Sparking debate?
Political deaths and Twitter discourses in Argentina and Russia

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Abstract

The big question that pervades debate between techno-optimists and their detractors is whether social media are good for democracy. Do they help to produce or accelerate democratic change or, alternatively, might they hinder it? This article foregrounds an alternative perspective, arguing that individual social networking applications likely do not fulfil a single political function across national contexts. Their functionality may be mediated instead by language and by pre-existing relationships between the state and offline domestic media. We arrive at this conclusion through examining reactions on Twitter to two fatal events that occurred in early 2015: the death in suspicious and politically charged circumstances of the special prosecutor Alberto Nisman in Argentina, and the murder in Russia of opposition activist Boris Nemtsov. Several similarities between the two deaths facilitate a comparative analysis of the discourses around them in the Spanish-language and Russian-language Twitter spheres respectively. In Russia, a hostile social media environment polluted by high levels of automated content and other spam reduced the utility of Twitter for opposition voices working against an increasingly authoritarian state. In Argentina, a third-wave democracy, Twitter discourses appeared as predominantly coextensive with other pro-government and opposition online, print, and broadcast fora, thus consolidating and amplifying a highly polarized and repetitive wider public political conversation. Despite the potential for social media to help citizens circumvent restrictions to discursive participation in national public spheres, in both cases compared here language environment and domestic political structures contribute significantly to determining the uses and limitations of online spaces for expressing opinion on current affairs stories involving the state.

Introduction

In the early hours of 18 January 2015 Natalio Alberto Nisman was found dead of a gunshot to the head in his apartment in the exclusive Puerto Madero district of Buenos Aires. Nisman, a 51-year-old special prosecutor, had risen to public prominence in Argentina during his decade-long investigation into the bomb attack on 18 July 1994 on the headquarters of the Asociación Mutual Israelita de Argentina (AMIA), a Jewish community centre in downtown Buenos Aires, that killed 85 people and injured a further 300. Although substantial evidence implicates high-level Iranian officials and agents of the Islamist militant group Hezbollah in the crime, the case remains unresolved (Government Printing Office, n.d.). In late 2004, President Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) of the then centre-leftist Frente para la Victoria (FpV) division of the Peronist Party declared the failed investigation a 'national disgrace' ("Flashback," 2003), and gave

responsibility for resolving the case to Nisman, then a mid-career lawyer rising through the ranks of the federal justice system. On 20 January 2015 Nisman was scheduled to present evidence before the Argentine National Congress in a closed session, where he intended to implicate Cristina Fernández, the President of Argentina and widow of Kirchner, for helping to cover up the alleged role of Iran in the bombing ("Incógnitas que surgen," 2015). Fernández vigorously denied the claims (Goñi, 2015).

Less than six weeks later, late on 27 February 2015, Boris Nemtsov was shot dead with four bullets to the back as he walked across the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge in Moscow, steps from the Kremlin. His assailants shot him with a pistol from a moving car. The investigative trace currently appears to lead to Chechnya (Bullough, 2015). Nemtsov, a 55-year-old trained physicist, had served as former deputy prime minister of the Russian Federation (1997–1998) under Boris Yeltsin. He had gained notoriety in Russia as a principal economic reformer of the 1990s when, coeval with the introduction of free market economics, price liberalization and the wide-scale privatization of former state enterprises, political corruption and crony capitalism became *de facto* norms of elite political conduct. Under the premiership of Vladimir Putin (2000–2008, 2012–), Nemtsov fell from the national prominence that he had previously enjoyed but continued to push an anti-corruption agenda, if now from a non-governmental and, in the heavily censored Russian public information infrastructure, sidelined position. He nonetheless remained active in *PARNAS,* (People's Freedom Party), and had played a public role in organizing a large-scale opposition rally in Moscow scheduled for 1 March 2015. On the day of his murder, Nemtsov had given a radio interview in which he called for democratic elections in Russia and revealed that he was compiling a dossier presenting evidence of Russian military activity in Ukraine, despite official claims to the contrary.

Several biographical and circumstantial details provide further parallels between the two men and their otherwise-unrelated deaths. Beyond their roles as oppositional provocateurs in heavily polarized domestic political landscapes, Nisman and Nemtsov were Jewish in countries with long histories of politically mobilizing anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitic trope would re-emerge, to one or another degree, in online and offline spaces in the wake of both fatalities. In the days and weeks before their deaths, both men expressed fear for their life to family and friends, comments that reveal an acute sense that contemporary political activism in their respective countries carried fatal risk. Few facts publicly surfaced surrounding the circumstances and possible perpetrators of the deaths, creating deep senses of uncertainty among the Argentine and Russian citizenry.

Perhaps substituting for these public information deficits, multiple narratives, including numerous conspiracy theories, emerged in Russia and Argentina to account for the unknowns and to attempt to invest the deaths with singular political meaning (see Zaretsky, 2015, p. 121 for the varied theories that arose in Argentina; Young, 2015 for Russia). In Russia, the conflict

took place against the backdrop of the war in eastern Ukraine, a context all the more acute because Anna Duritskaya, Nemtsov's girlfriend, is Ukrainian. Ukrainian nationalist accounts created the bulk of material critical of Putin, the official investigation, and the state of Russian democracy. Argentine and Russian officials alike advanced conspiracy-type narratives, providing almost identical theories of provocation. In a speech published on social media channels and her official website, Fernández described Nisman's death, as an 'operation against the Government' ("AMIA and prosecutor," 2015). Putin described the murder of Nemtsov as bearing 'all the signs of a provocation', and his press spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, labelled the murder an attempt to discredit the Kremlin (Luhn, 2015). The pro-Kremlin press was keen to draw a comparison between the two fatalities, arguing that both deaths were designed to besmirch the respective presidents (e.g. "Mukhin: Ubiistvo Nemtsova," 2015). In Argentina, contrastingly, opposition voices decried the deaths of Nemtsov and Nisman alike as the result of 'corrupt power' (Guyot, 2015).

In both cases, many of the discourses surrounding the political deaths were propagated in online spaces. A maelstrom of polemical, informational and emotional reactions on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr quickly developed. In the Nisman case, communication on Twitter, the microblogging platform, intervened and shaped political events, as the media and state jostled for the upper hand: the journalist Damián Pachter broke the story on Twitter. He fled to Israel soon after, suspecting that the Secretaría de Inteligencia (the Argentine secret intelligence service) were monitoring his movements at close-range (Pachter, 2015). The Argentine presidential office, the Casa Rosada, also published its first statements on the death on Twitter. Furthermore, on 27 January, the official Casa Rosada Twitter account published Pachter's flight details, including an apparent return ticket to Buenos Aires for 4 days later ("Reporter Who Broke," 2015), as evidence that he did not really fear the state. Twitter clearly functioned not only as a forum in which to document and comment on the death and its aftermath, but also a force driving subsequent events.

The parities between the two cases provide the conditions for a comparative analysis of the Russian and Spanish-language discourses that emerged on Twitter to account for the deaths of Nisman and Nemtsov respectively. We thus contribute to the still minimal literature that looks beyond Anglophone content in its analysis of the political affordances of Twitter.[1] Did Twitter facilitate broad participation and a diversity of content, as normative theories of the democratic public sphere would hope? Focusing on the 'Nisman' and 'Nemtsov' hashtags (henceforth #Nisman and #Nemtsov), we tackle this question through an analysis of volume of tweets, levels of artifice, and participant identity. To begin, we highlight the role that public discourses surrounding murder cases have historically played in expanding participation in the public sphere and consequently contributing to processes of democratisation. We then trace the shifts

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[1] Most of the literature that looks at 'events' outside the English world still focuses on English-language content.

and stagnations in the political affordances of such discourses as they emerge and circulate in the Twittersphere.

Discourses of Political Murder, Democratization and the Internet
Political murder tends to be understood as the acme of an expulsive violence that has no place in the inclusionary agenda of democratic politics. Yet, the public activities and debates that such fatal acts occasion have sometimes been read in a contrasting light: as part of democratic consolidation, or a sign of democratic maturity. In twentieth-century Mexico, where murder consistently occupied central thematic space in the national public sphere, it has even been suggested that 'critical exchanges' surrounding homicides were 'key to the process of incorporation and democratization' (Piccato, 2014, p. 323). If applied more broadly, this view risks overshadowing the censorship and culture of fear that has muted discussion of numerous political murders, but it nonetheless brings to attention an important, if overlooked, epiphenomenon of a selection of politically charged cases.

A more broadly applicable argument emerges once we perceive discourses surrounding political murder to reinforce democracy, rather than as a critical aspect of it. In various mid-to-late-twentieth-century contexts, political murders, including those targeting opposition figures, opened up public discursive spaces to competing and interacting viewpoints. Scholars have observed that, in the wake of a political homicide, the press sometimes facilitated this pluralizing process by incorporating a wider spectrum of voices than was usual outside the bounds of these extraordinary events (Piccato, 2014). Political murder cases also sometimes motivated citizens to look beyond media channels in order to communicate with political authorities, to express their sentiments regarding the fatality, and to contest the official narratives surrounding it. Citizens of diverse nationalities have publicly demonstrated their outrage at political murders by protesting; writing open letters (Ben-Yehuda, 2000); launching international campaigns, sometimes aided by national and transnational human rights organizations (Schmidli, 2013); and through memorialization designed to maintain public awareness of political murders and their lack of resolution after the media buzz abated (Bilbija & Payne, 2011). In each of these cases, political murder has stimulated participation in the public sphere, or the 'theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk' (Fraser, 1990, p. 57). In so far as many normative theories of the public sphere consider broad discursive participation to be vital to democracy (including Avritzer 2009; Ferree, 2002; Fraser, 1990), these discursive interventions have both redrawn the outer limits of participation in national discourse and consequently contributed to democratic achievement and consolidation.

If in the late twentieth century political murders sometimes fomented exceptional national discursive participation, what impact might social media have on deliberative processes surrounding political murder in the twenty-first century? As Jurgen Gerhards and Mike S.

Schäfer (2010, p. 145) have observed, a number of expectations surround the potential political affordances of the Internet: in particular, it is 'expected that alternative evaluations and interpretations will be presented online', and that the information available online will show greater variety. There is also an expectation that, over time, 'the Internet might democratize the public sphere and lead to strengthened political interest and participation among citizens'.

An extensive literature probes this putative link between democratisation and online forms of communication. In the late 1990s, Froomkin asserted that the Internet might redress a power imbalance between private and state actors by allowing the former to subvert domestic regulation by channelling communication through international platforms. Irrespective of location, citizens could send and receive anonymous messages, making censorship unenforceable. Consequently, Froomkin argued, the structure of the Internet would 'promote liberal democratic values of openness and freedom.' (Froomkin, 1997). This 'optimistic' view was tempered by Kalathil and Boas (2003), who outlined various ways authoritarian states could adapt the network in ways serving their own priorities and interests, for instance by creating 'business-friendly but politically sanitized Internet infrastructure' (Kalathil & Boas, 2003, pp. 136, 152).

The debate on the democratic virtues of the Internet was re-run in the wake of the Arab Spring, now between parties caricatured as cyber-utopians and cyber-sceptics. Larry Diamond (2010) coined the term 'liberation technologies' to characterise Web 2.0 applications such as Twitter and Facebook. Because authoritarian regimes restrict media freedom, any technology that reduces the costs of accessing independent news will increase the likelihood that citizens encounter information that might prompt them to participate in activity directed against the regime. Similarly, by allowing decentralised coordination and direct communication between individuals, social media applications lowered barriers to collective action (Shirky, 2009). Cyber-sceptics such as Evgeny Morozov (2010) asserted that the Internet enabled mass surveillance and therefore strengthened authoritarian rule. He also drew attention to ways that officials used social media both to disseminate pro-government views, and to identify hostile citizens. As the euphoria of the Arab Spring has faded, evidence has mounted that the Internet may not in itself intimidate authoritarian rulers. Quantitative data analysed by Rød and Weidmann (2015, p.2) indicates that the more oppressive authoritarian regimes are the more likely they are 'to support the Internet', a finding they read as showing that autocrats both realise the prospects for surveillance afforded by new technology, and are aware of the potential for technology to create and maintain 'a tightly controlled sphere of public opinion'.

A consensus has begun to emerge that social media may help facilitate both mobilisation and coordination, which provides citizens with more opportunities to engage in political discourse (Badr & Demmelhuber, 2014, p.149). However, evidence that social media expose users to views that challenge their perceptions is less clear-cut. Tewksbury et al. (2001) argued that the

dynamic nature of the web means individuals browsing the internet are accidentally exposed to new information, e.g. through breaking news headlines. Today, people frequently access a range of news content mediated through social network newsfeeds, and framed by their friends' commentaries. The network structure, it is argued, exposes individuals to a more diverse set of news, which increases the likelihood that they will stumble across critical material, for instance outlining electoral fraud (Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2011; Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). That said, algorithmic filtering of the kind implemented by Facebook means newsfeeds are composed of content a user has a high probability of interacting with, as determined by a user's previous browsing habits. Consequently, users are largely shown what they want to see. Selectivity is also a feature on Twitter, though to a lesser degree. A user's newsfeed consists of an unfiltered stream of recent content, but users choreograph the selection of accounts contributing to their newsfeed. They can thus avoid content oppositional to their own views. However, accidental exposure is more likely on Twitter. The lists of nationally and regionally trending topics can facilitate accidental exposure as it allows users to encounter political information, if it is already popular, without actively searching for it. And by clicking on a hashtag, the user can explore material on any subject, posted by anyone. Despite the freedom to select which content to engage or circumvent, then, the Twitter model means a user is more likely to stumble across unsolicited political information on Twitter than on some other social media.[2]

The Reach of Twitter in Argentina and Russia

Argentina and Russia occupy similar positions in rankings of Internet penetration (59.9% and 61.4% respectively. See: World Bank, n.d.), but Twitter usage is three times higher in Argentina than Russia, where domestic social media platforms remain more popular. In absolute terms, though, the number of Twitter users is similar: roughly 4.8 million Argentineans visit the platform every month compared to about 5.7 million Russians (Schoonderwoerd, 2013). Although Twitter attracts a broad age range, its key market in the US, as in Russia and Argentina, is 18-29 (Schoonderwoerd, 2013). Our analysis may therefore also shed light on the online discursive strategies that various stakeholders employ to engage and shape the political opinions of first-time and other young voters.

An extensive literature explores Russian political Internet usage, from the late 1990s when the Web proved an effective medium for disseminating compromising material about political opponents (see Chapter 5: The Internet in Russia in Zasurskii, 2004), to recent studies of social media usage during the abortive Snow Revolution of 2011-12 (Oates, 2013), and the increasingly hostile online environment following the Crimean conflict (Fredheim, 2015). As early as 2001 the BBC described Putin's campaign website for the March 2000 presidential elections as 'stylish', and emphasised that the Russian secret services had used hackers during the Second Chechen War (Mulvey, 2001). The Medvedev interregnum (2008-2012) saw the

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[2] Phillips (2015, p.119) makes the argument about internet users in general.

President launch his own videoblog; in 2010 he hailed an era of "direct democracy" and cajoled government officials and regional governors into maintaining an online presence (Gorham, 2014). The bulk of scholarship about the Russian internet has focused on media freedom within the context of a democratic transition. The Berkman Center's Russian project has analysed Russian cyberspace and social media usage, while the journal Digital Icons, edited by Vlad Strukov, explores the interface between the digital and all areas of political and public life in Russia, Eurasia and Central Europe.

Internet usage in Argentina averages more than 4 hours per day, higher than for citizens of almost all other countries (Kemp, 2015). Political usage has been evident since at least the presidential elections of 2003, when presidential candidates first experimented with online campaigning.[3] Social media exploded as a space for political communications and public political deliberation in 2008, when a set of political catchphrases and the names of candidates for presidential and other offices rose to mass usage. Political catchphrases trended on Twitter, with Fernández and her FpV party's slogan #Fuerza (Strength) rising to particular prominence (Dominguez, 2012, p. 85).

Despite broad access and intensive usage, and in contrast to the Russian case, scant scholarly literature analyses the use of social media, or Internet activity more broadly, in Argentina. The available literature predominantly examines domestic journalism online, or state-media online interactions. Argentina is not alone in the limited attention afforded to the political uses of online spaces. As Sebastian Valenzuela (2013, p.2) notes, 'most data on social media and protest behavior have been collected in either mature democracies or authoritarian regimes', with little attention afforded to 'the special case of third wave democracies' (countries that democratised between the 1970s and 1990s). A Latin American framework for Internet studies, and particularly the political uses of online spaces, is slim but better developed. Social movements have attracted the lion's share of this attention, perhaps because of the early global attention afforded to Mexican online social activism linked to offline political activity (Kahn and Keller, 2004, p. 87). In recent years, the strongest Latin America-focused work has examined social media and social protests during the 'Chilean Winter' of 2011 (Scherman, Arriagada, & Valenzuela, 2015; Valenzuela, 2013). One of the ambitions of this article, then, is to contribute to the underdeveloped literature on social media usage in Argentina, and third-wave democracies, more broadly. We do this both by bringing Argentine social media usage into dialogue with the expansive literature on social media in Russia, and employing a comparative approach of our own.

Data collection and Results
We collected data for a range of search terms related to Alberto Nisman and Boris Nemtsov. For Nisman we launched collection on Monday 19 January, the day after his death; Nemtsov

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[3] On the failure of presidential candidate (and former president) Carlos Menem's online strategy in 2003 see (Fernández, 2008, p. 26).

was killed on 27 February 2015, and we started data collection the next morning. The Twitter Search API allows collection of tweets posted in the last seven days (Twitter Developers, 2015). Upon its first iteration the script collected all available content. Subsequent iterations took place every fifteen minutes, searching for any new content. This collection process means some content posted in the first hours after each event will have been deleted before collection. Statistics for the number of favourites and retweets will also be higher for tweets in circulation for longer before collection. In order to account for these discrepancies, we collected up-to date information about retweet and favourite counts in late May 2015. At this point we also noted which tweets and user profiles had been deleted since our initial trawl.

In order to test whether Twitter facilitates accidental exposure to politically charged subjects in Argentina and Russia, we limited our analysis to the Twitter conversation in the Russian language around the Cyrillic Nemtsov hashtag, and Spanish language tweets including the Nisman hashtag.[4] This yielded 94,774 tweets about #Nemtsov and 224,532 about #Nisman. Selecting tweets by hashtags returns a relatively thin slice of the relevant tweets.[5] As a result, our view of the data is partial and imperfect, and the generalisations below should be treated with some caution. Nonetheless, comparing the Argentine and Russian dataset reveals at least three areas where usage is markedly divergent: volume, artifice, and identity.

Attentiveness to volume allows us to track participation size in comparison with both the national population overall and social media users in particular. Yet, not all Tweets are equal: checking for artifice - full or partial automation - helps elucidate how much of the content around our hashtags was human-produced, resulting directly from the rational and emotional thought processes of individuals. Finally, a focus on the constructed identities of active Twitter handles whose feed content appeared non-automated or not predominantly automated allows us to probe both the dominant characteristics of the groups and individuals who participated in the conversations and the extent to which they were willing to reveal facets of their offline identities as they contributed to online deliberation. Did Twitter function as an environment in which participants elected to be identifiable? Or, were desires for recognition arbitrated, with contributors choosing to use pseudonyms and generic avatars - constructed online identities - alone? Following Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013), we engage in this identificatory analysis in an effort to understand the types of accounts that formed the central tenet of the political conversations studied here.

Volume

We find three times more content generated around #Nisman than about #Nemtsov. The fact that Spanish-speakers wrote more about #Nisman than Russian-speakers did about #Nemtsov was apparent even when collecting the data: people were Tweeting about Nisman at a greater

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[4] Search used for Nemtsov: #немцов OR #немцова; for Nisman: #nisman. Searchers are not case sensitive.
[5] Spanish and Russian-language content may of course originate from non-Argentine and Russian accounts.

rate than we could capture using Twitter's Search API, an additional reason why we opted to archive only tweets with the Nisman hashtag. Two months later, when collecting data about Nemtsov, we were able to collect all tweets mentioning his name, both in English and Russian, with or without a hashtag.

This discrepancy is not restricted to content creation, but also to user engagement, as measured by the mean number of times each tweet is retweeted or favourited by other users. Tweets about #Nisman were on average retweeted twice as often and favourited three times as often as were those about #Nemtsov. We find a similar ratio if we contrast the proportion of tweets directed at (@) other users: 10% of tweets about #Nemtsov, compared to 16% about #Nisman.

If tweets directed at other users are taken as a proxy for active conversation, it is tempting to map who talks to whom. However useful network visualizations may or may not be for social media analysis, in our case they revealed a large cluster of users active about #Nisman (42,761), but very few (862) in the case of #Nemtsov. Again, this points not only to more content, but also a more active conversation in Argentina than Russia.

Identity

We graded the three hundred users whose posts about the respective hashtags had the highest average number of retweets to determine both gender and whether the account was linked with a 'real world' identity. We filed spoof, parody, and humorous accounts in a separate category, and labelled accounts that purported to represent a group or an interest accordingly. We also identified media outlets separately. Finally, we labelled accounts that present as individuals into one of two categories: 'real name' or 'pseudonym'. Accounts that had two of the following characteristics were labelled as 'real name': a plausible surname, a plausible profile picture, a specific and plausible biographical description, and links to other social media accounts or a personal website.[6]

For Russia, we found 29% were female, compared to 27% for Argentina; in a similar study Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013, p. 99) found 20% of core Austrian Twitter users were female. These figures are broadly comparable. The similarity does not, however, hold for user identity: 76% of Argentine core users were identifiable as individuals, which is similar to the Austrian results, but wholly different from Russia (36%).

	deleted	group	media	pseudonym	real name	spoof
Nemtsov	3	19	15	105	102	56

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[6] Whether or not the account is in fact fake is of secondary importance here; we were just looking at the persona projected by the user.

| Nisman | 4 | 18 | 13 | 35 | 226 | 4 |

Table 1: Identity of top 300 users who tweeted about Nemtsov and Nisman (excluding fake accounts)

In Russia pseudonymous accounts are more common than real name ones; there is also a high proportion of joke or spoof accounts. Based on these data, we conclude that the top-end of the Argentine Twittersphere is a real name environment, whereas the same cannot be said for Russia. This discrepancy highlights that the Russian Twittersphere operates differently to that of Argentina. It is not just a case of a lower volume and lower engagement, but an environment in which individuals are much less willing to own their words.

Artifice

When we first collected the Russian data we noted that the vast majority of content was spam, obviously automated, or emanated from accounts that, for a range of reasons, bore patterns pointing to automation in use, creation, or both. Twitter's rules allow some forms of automation, e.g. for customer service queries. However, it explicitly prohibits the posting of links that redirect through ad pages; automatically tweet to trending topics; users operating multiple accounts; automated replies, retweeting and mentions, automated following and unfollowing; and a myriad different types of spamming ("The Twitter Rules", 2015).

Twitter estimates that about 5% of its accounts are fake; researchers at Barracuda labs estimate the percentage is twice that (Wagstaff, 2015). Looking at the Russian Twittersphere, though, we are confident the true percentage is higher still. We identified large numbers of accounts that were obviously operated and or created using automation, and that broke the terms summarised above.[7] For this analysis we divided accounts into ones that are probably bots and ones probably not. Yet, levels of automation exist on a spectrum, from automatically created, populated, and operated accounts to those merely boosted through automation, e.g. by simulating a large following (amassing followers) or a large readership (as signalled by automated retweets or favourites).

To identify fake accounts we looked for irregularities within the full extent of metadata about users and tweets provided by Twitter. We looked for non-random clustering of two variables to identify suspicious looking user clusters. We then cross-tabulated the results against other variables to remove any genuine accounts that coincidentally shared characteristics with the bot clusters. For instance, we found a large number of accounts created within in a few seconds of each other, all of which appeared to have usernames made according to a specific template, as well as roughly the same number of friends and followers. These accounts were labelled as

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[7] We discuss the diversity of these accounts in greater detail elsewhere: Forthcoming

bots.[8] We also looked for patterns in material posted. If a large number of accounts positively identified as bots tweeted links to a particular spam site, other accounts tweeting the same message would also be flagged as fake. Finally, we ran a machine-learning algorithm to identify accounts that were the most similar to the ones flagged as bots. These we manually inspected, determining whether they were bot accounts or not. When in doubt, we erred on the side of caution, labelling accounts 'real'. We ran a series of iterations of the algorithm to help weed out false positives and false negatives.

This process revealed an incredible level of artifice in the Russian-language dataset: we estimate that 77% of the tweets originated from bot accounts, while 81% of accounts that tweeted about #Nemtsov were fake. In contrast, only 9% of tweets about #Nisman originated from fake accounts. Once we strip out automated or semi-automated content, there is virtually no debate left about #Nemtsov. Excluding fake content, we find the volume of tweets about #Nisman to be nine times larger than that about #Nemtsov.
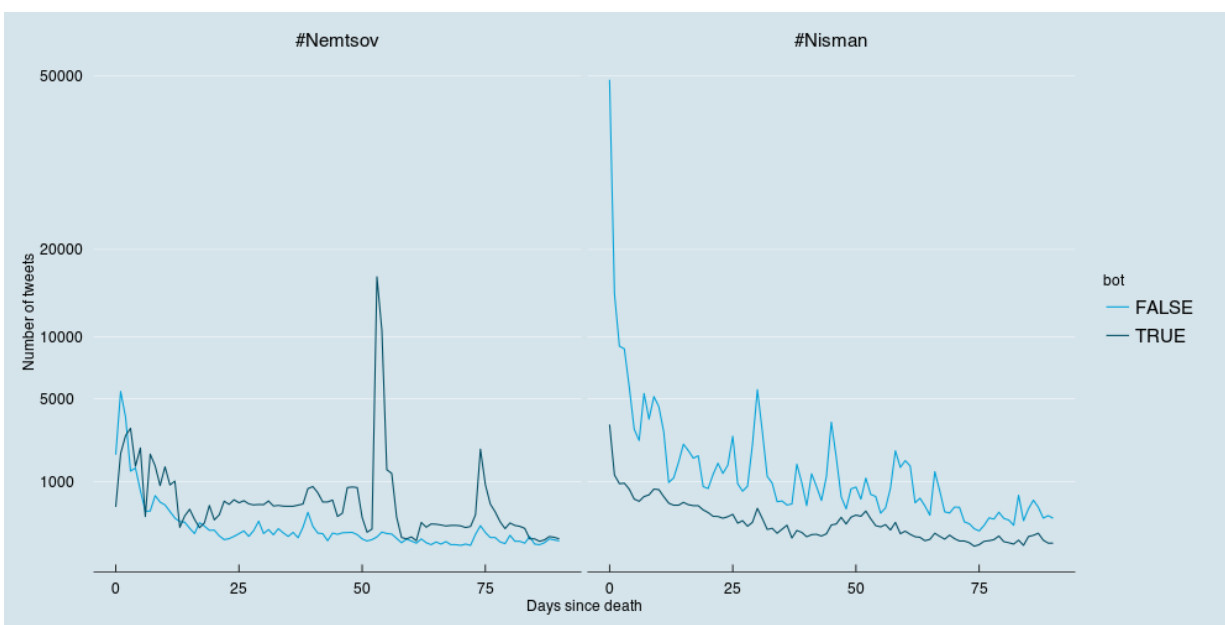

Figure 1: Volume of automated and authentic tweets about #Nemtsov and #Nisman for the first 90 days.

In the Russian Twittersphere bot activity was slow off the mark, but from day three bot activity consistently outpaced content from genuine accounts (see Figure 1). While twitter activity surrounding Nisman had a long tail, Russian conversations about Nemtsov spiked and faded, as bot activity picked up. On 21 April opposition figures Aleksei Naval'ny and Dmitrii Gudkov claimed Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic, was protecting Ruslan Geremeyev, the individual suspected of ordering the assassination. Geremeyev later left the country, and the investigation hit a dead end (Bullough, 2015). One might expect this event to have sparked

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[8] For an example of the sort of clusters we identified, see appendix 1 which shows one cluster of bots created in mid-September 2014.

renewed interest about #Nemtsov, but only bot activity spiked: of the 16,536 tweets using the Nemtsov hashtag on 21 April, all but 20 originated from bot accounts.

The degree to which automated content muffled conversation is visible for the final spike, at 75 days after Nemtsov's murder, on 12 May 2015. This is the publication date for the 64-page report 'Putin. War', based on material compiled by Boris Nemtsov, and completed by opposition heavyweights Oleg Kashin and Il'ia Yashin. The evidence presented in the report, purporting to prove that Putin was conducting a covert war in Ukraine, was hotly debated, but not in tweets about #Nemtsov: all but 115 of 2317 tweets originated from accounts identified as bots.

It would appear that Russian activists and liberal commentators have eschewed hashtag usage, possibly due to the high proportion of automated activity. The anti-corruption blogger Aleksei Navalny, for instance, wrote 24 tweets that mentioned Nemtsov, but only one of these used the Nemtsov hashtag. Our data suggest that a learning-process takes place: as a hashtag attracts automated content, authentic activity moves elsewhere. Perhaps established accounts, which already have a large, direct follower-base, have already learnt not to bother with hashtags.[9] Two months later, after a period of consistent hashtag spamming, #Nemtsov no longer served a mobilising function. Much like offline media, where critical journalists are frequently forced to move from one outlet to another, Twitter hashtags are rapidly muffled and the conversation moves elsewhere.

The Spanish-language Twittersphere following the death of Nisman looked markedly different to the Russian language Twittersphere after the murder of Nemtsov. We observed significantly less bot activity, and the bulk of automated content promoted and amplified the reach of material already available on Twitter or elsewhere. Most prominent on this list of amplified content was political messages, newspaper articles, and information about pro- and anti-Kirchnerist rallies. Bot accounts also occasionally posted duplicated statements and links in quick succession, seemingly in an attempt to flood the hashtag with partisan messaging. Patterns in user metadata do not, however, provide evidence that the accounts generating this material were created in an orchestrated fashion. In contrast to #Nemtsov, #Nisman triggered minimal reply spamming or hashtag flooding. Some of the bot activity involved hijacking Nisman-related hashtags for non-political ends, with marketers seeking to commandeer these top hashtags to increase their product visibility. As for #Nemtsov, we observe automated or semi-automated accounts that pose as grassroots supporters, but the numbers involved are vastly lower. There were no attempts that we could find that might have had the effect of blocking the hashtag, or limiting the spread of ideas and opinions.

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[9] Were we, then, wrong to select tweets based on including a hashtag? Ideally, more data would be better. We examined tweets about Nemtsov without a hashtag and found the proportion of automated activity was marginally lower, but still at least five times higher than for #Nisman.

Supporters of Fernández discussed the Nisman case in ways that almost entirely elided use of his name, terming it a provocation designed to besmirch the government. They chose exit over voice. This fact is in itself curious: while the space around #Nemtsov is polluted by apolitical spam and various forms of trolling, that around #Nisman is largely free from intervention. As a result, the feel of the content we collected is markedly different: for #Nisman we observe a largely uniform, oppositional message. For #Nemtsov, once we strip away the most egregious automation, we are left with cyber-battles, as warriors - be they pro- or anti-Kremlin - compete to dominate the space.

The degree of artifice observed in the Russian conversation prompts the question of whether automation has the effect of displacing authentic activity. And what is Twitter doing to stamp out spam? Revisiting our data in June 2015, we found many accounts had been deleted since our initial trawls in January-March. Most of the suspended accounts were ones we had previously identified as bots. For Nisman, 80% of deleted tweets originated from accounts identified as bots. And of the content we had identified as fake, Twitter had removed 75%. In Russia, though, we see a different pattern: 92% of the deleted content was created by accounts we had identified as bots, but only 15% of the accounts we found had been suspended by Twitter. Thus the identification of fake accounts is quite accurate both for Russian and Spanish language content, but for accounts tweeting in Russian the purge was much less extensive.

We suspect one reason for this discrepancy is that Russian bots are more sophisticated than the Argentine ones. It is easy to ban accounts that spout torrents of irrelevant or abusive content; banning numerous accounts that tweet sporadically is much harder. And within the data about Nemtsov we identified 20,150 bot accounts that only once tweeted about #Nemtsov. Most of the bots that tweeted about Nisman, on the other hand, tweeted streams of duplicated or near duplicated content.

The sheer volume of fake content in itself poses a challenge for moderators. Russian opposition activists complain that hordes of pro-government trolls systematically report Facebook and Twitter posts for containing abusive content, resulting in time-wasting, content embargoes, and account suspensions. The blogger Anton Nossik (2015) complained that an army of cyber warriors 'around the clock place deceitful denunciations against users on their "black list"'. His Facebook posts were reported as containing nudity, violence, or child pornography. Any organized campaign can overawe a structure ill-equipped to police Cyrillic posts; it must be especially difficult for moderators to determine which accounts are real and which fake if pro- and anti-Kremlin activists repeatedly denounce each other.

We expected our comparison of Twitter discourses surrounding these political deaths to reveal similarities; we found mainly differences. This divergence suggests pre-existing state-media

relations shape the online conversation more decisively than does the fabric of networked communication, or indeed Twitter's rules and structures. In Russia, opposition and independent voices are, through a range of means, pushed to the margins of the media landscape; in Argentina, jostling between powerful media outlets and the state has created a highly polarized public sphere.

Current state-media tensions in both countries emerge from complex recent histories. The formal re-democratization of Argentina (1983) introduced press freedoms, though a small number of media outlets with ties to the regime continued to dominate (Macrory, 2013, p. 181). Tensions between the media and the state deepened following the introduction of anti-monopolization legislature in 2009. The law coincided with a high-profile fall-out between the owners of the Grupo Clarín media conglomerate, the Herrera de Noble family, and Fernández (Macrory, 2013, p. 182). Its implementation thus sparked rumours that the president was carrying out a latent alternative agenda. This climate of polarization extends onto Twitter, where our data suggests that Kirchnerists do not shut down opposition discourse, but also do not engage with it; not even naming Nisman, they appear instead to use wholly different framing references.

The Russian media transitioned from state-control in Soviet times, to oligarchic control in the 1990s. Putin's presidency saw the re-establishment of central control over both terrestrial television stations and the main print outlets. By 2012 Russia held a Freedom House rating of 172nd, tied with Zimbabwe and Azerbaijan ("Sotseti i blogi podniali," 2012). Since the Russian elections of 2011 and 2012, the most popular online media, social media, and social-networking sites in Russia have been placed under control of oligarchs loyal to the Kremlin. Individuals and media outlets have been targeted by anti-corruption litigation, or intimidated through costly libel suits. As a result, dissenting voices are rare, and often on the move between publications. The dilution and deletion of political content in the Russian Twittersphere suggests an extension of these practices, in forms effective for the Twitter environment, as news and opinion has begun to circulate in online spaces.

Conclusions
The big question that pervades debate between techno-optimists and their detractors is whether social media are good for democracy. Do they help to produce or accelerate democratic change or, alternatively, might they hinder it? Our data do not resolve this question, but they do push us to consider whether the premise may be wrong: social networking applications may not fulfil a single political function. Their functionality may be mediated instead by language and by pre-existing relationships between the state and offline domestic media. Twitter may be ecumenical in its reach, but its local functions appear, in the cases we have studied, to be contingent on domestic factors.

Language-environments on Twitter exist largely in parallel, and impediments to discussion may vary widely from one to another. The degree to which Twitter is able to moderate different language environments introduces variation into how Twitter is used for political purposes. For our selection of data regarding Argentina we frequently see users amplifying offline messages, or using discourse online first that subsequently migrates offline. Twitter may, then, help extend the reach of political deliberation in Argentina. The space around #Nemtsov, by contrast, is dominated by a stream of junk content that muffles or at least displaces conversation. This intervention does not strip the Russian Twittersphere of political conversation, but it does mean that it is a dynamic source of information primarily for those already in the know: Russians who know who to follow can freely and easily access politically explosive content. The same, though, is true offline and (largely) elsewhere on the Internet. Conversely, politically disengaged individuals are not much more likely to stumble across oppositional content on Twitter than elsewhere. In this respect, Twitter cannot be said to play a particularly politicizing function in Russia. Moreover, whatever organizations and groups are responsible for polluting the Russian Twittersphere, the effect of automation is to undermine precisely those aspects of the network most likely to facilitate accidental exposure to cross-cutting information.

The Russian-language and Spanish-language environments that we explore here clearly coincide in owing much to pre-established national media environments. Twitter behaviours differ from the one environment to the other precisely *because of* this common consistency with localized precedents. The divergences in the political functions of Twitter in Argentina and Russia point, moreover, towards a further research question regarding online-offline interaction. Much has been made of the organizing potential of social media. In Argentina, protests often draw tens of thousands of participants, suggesting their continued popularity *over* active online participation. At the same time, although Twitter and Facebook are heavily engaged for organizing, estimates of participation in recent protests do not tend to outstrip pre-Twitter participant figures. Up to half a million Argentine citizens, some of whom use Twitter, are believed to have attended the anti-Kirchner administration rallies of 2012, but this striking figure is no greater than estimates for the pre-Twitter age protests against the political establishment during the financial crisis of 2001 to 2002. Contrastingly, in 2011-12, at the peak of techno-optimism, Russia saw 100,000 protesters take to the streets - the largest number since *perestroika* (1986-91). Any theory of offline mobilisation via online galvanization must, then, account for these kinds of variation across language environment and regime type.

A recent study suggests the criticality of Twitter as a 'medium of expression and communication' for those who are 'especially interested in politics' (Jamal, Keohane, Romney, & Tingley, 2015, pp. 56-7). Our research suggests some caveats to this broad claim. While it is clear that Twitter became an outlet for political expression following the deaths of Nemtsov and Nisman, we would be hard pressed to suggest that in either country those deliberations took on newly expansive forms, in terms of discursive content or key participants, as they circulated on

Twitter. The variation in the methods engaged for undermining or avoiding debate in Russia and Argentina highlights the importance of looking beyond English-language content as we seek to understand the political affordances of Twitter. Overarching theories based predominantly on English-language sources risk missing the complex internal variety that characterises the political content and uses of the Twittersphere, and thus the protean range of effects that it might exercise on offline politics.

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Appendices
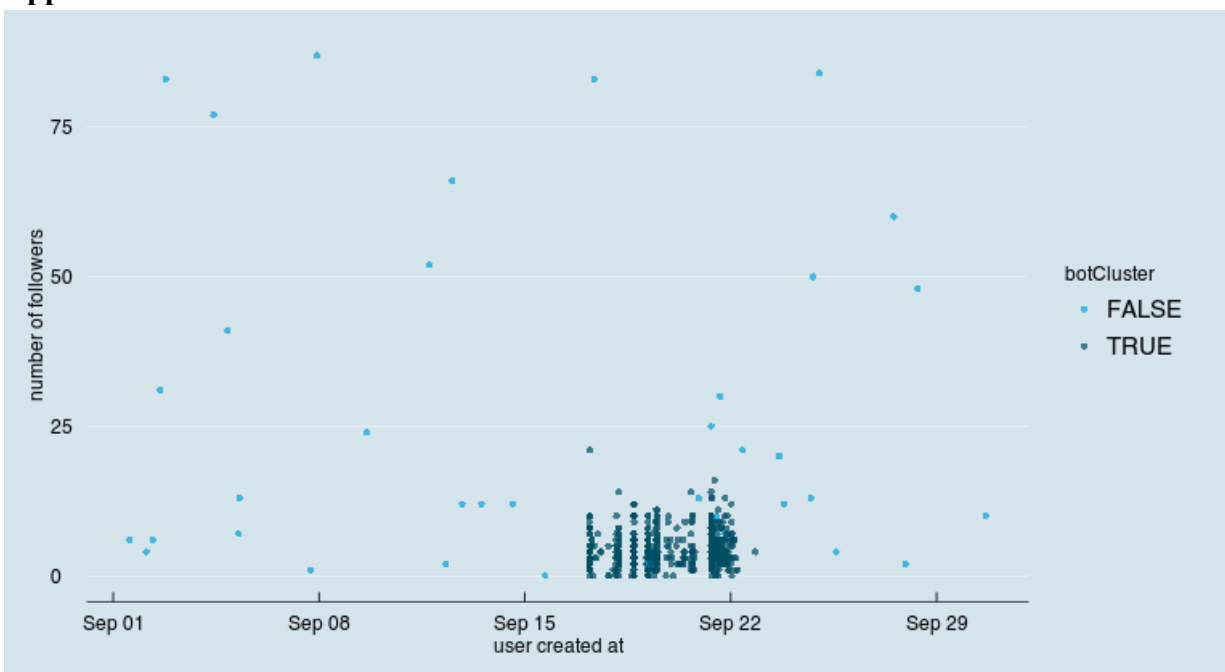
Appendix 1: One cluster of 503 bot accounts created in mid-September 2014