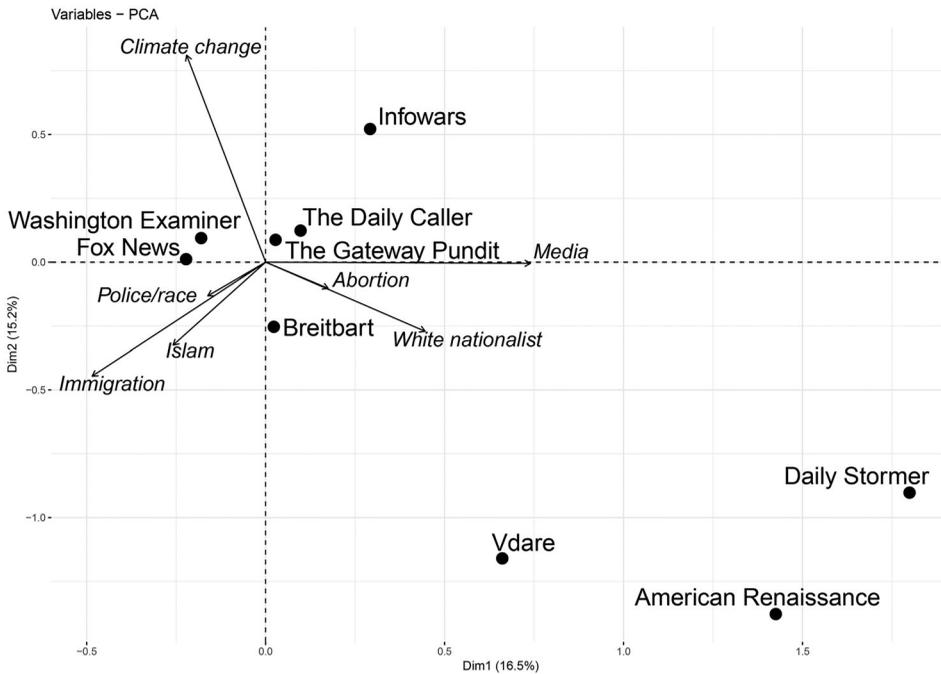
**Table 2.** Top words for 20 topics by highest probability, assigned labels. Words were stemmed in the preparation of the document corpus.

Top words for each topic	Label	Proportion
women, wife, miss, palin, father, famili, field	Republican/Trump Gossip	0.030
clinton, foundat, million, campaign, money, report, donat	Clinton Foundation	0.043
cruz, poll, state, voter, republican, vote, candid	Primaries REP I	0.093
star, dress, celebr, actress, click, pictur, film	Gossip	0.023
law, court, gun, rule, judg, justic, case	Judiciary	0.038
carson, abort, plan, christian, parenthood, ben, women	Abortion	0.025
obama, presid, deal, trade, union, american, iran	Obama/Trade	0.037
muslim, attack, state, islam, terror, terrorist, isi	Islam	0.044
trump, donald, republican, presidenti, nomin, support, campaign	Trump	0.103
clinton, hillari, campaign, bill, women, podesta, question	Clinton	0.057
immigr, illeg, border, american, countri, state, mexico	Immigration	0.034
clinton, democrat, sander, hillari, support, campaign, berni	Primaries DEM	0.069
tax, job, american, worker, plan, increa, busi	Economy	0.041
energi, state, climat, school, global, environ, oil	Energy/Climate	0.020
white, american, polit, america, peopl, black, nation	White nationalist	0.048
peopl, question, debat, kelli, countri, presid, problem	TV/Debates	0.070
polic, black, protest, citi, offic, report, kill	Police/Race	0.046
clinton, email, state, depart, investig, inform, fbi	Clinton Emails	0.077
rubio, republican, bush, ryan, conserv, gop, parti	Primaries REP II	0.049
media, report, twitter, polit, facebook, daili, tweet	Media	0.053

The STM analysis of the corpus offered us a good perspective into the right-wing's mindset throughout the elections. In general, we can distinguish between general political topics (Primaries REP I/II, Trump), gossip topics (Republican/Trump Gossip, Gossip), opposition topics (Clinton, Clinton Foundation, Clinton Emails) and issue-specific topics (e.g., Abortion, Judiciary, Immigration) (see Table 2). In addition, we are also able to identify a topic that we label "White nationalist" which predominantly deals with race (especially white identity) and being American.

A closer inspection of the topic distribution and their prevalence in the specific outlets show how much some of the outlets differ from each other (see Figure 1). In a first descriptive step, we see that the *Trump topic* about the then-presidential candidate is the most prevalent one in the dataset. The topic is prominent throughout all outlets, although the mainstream right-wing outlets cover Trump somewhat more prominently than the far-right ones do. We observe a similar trend for the *Primaries REP I* and *Clinton Emails* topics. Yet, the topics *Primaries REP I & II* are not the same: the first topic is more centered around the candidate Ted Cruz, the second topic more around Marco Rubio.

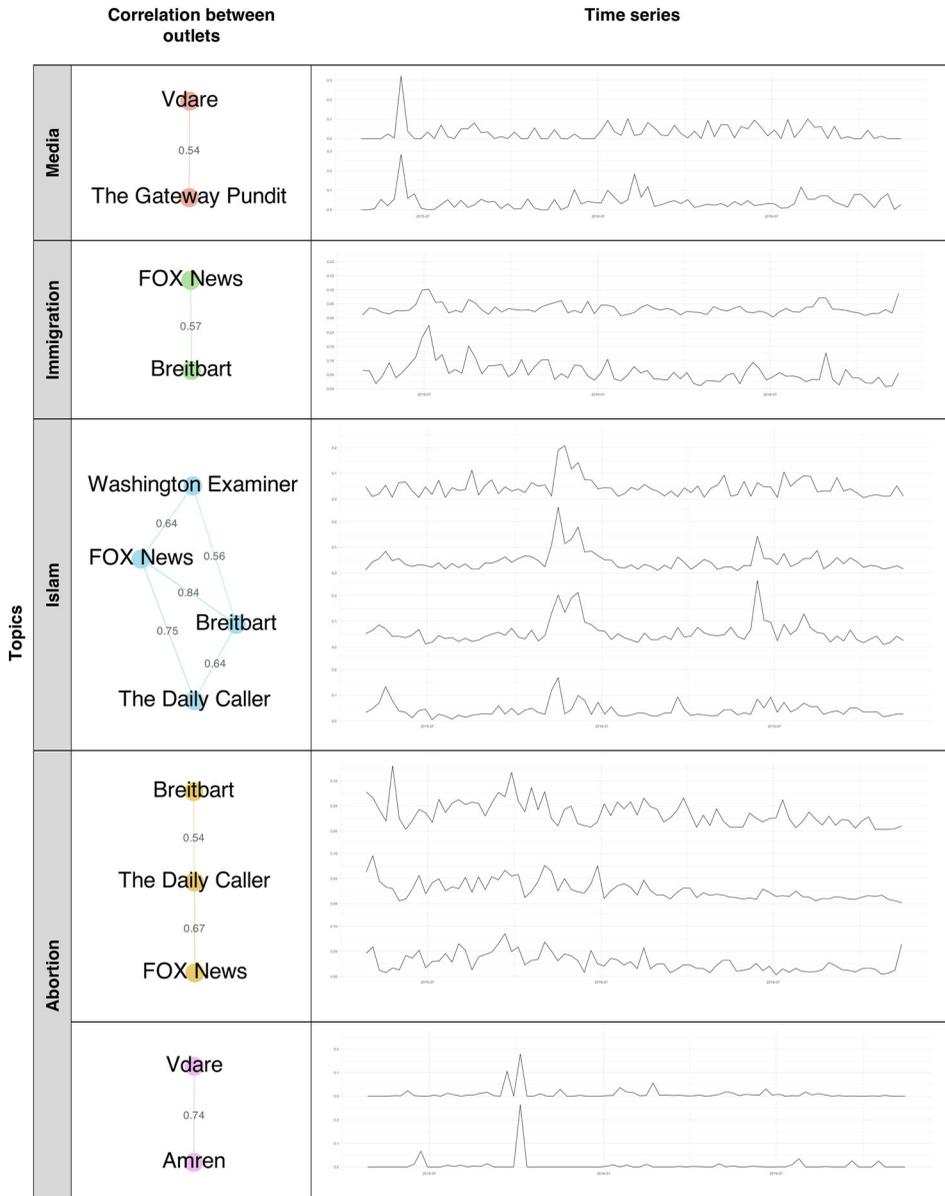
As Benkler et al. (2017) as well as Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen (2018) highlighted, partisan media outlets were not only highly relevant during the 2016 election but also served as a form of "gatekeeper" between more fringe sites (like fake news) and the established media outlets. We are thus especially interested in the role of the partisan media outlets that balance between far-right and the conservative establishment right: *Breitbart*, *Infowars*, and *The Gateway Pundit*. In general, *Infowars* is closer to the far-right than other outlets by covering topics like *White nationalist* or *Media* (a topic which consists of criticisms about the media and social media platforms). However, *Infowars* is in this context an interesting and unique case as it is the only outlet that covers the *Energy/Climate* topic prominently, which makes its position in the PCA graph (see Figure 2) unique. This is not surprising, given that *Infowars* is promoting a



**Figure 2.** Principal component analysis plot of selected issue topics combined with outlets. We used the topical distribution for each document to calculate the principal components. We then used the average topic probability for each outlet and predicted the position in the two-dimensional space.

variety of conspiracy theories, including climate change denial. The PCA also shows the similarity of *The Gateway Pundit* and the three mainstream outlets although it also talks about the far-right topic. When comparing the topics that *Breitbart* and the other outlets cover, we can see that *Breitbart* indeed covers more established topics as well as extreme topics: the outlet covers, for example, mainstays of the Democrats and Republicans, yet is the one outlet apart from the far-right extreme alternative media that covers *Immigration* prominently. It also, although more moderately, talks about the *White nationalist* and *Islam* topics. *Breitbart's* position as neither part of the mainstream right nor the extreme far-right is even more visible when looking at its position on the PCA graph (see [Figure 2](#)). We can see that *Breitbart* is the outlet that is the closest to the far-right outlets of all other outlets; being pulled towards the extreme far-right by the coverage of the *White nationalist* topic.

Perhaps the most notable differences between the far-right outlets and more moderate ones beside the *White nationalist* topic is that the three most extreme alternative media (*Daily Stormer*, *Amren*, *Vdare*) are not too concerned about Hillary Clinton, her emails, foundation, *Obama/Trade* or the Democrats in general. In contrast, they are much more interested in issues like *Immigration*, *Islam*, *Police/Race*, or the *Republican* topics. This is indicative of the far-right's point of reference: Whereas the established media outlets have to cover their opponents and try to highlight their flaws (real or



**Figure 3.** Time series clusters for selected topics of *Fox News*, *Breitbart*, *Daily Caller*, and *Washington Examiner* with a correlation of  $>0.5$ . Visualization with Gephi and R.

not), the alternative media outlets are more interested in identity-defining issues (e.g., Islam and immigration) and the political actors that are the closest to them ideologically. Indeed, the PCA can be read in the way that there is still a gulf between the far-right alternative media *Daily Stormer*, *Amren*, *Vdare*, and *Infowars* and the professionalized and (more) ad-dependent outlets like *Fox News*, *Washington Examiner*, *Gateway Pundit*, *Daily Caller*, and *Breitbart*.

**Table 3.** Link list between different outlets (in percent).

Source	Target (in %)										Total
	<i>The Daily Caller</i>	<i>Washington Examiner</i>	<i>Vdare</i>	<i>Info-wars</i>	<i>The Gateway Pundit</i>	<i>Daily Stormer</i>	<i>Amren</i>	<i>Breit-bart</i>	<i>Fox News</i>		
<i>The Daily Caller</i>		1.3	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	1.5	2.7	9681	
<i>Washington Examiner</i>	0.6		0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.7	1721	
<i>Vdare</i>	6.3	6.8		0.5	0.5	0.0	10.4	19.8	5.0	222	
<i>Infowars</i>	6.2	0.8	0.0		3.8	0.0	0.0	8.5	2.3	130	
<i>The Gateway Pundit</i>	2.7	1.8	0.0	0.4		0.0	0.0	5.8	8.5	447	
<i>Daily Stormer</i>	7.2	2.4	8.4	1.2	1.2		4.8	9.6	2.4	83	
<i>Amren</i>	15.2	0.0	24.2	0.0	0.0	0.0		9.1	6.1	33	
<i>Breitbart</i>	2.9	2.4	0.0	0.1	0.6	0.0	0.0		4.4	4516	
<i>Fox News</i>	0.6	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4		5086	

Note: Links were collected from all the URLs within our corpus. Multiple links to the same outlet per article were not measured. Percentages were calculated based on the number of articles an outlet was linked to divide by the total articles per outlet.

### **Which Topics Are Covered Simultaneously by Which Outlets over Time?**

After having highlighted both the specific role of *Breitbart* as well as the prominent topics throughout the election, we are now focusing on the temporal aspect and the relationship between different media outlets and the topics they covered (Figure 3). To do so, we calculated a time series for every outlet and topic (with the R package *xts*; for the same selected topics as in Figure 3) and calculated the correlation between each of those time series to determine the connection between the different time series. Then we visualized the topic clusters in Gephi and the time series in R. As we were only interested in the strongly correlated clusters, i.e., those where we could see a convergence, we chose that the correlation between time series must be above 0.5. We further discarded correlations between topics that got covered by the same outlet for statistical reasons and between different topics as these were mostly the result of non-coverage. This resulted in four topical clusters that dealt with *abortion*, *Islam*, *immigration*, and *media*.

These represent core (far-)right topics: whereas *abortion* (e.g., Planned Parenthood) and *immigration* (e.g., border security) can be considered key topics for the (far-)right identity in general, *Islam* is a relatively new topic that is mostly connected with ISIS and terrorist attacks. However, it also has to be noted that the topics are based on a shared language, i.e., these convergences do not only reflect a similarity of topical importance but also of a shared language. In addition, the *media* topic can be understood as a meta-topic, i.e., about the media and social media (mostly critical).

But not all time series in these clusters are also correlated to each other. *Fox News'* coverage of *abortion* and *Breitbart's*, for example, do not correlate (>0.5) with each other. Both correlate, however, with *The Daily Caller's* *abortion* coverage. In addition, we see that *Vdare* and *Amren's* *abortion* coverage, or rather non-coverage, is also correlated. The *media* topic is the only topic where we see a correlation between a far-right and a less extreme outlet's coverage over time. This is interesting, as it shows similarities between these outlets.

*Breitbart* and *Fox News* build the core for the *Islam* cluster, i.e., their coverage correlates both with *The Daily Caller* and *Washington Examiner* although the latter two do

not correlate with each other. And *Fox News* and *Breitbart* correlate strongly with each other in their immigration coverage but do not seem to have an impact on the other outlets. Taking into account that *Breitbart* was much more vocal about immigration than *Fox News* (Figure 1), but also noting that neither *Washington Examiner* nor *The Daily Caller* had a similar coverage, this suggests, that the correlation between *Fox News* and *Breitbart* cannot only be explained with external effects, since these would have impacted the other two outlets as well. It is thus likely that *Breitbart* and *Fox* had an impact on each other's coverage. To further test this idea, we calculated a vector autoregression for *Fox News* and *Breitbart* based on our time series which we then used to check for causal effects between the two outlets. Indeed, we were able to find an instantaneous causality between *Fox News* and *Breitbart* ( $\chi^2 = 14.631$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p > 0.001$ ) that suggests to us, that there is a relationship between *Fox News* and *Breitbart* that goes beyond covering the same events.

In general, this analysis highlights the importance of the topics *abortion*, *Islam*, *immigration*, and *media* for the right-wing and the similarity between *Fox News*, *Breitbart* and to some extent *The Daily Caller* with regard to some of their coverage (especially immigration). And while especially the topics *abortion* and *immigration* may not come as a surprise given its relevance for the Republican Party's identity (Miller and Schofield 2008), it is noteworthy that there is a convergence between the coverages of different outlets on these topics nevertheless. Furthermore, the addition of *Islam* signals a distinct Islamophobia on the (far-)right that is especially prominent for the far-right.

### **What Are the Linking Patterns Between Different Alternative Media Outlets?**

Finally, we were interested in the linking patterns between the (alternative) media outlets and whether we could identify a hierarchy between the outlets (Table 3). Our hyperlink analysis shows that *Fox News* is the most linked to outlet in our sample. *Breitbart*, for example, linked to *Fox News* in 4.4% of their articles ( $n = 200$ ). This relationship was, however, not mutual: *Fox News* linked more often to *Washington Examiner* (1.1%,  $n = 58$ ) and *The Daily Caller* (0.6%,  $n = 30$ ) than to *Breitbart* (0.4%,  $n = 18$ ). The second most linked to outlet within this group is *Washington Examiner* ( $n = 316$ ). This is noteworthy as the finding that the outlet seems to be a credible link target for the other media is in line with Benkler, Faris, and Roberts's (2018) findings that the *Washington Examiner* was one of the most important outlets during the election. However, it has to be noted that *Breitbart* which only rose to prominence during the 2016 elections, quickly established itself as source for the other outlets ( $n = 273$ ). So did *The Daily Caller* which received 215 links within our sample. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the far-right alternative media outlets did receive few inlinks, and if so mostly from other far-right outlets; *Breitbart*, for example, linked once to *Daily Stormer*. *The Daily Caller* linked once to *Vdare* and twice to *Amren*. *Fox News* did not link to an extreme far-right outlet. As the far-right outlets link to *Fox News*, *Breitbart*, *The Daily Caller*, or *The Gateway Pundit*, this shows that the relationship between far-right outlets in the periphery and the more mainstream outlets is mostly unidirectional on a hyperlink level.

## Discussion

We show that even though the far-right outlets are more similar to each other than the other outlets, they focus on different topics, thus echoing studies from Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann (2012) and Zhou et al. (2005) in which they highlighted the far-right's fragmentation. We can, however, show that it came to an agenda alignment with regard to topics like *abortion*, *immigration*, or *Islam*. We were able to establish *Breitbart's* special role in the right-wing, as the outlet both covers topics that are highly relevant to the far-right's common identity like *White nationalist* or *Immigration* but also mainstream topics like *Trump* or the primaries of the Republican and Democratic parties; it positions itself between established and radical alternative media (see Figure 2). We thus propose that *Breitbart* is a more radical version of *Fox News* that tries to solidify a common identity among fragmented far-right groups through extreme, potentially, identity-forming topics, but simultaneously tries to connect with the mainstream right and potentially influence its agenda via shared topics.

Then, we show the special relationship between *Fox News*, *Breitbart*, and to some extent *The Daily Caller*. We identify *immigration*, *Islam*, and *abortion* as major concerns of the right-wing and can show that *Fox News's* and *Breitbart's* coverage of *immigration* and *Islam* correlate strongly with each other. On *immigration*, we even find a direct causality between *Fox News's* and *Breitbart's* coverage. We show that *Breitbart* gives more attention to inward-oriented topics than *Fox News* which focuses on more outward-oriented topics such as Hillary Clinton's emails.

Finally, we show that on a link-level *Fox News* is still the most linked to outlet by the other highly professionalized outlets. And although *Washington Examiner* is the second most linked to outlet, it is remarkable how quickly the other outlets "accepted" *Breitbart* within their ranks. Not only was the site one of the most linked to by the other sites but also had an impact on *Fox News's* immigration coverage. This, to us, shows that *Breitbart* filled a role within the (far-)right by offering a more radical interpretation of *Fox News*.

Against this background, we want to highlight two points that have implications for the networked public sphere and that are worthy of discussion and future research. First, the big question is, in our opinion, how a self-described alternative media outlet, or rather its outlook, can survive if the outlet becomes too mainstream. Not only was Bannon appointed to a position in the White House, enabling him not only to influence the mainstream agenda but also to potentially get *Breitbart* prime access to the White House. Keeping Benkler et al.'s (2017) findings about social media shares and *Breitbart's* prominence in mind, the question is if *Breitbart* is a bridge between far-right and mainstream right. And what they have to do to keep the balance between radical and extremist groups and more moderates. In other words: how much political extremism, e.g., racism, will the broader networked public sphere tolerate? While the goal might be to push the so-called Overton Window (i.e., what can be said in public without fearing repercussions) to the right, too crass attempts in doing so might lead to discursive punishment (e.g., Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019). An open question, however, is if there will be a true form of punishment in a hyper-polarized networked public sphere.

Secondly, a topic that we only broached but that is nevertheless important is professionalization of alternative media. Based on Lüders' (2008) idea to understand professionalization and institutionalization of media outlets as a continuum and Rauch's (2016) remark that alternative media outlets will try to have similar structures than mainstream media outlets, let alone that they are already similar to professional ones in the United States, we posit that alternative media that want to reach the general public sphere need a high degree of professionalization in order to both appeal to their original audience but also not to alienate the mainstream. This professionalization, then, would go hand in hand with aspects such as routine day-to-day coverage but may also estrange their audience as certain, too extreme, topics cannot be covered anymore. However, if such an outlet uses strong identity-forming communication such as the White Supremacist *White nationalist* topic or by promoting harmful conspiracy theories it endangers its advertising revenues.

The possible consequences for a more mainstream outlet covering extreme topics can be illustrated with a recent example. When *Fox News'* Sean Hannity was covering an already debunked election murder conspiracy (Seth Rich murder) in May 2017, several companies canceled their commercials even after Sean Hannity promised to stop covering the conspiracy.<sup>5</sup> While the promotion of such conspiracy theories is beyond the topical scope of *Fox News*, some of the more extreme outlets, including *Breitbart*, can cover such topics without direct consequences. *Breitbart*, in contrast to *Fox News*, still covered this conspiracy theory in June 2017 (title: "Independent Report Casts Doubt on Police Theory of Seth Rich Murder").<sup>6</sup> *Fox News* retracted an article about the conspiracy theory in May after the conspiracy had been debunked. This example also shows how *Fox News* as a right-wing mainstream media outlet tries to appeal to a more extreme audience but at the same time still has to follow basic journalistic norms as they rely on advertising revenues. In the meantime, *Breitbart* has been facing an online movement organized by the Twitter account *slpng\_giants* that aims to discourage advertisers to advertise on the site. So far, the group claims to have discouraged about 4,000 companies from advertising at *Breitbart*.<sup>7</sup> However, the question remains if *Breitbart* is truly dependent on ad revenue.

Alternative media outlets and their attempt to reach the mainstream is often seen as positive for the public sphere and democracy (Wimmer 2005). However, as we have shown with the example of the US right-wing, not all alternative media are equally progressive or aimed at societal inclusion. Indeed, the strong connection between "the platform of the alt-right" *Breitbart* and the mainstream *Fox News* raises serious questions over the influence of the far-right on the mainstream right and, closely connected, for the radicalization of the US (far-)right. As we have shown *Breitbart* potentially connects the dots between the extreme far-right and mainstream right and may thus legitimize an illegitimate discourse. If this radicalization were to continue this may have serious consequences for the political discourse as well as the democracy of the United States.

This analysis, then, highlights the impact that the far-right alternative media has on the right-wing networked public sphere. While Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen (2018) found evidence for a reciprocal relationship between fake news sites and partisan sites, we find evidence for a relationship between alternative right and mainstream right. This

matters as it raises the question of how reciprocal the relationship is and how extremism may find its way into the right mainstream. The finding that *Breitbart*, for example, is more open to the *White nationalist* topic than other outlets but also influences *Fox News'* immigration coverage can be seen against this background. Reaching *Fox News* and *Washington Examiner* with their coverage also means for the digital-only outlets to reach a broader media ecosystem as both outlets also have more traditional editions.

## Notes

1. See <https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-the-mercenary-the-wealthy-backers-of-breitbart/a-42100407> (Accessed June 20, 2018).
2. Media Cloud is an open source platform. Its source code is public (see <https://github.com/berkmancenter/mediacloud>) and the platform itself is free to use ([mediacloud.org](http://mediacloud.org)). We received special access to all the articles covered by Media Cloud.
3. Although only a heuristic, Alexa scores offer a third-party perspective on our selected outlets which can serve as a benchmark.
4. Solr search syntax for Media Cloud: `+( fiorina ( scott and walker ) ( ben and carson ) trump ( cruz and -victor ) kasich rubio (jeb and bush) clinton sanders ) AND (+publish_date:[2016-09-30T00:00:00Z TO 2016-11-08T23:59:59Z]) AND ((tags_id_media:9139487 OR tags_id_media:9139458 OR tags_id_media:2453107 OR tags_id_stories:9139487 OR tags_id_stories:9139458 OR tags_id_stories:2453107))`.
5. See here <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40050203> (Accessed, November 26, 2018).
6. <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2017/06/21/independent-report-casts-doubt-on-police-theory-of-seth-rich-murder/> (Accessed, November 26, 2018).
7. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/business/media/sleeping-giants-breitbart-twitter.html> (Accessed, November 26, 2018).

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