"Breadth – depth – back to breadth": What can we learn about migration narratives among non-elites on Twitter through the application of computational and qualitative social science analytical strategies?

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This presentation will discuss an innovative and interdisciplinary methodology to investigate migration narratives on Twitter. A data-driven but theoretically informed approach is proposed and draws on computational and qualitative social-science analytical techniques. The corpus consisted of 47,978 tweets created between Oct. 1, 2013, and March 1, 2014, that contain keywords related to migration narratives in the U.K. at a time when temporary transition controls on free movement from Romania and Bulgaria were lifted. The initial analysis (breadth work) revealed a few highly influential users (media elites) with high digital capital and a large proportion of isolated users (non-elites) with low digital capital who were never retweeted. Qualitative thematic analysis (depth work) of a five percent sample of tweets not retweeted confirmed the presence of highly polarized immigration attitudes among non-elites as well as values and beliefs embedded in these narratives that have implications for the construction of the symbolic boundaries of the nation. This was followed with surface thematic mapping (breadth work) to investigate patterns of information consumption and sharing on the topic of migration/immigration among non-elites in the migration 'conversation'. This analysis revealed the importance of the entire media environment when social media users engage with emotionally charged issues and the presence of echo chambers among those expressing anti-immigrant sentiments but not among those expressing pro-immigrant sentiments. This presentation will demonstrate the potential of inter-disciplinary and iterative analytical strategies to grapple with big data in a fashion that allows for the development of the sociological imagination.