

The Role of Social Media in the 2021 Capitol Riot

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Abstract

After years of increasing political tensions, in 2021, a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol with the intent of overturning the official vote count of the 2020 presidential election. Many have attributed the Capitol Riot to a mass delusion fueled by misinformation. There are still many open venues of research regarding the attempted insurrection – exploring the role of online social networks should provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media dynamics and their real-world consequences. A better understanding of the communicative actions that unfold on online social media following highly salient events might also provide useful insights for policymakers or regulatory bodies. Using a large Twitter dataset comprising multiple communities – as encoded by political preference – the present study seeks to answer four key questions. First, what is the overall sentiment shared by groups originating from distinct processors during the riot event as compared to sampling controls and similar time periods before and since? Second, to what extent does activity within and across political dyad types spike on the day of the riot? Third, do highly retweeted posts on the day of the riot emanate from a specialized subset of political communities? Fourth, which topics and personas dominate the analyzed Twitter discourse surrounding the spread of misinformation regarding the riot? In the weeks following the Capitol Riot, identifying important considerations when optimizing platform transparency is of primary importance. Had these taken place two months prior to the event, they may have prevented or mitigated violent escalation at the Capitol on January 6.

Keywords Capitol Riot, social media, misinformation, Twitter, political sentiment, online networks, communication dynamics, regulatory insights.

2. Introduction

On the 6th of January 2021, a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol in a violent attack. The mob, which included various extremist groups, breached the Capitol, causing the evacuation of the assembled members of Congress. Criminal damage occurred as the

mob looted offices, smashed windows, and vandalized the building. The riot, which led to five deaths (including a Capitol Police Officer) marked a significant episode in the contemporary history of far-right extremism in the United States.

The storming of the Capitol was the culmination of a concerted effort to overturn the 2020 Presidential Election results by supporters of former President Donald Trump, motivated by false claims of electoral fraud (Padinjaredath Suresh et al., 2023). A prominent component of these conspiracy theories was the idea that the election was “stolen” from Trump. After these claims were debunked, adherents began trying to identify alternative explanations. To describe the alleged fraud, supporters employed a diverse set of narratives including “fake” ballots, rigged voting machines, dead voters, foreign interference, and different kinds of tampering.

Analyzing the role of social media in relation to the 6th January Capitol riots is crucial given the extensive use of social media platforms for organizing, spreading narratives, and live-streaming the riot itself. In the lead-up to, and during the riot, social media platforms provided the infrastructure that facilitated coordination between groups of extremists. There are different and fragmentary accounts of the importance of social media, both in relation to the day’s events, and its broader setting. Detailed empirical investigations and statistical analyses relevant to this date have nonetheless not been produced, despite concerns raised by scholars and media reports. This gap is reflected in the questions posed about the consequences of social media.

3. The Use of Social Media Platforms by Extremist Groups

On January 6th, 2021, the US Capitol building was attacked by a pro-Donald Trump mob. Mirroring similar tactics by authoritarian governments in the past, the rioters breached the security fencing around the building and stormed the exterior. As the first few made it into the building, law enforcement appeared unprepared or, in some cases, appeared to actively aid those attempting to break into the halls of government. The scenes broadcasted around the world showed heavily armed Capitol police engaging in slap-fights with MAGA supporters-turned-rioters. As Trump supporters chanted threats to execute lawmakers, the US National Guard was reluctant to intervene given uncertainties of whether they had the legal authority and chains of command to do so. These events receive significant coverage from the social media accounts of those present, creating a data set able to show how the storming of the US

Capitol unfolded inside the building (Jakubik et al., 2022). In particular, it is important to establish whether the presence of law enforcement inside the Capitol appears to actively aid the far-right rioters, or if they were simply ineffective due to lack of coordination or preparedness. This aims to create an overall timeline from the briefing time 1 P.M. when Trump supporters reached the Capitol to 6 P.M., when DC Mayor Bowser's curfew came into effect and National Guard deployment began in earnest (Agarwal & Sureka, 2015). Since 2020, there has been a significant increase in the use of social media platforms by extremist far-right groups as Brexit, Black Lives Matter, and COVID restrictions have created a fertile landscape for radicalization. In particular, the two largest social media networks, Twitter and Facebook, have made efforts to force QAnon and similar libertarian far-right userbases on to alternative social media site Parler. However, the decentralized structure of Parler has made it more capable of avoiding complete ejection from app stores, Section 230 takedowns, or coordinated removals of content. This has seen Parler become the top choice for group sharing- similar to an article being reposted to dozens of like-minded pages to allow it to make a much larger impact. Telegram, another platform noted for its decentralized structure and as a place of refuge for ISIS recruiters in 2017, has largely avoided scrutiny or disruption by law enforcement so far of the same manner as Parler or Gab.

4. Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation

This paper investigates the role that social media platforms have in the organization before and during the United States Capitol event of January, 2021. Most of the content analyzed pertains to Twitter, as posts on that platform can be easily collected and analyzed in a neutral way. The study characterizes fringe and coordinated activity on Twitter in eleven days leading up to the Capitol incident according to several aspects. (Padinjaredath Suresh et al., 2023) The number of tweets concerning the Capitol event that were collected daily is analyzed as well. A significant spike is evident before the event, then activity decreases and stabilizes on January 8th. The characterizations of fringe and coordinated activity show that during the time frame under scrutiny, there was a significant increase in both aspects. Concerning fringe activity, the co-occurrence distribution of hashtags is analyzed. Beyond the expected use of official and general hashtags, many more specific to fringe groups are found. A

more traditional content analysis of fringe posts is also presented. For the coordinated aspect, an analysis of the network of users involved is conducted, stressing the transition to larger accounts as the event unfolds. Additional insights regarding dynamics linked to the event are then provided.

On January 6th, 2021, supporters of the 45th President of the United States Donald J. Trump breached the Capitol in Washington D.C. as lawmakers certified the Presidential election of 2020. That event has been widely covered as an act of insurrection and was constitutionally unprecedented. Participants violated the sanctity of one of the most iconic buildings in the country, causing the death of five and injuring around one hundred people. Most of the content addressing the organizational aspect of the event tends to frame it in a negative manner, i.e., as the result of a malicious, possibly criminal behavior. Such an approach to this research is based on the belief that a broader understanding of these processes is necessary. The “Stop the Steal” movement is precisely the term employed by the organizers and supporters of those events, who, according to this definition, see themselves as partaking in a legitimate democratic protest and carrying out constitutionally enshrined rights such as protesting and expressing dissent. It is noted that as the action goes on, an (unsuccessful) attempt to frame sedition becomes more prominent. The range of content that was collected methodologically spans from simple statements of concern for gatherings in D.C., through calls to action (including protests and/or confrontations with authorities), to borderline violent or subversive language. A practical prediction task is framed as distinguishing between the violent and nonviolent behavior of groups. (Hughes II, 2022)

5. The Impact of Social Media on Mobilization and Coordination

User data from over 500 million tweets has been used to investigate coordinated and fringe activity around the 2020 US Presidential Election and leading up to the US Capitol Building attack. An international human rights consultation on the Capitol Protest has concluded the event was severely influenced on a large scale by the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media. The existence of fringe group and coordinated activity weeks before and after the attack on the US Capitol Building has been examined using an outlier detection method. Changes in their activity before the Capitol Building attack were analyzed, pointing to a trend toward offline

movements. Varied behavior was observed among random non-fringe and non-coordinating accounts, indicating special care is called for in the investigation of coordinated behavior on social media.

In recent years, social media has shifted substantial portions of shaping public opinion and the political landscape. The spread of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and media manipulation has raised strong concerns over the massively uncontrolled impact that information propagated online can have on people and institutions. Online coordination and amplification of campaigns are perceived to be more of a concern by the scientific community, also in light of the Capitol riot in the U.S. The event led to the death and injury of several people, including law enforcement officers and protesters, with wide repercussions for the stability of democratic governance in the U.S. It shone a light on the role that social media plays in organizing protests, violent or otherwise, and has initiated widespread discussions within political and academic circles. The Select Committee on the attack of the U.S. Capitol took advantage of this body of knowledge to investigate the use of social media in relation to the spread of both legitimate and non-legitimate information surrounding the event. In light of this, fringe and coordinated activity posted on Twitter in the period around the event was observed, employing techniques designed to detect accounts that participate in trends deviating from their ordinary one. (Dixon, 2021)

6. Regulatory Responses and Challenges

In the wake of the events of January 6, 2021, and the public attention drawn to them, a variety of regulatory efforts and proposed legislative measures have emerged. Many of the regulatory responses have focused on—or were catalyzed by—the behavior of social media platforms. Instances of extremism, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and misinformation have festered on popular sites for years, as a result of their scale and openness. Following the attack on the U.S. Capitol, though, public dissatisfaction with Big Tech’s content moderation and the rapid rise of extremism-focused advocacy groups led to tangible proposed laws, existing regulations, lawsuits, and advocacy along changes to the status quo (M. Dickinson, 2023). In light of this increased scrutiny and plenty of labels, this report explores the regulatory responses and challenges that have emerged for social media platforms since the events of January 6. Since the Capitol riot, Congress and states have proposed a variety of laws and

lawsuits that seek to safeguard the public against the spread of extremist content and misinformation. Big Tech companies have also made changes in response to the events. Far more difficult to gauge, but just as complex, are the consequences and challenges of the measure's enforcement. While Congress has narrowly defeated proposals, states like Florida have advanced stringent content moderation policies in an effort to address perceived biases. Media law experts hold beliefs that this string of lawsuits should be seen in view of ongoing efforts to dismantle the regulatory framework that has kept the internet relatively free compared to other regions (C. Nunziato, 2019). Major digital rights groups have joined this line of criticism, arguing that existing EU law empowers authorities to ensure internet speech does not unduly stray.

7. Conclusion and Future Implications

The current political landscape is significantly different from that of late 2020 which was laden with uncertainty and public discontent following a contentious general election with a disputed result. A change in administration and a growing belief among portions of Trump's base in the veracity of the "Stop the Steal" conspiracy added to this. Social media, having reiterated the rise of user disinformation, misinformation, extremism served as a hyperspeed amplifier, radix determinism steam-valve and a fount of community spirit, samizdat-style. On Jan. 6th, 2021 — after the seal was set and parboiled — this became a literal flashpoint as a mass of anti-government paramilitaries and orbiting fans blitzed the Capitol building, egged on with explicit instructions and exclamations by the then-president and various of his - now estranged - allies.

The events that unfolded on Jan. 6th, 2021 were not organized online, but instead in physical space with users turning to online platforms after the fact to celebrate their perceived success. The storming of the Capitol was the tipping point in a monthslong assault on American democracy, enabled by a groundswell of misinformation on key social media platforms. Compliance with Section 230 of the DMCA 1996, and the case filled against interpretations and broadened scope of services does highlight the American tech industry's influence and its ability to sway political opinion even within the developed world.

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