#Migrantcrisis: “Tagging” the European Migration Crisis on Twitter

Journal:	<i>Journal of Communication Management</i>
Manuscript ID	JCOM-02-2017-0026.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Communication Technologies, Conflict, Crisis Communication, Social Media, Internet, Rhetoric

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#Migrantcrisis: “Tagging” the European Migration Crisis on Twitter

Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores how the transnational discourse on the migrant crisis materialised on Twitter; it analyses how different stakeholders make use of online platforms to engage in the transnational digital public sphere in a crisis context. This type of analysis can support the development of digital diplomacy policies for organisations involved in migration issues.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The case study combines insights from research on transnational public discourses with web sphere theory for the methodological angle; it also applies Social Network- and Semantic Analysis as empirical methods for data analysis. Twitter data related to #migrantcrisis and published on the 26th of February 2016 was collected, processed and visualised with NodeXL.

Findings: The Social Network- and Semantic Analysis of 4277 tweet identified the key actors/stakeholders who dominated the transnational web discourse and the main topics subsumed under the #migrantcrisis. The results suggest that the hierarchical structures that shaped the “offline” public sphere resonate in the digital public sphere. Simultaneously, strong links with general EU politics and other crisis events that caused turmoil in the transnational public sphere emerged as well.

Research Limitations/Implications: The paper provides an exploratory mapping of noticeable tendencies in a data set that is limited to the 26th of February 2016, which marked the closing of borders along the so-called “Balkan Route” to Europe.

Originality/Value: This paper examines the usage of Twitter and the formation of the transnational web discourse by focusing the examination of a key date and event as regards to the unfolding of the migrant crisis in Europe.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Communication Technologies, Conflict, Internet, Rhetoric, Social Media,

Paper Type: Research Paper

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Introduction

Between 2011 and 2016 the European media landscape was dominated by the “migration crisis”, i.e. the arrival of refugees from the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and the Balkans to Europe. Large numbers of people who fled wars and economic hardship put considerable pressure on European solidarity and confronted the EU’s member-states with yet another challenge that led many observers to question the political stability of the union (Nguyen 2016). Still dizzy from the Eurozone crisis, which triggered heated transnational debates across the continent, European media off- and online shifted their attention to the human tragedy unfolding in the Mediterranean, where thousands arrived on Greek, Italian, and Spanish shores. The migration wave caused social, cultural and political conflicts during a volatile period for Europe (Karatzogianni et. al. 2016). Questions over responsibility and integration as well as racism and exclusion shaped public debates, in which political groups from the left and right put forward their framings of the issue; migrants themselves had few chances to take active agency in discourses about their lives that were dominated by forms of othering (Hall, 1997), i.e. framing by non-migrant groups in the (online) media public sphere (Karatzogianni et. al., 2016).

The Web provides spaces for communication and socialisation ~~and at the same time, it~~ expands and diversifies the public sphere to an unprecedented degree. Social media platforms and blog networks transformed the configuration of public discursivity and ~~enabled~~enable established media agencies, governments, political organisations, and grassroots movements to initiate and participate in public discourses with a transnational dimension (ibid). Online platforms also serve as impactful tool for public relations and the formation of communities. Framing issues from specific political viewpoints through online content is central to these communication processes. This implies practical challenges for organisations involved in the migration crisis in terms of developing and applying efficient policies for digital diplomacy (Zhang 2013; Olubukola 2017; Duncombe 2017; Dodd & Collins 2017). Political organisations need to consider the inherently transnational scope of online communication in the migration crisis context and that especially social media communication can influence public discourses but also diplomatic relations between national governments. This became drastically apparent during the different peaks of the migration/refugee crisis, such as the tweet shared by the German government in August 2015 on the Dublin procedure that was

interpreted as an open invitation by Syrian refugees stuck in Hungary (Guardian 2016) or, as focused in the present paper, the closing of the Balkan-Route in February 2016.

The present paper explores how the transnational discourse on the migrant crisis materialised on Twitter, which is considered a central part of a larger European web sphere (Smyrnaio, 2014). The theoretical foundations of the study integrate insights from public sphere theory, the transnationalisation of media communication, framing research and social media- and web sphere analysis; the latter field discusses the discursive practice of “hash-tagging” in social media networks.

Two research questions guide the analysis:

1. *What groups and organisations participated in debates related to #migrantcrisis on Twitter?*
2. *What frames are associated with #migrantcrisis on Twitter?*

Through the empirical analysis of the Twitter network and the semantic content of related tweets, i.e. hashtags and top keywords, both the structure of the discourse and the dominant frames are revealed and critically analysed. The argument at this point is that online debates on both the economic and the migration crisis cannot be regarded as somehow separated but rather mutually affective and that “dehumanising” tendencies (Nail, 2015) are characteristic for the online discourse. Considering that the crisis situations cause the formation of public discourses across different media planes, i.e. off- and online, and that the mediated public spheres are transnational when their content and the set of communicators transcend the national discursive context (Hepp et al., 2012; Nguyen, 2016), the paper developed an insight on how the migration crisis was perceived, processed, and communicated; who participate/dominate the online discourse (e.g. off- or online media, political actors, public, EU and national institutions) and which are the dominant frames.

-The empirical part concerns the usage of #migrantcrisis on Twitter, which gained in popularity around the 26th of February 2016; this date marked the closing of borders along the so-called “Balkan Route” to Europe.

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Theoretical Framework

“Crisis” as a Trigger for Public Discourse in Europe

The Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, and the “Brexit” have distinct causes but are not isolated from each other; they form a chain of events that reshaped the political and economic order and the social and cultural relations in Europe. Recent publications focus on the chances and limits for the emergence of transnational public spheres as transnational mediated discourses across online and offline media platforms (Hepp et al., 2015; Nguyen 2016; Risse, 2015; Swen, Grande and Kriesi, 2015) and the formation of alternative political networks (Ferra, 2016; Kousis, 2016; Mattoni, 2016; Ross, 2016;) against the background of crisis. Most researchers describe an ambivalent situation for a crisis-ridden Europe: while transnational discourses on shared problems and common challenges frequently materialise, fragmenting tendencies caused by socio-cultural conflicts and the perseverance of national perspectives and framings are European reality. The current crises provide a common context in which partly irreconcilable positions clash. The transnational debate is strongly affected and shaped –or “moulded” (Hepp 2013)– by media technology, including online media (Hepp et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2016; Smyrniotis, 2014), as a multitude of websites, blogs, forums, and debates on social media platforms focus on the European crisis and its subareas.

Profound irritations and transformations in the socio-economic and political organisation of societies trigger public communication across a multitude of different media platforms on and off the Web; virtually innumerable messages and statements condense into public discourses, a process which can be described as the materialisation of public spheres in mediated information societies (Hepp et al., 2012; Nguyen, 2015). Examples for crisis situations are developments that are difficult to control and which can lead to conflict and contestation among different societal stakeholders, such as economic and/or financial crises (Walby, 2015), social, political, and cultural conflicts, wars, and disasters (Kohring, 2007). Arguments over responses and solutions to challenges and problems are at the centre of public discussions across offline- and online media platforms (e.g. Castells, 2009; Entman, 1993; Karatzogianni, 2006; Nguyen 2016).

Developments that may lead to lasting changes in the configuration of social order, political hierarchies, and/or economic flows of capital are accompanied by frictions that can ignite conflicts on a larger scale and could therefore be described as crises. Exceptional situations provide the context in which different political viewpoints compete in publicly accessible discourses; they share their interpretations, evaluations, and proposals for action with a wider public through mediated communication. This serves two purposes: firstly, to ensure visibility of stakeholders in the public realm, as they present themselves and voice their claims; secondly, they push for their agendas by framing issues from specific ideological perspectives to gain supporters, to convince the uncommitted, and finally to prevail over competing groups in the political contest (Matthes, 2014). Through framing, political agencies strategically influence the direction of public debates (Castells, 2009; Karatzogianni, 2006; Nguyen, 2016).

Framing in media communication is a discursive strategy to collect social and political resources from the public realm (Karatzogianni, 2006). Online media, especially social media platforms, offer alternative spaces for political organisation, discourse and conflict; they are spaces of resonance, reflection, and response to developments in society. Simultaneously, online media are efficient tools that allow political organisations and groups to circumvent the monopoly on broad scale communication traditionally held by print- and broadcasting news media outlets; they level the field and expand the public arena (Karatzogianni 2006; Nguyen 2016). For instance, protests during the Eurozone crisis years indicated the role of Internet technology as a means of social change (Passini, 2012). The versatile usage of online media platforms triggered heated debates on political participation and citizenship; the usage implementation of e.g. social media sites contributed to the emergence of alternative public spaces based on digital communication; this potential becomes manifest especially in situations of change, i.e. when societies discuss and negotiate the reallocation of resources, the prioritisation of challenges and problems, their socio-economic structure, and ethic-moral orientation. The empirical analysis of Twitter's semantic content, i.e. hashtags and top keywords, reveals what frames are being communicated in the digital public sphere by what stakeholders, which eventually points to the main conflict lines in the overall migration crisis discourse. The present paper therefore employs digital methods (Rogers 2015) associated with social media analysis to collect and analyse large scale data sets for the identification of frames.

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Political conflicts and crises are major causes for the formation of public discourses. They trigger communicative activities across the political landscape and provide a context for related messages; they are the most prominent items on public agendas (Castells, 2009) and have the widest transnational-global reach. During the Eurozone crisis and migration crisis this became evident in the European media landscape and alternative networks on an almost daily basis since 2007/8 (Nguyen, 2016). The areas of affectivity of a crisis further determine the tone of the surrounding public discourse; the higher the perceived (but not necessarily factual!) social, political, economic, and cultural stakes, the more intense, emotional, and extreme the debates appear to be. The intensity and urgency of the economic and financial crisis had a tangible effect on the degree of “radicalisation” in the transnational discourse.

During the Eurozone crisis this emerged in various forms of pejorative statements against e.g. quasi-imperialist Germans and lazy Greeks as opposite poles, which indicated ‘racist framing’ in the discussion on the alleged North-South divide in the Eurozone (Van Vossle, 2016). The same applies to the migration crisis to a potentially more profound extent; though the critical observer needs to differentiate between varying shades of othering (Hall, 1997), debates about migration were shaped by extreme viewpoints that applied plain racism and dehumanization in their public communication (Nail, 2015). One reason for the emotional affectivity of the migration crisis are its sheer proportions: the recent migration flows to Europe are comparable to the situation during World War II (Brannan et al., 2016), since large quantities of refugees leave their home countries due to wars and/or instable political situations. The UN Refugee Agency states that the number of people forcibly displaced in 2014 exceeded 59.5 million worldwide (Khiabany, 2016). In Greece, over one million people arrived in 2015, mainly via boat from Turkey (Brannan et al., 2016). This coincided with the parallel unfolding and intensification of the crisis in Greece, which spread from finance and economy to politics and society and caused a multi-layered crisis in the austerity-ridden country (Nguyen, 2016; Rozakou, 2016).

While various debates on the political correctness of defining the crisis (e.g. migrant crisis, refugees’ crisis, humanitarian crisis, etc.) frequently emerged, Khiabany (2016) asserts that such approaches result in polarisation, contestation, and conflict. At the root of these frictions is the categorisation of migrants in more and less welcome people; hence, Khiabany argues, forced migration is both a product *of* and a condition that *maintains* inequality (ibid). This echoes in the highly mediatised, emotional, polarising, and inherently transnational discourse.

In a few extreme instances, not even images of dead refugees, including children, measured down the tone of the debate; to the contrary, such tragic events were occasionally exploited or even mocked or ridiculed (Kingsley, 2015). The split between pro- and anti-migration groups was not limited to nation-states but emerged throughout Europe.

There are plenty of examples: Golden Dawn in Greece used challenges and problems related to migration for their ethnic-nationalist agenda, which found considerable support in a country that was wrecked by economic crisis; the consequences of austerity politics further fuelled disillusionment among voters who sought a new political home in the ideological fringes (Dalakoglou 2013; Georgiadou, 2013). In Italy, the Lega Nord advanced its anti-European agenda by heavily criticizing migration policies, i.e. by resorting to racism and xenophobia. All over Europe migration became a key issue that was hotly debated across the political spectrum; right-wing groups referred to migration as the main reason for socio-economic problems and the loss of cultural identity, as voiced, for instance, by the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands under Geert Wilders or France's National Party under Marine le Pen (Lazaridis, Campani and Benveniste, 2016); Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) emphasized an openly anti-migration position in its political agenda, too. In the case of the UK, the Eurozone crisis, but even more pressingly the perceived migration crisis, fuelled anti-European sentiments to such a degree that many voters chose to support the country's exit from the EU in the 2016 referendum (Van Reenen, 2016).

Opposition to anti-migration positions is admittedly strong across the continent; pro-migrant and left-wing groups frequently contested right-wing, racist, and nationalist framings of the issue. However, research has shown that even pro-migrant groups do not provide genuine agency for the people they claim to speak for; migrants largely remain voiceless in a volatile and increasingly brutalized discourse about their lives (Karatzogianni et al., 2016). In Italy and Greece, the dire economic situation had a tangible impact: on one hand the migration crisis became a bargaining chip for countries that sought better conditions and outcomes in bailout negotiations; on the other, migration exerted further pressure on already strained social cohesion and solidarity, which resonated in discriminatory policies (Tzanelli and Yar, 2009). The unfolding and handling of the Eurozone crisis as well its connection to the migration crisis, and the capability of European politicians to find solutions to both, was frequently addressed in the online media discourse (Euractiv 2015; FT 2016; Open Europe 2016; Reuters 2016).

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The Transnational Dimension

Public discourses on the Internet have a latent transnational dimension due to the virtually global accessibility. This potential becomes manifest if the set of issues in focus and the included political and social actors transcend the “national” media arenas (Nguyen, 2016; Risse, 2015). A prime example is the public discourse on the Eurozone crisis, which emerged in late 2007 and continued to occupy the European media landscape in the subsequent years (ibid). Commentators from e.g. Germany, France, the Netherlands or the UK discussed developments in Greece, Spain, or Portugal and vice versa; events in one part of the Eurozone, or the EU, triggered heated debates across all member-states and the lines between domestic/national and European/transnational politics frequently blurred during the crisis years. Both the Eurozone crisis and migration crisis had an inherently transnational dimension due to the simple fact that the entailed challenges and problems influenced not only individual nation-states or separate cultural spaces; they affect the entirety of the European transnational project. However, different cultural and socio-political alignments within the various cultural spaces that “form” the EU cause multiple fragmentation (Hepp et. al., 2012) of transnational public discourses; the lines of conflict and contestation cannot be viewed as simplified clashes between somehow closed national containers but are much fuzzier and dynamic; they are driven not only by cultural but also political differences. This leads to a paradox situation: the overall framework of the EU and even its crises provide a shared transnational context but within this context different affiliations are communicated by public political communicators, ranging from pro-European/postnational on one side of the ideological spectrum to ethno-nationalist/anti-European on the other one (Nguyen, 2016). The same applies to the migration crisis discourse, which affects not one European country but the foundations of the EU and stimulates communicative activity across off- and online media on a transnational scale.

The Web Sphere Perspective

On the Internet, public discourses that consist of mediated communication emerge as web spheres (Schneider and Foot, 2007). Simply put, these are clusters of related online content with the same focus. Examples are Internet discourses on elections, sports events, or scandals that span across different online platforms (ibid). The web sphere model basically enables the empirical analysis of online discourses by operationalising them into measurable components, which fall into two categories: content and networks. Both the issues that are covered in online text and the hyperlink networks between the involved online platforms enable the description of a web sphere's thematic focus, social composition, as well as communicative structure along the spectrum of unilateral and multilateral communication flows. Since web spheres are primarily defined by specific sets of issues, themes, and topics that pool online communication, they can be screened and critically assessed with content- and network analyses, which again can be modified for e.g. framing analyses (Kohring and Matthes, 2008; Nguyen, 2016).

Empirical analyses that applied this research design with the help of a complementary content- and network analysis, suggest that the Eurozone crisis triggered the formation of a transnational web sphere in which commentators from different cultural and socio-political backgrounds voiced their opinions and therefore framed related developments and events from specific ideological viewpoints (Nguyen, 2016); the same seems to apply to the migration crisis, which actually emerged as a subarea of the Eurozone crisis as early as 2011 (ibid), i.e. years before the migration crisis started to supersede the economic malaise that had befallen Europe as a primary issue on public agendas.

Social Media Platforms as Integral Parts of Web Spheres: The Example of Twitter

Web spheres can span across different online media platforms, i.e. they can connect debates on websites, in forums, and in social media networks in one thematic context; postings in e.g. social media networking sites often link to websites, blogs, or other online media and thus expand beyond the immediate "boundaries" of a single platform (Brundidge 2010). The present study focuses on Twitter as a central site of communicative activity in web spheres on

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current issues. Launched in 2006, it belongs to the most popular social media platforms and provides a relatively quick as well as cheap tool for public communication (Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013) that provides a ‘new human environment’ (Cross, 2016) for discursive interaction on a potentially transnational to global scale.

There is a controversial debate between “optimistic” and “pessimistic” perspectives on the relation between the public sphere and Twitter that focuses on the democratizing role of social media and on participation and polarization. This “microblogging” platform must also be understood as a place of online conflict with considerable potential to influence offline conflicts (Liu and Weber, 2014); a very recent example is the Trump campaign and its various supporting groups during the last US presidential elections. In crisis contexts, online media, and social media networking sites like Twitter are popular tools for protestors to network and organise political activities; they play an important role in facilitating political mobilisation towards change (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013), which indicates their political potential for spreading awareness and information on e.g. activist groups and social movements (Konelly, 2015). The European context is no exception: research shows that Twitter became an integral part of the transnational web sphere on EU politics (e.g. Smyrniaios, 2013). Additionally, research focusing on the usage of Twitter in breaking news situations suggests that the platform is a popular source of information, most importantly for younger generations (Tandoc and Johnson, 2016; Vis, 2013). Tandoc & Johnson (2016) argue that Twitter’s central features, i.e. the quick and easy distribution of information and the live coverage of events by users (Bruno, 2011), are primary reasons for the platform’s dominant role in public communication processes, especially in regards to crises and “breaking news” situations.

With Twitter’s success, the usage of hashtags gained in popularity for coordinating online discussions and making online discussions observable in quasi-real time (Zapavvigna, 2015; Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013). This allowed individuals to simultaneously search and participate in discussions (Zapavvigna, 2015). Hashtags, which are keywords combined with a literal #, provide connecting points for participants and cohesion to public online discussions, i.e. web spheres; they categorise contributors (Burgess et.al., 2015), form a central element in the linguistic structure and semantics of posting or “tweets”, and provide metadata about an online discourse (ibid).

Communication in social media networking sites can appear ‘speedy and unstructured’ (Giglietto and Lee, 2015, p.34) and the study of hashtags helps with the identification of the structural characteristics of online discourses. Twitter offers rich data that researchers can screen from multiple angles to address questions concerning the polarisation among ideological lines in crisis- and conflict discourses and/or the identification of trends and opinions leaders (Tremayne, 2013). The analysis of public discourses in Twitter covers two closely interwoven dimensions: on one hand, it is important to map the network of involved accounts in a particular discourse; this reveals what stakeholders participate and potentially compete with each other. On the other, there is the content level consisting of the content of the tweets. Through the strategic usage of hashtags and keywords, communicators on Twitter frame issues from ideologically loaded perspectives despite the technical limitation of 144 characters. Hence, any frame analysis of Twitter content needs to focus on the semantic content. The automatized content analysis of Twitter content then enables a quick mapping and evaluation of the shape and direction of the discourse.

The #migrantcrisis on Twitter on the 26th of February 2016

#migrantcrisis: Sampling, Data Collection & Analysis

On the 25th of February the “Managing Migration Together” conference on the migration and refugee crisis took place in Austria, where representatives from Western Balkan countries discussed new policies on the issue, proceeding to the cancellation of open border traffic between neighbouring states (including Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia; Deutsche Welle 2016); Greece was not invited to the meeting, which Athens perceived as an affront and subsequently recalled its ambassador from Austria. The closing of borders along the Balkan route trapped more than 20.000 refugees in Greece, while one day after the conference, two 25-years old refugees tried to commit suicide, hanging themselves in the centre of the Greek capital (Rothwell, 2016). This events highlighted once more the fragile relations between EU member-states (BBC News, 2016b) while echoed on the European web sphere. Twitter, is an indicative example of how public sphere is shaped by different stakeholders, pointing out the different frames, understanding and approaches on the issue.

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Throughout the unfolding of the crisis the hashtags #migrantrcrisis and #refugeecrisis were among the most popular, “trending” in different countries. However, #migrantrcrisis was a more relevant choice for this study, as it refers to displaced populations in general and it’s semantically closer to the way that the term is being used by both EU and media institutions’ discourse on the issue.

The data was collected and analysed with the open-source tool NodeXL, an add-in to Microsoft Excel, able to facilitate exhaustive network analysis of complex data sets, that offers a range of visualisation features (Hansen et al., 2011, p.47). NodeXL enables empirically grounded Social Network Analysis (SNA) which, according to Wasserman & Faust (1994, p.17), ‘provides a precise way to define important social concepts’ while at the same time, it enables the in depth examination of structured social relationships, including different social entities and units, as well as individual, corporate or collective social units (1994, pp.16-21). The identification of dominant actors and influencers, reveals noticeable trends and patterns as regards to formation of online discourses and social networks. Social networks ‘allow all types of things to spread from person to person’, from diseases and viral videos to rumours, i.e. different types of information, throughout networks (Golbeck, 2013, p.151) and therefore, it’s an appropriate approach for the examination of the participation and the formation of online public sphere, focusing both on actors and discourse.

The collection of the #migrantrcrisis data was conducted on the 26th of February 2016. NodeXL enables a maximum of 10.000 relations for the data collection process, including tweets, retweets and mentions. In the process 4277 relevant items were identified, with the “oldest” being posted on the 22/2/2016. While such a rich data set could be scanned on multiple levels and angles, the present study focused on online social networks and the semantic content of the discourse. This enabled the examination of various actors, frames and debates, as well as communication strategies and their effects on the transnational web sphere. While this is a limited data set, both in its temporal scope and content, still it sufficiently provides an exploratory mapping of noticeable tendencies which emerged during the examined period.

After visualising the network and calculating the graph metrics, the analysis proceeded with the detection of groups in form of clusters of vertices. This supported the identification of top items and opinion leaders, and/or influencers, of the network that form the social substructure

of the online discourse. The second phase of the analysis focused on the content of the sampled material and the detection of the top hashtags, top words and word pairs. This step allowed the researchers to create a semantic network graph, which again helped with the detection of framing strategies. In sum, the research process facilitated analysing the Twitter discourse on the chosen date in terms of the networks and content, i.e. to scan and evaluate communicative activities and strategies on the transnational web sphere, to gain a better understanding of modes of networking and framing in the crisis context.

However, in contrast to “big data” research, which allows longitudinal analyses of online data based on millions of items and relations, the chosen technique for the present study is limited to only a few days of discursive activity, which is a mere snippet of the online discourse on the Web. Admittedly, this could be considered as a major limitation of the applied method, since it does not support a long-term examination of communicative and structural patterns, due to a lack of a broader empirical database; however, the analysed data set managed to efficiently develop an insight on networks and discourse, created a basis for the development of communication strategies by different stakeholders. Still, the sampled material provides a strong basis for the identification and mapping of dominant themes, associations, evaluations and other hints towards framing in the digital debate on migration during a particularly tumultuous period; it is intended as an exploratory study and its preliminary results may be further corroborated in a larger follow-up research project.

Findings

#migrantcrisis: The Social and Semantic Networks

The data was scanned at two levels: firstly, analysing the social network focusing on participants; secondly, mapping the semantic network that emerged around the hashtag #migrantcrisis. The data crawling conducted and the #migrantcrisis network comprised by 2768 vertices and 3031 unique edges, i.e. connections, including links to the 4277 collected relations that evolved between 22/02/2016 and 26/02/2016

After the calculation of the overall graphs’ metrics, the data was grouped into clusters using the Clauset-Newman-Moore algorithm (Clauset, Newman, and Moore, 2004):

Figure 1: #migrantcrisis network (Entire Graph and Graph's groups in its own box)

Then, focusing on betweenness centrality, the following nodes/actors identified as having noticeably strong influence in the network through bridging different clusters and other nodes (Cherven 2015: 195). These actors/nodes had a central position in transmitting the information, shaping the public discourse. Therefore, the dominant actors/hubs of each of the identified clusters/groups include mainly international new media outlets (@Reuters, @Reuterstv, @Sputnikit, @Xhnews), media related individuals, such as journalists, reporters (@Natashafatah, @Bbckatyadler, @Realalexjones, @Dgatopoulos, @Kallergisk), but also NGOs (@Oxfam, @Rnli). Another observation is that these user accounts reflect a wide geographical distribution (including e.g. Russia, UK, China, Greece, etc.).

Admittedly, the positions these accounts hold in the network alone say little about the quality of relations between them and other users, i.e. nodes, in the network; these interactions can range from uncommented transfer via simple re-tweeting through positive approval of statements to criticism, mockery, and/or rejection. Still, it is important to acknowledge their standing in the discourse, as it determines the network structure of the Twitter debate. At this level of the analysis two preliminary conclusions about the web sphere on Twitter can be drawn: firstly, the discourse on #migrantcrisis has indeed a transnational-global reach, as indicated by the diverse geographical distribution of participants in the network; secondly, “traditional” media organisations and other professional communicators appear to dominate the discourse, which corroborates findings from other web sphere analyses for the European crisis context (Nguyen, 2016).

A comparison of the groups’ most frequently mentioned hashtags provides insight to discursive practices in the Twitter network, most importantly in regards to how users label and categorise their statements. Hashtags have a considerable capacity for cultural generativity (Burgess 2011: 3); this means that the analysis of hashtag needs to consider different connotations and multiple meanings that users may communicate with selected words. While the content of tweets might vary, still the way that this was labelled, reveal patterns as regards to the development of discourse around #migrantcrisis. This can also

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7 reveal how groups frame the issue at the centre of a discourse and what the main fault lines of
8 conflict between the participating stakeholders look like. In any case, taking a comparative
9 look at the most frequently mentioned hashtags facilitates the in-depth analysis of the content
10 of a web sphere.
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12 **Table 1: Top Hashtags and Top Word Pairs**
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17 Unsurprisingly, the hashtag #migrantcrisis is the most frequently used one in all the examined
18 groups, since it is the searched/seed hashtag used for data collection. However, a number of
19 other relevant hashtags also emerged in noticeable frequencies in the sample that allow
20 differentiating between strongly interconnected yet distinct subareas within migrant crisis
21 debate. For example, the dominant hashtags in Group 1 can be linked to the political turmoil
22 in EU as well as the international unsustainable political environment as understood by the
23 discussion on #brexit, on #trump2016 linking these issues with the #migrantcrisis and the
24 #buildthewall. These issues were the main points based on which the discussion around right-
25 wing and extreme politics emerged, while at the same time, links different contexts and cases
26 from the international political environment. Group 2 appears to focus on the refugee crisis
27 summit in Austria and the discussion on the EU policies, which is not considered to be
28 supportive of refugees. At the same time, hashtags such as #rapefugees and #Hungary
29 indicated both the conflicted discourses and then, the political debate and the rise of racist
30 and xenophobic rhetoric as well (e.g. @Stop the Rapefugee wave! Save our children! Save
31 Europe!, @No-Islam/send rapefugees back anti-EU/LEFT - SHUT UUUUUPP). Group 3
32 places emphasis on the issue of closed borders and the Schengen zone as well as on the
33 political turmoil escalating after the closure of borders; it also includes hashtags that may
34 imply a potential ascription of responsibility, as communicated in #nato and #merkel. Group
35 4 deals with the Southern hemisphere of the Europe, including the Idomeni refugee camp,
36 Greece and Turkey, which serve as a central hub towards Europe for current migration flows.
37 Finally, Group 5 focuses on the case of Calais in France, where an unofficial refugee camp
38 gained notoriety in relation to the migration crisis (implied in e.g. #breaking and
39 #refugeecrisis).
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52 In the whole data set, the most dominant hashtags include central political actors (#nato,
53 #merkel, #eu and different countries) who are involved in the unfolding of the crisis and
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decision-making processes in regard to migration and refugee policies. While the comparison of the usage of hashtags, i.e. the content of the discourse, points to differences in the way participants place emphasis on partial aspects of the migration crisis, the appearance of shared hashtags indicates the main frames for contestation and conflict; they also imply where offline and online debates connect.

In order to make these observations possible, the data was scanned again in two steps: firstly, frequencies for the top hashtags were determined; secondly, the algorithm identified word-pairs, or dyads, for compiling the semantic network. The detected semantic network emerged by the graph's word pairs, including most of the dominant hashtags and sets of meanings that produced by the words dyads. At this stage, the pairs of words are understood as vertices and edges, while the relations/links shaped based on the repetition level, including links which appeared more than 50 times. The semantic network comprised by 11 sub-groups. The nodes/words that were repeated more frequently than others appear in the graph as bigger nodes; connections with a higher betweenness centrality, i.e. which appear to be stronger, are symbolised as bigger and darker edges in the graph.

Figure 2: Word Pairs repeated more than 50 times in the Semantic Network

The first group (G1) is the biggest clusters in the graph. In this group, the terms “migrantcrisis” and “Europe” are the most relevant nodes in terms of sheer frequency and they also serve as connecting hubs to other clusters in the network.

While there are direct references to the closing of borders and official government policies on the migration issue, there is also a noticeable linkage between G1 and G3 that indicates a sub-discourse on the potential future scenarios for the EU within the migration context; this is communicated in terms such as “collapsing” or “invasion”, which also implies the presence of a right-wing discourses connected to the word-pair of “migrant” and “crisis” within semantic network. These rather negative outlooks are somewhat countered by references to online and offline solidarity campaigns, such as “pray” in G2; the same cluster includes terms linked to the permanent news media coverage of related events (e.g. “investigates”,

“reuters”). The peripheral groups G4, G5 and G6 emerged in relation to incidents that were currently unfolding in the sample timeframe; starting with G4, there is a reference to the decision of France to abolish the so-called “Calais-jungle” on 25/2/2016 (Chazan, 2016); G5 also refers to the refugee camp in Calais, while G6 emerged around the decision of Greece to recall its ambassador from Austria in the aftermath of the summit on refugee policies to which it was not invited. G7 is another peripheral cluster apparently related to the tragedy of sinking refugee boats in Greek waters (“Greece”, “lifeboat”, “crews”). The remaining clusters G9, G10 and G11 do not seem to be central to the migrant discourse in general and refer to other media observers as well as political actors, such as a Chinese news video (G9), the German government (G10) BBC news (G11).

Conclusion and Discussion

The analysis on #migrantcrisis has shown a) what types of participants appear to dominate the transnational web discourse and b) what topics are subsumed under the migration crisis, which again can serve as a starting point for the identification of frames that emerged in relation to specific events within a specified timeframe. The first important observation is: the network analysis showed that the main actors, i.e. those with a central position in the discourse and widest reach, were traditional news media agencies, this implies that hierarchical structures that shaped the “offline” public sphere resonate in the digital public sphere. They can be challenged or circumvented (Karatzogianni, 2006) but their dominance does not become obsolete on the Web. Concerning the content, linkages between causes and results are discussed or suggested online (e.g. Brexit, future of EU).

What becomes clear from the Twitter analysis is that the refugee crisis is not per se a primary concern, in terms of displaced population or poverty and human suffering, etc. Instead, the main concern implied in the data is related to EU politics, indicating Germany’s position in this structure. This discourse can be linked to contemporary social and political turmoil “offline”, which is common for most crisis areas (financial, migration, political, etc.). The role of dominant actors in the EU politics, the future of Europe, and the EU policies are key issues around which online discussions emerged.

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At the same time, the linkage between the EU politics with the International political turmoil is also pointed out. Hashtags such as #brexit and #trump2016, indicate interesting considerations as regards to the political incident which developed after February 2016, when the data collected, but also point out the linkages between different types of crisis events too. The ~~emergence~~ of racist and xenophobic ~~discourse~~discourses developed in parallel to the discussion ~~starting based~~ on the #migrantcrisis in EU, ~~including though which is also~~ linked to the US and Trump's migration discourse ~~as regards~~related to #buildthewall.

As an overall what is suggested in this analysis and the examined points is that the dominant actors within the online discourse were actors, which dominate the public discourse through offline media as well. The migrant crisis discourse is developed around the event of the closure of the borders, although the crisis per se is discussed as another element of the wider political crisis, including the EU crisis and austerity as well as the rise of far-right and extreme politics. The discussion is developed focusing in the EU and the US context, although the different considerations and debates are related to the European and national sovereignty.

The example of Twitter as a partial area of a web sphere indicates how and around which points/statements or debates the online public sphere materialised; quite strikingly, the empirical evidence shows that hierarchical procedures and structures remain central to public discourses. Organisations can use this information to better understand the associations and causalities that participants in online discourses put forward; they can map the field and, based on these insights, devise their own communication strategies.

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Table 1: Top Hashtags and Top Word Pairs

Top Hashtags - G1	Top Hashtags - G2	Top Hashtags - G3	Top Hashtags - G4	Top Hashtags - G5	Top Hashtags - Entire Graph	Top Word Pairs in Tweet in Entire Graph
Migrantcrisis	migrantcrisis	Migrantcrisis	migrantcrisis	migrantcrisis	Migrantcrisis	greece,migrantcrisis
Merkel	Eu	Merkel	Greece	Breaking	Greece	migrantcrisis,Germany
Germany	Hungary	Media	Spain	Calais	Eu	migrant,crisis
Eu	Europe	Schengen	Austria	refugeecrisis	Merkel	hundreds,migrants
Uk	Brexit	Germany	Athens	Germany	Germany	french,court
German	Migrants	Syrianrefugees	Turkey	Refugees	Refugeecrisis	migrantcrisis,https
Europe	Greece	Refugees	Eu	Finland	Europe	migrantcrisis,refugeecrisis
trump2016	rapefugees	Eu	refugeesgr		Migrants	germany,merkel
Brexit	refugeecrisis	Asylumseekers	idomeni		Calais	migrant,invasion
Buildthewall	Austria	Nato	Syrians		Breaking	gives,green