Conspiracist propaganda:
How Russia promotes anti-establishment sentiment online?

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It is widely recognized that the Russian government has been involved in international propaganda to influence foreign publics as part of its "active measures" against the West, but experts still disagree on the nature of its propaganda messages. To understand how Russia is attempting to achieve that goal, I have collected and analyzed Sputnik News articles and Twitter posts linked to them over the course of a year in terms of conspiracy framing of social and political events. The result of quantitative text analysis shows that the Russian website uses conspiracy frames in stories about the United States and Britain, both strategically and tactically, to promote skepticism towards western public institutions beyond the conspiracist community. I argue that its conspiracist propaganda is effective in generating anti-establishment narratives on the internet, potentially giving rise to the advancement of populist parties in the West.

Western policymakers, journalists and academics are increasingly concerned about the spread of false information on the internet. Although "fake news" was understood initially as random news content produced by non-journalists for economic interests, they soon realized that false news stories are often

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written strategically for political purposes. A study conducted by Kragh and Asberg (2017) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs revealed that the Russian government has been attempting to influence the Swedish public's perceptions of its government and the EU through false information published on the Sputnik News website, which was created by the Russian government in 2014 following its success in creating international propaganda during the Ukraine crisis (Watanabe, 2017b). While Russia's older state-controlled news media (RT and TASS) aims to reach out to satellite TV audiences and the mass media, Sputnik News targets social media users. Branding itself as a "provider of alternative news", the website publishes foreign news stories in over 30 languages produced either by its own editorial staff or news agencies. The strategic communication divisions of the EU and NATO have been monitoring the content of Russia's international propaganda outlets, including Sputnik News (Boffey & Rankin, 2017; Rankin, 2017), but they have been criticized for their slow responses (Abrams, 2016). These organizations' inability to quickly respond to Sputnik News seems to indicate that they do not fully understand the nature of its propaganda messages.

In this study, I systematically analyze English-language articles published by Sputnik News and Twitter posts that contain links to the website over a one-year period from 2017 to 2018 in terms of the use of conspiracy frames. The conspiracy frames are operationalized by keywords identified in the psychological literature and identified by dictionary-based quantitative text analysis. I argue that the goal of the Russian website is to promote a conspiracist worldview among the American and British publics as part of its attempt to undermine western democratic institutions (Abrams, 2016; Kragh & Asberg, 2017). Unlike the spread of factual misinformation, conspiracist coverage of social and political events can produce narratives which are skeptical of political leaders, intelligence agencies, major companies and wealthy people. Distrust towards established member of the society leads to the creation of general anti-establishment sentiment, which will enhance support for the populist parties (Rooduijn, 2014; Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017; Yablokov, 2015). Conspiracy theories constitute an important element of modern culture, but it is believed that they are becoming even more visible on the internet (Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Wood & Douglas, 2013).

For example, the number of people who do not believe the official account of the assassination of President Kennedy has increased from 71% in 1963 to 87% in 2001 (In Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), and up to 25% of respondents in the United States and Britain expressed disbelief in the official account of the 9/11 and the 7/7 terrorist attacks (Swami et al., 2011).

There has been a large body of psychological research on conspiracist beliefs (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Douglas & Sutton, 2008, 2011; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b, 2014a; Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Swami et al., 2011; Swami & Furnham, 2014; Van der Wal, Sutton, Lange, & Braga, 2018; Wood & Douglas, 2013), but their increased visibility has caught the attention of political scientists recently (Lee, Matsuo, & Hendry, 2018; Silva et al., 2017). Conspiracy theory is understood as an attempt to explain a significant political or social event as a secret plot by a secret alliance of powerful individuals or organizations (Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), but there have been different explanations for why people believe in conspiracy theories. Some argue that conspiracy theories are a product of erroneous recognition of the causal links between co-occurring and temporally contiguous events (Van der Wal et al., 2018), but others contend that conspiracies theories are ways of understanding complex events (Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Swami et al., 2011). According to psychologists, belief in conspiracy theories increases when people feel distrust towards authority or feel anxiety about their lives (Goertzel, 1994; Sutton & Douglas, 2014). They have also identified that the factors associated with conspiracy beliefs are: exposure to conspiracy theories (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Swami et al., 2011), people centrism or anti-elitism (Goertzel, 1994; Silva et al., 2017; Swami et al., 2010), low self-esteem (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Van der Wal et al., 2018), feelings of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami & Furnham, 2014), and distrust of the mass media (Wood & Douglas, 2013).

Once conspiracy theories are accepted, people do not easily abandon their conspiracy beliefs (Silva et al., 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Since conspiracy theories explain occurrences of important events by a secret coalition of the elites, any attempt to rebut these theories by the government or the mainstream

media are perceived as part of the secret plot (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Swami & Furnham, 2014). Believers of conspiracy theories rarely look for evidence that supports their beliefs (Goertzel, 1994). They tend to underestimate the level of conspiracy theories' influence on their thinking (Douglas & Sutton, 2008), and to strongly dispute the use of the term "conspiracy theory" (Wood & Douglas, 2013). These self-sealing features make their conspiracy beliefs immune to challenges (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) and help to develop a conspiracist mentality (Wood & Douglas, 2013). In short, a conspiracist mentality is a based on a "monological belief system" that makes people willingly accept newer conspiracy theories and firmly deny ideas that challenge that belief system (Goertzel, 1994; Swami & Furnham, 2014).

Conspiracy beliefs not only distort the understanding of reality (Aaronovitch & Langton, 2010a), but also make people less active in political areas and more negative about human rights and civil liberties (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b). More importantly, conspiracy theories create a distrust of all kinds of authoritative knowledge-producing institutions (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), and undermine basic democratic principles and communication processes (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Silva et al. (2017) point out the resemblance between the worldviews of conspiracy theorists and of populists: populist narratives render the elite and non-elite as homogeneous groups that have conflicting interests in political, economic, cultural, media and legal fields, in which the elite alienate the non-elite by controlling flows of information. Exploiting the tension between the elite and non-elite, populists claim that "ordinary citizens" must regain political control by undermining the presumed conspiracy (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014).

There is accumulating evidence of Russia's heavy involvement in international propaganda (Abrams, 2016; Galeotti, 2015, 2016; Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015; Kragh & Asberg, 2017; Paul & Matthews, 2016; Snegovaya, 2015; Watanabe, 2017a, 2017b; Wilson, 2015). From the early 2000s, Russian political leaders and academics started to acknowledge that controlling information is of vital importance in its international strategy (Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015; Lankina & Niemczyk, 2015; Simons, 2014; Yablokov, 2015). After the revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, Russia decided to increase its public diplomacy effort to influence foreign audiences, leading to the establishment of Russia Today, which was later

renamed RT (Saari, 2014), although Russia failed to influence foreign publics during the Georgia-Russia conflict in 2008. While Russia was victorious in the conflict militarily, Georgia successfully spread the image of itself as a "tiny neighbor battered by imperialists in Moscow" (Avgerinos, 2009). Avgerinos (2009) explains that Russia failed in public diplomacy because (1) audiences tend to pay more attention to what reinforces their stereotypes, and (2) Russia's top-down and one-way communication is perceived as propaganda, and (3) Russia's international communication lacked a consistent message.

Nevertheless, Russia quickly developed its ability to influence foreign publics after 2008. It was successful in spreading a favorable image in the 2009 gas dispute with Ukraine by using websites and the western news media to reach out to foreign audiences (Avgerinos, 2009). Its greatest success was in the 2014 Ukraine crisis, when Russia swiftly annexed Crimea using various means for international propaganda (Galeotti, 2015; Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015; Lankina & Watanabe, 2017; Snegovaya, 2015). During the crisis, even its false claim that the Russian-speaking minority in east Ukraine was under threat from the new Ukrainian government was circulated internationally through the Reuters news agency and published on the most popular online news sites in the United States (Watanabe, 2017b).

In late 2014, Russia launched the multi-lingual propaganda website, Sputnik News, to counter western media's "propaganda promoting a unipolar world" (Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015, p. 42). It is currently publishing news stories in over 30 languages and brands itself as a "provider of alternative news content", being more explicit about its propagandist messages than RT (Boffey & Rankin, 2017). The creation of the website happened not only because RT had lost its credibility among the US audiences during the Ukraine crisis (Snegovaya, 2015), but also because Russia understands that private communication is important in communities where the mass media is no longer trusted (Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015). The Sputnik News website has been monitored by the strategic communication divisions of the EU and the NATO as a major source of false information (Boffey & Rankin, 2017; Rankin, 2017). In a study of Swedish Sputnik News conducted in 2015, Kragh and Asberg (2017) found that its articles repeatedly project positive images of Russia, and emphasize western countries' social and economic problems and their aggression towards non-

western countries. It covers European countries especially negatively, giving the audience the impression that the EU is in irreversible decline and facing imminent collapse. However, the website only has a small audience: a study conducted using comScore and CrowdTangle data in 2017 showed that Sputnik News reached 1.4% and 0.6% of the internet users in France and Italy respectively; Facebook users who interact with Sputnik News were 4.1% and 0.9% in the respective countries (Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, & Nielsen, 2018).

Russia's propaganda does not have a consistent narrative but the common themes are the decline of Europe, the rise of other powers, the crisis of global capitalism, and the re-definition of liberal interventionism and misguided democratization (Wilson, 2015). The metanarrative of Russia's propaganda is a division between "us" and "others", which can lead to popular opposition to the power holders, and a subsequent reallocation of power between political actors (Yablokov, 2015). RT claims that its goal is to find news that would be ignored by the mainstream media and bring it to viewers' attention, and to openly challenge established views through conspiracy theories. For example, its flagship shows have suggested that the 9/11 attacks were conducted by the Americans themselves, but have rebuked the accusation that it is spreading conspiracy theory by claiming that the establishment is trying to destroy the reputation of those who know the truth (Yablokov, 2015).

In security studies, Russia's international propaganda is often considered as an "active measure", which is a Soviet term referring to operations that aim to hamper foreign countries' ability to pursue policies through propaganda, forgery, assassination and terrorism (Abrams, 2016; Kragh & Asberg, 2017). In the Soviet state, for example, the KGB was responsible for spreading false information and the International Information Department for releasing official statements. Under Putin's leadership, Russia developed new types of active measure to influence foreign publics, and the annual budget for the state-controlled international media is estimated to be one billion USD (Abrams, 2016; Boffey & Rankin, 2017). Russia's active measures since the annexation of Crimea include: (1) spread a corrupt or barbaric image of the West

or Sweden, (2) hinder NATO-Sweden cooperation, and EU-Ukraine integration, and (3) justify use of its military and non-military operations in near-abroad (Kragh & Asberg, 2017).

However, experts disagree on the nature of Russia's modern propaganda techniques. Jaitner and Mattsson (2015) argue that today's audiences are narrative-bearing and narrative-developing agents, whereas the propaganda narrative was created in the central agencies in the Soviet time. Yablokov (2015) argues that Russia's propaganda is different from Soviet active measures in that it lacks ideological components. Wilson (2015) notes that Russia's propaganda has a different goal from the Soviet era's, because it aims to confuse audiences to make moral and factual judgement more difficult, thus leaving them politically incapable. Snegovaya (2015) argues that these authors overstate the novelty of Russia's propaganda techniques, because Russia adopted the Soviet 4D approach (dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay) to misrepresent events in the news media during the Ukraine crisis. For Paul and Matthews (2016), Russia's propaganda is similar to the Soviet era, but different only in the high numbers of channels and messages, and the government's willingness to disseminate outright fictions.

Considering the literature suggesting that Russia is attempting to undermine western democracies using conspiracy theories, we must understand how they are used in Russia's propaganda messages and how internet users respond to them. Therefore, my research question is: *How does Russia's propaganda utilize conspiracy theories to promote anti-establishment sentiment in the United States and Britain?*

HYPOTHESES

If Russia is aiming to promote anti-establishment sentiment among the United States and Britain, it is likely that articles published in the English-language edition of Sputnik News cover those counties using conspiracy frames more frequently than for other countries:

> H1: Sputnik News uses conspiracy frames in stories about the United States and Britain more frequently.

If the website uses conspiracy theories strategically to foment conspiracist thinking beyond its small audience, social media accounts linked to the website promote stories with conspiracy frames more than those without:

H2: Sputnik News promotes stories with conspiracy frames on social media more than those without.

If the use of conspiracy theories by Sputnik News is an effective approach, social media users share stories with conspiracy frames with other users more frequently than those without:

H3: Sputnik News stories with conspiracy frames are shared by social media users more than those without.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

I started collecting Sputnik News articles from July 2017 by subscribing to its RSS feeds and searching Twitter for "sputniknews.com" repeatedly using a web scraping system. It downloaded all the English-language articles found to extract their heading and body text along with metadata such as date of publication. It also saved the names of Twitter users and the number of Twitter posts that linked to these articles. The total number of articles published between 11 July 2017 and 10 July 2018 was 51,651, which are linked from 1,280,597 Twitter posts.

Content analysis

Since the number of the news articles that I collected was too large to analyze manually, I performed quantitative analysis using Quanteda (Benoit et al., 2018), which I am contributing to the development of. I classified the news content according to main country and topic using a semi-supervised model, Newsmap (Watanabe, 2018). Although there are popular unsupervised classification algorithms such as LDA (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003), the semi-supervised model is more useful here because it allows me to define classes using a small set of pre-defined keywords, called "seed words".

Compared to dictionary analysis, Newsmap's classification results are high in recall, because it has an ability to exploit a greater number of features in documents. It was originally developed for geographical classification of news articles, but it can perform topical classification if a different set of seed words is provided. However, the conspiracy frames of news stories are detected by a simple dictionary to guarantee consistency with the literature and maximize the precision of classification.

Geographical classification

In geographical classification, I first performed collocation analysis targeting capitalized words to discover multi-word nouns, (e.g. "European Union" and "Kim Jong Un") utilizing an algorithm proposed by Blaheta and Johnson (2001). Then, I compounded elements of statistically significant collocations ($p < 0.001$) to avoid ambiguity of individual words (e.g. "european_union" and "kim _jong_un"). After modifying the tokenization of multi-word expression, I trained the Newsmap model on the whole corpus, selecting only proper nouns in the documents, based on capitalization and using a geographical dictionary available as part of the package.[2] Its classification accuracy was evaluated using a sample of 100 manually coded articles, and I found that precision is 0.82 and recall is 0.77 in micro average.

Topical classification

In topical classification, I adopted the conventional bag-of-words approach, only removing grammatical elements from the documents. I defined five topics, "economy", "politics", "society", "diplomacy", "military" and "nature", by the keywords presented in Table 1 for fields that are usually considered important in international and domestic political debates. Here, "nature" is a category for environment, natural resources and natural sciences. These topics are operationalized by using keywords referring to objects or entities instead of concepts. There is no "sports" because the news website rarely reports sport matches. Keywords for these topics are used as seed words to train a Newsmap model and achieved 0.78 in precision and recall in micro average.

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[2] Newsmap is available at https://github.com/koheiw/newsmap

Table 1: Topical seed words

Topic	Seed words
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

Framing analysis

Experts agree that the one of the core themes of conspiracy theory is the confrontation between people and elites (Aaronovitch & Langton, 2010b; Rooduijn, 2014), which would promote anti-establish sentiment among the people (Silva et al., 2017). Brotherton et al. (2013) summarized numerous conspiracy theories in 59 generic statements in their psychological study. I extracted frequent words from these texts and classified these into three categories: "elites", "people" and "secret" (Table 2). In this dictionary analysis, words in these categories were counted separately in the documents, and those that contained words in all the three categories were classified as conspiracy framing. Frequent words (e.g. "secret service" and "secretary") that can wrongly match the keywords were removed from the documents before the dictionary analysis.

Table 2: Conspiracy keywords

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

ANALYSIS

The result of the geographical and topical classification shows that Sputnik News covers the United Sates (US), Russia (RU), Syria (SY), Britain (GB), Palestine (PS), and China (CN) most frequently in its English-language edition. Figure 1 represents the shares of countries and topics within countries: the United States

(19.8%) and Russia (15.3%) are covered the most intensively, followed by Britain (8%), Syria (7%), Spain (6%) and China (5%); the most frequent topics in western countries are "politics" and "society", while these are "diplomacy" in Russia, "military" in Syria and "economy" in China.

Figure 2 shows that the proportion of the articles with conspiracy frames is highest in the United States (11%) and Britain (15%), but conspiracy frames increased in articles about Britain only after March 2017, when Sergei and Yuria Skripal were poisoned in Salisbury (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Share of countries and topics in articles
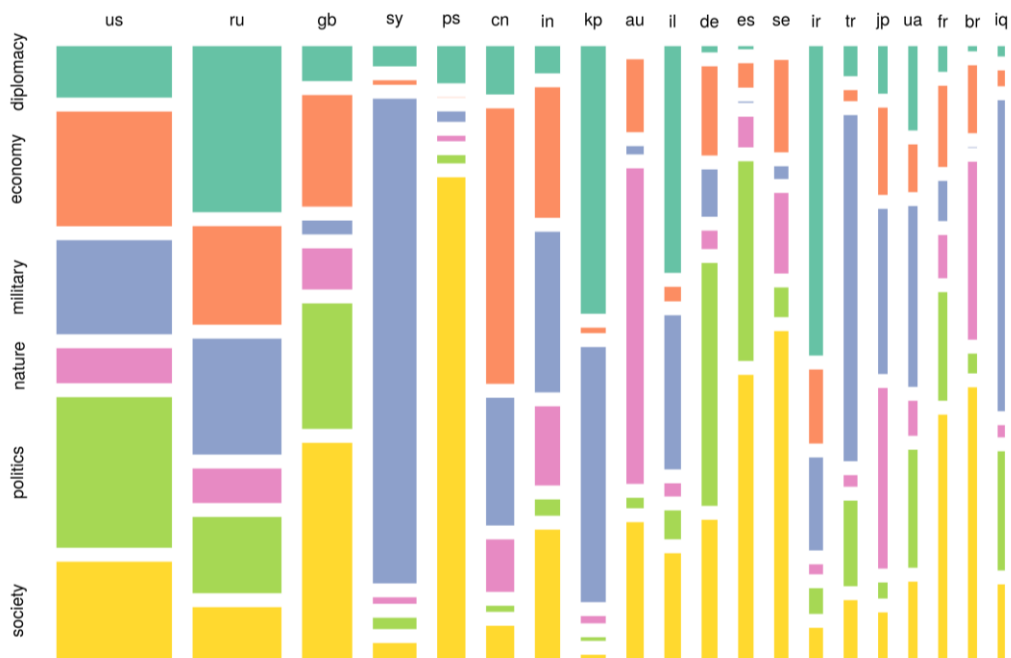
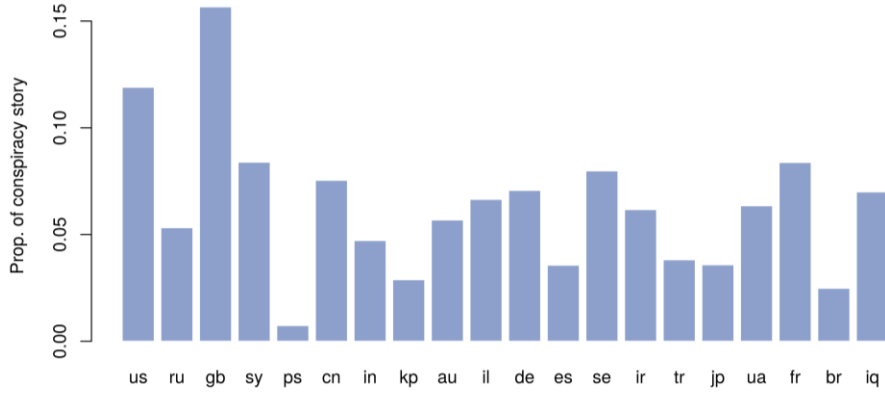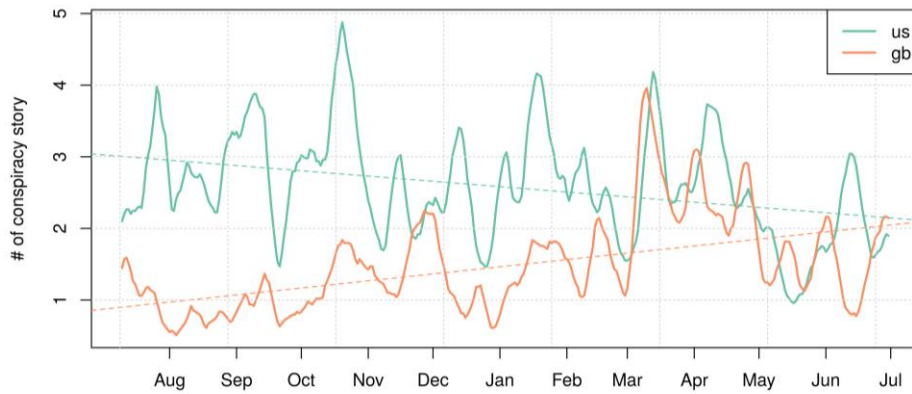**Figure 2: Proportion of articles with conspiracy frames**

Figure 3: Number of articles with conspiracy frames

If only articles with conspiracy frames are selected, western countries become more prominent: the United States (30%) and Britain (18%) become the most frequent countries (Figure 4). The proportion of conspiracy frames across all the countries are the highest in "politics" (11%) and "economy" (9%).

Figure 4: Share of countries and topics in articles with conspiracy frames
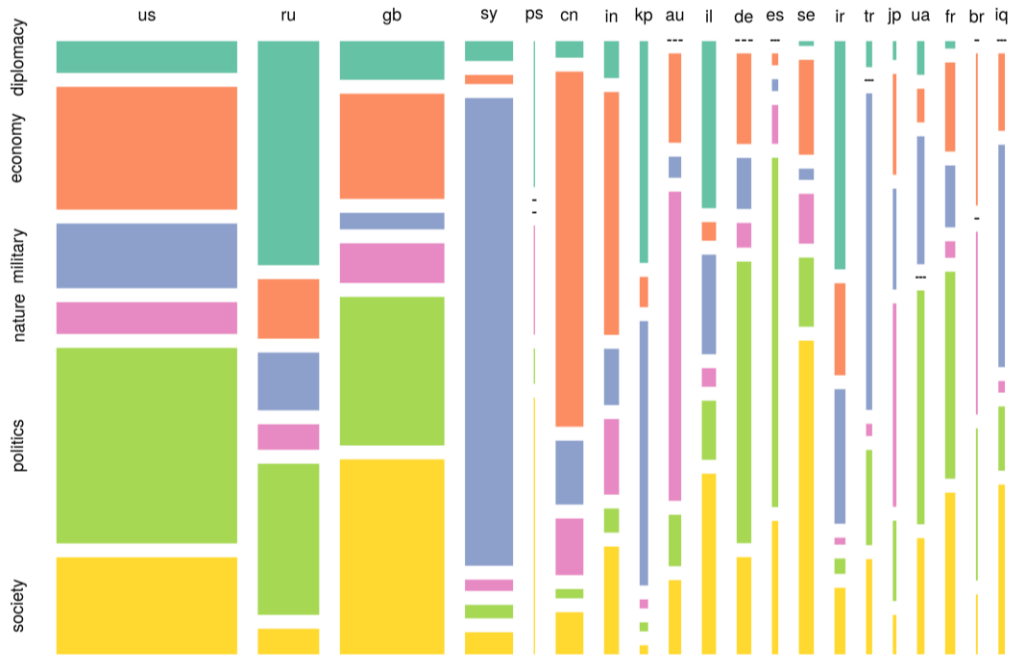
Use of conspiracy frames in articles

I performed a logistic regression analysis with the conspiracy frame indicator as a dependent variable and country and topic indicators as independent variables to test the first hypothesis (H1). In the topic variable, "nature" is set as a reference category since it is the least likely to contain conspiracy frames (Van der Wal et al., 2018). Countries included in the models are those frequently covered by the website and strategically important to Russia, including Russia itself. Table 3 shows that conspiracy frames are more likely to be used in stories about economy (1.59 times) and politics (2.16 times). Controlling for topics, stories about the United States (2.0 times), Britain (2.6 times), France (1.5 times), Sweden (1.5 times) and Syria (1.9 times) are more likely to have conspiracy frames than other countries (Model 2). All of these are statistically significantly different from 1.0 (p < 0.01). Model 3 includes interaction terms between Britain and stories published after the Salisbury incident, but it did not appear statistically significant (p < 0.05).

Table 3: Likelihood of a story to contain conspiracy frames

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	0.062***	0.052***	0.052***
	(0.055)	(0.057)	(0.058)
topic: diplomacy/nature	0.957	0.956	0.945
	(0.077)	(0.078)	(0.078)
topic: economy/nature	1.587***	1.345***	1.342***
	(0.068)	(0.069)	(0.069)
topic: military/nature	0.995	0.883	0.882
	(0.068)	(0.072)	(0.072)
topic: politics/nature	2.160***	1.739***	1.733***
	(0.065)	(0.068)	(0.068)
topic: society/nature	1.095	0.960	0.955
	(0.066)	(0.067)	(0.068)
us		2.092***	2.094***
		(0.046)	(0.046)
gb		2.940***	2.659***
		(0.056)	(0.072)
de		1.072	1.071
		(0.118)	(0.118)
fr		1.502**	1.499**
		(0.137)	(0.137)
es		0.561***	0.563***
		(0.163)	(0.163)
se		1.549***	1.551***
		(0.117)	(0.117)
ru		0.958	0.960
		(0.064)	(0.064)
sy		1.913***	1.907***
		(0.078)	(0.078)
salisbury			1.033
			(0.038)
gb x salisbury			1.250*
			(0.101)
McFadden R-sq.	0.012	0.035	0.035
Log-likelihood	−13346.450	−13045.739	−13041.719
Deviance	26692.901	26091.478	26083.439
AIC	26704.901	26119.478	26115.439
N	51671	51671	51671

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

I also manually analyzed a sample of conspiracy stories about the United States, Britain and Syria, taking

samples to confirm the above findings. As the following excerpts show, there are classic conspiracy frames

identified in the earlier studies (Aaronovitch & Langton, 2010b; Rooduijn, 2014; Yablokov, 2015). For

example, in a story about an American chemical company, Monsanto, published on 1 September 2017, a

scientist is claiming that the company is hiding evidence against its business interests:

"They are clearly trying to muster some type of evidence that would counteract this finding that Roundup causes cancer… But I think it's very difficult for government bodies to go against the corporations so it's going to require a lot of public pressure and support for real science in order to make sure that the EU hears the real evidence and can stand up to the <u>*powerful corporations*</u>*."* [3]

A story published the next day quotes a "political scientist" who claims that the Jewish millionaire, George Soros, is trying to destabilize the United States:

Alexander Gusev, a political scientist and director of the Institute for Strategic Planning, explained to Sputnik why this petition might signal real trouble for the 87-year-old Soros. <u>*Soros is a political broker.*</u> *Having lost, he needs to return the money. He has been supporting the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton, has been betting money and has lost around one billion US dollars," the political scientist told Sputnik.* [4]

Intelligence agencies are often the focus of Sputnik News articles. An article published on 5 December reports of, based on a story on another conspiracist website, the US government's plan to create a new intelligence agency:

Several current and former US intelligence officials have told The Intercept that the Trump administration is considering the <u>*creation of a private global spy network*</u> *working independently of traditional US intelligence agencies such as the CIA to circumvent its 'deep state' adversaries.* [5]

An article published on 18 October 2017 reports that there is covert intelligence gathering in Britain:

Rights group Privacy International has unearthed documents that show UK intelligence services <u>*collect data on millions of UK citizens via popular*</u> *social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and share harvested information with foreign governments and private businesses,* <u>*without ministerial permission or official oversight.*</u>[6]

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[3] https://sputniknews.com/environment/201709011057009199-monsanto-glyphosate-eu-/
[4] https://sputniknews.com/us/201709021057027149-petition-soros-terrorist/
[5] https://sputniknews.com/viral/201712051059729401-trump-anti-deep-state-spy-network-reaction/
[6] https://sputniknews.com/military/201710181058344483-uk-gchq-data-collection/

In addition to these classic examples, conspiracy frames are used in more specific political stories to cast a negative light on American and British political institutions. One of the common themes of such stories is sexual abuse of children by politicians. An article published on 10 October 2017 features a case from nearly 40 years ago:

> *In May 1979, days before the general election, underground publication the Rochdale Alternative Paper published an article, "Strange Case," detailing the allegations against Smith, then-MP for Rochdale. It claimed <u>Smith had subjected boys</u> at Cambridge House hostel to a series of "bizarre medical inspections" and savage spankings in the 1960s. With the exception of Private Eye, the claims were <u>ignored by the mainstream media</u>, and effectively shut down when the DPP's office said it had no files relating to Smith.[7]*

Sputnik News is often critical of the main stream media, but it leverages their reports whenever they support conspiracy theories. An article published on 5 February 2018 suggests, citing the *Guardian*, that British politics is hampered by a secret society:

> *The Guardian report suggests that two <u>Masonic lodges are covertly operating at Westminster</u>, with the New Welcome Freemasons' Lodge established for members of parliament, peers and parliamentary staff, and the Gallery Lodge set up for the political press corps, known as the lobby… In December 2017, then-chair of the Police Federation, Steve White, made a statement, claiming that reform in <u>policing is being hampered by Freemasons</u>, who had been thwarting the progress of women and people from black and minority ethnic groups.[8]*

For the website, Russia's alleged interference in the campaign for leaving the EU is an opportunity to promote a conspiracy theory:

> *Unfazed by the criticism, Bradshaw began telling every mainstream media outlet that would listen, that Prime Minister Theresa May was not being transparent about the issue, and pressuring the government to*

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[7] https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710101058102121-cyril-smith-pedophile-rochdale/
[8] https://sputniknews.com/europe/201802051061361719-freemason-operate-westminster/

reveal information on whether <u>Russia provided direct political funding to Brexit</u> campaigners…

Bradshaw's clear belief that lack of evidence is <u>tantamount to proof of conspiracy</u> was adopted by other

UK politicians…[9]

Any lack of transparency in politics can be the target of conspiracy frames by Sputnik News. An article published on 30 January 2018 suggests that the British government is hiding important information on Brexit:

> *As divisions deepen within the British government surrounding Brexit, the position of British premier.*
>
> *Theresa May appears to be under greater scrutiny following the latest embarrassment caused by the*
>
> *<u>leaking of a covert study</u> carried out on the economic impact facing the UK following its proposed exit*
>
> *from the European bloc. It is understood the document - which revealed Britain will be worse off under*
>
> *every scenario despite any future new trade deals - was <u>meant to be seen only by government ministers.</u>[10]*

An article published on 22 November 2017 targets NATO in the same ways as intelligence agencies, claiming that the organization was involved in secret illegal operations in the 1990s:

> *On November 22, 1990, the European Parliament passed a resolution on the Gladio Affair - a NATO*
>
> *operation in which covertly <u>state-sponsored right-wing groups and militaries</u> carried out attacks and*
>
> *criminal acts as part of a "strategy of tension," designed to discredit the left, and justify ever-greater*
>
> *security measures, over the course of more than four decades. "For 40 years… a clandestine intelligence*
>
> *and armed operations organization [has existed] in several member states. <u>This organization has escaped</u>*
>
> *<u>all democratic controls</u>, and been run by the secret services of the states concerned in collaboration with*
>
> *NATO.[11]*

Sputnik News describes the Salisbury incident as a plot by the British intelligence agencies to secure more funding, publishing an interview with a "former British ambassador to Uzbekistan":

[9] https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710251058531124-uk-russia-brexit-allegations/

[10] https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201801301061193601-economy-growth-pessimism-Brexit/

[11] https://sputniknews.com/military/201711221059343153-operation-gladio-resolution-europe/

Craig John Murray: Well I think the British authorities have made it absolutely plain from the start that they were going to blame Russia whatever the evidence, which at the moment we have no idea what the evidence is. And spying and security are big industries now. Tens and thousands of spies are employed in GCHQ, MI6 and MI5, you've pretty much got 100,000 people between those organisations and they are financial interests. Porton Down is having an £85million increase to its budget already as a result of these accusations and we've had Conservative MP's calling for big increases in UK armament spending so you have to look at who benefits and this is all a desire to whip up Russo-Phobia for the benefits of arms manufacturers, security consultants and spies.[12]

Within a week, the website published an interview with an "author and digital expert", who argues that the British prime minister's strong response is a mere political gesture:

Rob Abdul: I would agree with that, I think she's trying to pick a fight, trying to make herself look good in front of the international community, when the reality is the Brexit negotiations are really going nowhere at the moment, and it's a fantastic way to distract the British public. I don't see our Prime Minister making such a fuss about the Grenfell disaster, 71 people lost their lives there, why wasn't the government up in arms about that? It's because it doesn't make them look good. I wholeheartedly agree that what Theresa May is doing here is just basically making a play at the international stage to show that she's a powerful person, that she can take control.[13]

Finally, Sputnik News often describes military operations in Syria as western countries' conspiracy. On 12 October 2017, its article quoted comments by an "author and political activist", who claims that the United States secretly supported ISIS:

"For the past three years or so, this goal of 'destroying' Daesh, rather than the Syrian government, has been a prominent pretense in Washington, while some in decisive positions have clearly prioritized overthrowing Syria," he said. There was also evidence that the US government had backed a policy

[12] https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803161062616804-uk-russia-skripal-poisoning-murray/
[13] https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803201062722462-skripal-case-public-distraction-brexit/

of playing off Daesh against the Syrian government and preventing either side from winning an outright victory in order to exhaust both, Swanson observed.[14]

Spread of conspiracy stories on social media

Sputnik News articles were linked from 1,280,597 Twitter messages, posted by 151,817 user accounts during the period. The number of posts per account ranged from 1 to 60,943, and 82% of the accounts forwarded other users' massages over 90% of times. I identified the 71 most active accounts that strongly promote the website by posting original links based on the total number of their posts (top 0.1%) and their share of reposts (less than 50%) and labeled them as pro-Russian "activist". Although the owners of these accounts are not necessity affiliated with website, at least three accounts ("SputnikInt", "SputnikNewsUS" and "SputnikNewsUK") have official ties. I excluded highly active accounts that rarely post original links from the analysis, because they could be so-called social bots, computer programs that relay other users' posts automatically (Ferrara, Varol, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2016). I also separated the remaining 99.9% of the accounts based on the share of reposts and labeled them as "regular reader" (n=22,309) and if it was more than 50% as "occasional reader" (n=129,352). I assume that the former group visits the Sputnik News website regularly and shares articles if they find them interesting in the original posts, but the latter group visits the website through links in other users' posts and forwards them if they find articles noteworthy.

The published articles were shared on social media to varying degrees ranging from 0 to 3,828 times. Therefore, I created a dummy variable for articles that attracted the highest number of links (top 10%) to perform robust statistical analysis. The binary codes were included in logistic regression models as dependent variables with a categorical variable for topics, and dummy variables for countries, conspiracy frames, the period after the Salisbury incident, and interaction between the countries and conspiracy frames (Table 4). Model 1 shows that pro-Russian activists are more likely to share stories about the "military"

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[14] https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710121058156013-usa-keeps-goal-topple-assad/

(1.3 times) but less so about "politics" (0.7 times) than about "nature". They are more likely to share stories about the United States (1.1 times) and Syria (1.5 times) than other countries. They are 1.6 times more likely to share articles with conspiracy frames than those without. Further, the interaction terms in Model 2 show that the stories about the United States with conspiracy frames are 1.6 times more likely to be shared by pro-Russian activists than stories about other counties with conspiracy frames. These results suggest that the website is promoting stories with conspiracy frames, especially about the United States, thus supporting the second hypothesis (H2).

Model 3 shows that regular readers of the articles are more likely to share links to "military" (1.6 times) and "society" (1.3 times) stories. The likelihood for them to share stories about the United States is the same as for other countries but it is twice as high when the stories are about Syria. Conspiracy frames in articles also make regular readers 1.7 times more likely to share links. Conspiracy frames of stories about the United States (1.4 times) and Britain (1.9 times) make them significantly more likely to share the articles with other Twitter users (Model 4). However, occasional readers are significantly less likely to share articles about "economy" (0.8 times), while more likely to share articles about the "military" (1.4 times) and "society" (1.5 times) (Model 5). They are less likely to share stories about the United States (0.6 times) and Britain (0.7 times) but more likely to do so about Germany (1.4 times) and Syria (1.9 times). Conspiracy frames increase their likelihood to share links only 1.6 times, but interaction terms indicate that such frames make occasional readers more likely to share stories about the United States (1.8 times), Britain (1.7 times) and Russia (1.6 times) (Model 6). These results indicate that stories with conspiracy frames are popular among the readers of the Sputnik News articles, supporting the third hypothesis (H3).

Finally, there is significant decrease in likelihood for activists to share articles (0.3 times) after the Salisbury incident in Model 1 and 2. It is due to the consistent decline in the number of their posts (Figure 6), which include the suspension of two of the most active Twitter accounts ("globnewsen" and "NarrendraM") around the event. The decrease in the likelihood of regular readers to share articles (0.8 times) is explained by the increase in the number of articles about Britain, which they shared less frequently compared to

articles about other countries. In contrast, occasional readers became 1.3 times more likely to share articles

after the event.

Table 4: Likelihood of an article to be shared on microblog

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	activist	activist	regular	regular	occasional	occasional
(Intercept)	0.129***	0.131***	0.081***	0.082***	0.082***	0.084***
	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.049)
topic: diplomacy	0.995	0.994	0.985	0.984	1.134	1.129
	(0.063)	(0.063)	(0.070)	(0.070)	(0.064)	(0.064)
topic: economy	1.006	1.009	1.161*	1.164*	0.814**	0.817**
	(0.060)	(0.060)	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.066)	(0.066)
topic: military	1.378***	1.381***	1.601***	1.602***	1.424***	1.425***
	(0.054)	(0.054)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.057)	(0.057)
topic: politics	0.799***	0.796***	0.949	0.947	0.974	0.969
	(0.063)	(0.063)	(0.068)	(0.069)	(0.065)	(0.065)
topic: society	0.900	0.899	1.336***	1.334***	1.577***	1.574***
	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.055)	(0.055)
us	1.191***	1.122*	1.051	0.994	0.657***	0.607***
	(0.043)	(0.047)	(0.045)	(0.049)	(0.050)	(0.055)
gb	0.931	0.898	0.614***	0.520***	0.749***	0.688***
	(0.068)	(0.076)	(0.076)	(0.093)	(0.066)	(0.075)
de	1.118	1.095	0.983	1.049	1.554***	1.621***
	(0.106)	(0.112)	(0.109)	(0.112)	(0.087)	(0.090)
fr	0.727*	0.691*	0.651**	0.652*	1.120	1.052
	(0.157)	(0.170)	(0.158)	(0.169)	(0.117)	(0.126)
es	0.970	0.983	0.706**	0.725*	1.119	1.124
	(0.111)	(0.113)	(0.126)	(0.128)	(0.097)	(0.099)
se	0.814	0.806	1.175	1.176	0.914	0.860
	(0.119)	(0.127)	(0.102)	(0.109)	(0.105)	(0.112)
ru	1.095	1.069	0.945	0.931	1.018	0.982
	(0.049)	(0.050)	(0.052)	(0.055)	(0.049)	(0.051)
sy	1.582***	1.581***	2.037***	2.066***	1.971***	1.977***
	(0.058)	(0.061)	(0.055)	(0.058)	(0.055)	(0.057)
conspiracy	1.663***	1.351***	2.059***	1.782***	1.606***	1.249**
	(0.051)	(0.085)	(0.049)	(0.079)	(0.051)	(0.085)
salisbury	0.326***	0.325***	0.856***	0.856***	1.300***	1.297***
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.030)
us x conspiracy		1.600***		1.445**		1.825***
		(0.126)		(0.123)		(0.141)
gb x conspiracy		1.359		1.954***		1.727***
		(0.175)		(0.172)		(0.166)
de x conspiracy		1.331		0.480		0.582
		(0.345)		(0.445)		(0.374)
fr x conspiracy		1.633		1.046		1.893
		(0.449)		(0.469)		(0.349)
es x conspiracy		0.656		0.474		0.765
		(0.619)		(0.740)		(0.543)
se x conspiracy		1.181		1.041		1.870*
		(0.370)		(0.314)		(0.311)

ru x conspiracy		1.422		1.198		1.658**
		(0.191)		(0.186)		(0.175)
sy x conspiracy		1.051		0.905		1.053
		(0.191)		(0.168)		(0.173)
McFadden R-sq.	0.043	0.044	0.025	0.026	0.025	0.026
Log-likelihood	−16042.244	−16033.476	−15684.267	−15669.238	−16702.578	−16684.354
Deviance	32084.488	32066.951	31368.534	31338.477	33405.156	33368.707
AIC	32116.488	32114.951	31400.534	31386.477	33437.156	33416.707
N	51671	51671	51671	51671	51671	51671

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Figure 6: Number of microblog posts linking to Sputnik News
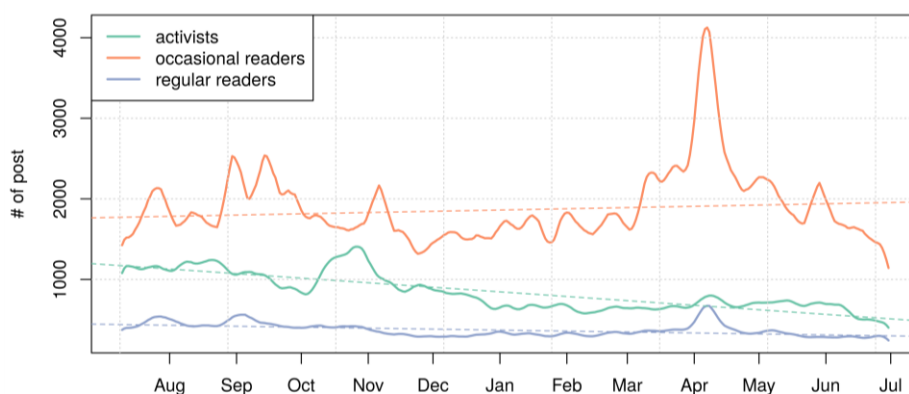
DISCUSSION

My content analysis of Sputnik News revealed that the websites publishes a wide range articles with conspiracy frames. Many of them take the form of modern conspiracy theories, featuring intelligence agencies, major companies, and minority groups (Sutton & Douglas, 2014), but others target members of the parliament, police organizations, and the western military alliance. Conspiracy frames are particularly frequent in stories about the United States and Britain, because the American and British publics are the primary targets of the website's English-language edition. The website also uses conspiracy frames in stories about Sweden because the Russian government is trying to prevent the country from joining NATO by discrediting its public institutions (Kragh & Asberg, 2017). Conspiracy frames are frequent in stories

about Syria because the failed intervention by the western countries allows the website to emphasize their diplomatic and military incapability.

The higher likelihood of pro-Russian activists to share conspiracist stories on social media suggests that the website's goal is to promote conspiracist beliefs among English-speaking audiences. These stories are also shared by regular and occasional readers of the website: regular readers react most strongly to such stories, suggesting that they are conspiracists who seek stories that support their world view, but occasional readers respond only to conspiracist stories about the United States and Britain, which are also intensively covered by mainstream news media. This means that use of conspiracy frames is both *strategic* and *instrumental* for the website: publication of articles with conspiracy frames not only reinforce the beliefs of the conspiracists (i.e. regular readers) in the target countries, but also extends its reach beyond the existing community (i.e. occasional readers) by providing unique coverage of the countries. The instrumental conspiracy stories are essentially the same as the "fake news" produced by non-journalists for economic interests, but the strategic conspiracy stories are unique to Russia's political propaganda.

However, the number of posts by pro-Russian activists and regular readers since July 2017 has declined, presumably because of western countries and companies' measures against the spread of false information (Hern, 2017), which included suspension of the two activist accounts (the second most active account, "news16media", also ceased to post links to the website recently). This required Russia to change its tactics in promoting conspiracy beliefs among the western population. An indication of this change is the attempted assassination of the ex-Russian spy in Salisbury. Assassination is a type of "black" active measure used by Russia during the Soviet era, along with the "gray" active measures such as disinformation (Abrams, 2016). Sputnik News has covered the development of the story intensively, presenting the event as a plot by British intelligence agencies to secure more spending and as the Prime Minister's desperate attempt to gain popularity. These stories attracted a lot of readers from outside the conspiracist community.

The decline in the number of conspiracist stories about the United States and the increase in such stories about Britain suggest changes in the priorities of propaganda targets. The alleged foreign interference into

the US 2016 presidential election, and the collaboration between the Trump campaign and Russia are types of conspiracies. The new president's frequent use of the term "fake news" to discredit the mainstream media, such as the *New York Times* and the CNN, is contributing to the promotion of conspiracist world views in the country. This is the type of metanarratives that "challenge the very principles of democratic freedoms and tolerance and undermine the norms of reason and evidence" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 128). Sputnik News has been exploiting these discussions to promote skepticism towards America's democratic institutions, and it seems to have achieved the goal.

Although British politics is highly polarized by the Brexit debate, almost no attempt has been made by political leaders to discredit its own public institutions. There is an alleged collusion between anti-EU campaigners and the Russian government, but it only has attracted a little public attention. Sputnik News has attempted to exploit the British government's secretive plan for leaving the EU, but the website failed to do so, probably due to the politicians' rhetorical claims of respecting the British people's will in the referendum. The Salisbury incident could be Russia's attempt to disturb Britain's politics but the framing of the event by Sputnik News has been inconsistent and therefore its long-term impact is questionable.

Nonetheless, the significance of Russia's current propaganda strategy should not be overlooked. Snegovaya (2015) argued that Russia's propaganda techniques during the Ukraine crisis were similar to those developed in the Soviet era, but it is clear that Sputnik News, which was launched after this, uses different techniques. Russia is aiming to promote anti-establishment sentiment by publishing tailored conspiracy theories on Sputnik News websites targeting English-speaking Twitter users. The website only has a small audience but conspiracist messages can spread as private communication and influence a much greater number of people. These narrative-developing users are not necessarily located in the target countries (i.e. the United States and Britain), but their location does not matter because their posts contribute to the broader conspiracist culture on the internet.

There are several measures to protect the American and British publics from misinformation. These are, for example, counter-propaganda education and the blocking of foreign websites (Aro, 2016), but it is more

difficult to stop conspiracist thinking from spreading, because conspiracy theories usually have a self-sealing logic that denies challenges (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). While the blocking of conspiracist websites by governments would reinforce people's beliefs in conspiracies, a prohibition against supplying conspiracist websites with news materials would reduce their productivity and credibility, because Sputnik News uses news texts and photos supplied by AP, Reuters, and AFP in their articles, emphasizing these names even when the stories only have a slight relevance to the materials.

Conspiracy theories have been an important element of popular culture, and have become even more so after the emergence of the internet (Wood & Douglas, 2013). They have become politically important because a growing number of people are feeling that they are excluded from the traditional political process. According to earlier studies, people who have low self-esteem (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Van der Wal et al., 2018) and feelings of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami & Furnham, 2014) tend to believe in conspiracy theories to explain their political, economic or social failure (Sakwa, 2012). The increase in the number of people who are susceptible to conspiracy theories results in the emergence of populist parties, which further promote conspiracist thinking to stay in power (Rooduijn, 2014). The only way to prevent conspiracist thinking from spreading is minimizing the socio-economic disparity within a country and maximizing the transparency of the domestic political process.

Finally, I revealed Russia's propaganda strategy through a large-scale analysis of Sputnik News and Twitter posts in this study, but it is far from complete for three reasons. First, I have identified articles with conspiracy frames using keywords collected from the literature, but the number of such stories would be greater. Use of simple dictionary-based classification is appropriate to minimize false positive cases, but it often entails a high number of false negatives. To balance between these two (precision and recall) in future research, a semi-supervised model could be applied using these keywords as seed words (c.f. Watanabe, 2017a). Second, I have used Twitter posts only as metadata to Sputnik News articles, but conspiracists' online behavior deserves more attention. My segmentation of Twitter users based on the frequency and originality of posts produced meaningful results in relation to linked articles, so a similar approach could

be adopted in a future project that focuses on social media. Third, I discussed the relationships between the spread of conspiracist beliefs and the emergence of populist parties based on the literature (Silva et al., 2017), but the causal link is still unclear: even psychological experiments did not make it clear whether conspiracy beliefs are a cause (Swami et al., 2011) or result (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a) of a distrust towards authority. Although conspiracy beliefs cannot be manipulated easily in an experiment, since it is a mindset that develops through repeated exposure to conspiracist narratives, understanding of the mechanism is necessary considering its impact on democracy.

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