

Conspiracist propaganda

How Russia promotes anti-establishment sentiment online?

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Russia's international propaganda

- Russia has developed its capability since the early 2000s
 - 2005: Russia Today (RT) was launched
 - 2008: Georgia-Russia conflict in 2008 (unsuccessful)
 - 2009: Gas dispute with Ukraine (successful)
 - 2013: Ukraine crisis (very successful)
 - 2014: Sputnik News was launched
- Russia's "active measures"
 - Aim to hamper foreign countries' ability to pursue policies through misinformation, assassination and terrorism (Abrams, 2016; Kragh & Asberg, 2017)
 - Sputnik News seems to be an outlet for active measures, but we do not know much about its content

Sputnik News

- Russia's international propaganda outlet launched in 2014
 - Branding itself as a “provider of alternative news”
 - Publish stories on international events in over 30 languages
 - Equipped with social media-friendly functions
- Monitored by EU and NATO's strategic communication divisions
 - Identified as major source of misinformation
 - It seems to be using conspiracy theories in its *narrative-generating* propaganda

Socio-psychological impact

- Conspiracy beliefs can increase skepticism towards the establishment
 - Conspiracy emphasizes conflicting interests between the elite and people
 - Render people as homogeneous group marginalized by the elite
 - Claim that elite is controlling the flow of information
 - Conspiracist theories are self-sealing
 - Lack of evidence is interpreted as sign of conspiracy
 - Authoritative sources' attempt to rebuke conspiracy theories can backfire
 - Conspiracy theories are becoming more visible on the internet
- Spread of conspiracy theories can undermine western democracy
 - Make people less active in political areas (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b)
 - Help populist parties to advance in elections (Rooduijn, 2014; Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017; Yablokov, 2015)

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- **Sputnik International** / English
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- **Sputnik Latvija** / Latvian
- **Sputnik Lietuva** / Lithuanian
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- **Sputnik O'zbekiston** / Uzbek
- **Sputnik ایران** / Persian
- **Sputnik Polska** / Polish
- **Sputnik Србија** / Serbian
- **Sputnik Хуссар Ирыстон** / Ossetian
- **Sputnik Тоҷикистон** / Tajik
- **Sputnik Türkiye** / Turkish
- **Sputnik Việt Nam** / Vietnamese



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SPUTNIK

UK's 'Spying Industry' Is Main Beneficiary of Skripal Incident - Analyst

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My approach to Sputnik News

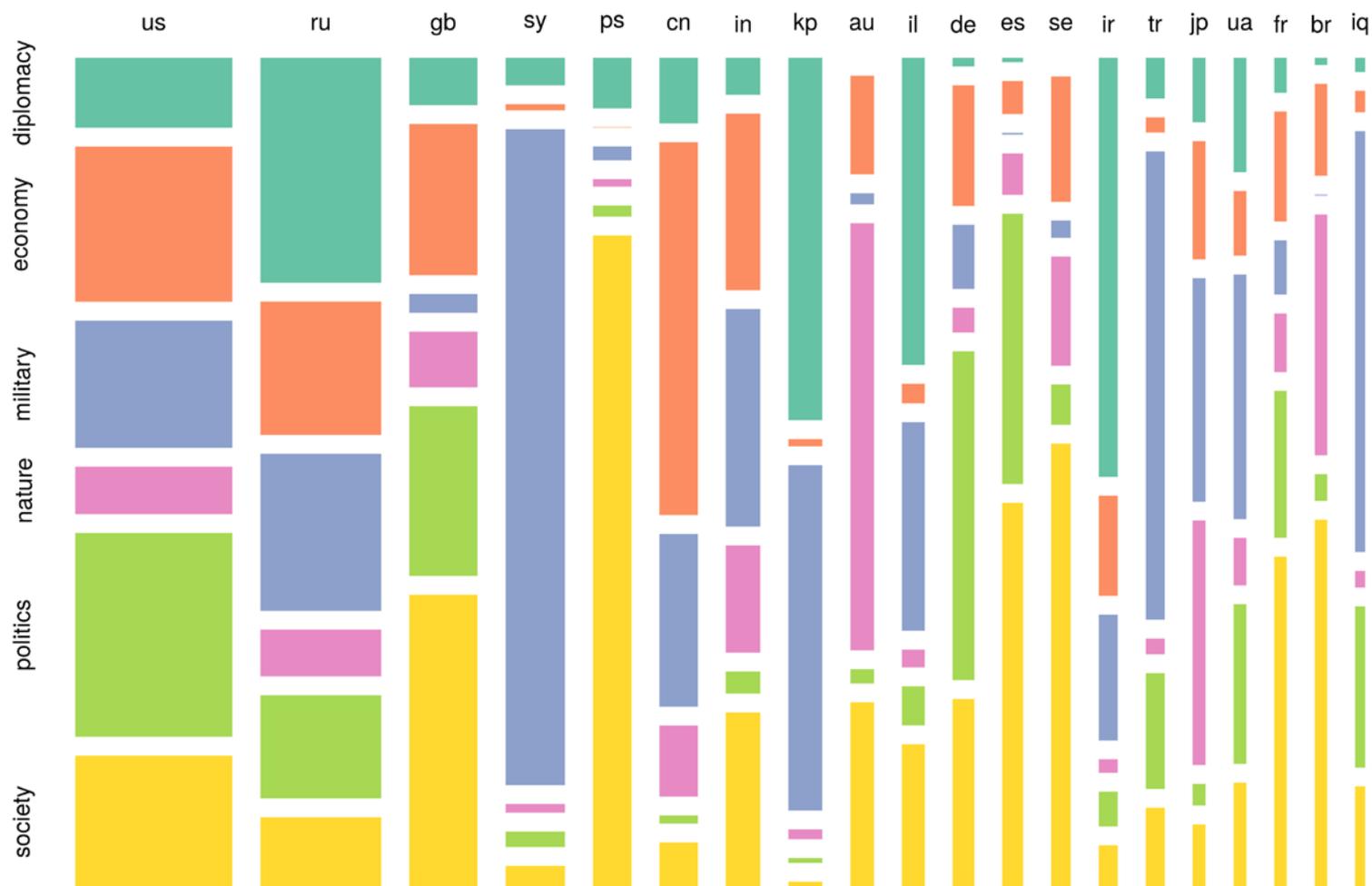
- Download articles and social media posts synchronously from July 2017
 - Sputnik News articles
 - Subscribe to its RSS feeds to collect URLs of all the pages
 - Extract heading and body texts from the web pages
 - Collected 51,651 English-language articles
 - Twitter posts
 - Search Twitter posts for links to sputniknews.com using API
 - 1,280,597 Twitter posts by 151,817 users
- Analyze articles along with social media as metadata
 1. Classify articles by country and topic using a semi-supervised model
 2. Identify articles with conspiracy framing using a keyword dictionary
 3. Compute frequency of social media post linking to these articles
 4. Perform statistical content analysis by regression models

Countries and topics of articles (1)

- Use a semi-supervised model to perform document classification at low cost
 - Geographical seed words are available in the Newsmap package
 - Topical seed words

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Seed words</i>
economy	market*, money, bank*, stock*, bond*, industry, company, shop*
politics	parliament*, congress*, party leader*, party member*, voter*, lawmaker*, politician*
society	police, prison*, school*, hospital*
diplomacy	ambassador*, diplomat*, embassy, treaty
military	military, soldier*, air force, marine, navy, army
nature	water, wind, sand, forest, mountain, desert, animal, human

Countries and topics of articles (2)



Identifying conspiracy frames (1)

- Brotherton et al. (2013) summarized conspiracy theories in 59 generic statements for as survey questions

1. The government has employed people in secret to assassinate others
2. Government agencies have been secretly involved in the assassination of their own citizens
3. The deaths of certain high-profile public figures have been the result of covert, government-sanctioned operations
4. Certain world leading political figures who died untimely deaths were in fact “taken out” by government operatives
5. For strategic reasons, the government permits certain terrorist activities to occur which could otherwise be prevented
6. High-level politicians have had certain people killed in order to prevent embarrassing events from becoming publicly known

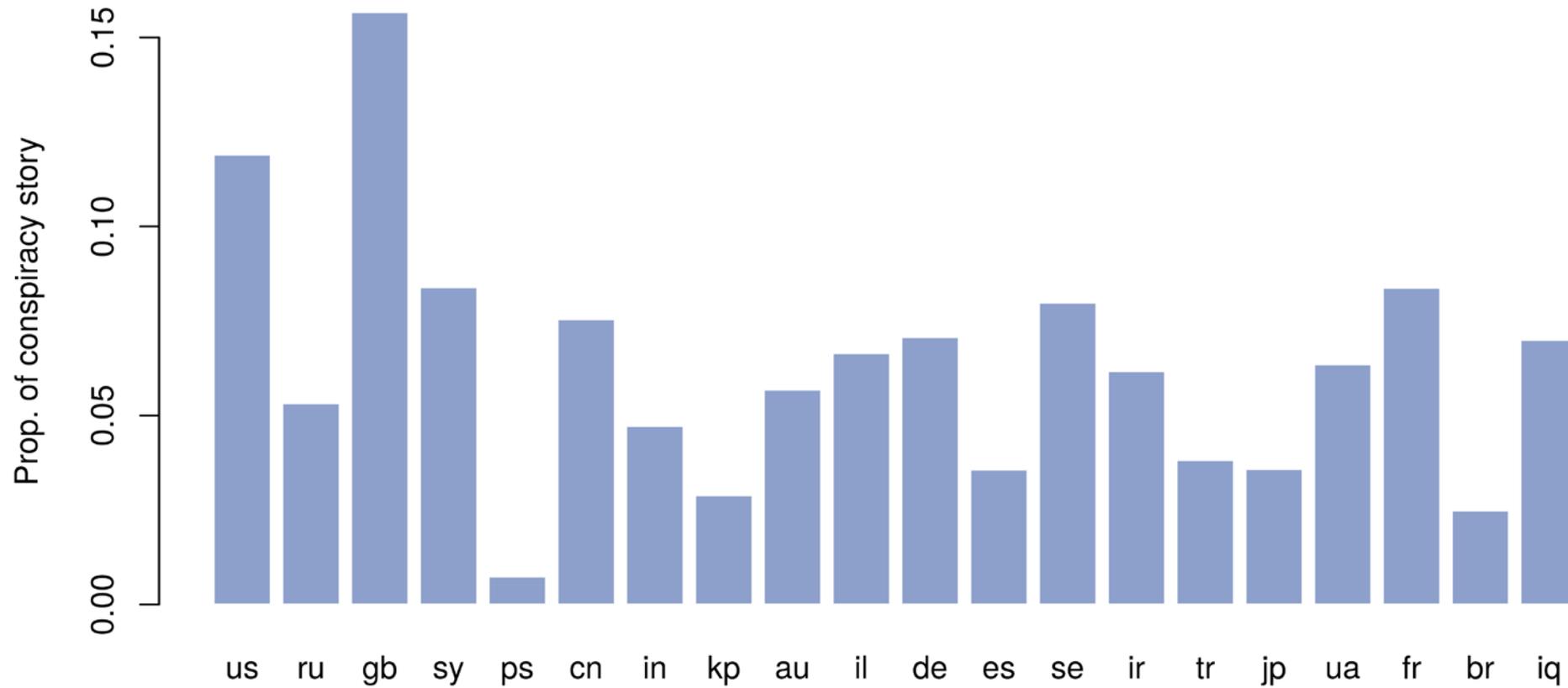
Identifying conspiracy frames (2)

- Created a dictionary of conspiracy frames
 - Analyze generic conspiracy statement in Brotherton et al. (2013)
 - Classify frequent words into three categories

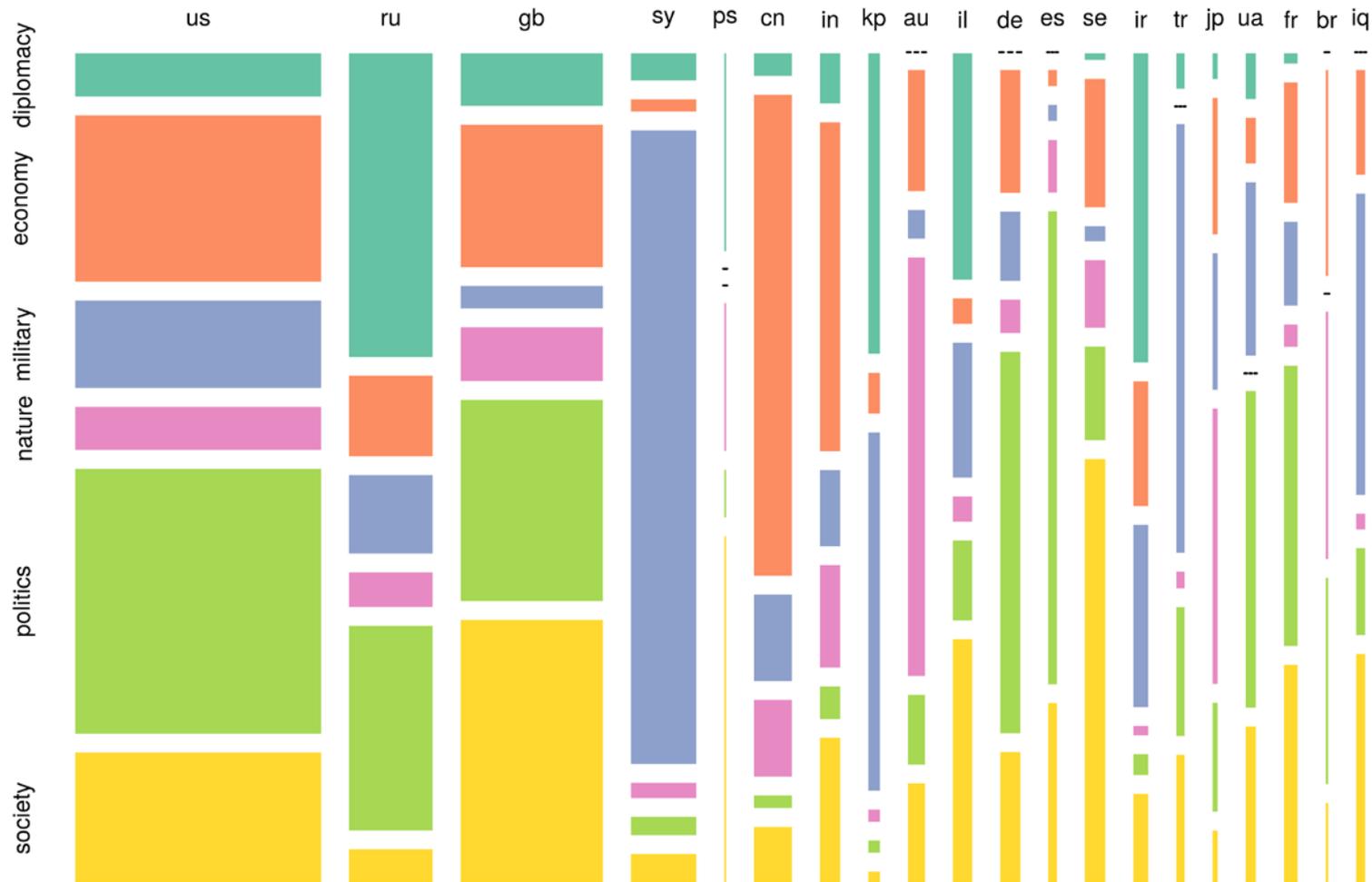
<i>Category</i>	<i>Keywords</i>
elites	govern*, celebrit*, scientist*, industr*, politi*, power*, wealth*
people	public*, people, citizen*, society
secret	private*, secret*, evidence*, concealed*, covert*, covered, real, unknown

- Articles with all the three categories are considered to have conspiracy frames
 - Words such as “secret service” and “secretary” were removed beforehand to avoid false matches

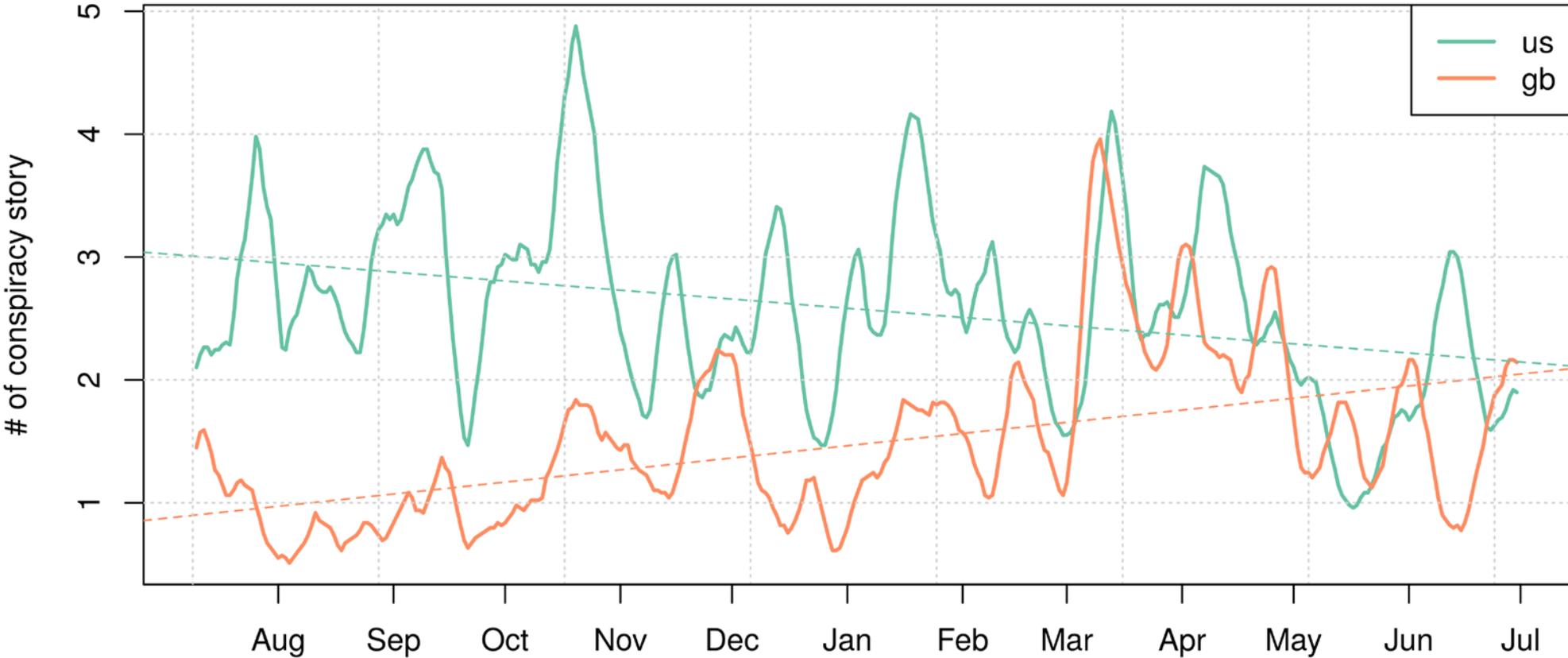
Articles with conspiracy frames



Countries and topics with conspiracy frames



Number articles with conspiracy frames



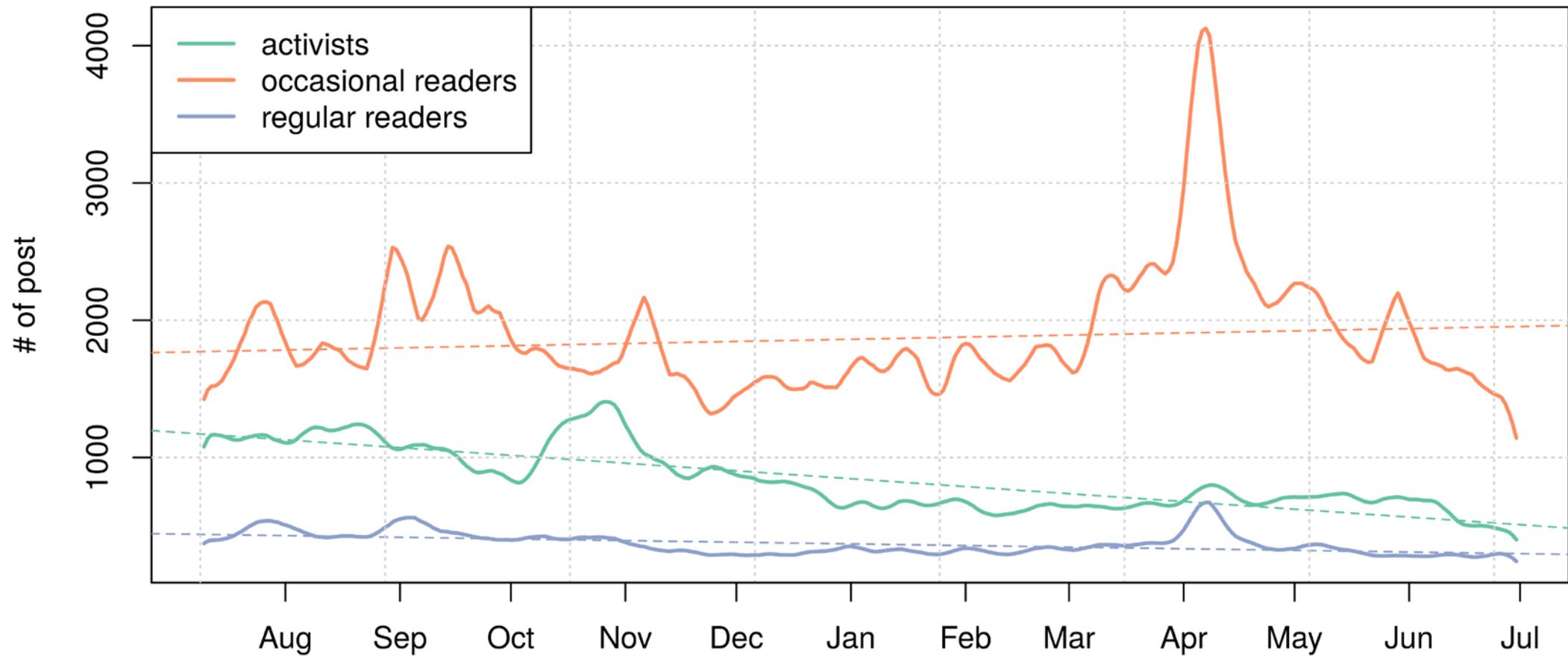
Number of Tweets linking to the website (1)

- Twitter accounts were separated into three types

	<i>Retweet</i>	
	<i>< 50%</i>	<i>> 50%</i>
<i>Active account (top 0.1%)</i>	Pro-Russian activist (n=71)	Social bot (not used)
<i>Other account</i>	Regular reader (n=22,309)	Occasional reader (n=129,352)

- Number of links to articles are counted separately for the three count types
 - Articles are linked from Twitter posts to varying degrees (0 to 3,828 times)
 - Created dummy variables for top 10% articles based on the number of links

Number of Tweets linking to the website (2)



Statistical content analysis (1)

- Articles with conspiracy frames
 - Logistic regression model (conspiracy ~ topic + country + gb * salisbury)

	<i>Likelihood to have conspiracy frame</i>
<i>Overall</i>	Economy (1.59) Politics (2.16)
 US (2.0) UK (2.6) France (1.5) Sweden (1.5)
<i>Interaction</i>	UK after Salisbury (1.2)

Statistical content analysis (2)

- Social media links to the website
 - Logistic regression models (linked ~ topic + country + conspiracy + salisbury + country * conspiracy) for the thee account types separately

	<i>Pro-Russian activist</i>	<i>Regular reader</i>	<i>Occasional readers</i>
<i>Overall</i>	Conspiracy (1.5)	Conspiracy (1.7)	Conspiracy (1.6)
	Military (1.3)	Military (1.6) Society (1.3)	Military (1.4) Society (1.5)
	US (1.1) Syria (1.5)	UK (0.6) Syria (2.0)	US (0.6) UK (0.6) Syria (1.9)
	Salisbury (0.3)	Salisbury (0.8)	Salisbury (1.3)
<i>Interaction</i>	Conspiracy in US (1.6)	Conspiracy in US (1.4) Conspiracy in UK (1.9)	Conspiracy in US (1.8) Conspiracy in UK (1.7)

Summary of findings

- Sputnik News cover US and UK with conspiracy frames
 - Russia (pro-Russian activist) promotes conspiracy stories about the US on Twitter
 - Conspiracist Twitter users (regular readers) share more likely to share conspiracy stories
 - General Twitter users (occasional readers) respond more strongly to conspiracy stories about the US and the UK
- Sputnik News started focus on the UK since the Salisbury incident
 - Conspiracy stories about the US has been declining
 - Articles about Salisbury incident attracted the attention of general Twitter users

Discussion

- Sputnik News uses conspiracy frames
 - **Tactically** to attract more readers to the website
 - Produce “unique” stories about the US and the UK with conspiracy frames (similar to commercial “fake news” production)
 - **Strategically** to promote conspiracist culture on the internet:
 - Reinforce beliefs of conspiracist internet users
 - Prompt generation of conspiracist narratives (narrative-generating political propaganda)
- Russia’s active measures shifted from “gray” to “black”
 - Russia wants to discredit British public institutions as in the US
 - Salisbury incident could be a planted event to destabilize British politics by creating conspiracist narratives

Conclusion

- Spread of the conspiracist world view on the internet can be consequential to democracy
 - Give rise of populists who exploit anti-establishment sentiment
 - Make discussions based on authoritative information impossible
- Difficult to counter conspiracist narratives, but we should
 - Cut the supply of news materials from the main stream media (e.g. western news agencies) to conspiracist websites
 - Reduce socio-economic disparity to eliminate to the root-cause of conspiracy beliefs
 - Pay more research attention to conspiracy theories and beliefs in politics
 - Online news, social media, news comments etc.