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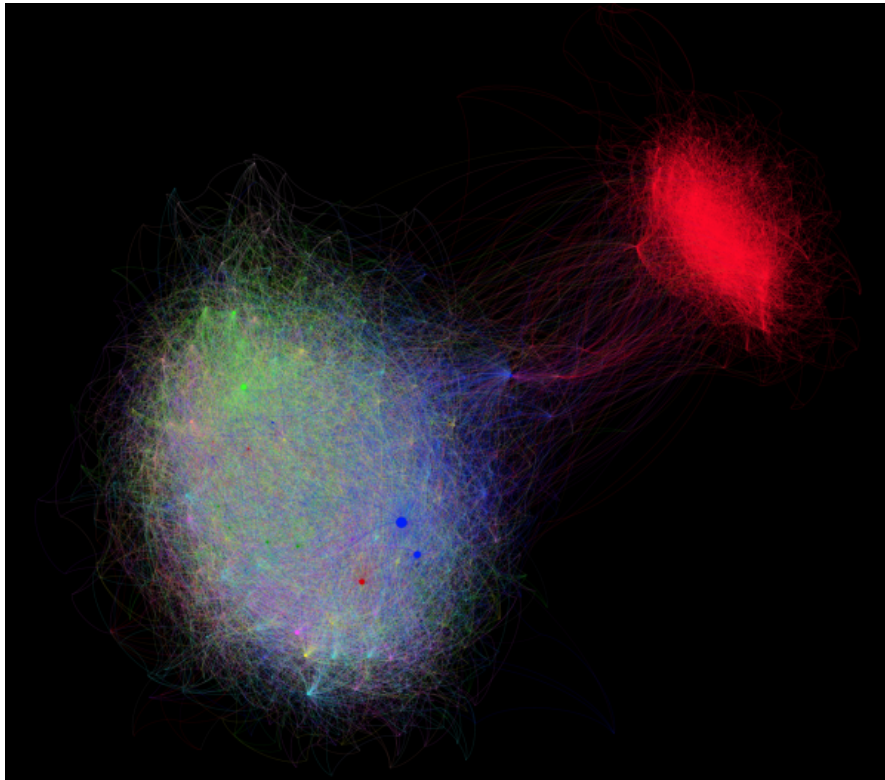


Twitter snapshots show Venezuela's government isolated from its people

Jonathan Wheatley [Author alerts](#) Mar 11 17:38 1 comment

How isolated is Venezuela's government from the people it supposedly represents? Very isolated indeed, according to a study commissioned by beyondbrics from Marco Ruediger and colleagues at FGV DAPP, the department of public policy analysis at the Fundação Getulio Vargas in Rio de Janeiro.

The study, derived from activity on Twitter, demonstrates the extreme polarisation of opinion in the country and suggests that Venezuela's media, often either controlled or suppressed by the government, is increasingly lining up with opposition voices.



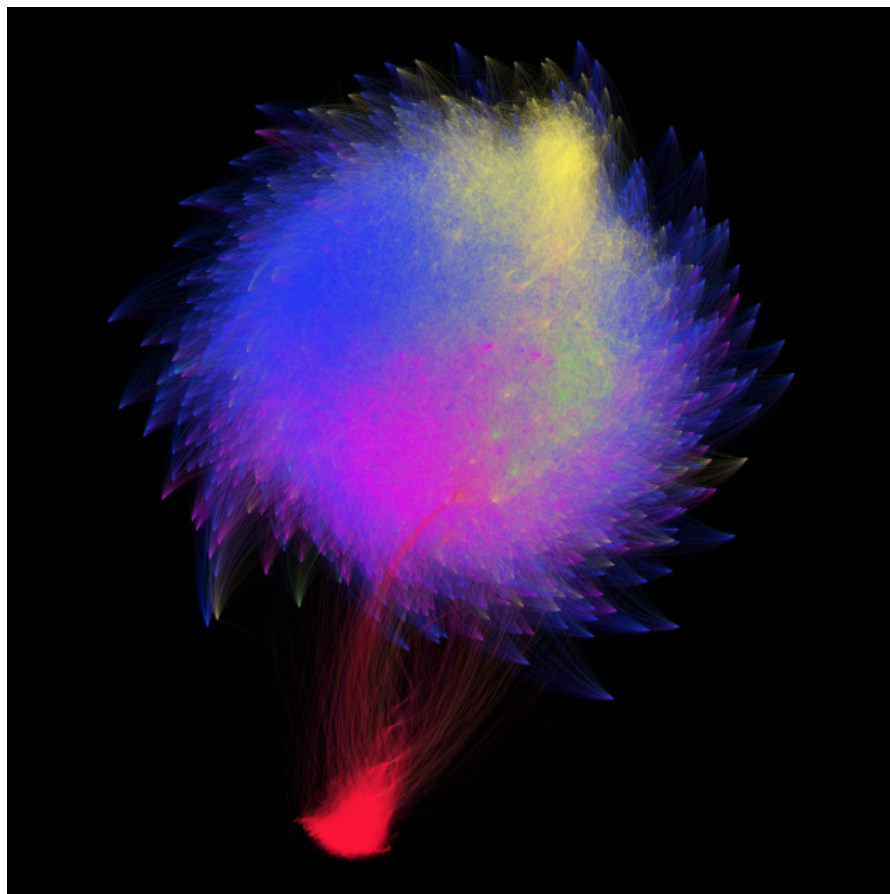
Source: FGV DAPP

We asked Ruediger and his analysts to look at Twitter activity on three key dates last month (see a note on methodology at the bottom of this post). The first was February 12, when Nicolas Maduro, the president, claimed to have foiled a US-sponsored coup attempt.

The resulting image (above) is derived from 91,000 tweets on that day. The red cloud to the right represents tweets from accounts aligned to Maduro. The cloud to the left consists of tweets by Venezuelan and other Spanish-language media, by people aligned to the

opposition and by other Venezuelan citizens. The group is amorphous, suggesting the various players have not taken a single position on the alleged coup attempt. But while its members are communicating freely with each other, they are paying almost no attention to Maduro's supporters – and vice versa.

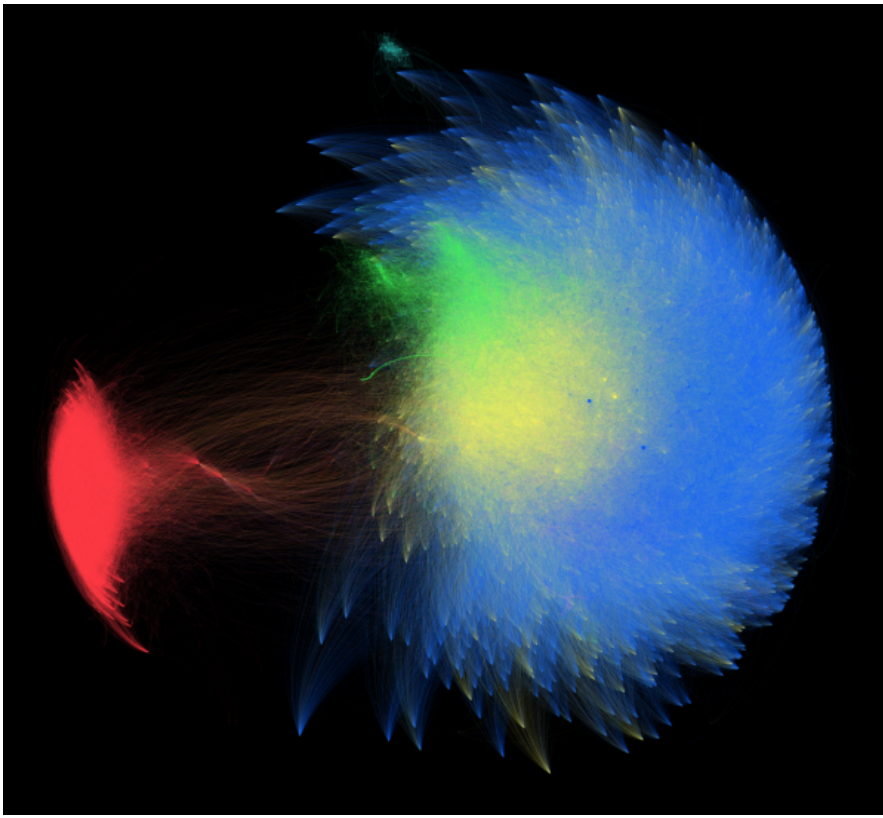
Our second image is based on 922,000 tweets on February 19, following the arrest of the opposition mayor of Caracas.



Source: FGV DAPP

In this much bigger group of tweets, the government's small red cloud is even more isolated at the bottom of the image, with few tweets defending the arrest. In the large, multicoloured group above, Twitter profiles opposed to Maduro dominate and, while there is still no unified opposition, the analysts note, "several groups are very close in the debate, forming a big and strong group critical of the arrest." The large cloud consists of opposition journalists and activists in pink, "non-aligned" journalists and activists in blue, Venezuelan media in green and other Latin American media in yellow. Unsurprisingly, foreign media are the most critical of the arrest, but Venezuelan media are remarkably aligned with the opposition.

Our third image is derived from 924,000 tweets on February 24, when a 14-year-old boy died after being hit by a police baton round in a street demonstration.



Source: FGV DAPP

Again, Maduro supporters are extremely isolated. But Twitter profiles aligned with the opposition form a more unified field of criticism. As the analysts note, “even the press (yellow and green) appears close to the opposition after the death.”

It shouldn't perhaps be surprising that large sectors of the population are unified in their revulsion at the death of a young protester at the hands of the police, who had recently been given authority by the government to use lethal force – in other words, to kill people – when putting down demonstrations.

Government supporters may counter that such surveys are likely to exaggerate support for the opposition as they only capture the views of the affluent twitterati. But internet penetration is remarkably deep in Latin America. Even in Venezuelan, a country on the brink of social and economic meltdown, it was 55 per cent in 2013 according to the ITU, the United Nations agency on information and communication technologies. It is likely to be more than 60 per cent today.

Note on methodology

FGV DAPP uses one set of software from Gnip to search for and collect tweets on certain subjects on certain days, and a separate set from Gephi to generate images based on those data. The analysts prepare and fine-tune search strings; the software delivers sets of results including clusters based on affinities between individual Twitter accounts on the day in question. The analysts then open hundreds of tweets in each set of outcomes to identify what it is that defines each cluster. Lead analyst Amaro Grassi says Twitter accounts run by media outlets and individual journalists may be in the same cluster as other accounts, but they will all be generally informative accounts. He says the image generated on February 24 was a notable variation on that theme: “The intermediation clusters were in the same place as the opposition ones. It shows the radicalisation of the debate. The mediators were not exactly mediating, they were feeding one side more than the other.”

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