

Muddied Waters: Online Disinformation during Crisis Events

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US National Science Foundation

IIS 1342252, IIS 1420255, IIS 1541688

Office of Naval Research

HCDE Human
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Engineering

dub W

Misinformation

Fake News

Political Propaganda

Misinformation

Fake News

Political Propaganda

Misinformation

Fake News

Information War

Political Propaganda

Misinformation

Hybrid War

Fake News

Information Disorder

Information War

Political Propaganda

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Active Measures

Asymmetric Warfare

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Information War

Active Measures

Asymmetric Warfare

Information Operations

Disinformation

Online Disinformation during Crisis Events

Information Operations

Boston Marathon Bombing (2013)



Johnny/venomlegions

@JohnnyReb1970

 Follow



BOSTON BOMBING SMELLS LIKE A CIA
BLACK OPS FALSE FLAG SET UP! AGAIN!
Don't be fooled by the mainstream media lies!

2:42 AM - 16 Apr 2013



Boston Marathon Bombing (2013)



Armand Gerard Haddad

@AGerardHaddad

 **Follow**



Truth has been revealed: Boston Bombing
culprits found as NAVY SEALS
UNDERCOVER. bit.ly/12mZePa

THIS IS UNBELIEVABLE.



Potential Boston Bombing Culprits and Persons of Interest ...

Infowars.com | Images show suspicious men with backpacks.

infowars.com

10:38 AM - 17 Apr 2013



9/11 (2001)

Sandy Hook Shootings (2012)

Boston Marathon Bombing (2013)

Downing of Flight MH17 (2014)

San Bernardino Shootings (2015)

Umpqua School Shootings (2015)

Paris Attacks (2015)

Orlando Nightclub Shooting (2016)

Munich Market Shooting (2016)

Las Vegas Concert Shootings (2017)

Parkland School Shooting (2018)

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“Hoax”

“False Flag”

“Crisis Actors”

Las Vegas Concert Shootings (2017)

Parkland School Shooting (2018)

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“False Flag”

“Crisis Actors”

Las Vegas Concert Shootings (2017)

Parkland School Shooting (2018)

Conspiracy Theories or “Alternative Narratives” of Crisis Events

9/11 (2001)

Sandy Hook Shootings (2012)

Boston Marathon Bombing (2013)

Downing of Flight MH17 (2014)

San Bernardino Shootings (2015)

Umpqua School Shootings (2015)

Paris Attacks (2015)

Orlando Nightclub Shooting (2016)

Munich Market Shooting (2016)

“Alternative Narratives” of Shooting Events in 2016

Las Vegas Concert Shootings (2017)

Parkland School Shooting (2018)

Starbird, K. (2017). Examining the Alternative Media Ecosystem Through the Production of Alternative Narratives of Mass Shooting Events on Twitter. In ICWSM (pp. 230-239).

Methods Interlude

Grounded, Interpretative, Mixed-Method Research

Kathy Charmaz. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Leysia Palen and Ken Anderson. 2016. Crisis informations - New data for extraordinary times. *Science*.

Jim Maddock, Kate Starbird et al., 2015. Characterizing online rumoring behavior using multi-dimensional signatures. *CSCW 2015*.

Method: Data Collection

- Collected Twitter data on shooting events: shooting, shooter, gunman, gunmen
- Nine months (January - October 2016)
- Used the Twitter Streaming API
- 58,000,000 tweets
- Scoped to tweets with: false flag, falseflag, hoax, crisis actor, crisisactors
- ~100,000 tweets



wake up

@WakeUpMFers

Follow

Police Investigation Reveals Orlando Shooting An 'Inside Job'~ yournewswire.com/police-investi ... #OrlandoShooting #FalseFlag



RETWEETS

27

LIKES

19



7:00 PM - 17 Jun 2016



2



27



19



wake up

@WakeUpMFers

Follow

13 Important Elements To Look For In Every Staged Shooting Event~ activistpost.com/2016/07/13-imp ...



RETWEETS

28

LIKES

21



2:40 PM - 24 Jul 2016

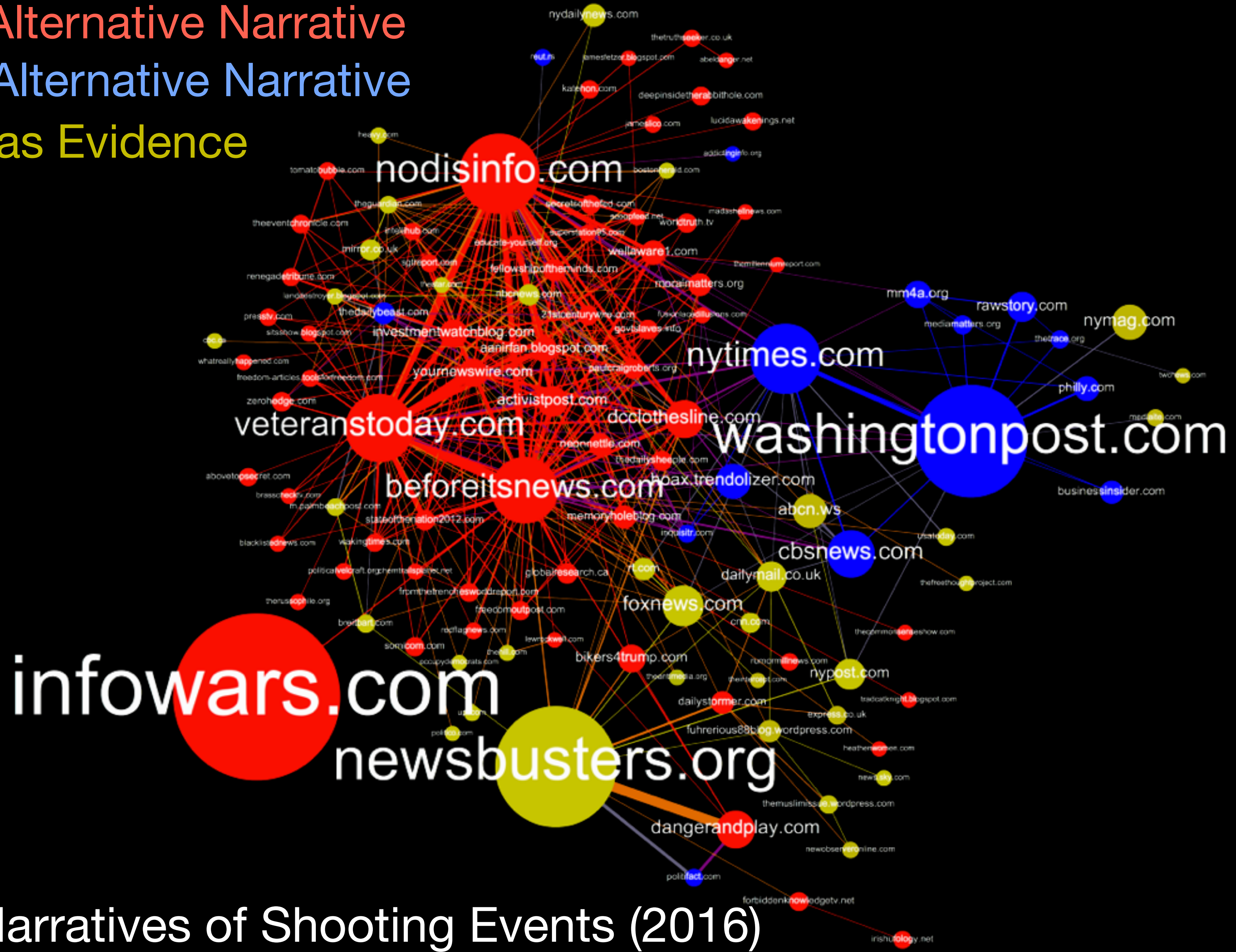
Method: Visualizing the Surrounding Ecosystem



YourNewsWire

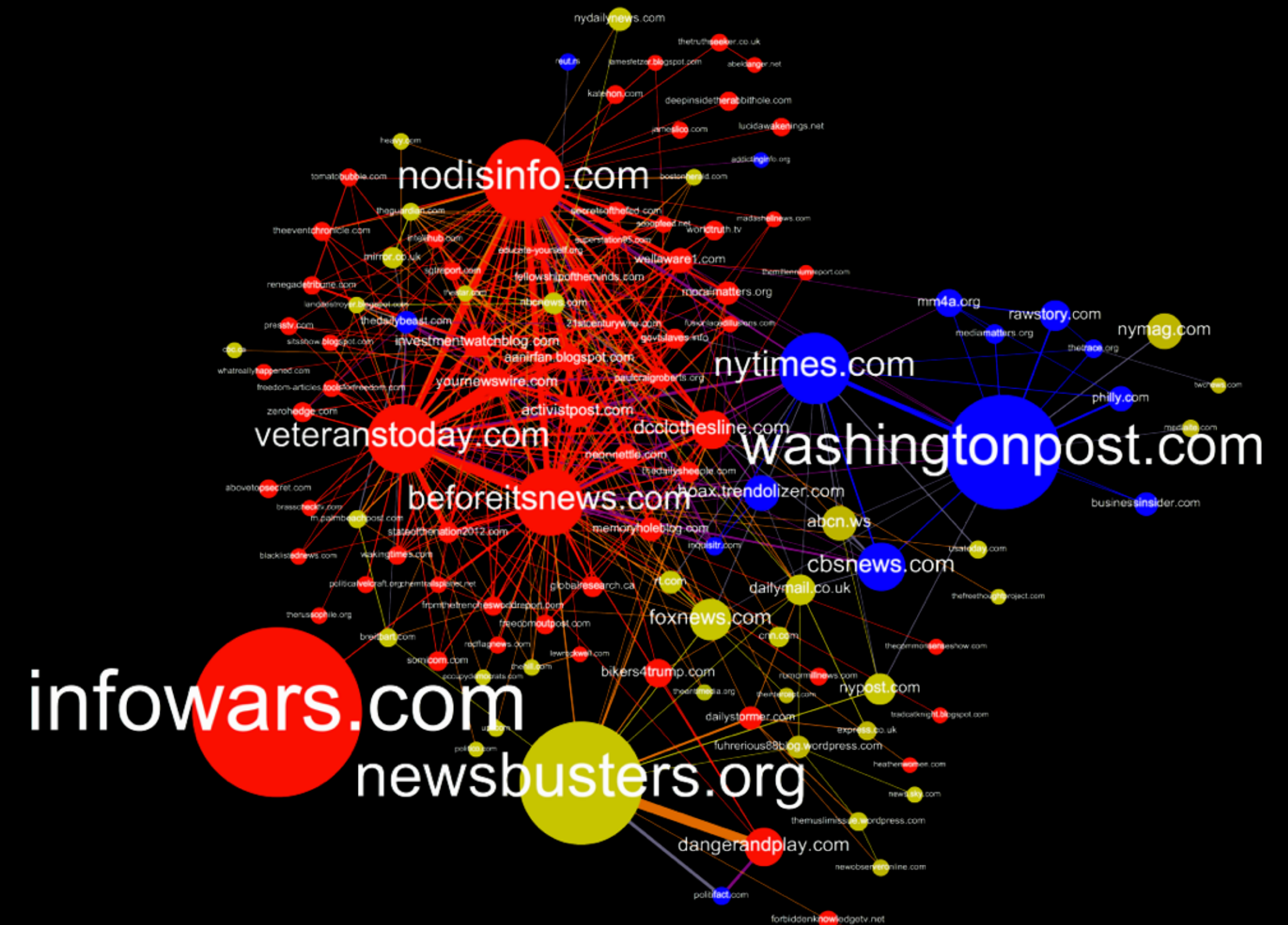
ActivistPost

Red: Affirms Alternative Narrative
Blue: Denies Alternative Narrative
Yellow: Used as Evidence



Alternative Narratives of Shooting Events (2016)

Method: Content Analysis of Web Domains



Method: Content Analysis of Web Domains

Aliens

Anti-Big Pharma

ChemTrails

Anti-Corporate Media

Anti-Globalist

Geo-Engineering

Anti-GMO

Anti-Vaccine

Anti-Zionist

Anti-Media

Flat Earth

Illuminati

Koch Brothers

New World Order Cabal

9-11 Truther

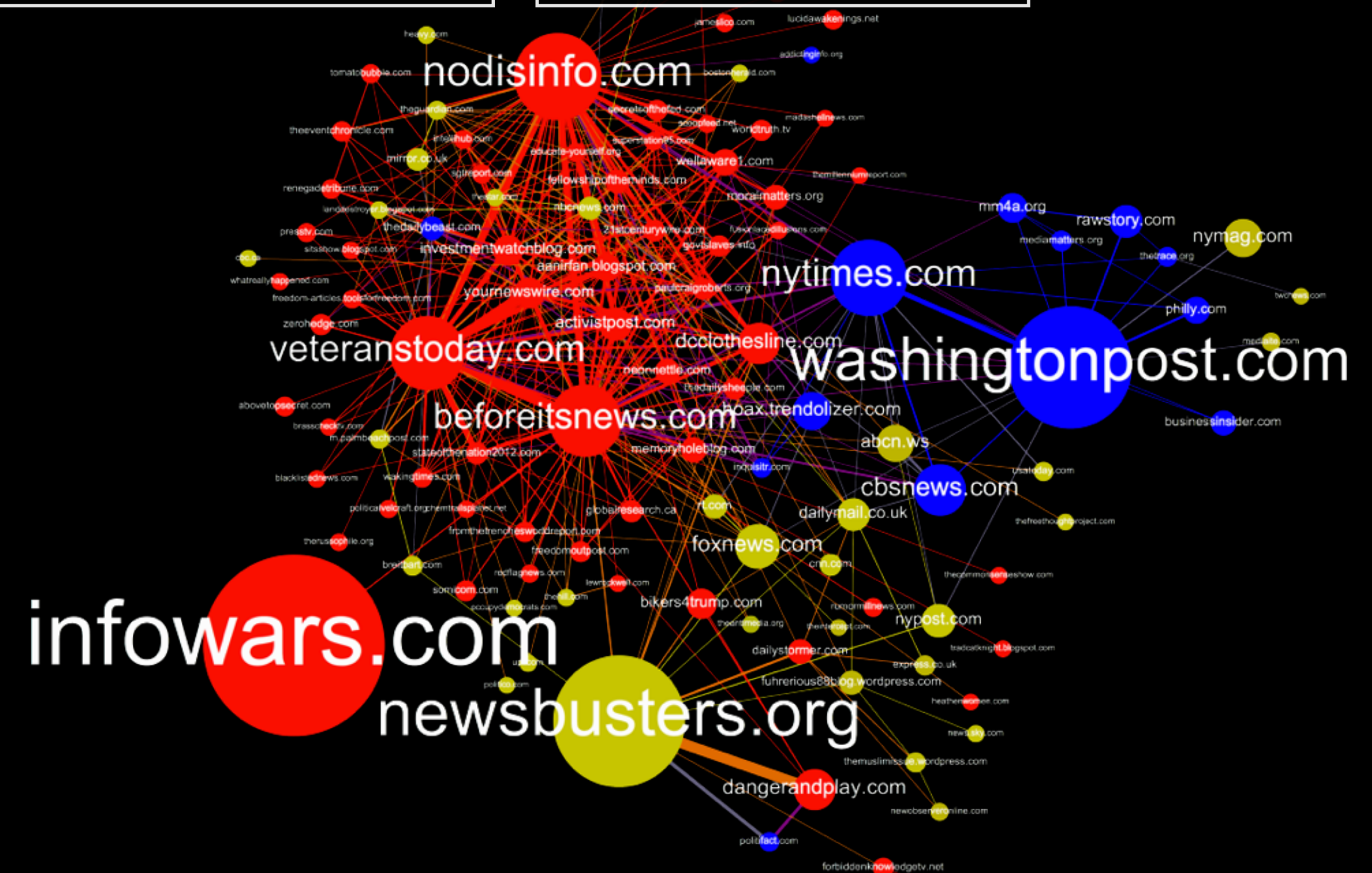
Nutritional Supplements

Pedophile Rings

George Soros

Rothschilds

Many, Many Conspiracy Theories



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Aliens

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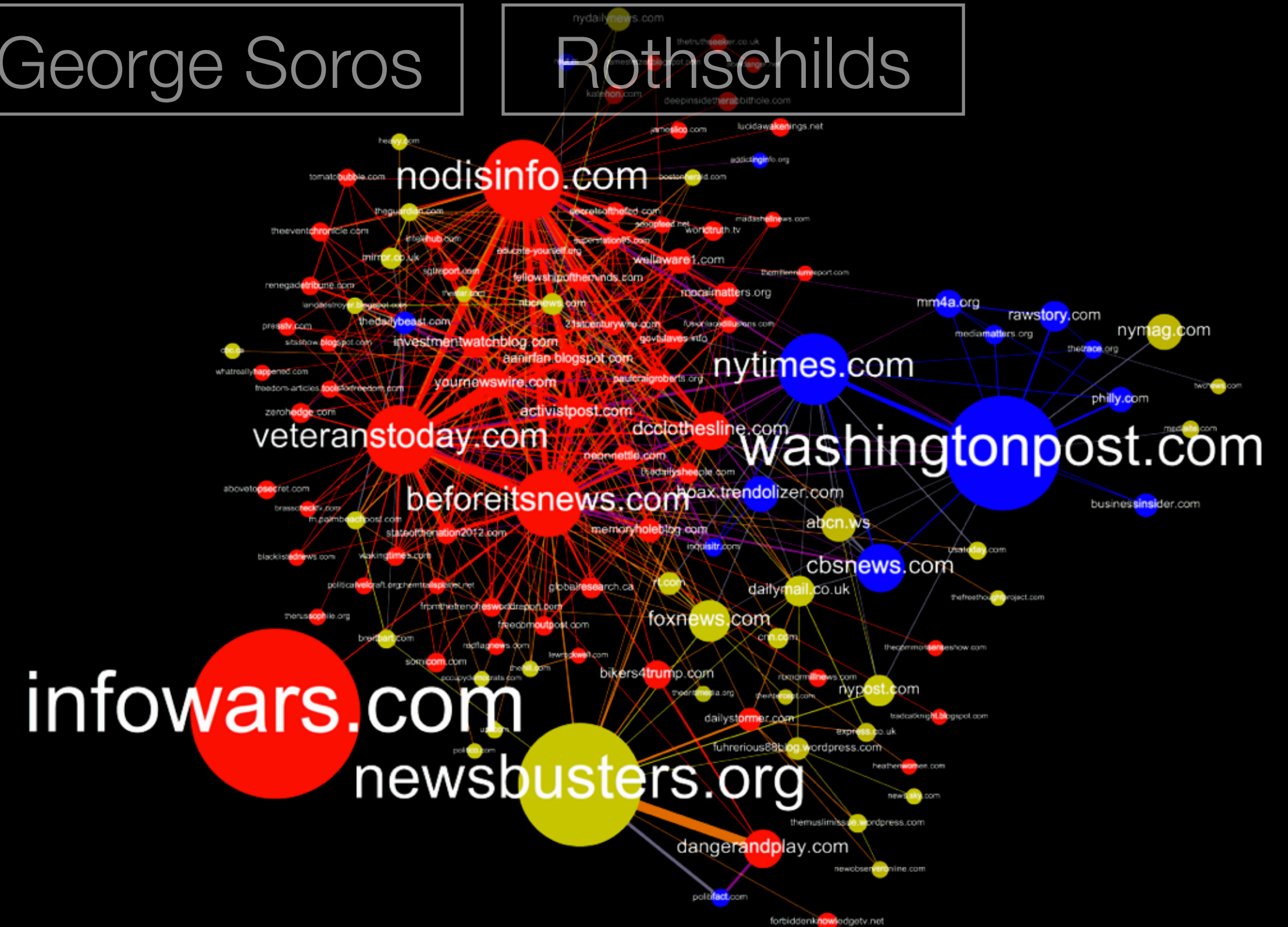
Pedophile Rings

George Soros



The Rothschild logo is displayed in a large, white, serif font. The background features a network diagram with red and blue nodes connected by lines, suggesting a global or interconnected theme.

Many, Many Conspiracy Theories



Method: Content Analysis of Web Domains

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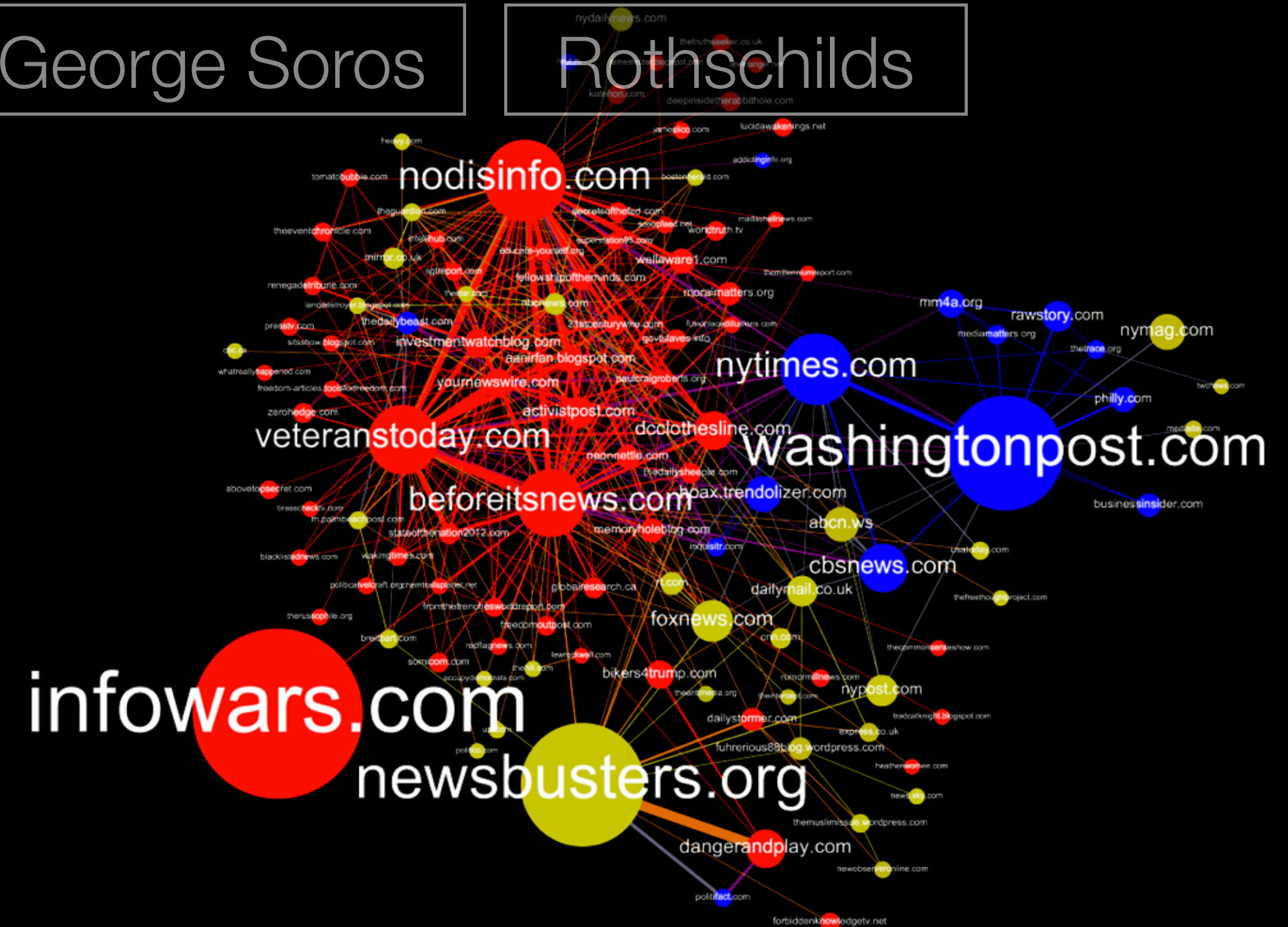
Nutritional Supplements

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Many, Many Conspiracy Theories

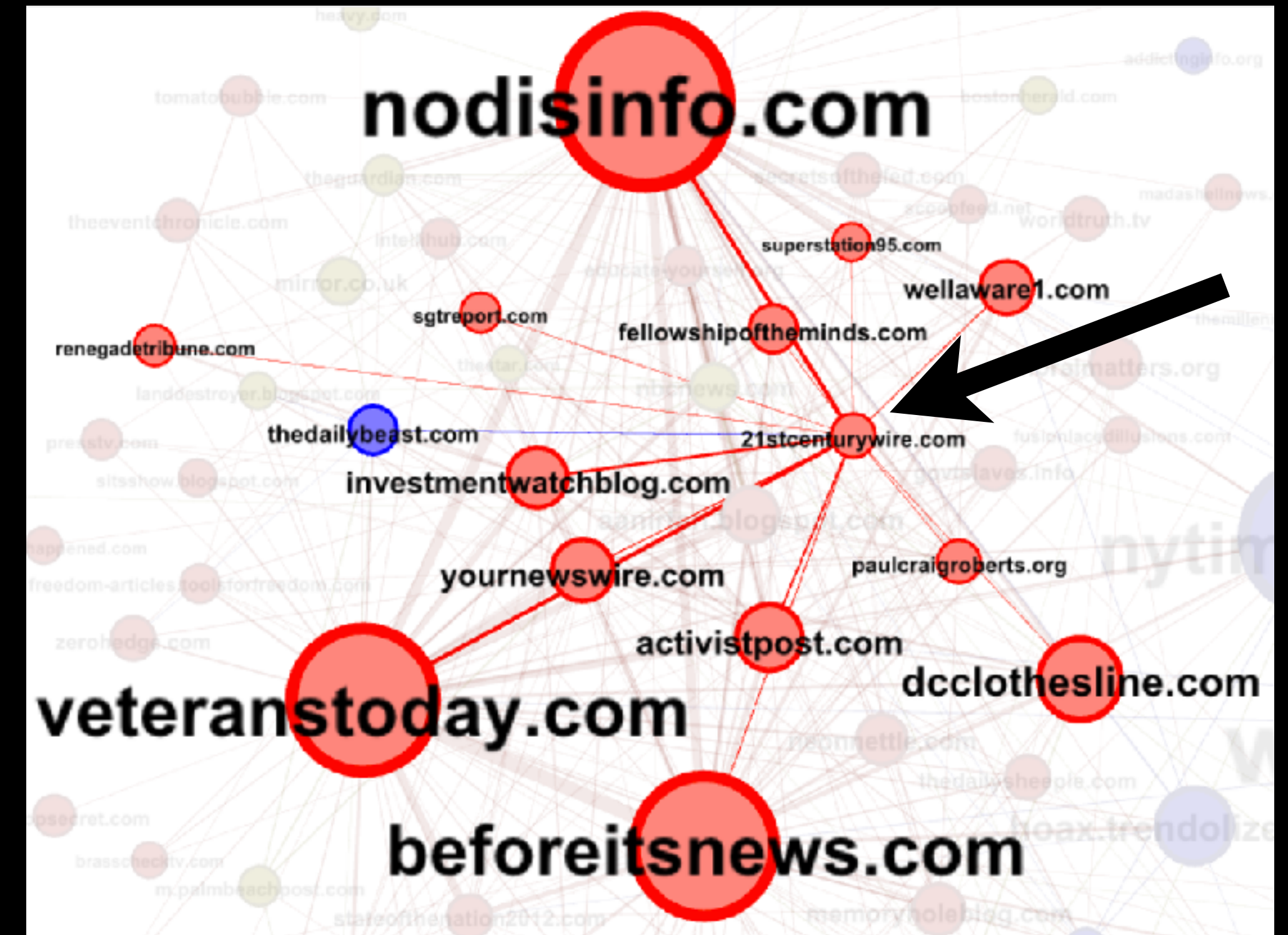


Co-Opting Critical Thinking

21stCenturyWire.com:

[About page]

The 21st Century is the beginning of a new information epoch and you, the reader, are the **freshman class of free and critical thinkers** in a new and dynamic information age. In its totality, there is an immense volume of information to be had on the Internet but we truly believe that in this new **decentralised, grassroots and egalitarian World Wide Web**, the cream will eventually rise to the top — but this can only be achieved by keeping this internet 'neutral' and free from excessive government and corporate control.



Co-Opting Critical Thinking

Stories related to all of these topics appear on
21stCenturyWire

Aliens

Anti-Big Pharma

ChemTrails

Anti-Corporate Media

Anti-Globalist

Geo-Engineering

Anti-GMO

Anti-Vaccine

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George Soros

Rothschilds

Co-Opting Critical Thinking

Presence of State-Sponsored Media

- RT, Sputnik (Russian government)
- PressTV (Iranian government)
- Katehon (Russian-Ukrainian Think Tank)

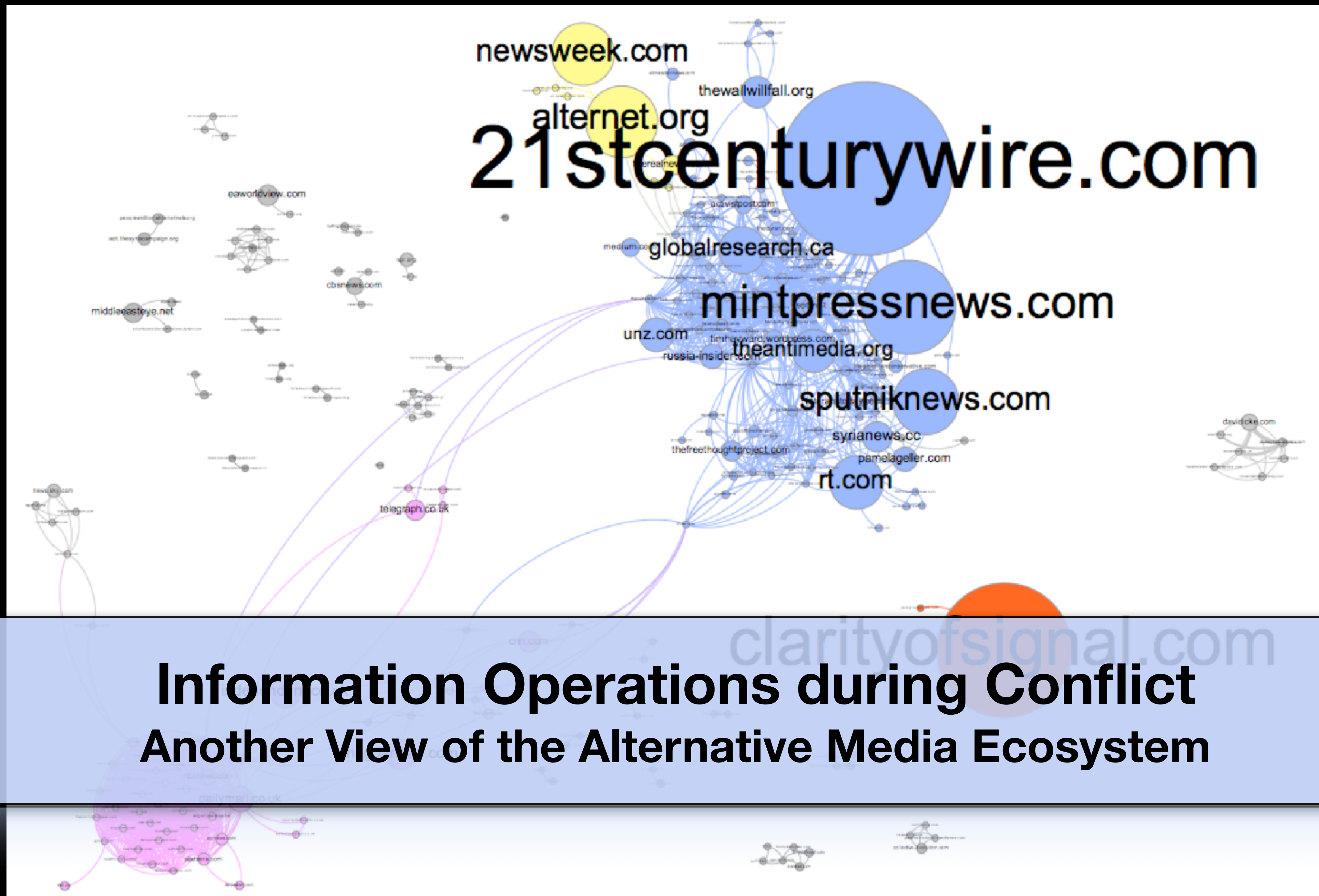
Presence of State-Sponsored Media

- RT, Sputnik (Russian government)
- PressTV (Iranian government)
- Katehon (Russian-Ukrainian Think Tank)

Presence of State-Sponsored Media

- VeteransToday (partnership with NEO)
- GlobalResearch.ca
- 21stCenturyWire, YourNewsWire, Infowars, ZeroHedge (common amplifiers)

Content-Sharing across Domains



Information Operations during Conflict

Another View of the Alternative Media Ecosystem

 **TurtleWoman**
@TurtleWoman777 [Follow](#)


.#SyriaHasHeroes: meet the #WhiteHelmets:
#Syria heroes rescue men. #7DaysInSyria

 Hope Sarout **نمياء**

**Khaled Khatib**
volunteer and
cameraman
for The White
Helmets

1,589 views 0:06 / 0:45

7:37 AM - 30 May 2017

 **Ishana Shekhawat**
@IshanaShekhawat [Follow](#)

The White Helmets are being targeted for saving lives. They've saved over 85,228 lives. Now they need you and me.

 **The People's Million**
act.thesyriacampaign.org

7:39 PM - 28 May 2017

Information Operations during Conflict

Another View of the Alternative Media Ecosystem

WhiteHelmetsExposed
@WhiteHelmetsEXP

Mintpress News/RT Interview- John Pilger: The White Helmets Are A "Complete Propaganda Construct"



John Pilger: The White Helmets Are A "Complete Propaganda Construct"
In yesterday's interview with RT's Going Underground, John Pilger outed the White Helmets as nothing more than a "complete propaganda construct in Syria.", hum...
mintpressnews.com

3:54 PM - 11 Jun 2017

MintPress News
@MintPressNews

Investigation: White Helmets Committing Acts of Terror Across Syria
[mintpressnews.com/investigation- ...](http://mintpressnews.com/investigation-...)

#Syria #WhiteHelmets #AlQaeda




We are Syria and FSA is our choice

5:55 PM - 6 Sep 2017

10 Retweets 13 Likes

vanessa beeley
@VanessaBeeley

#WHITEHELMETS STEAL & LOOT HOUSES, TERRORIST LEADERS AMONG THEM - interview in E #Aleppo youtu.be/-6bGXfM8-gs @RenieriArts @21WIRE



WHITE HELMETS STEAL & LOOT HOUSES, TERRORIST LE...
I interviewed Ahmad Aldayh in May 2017, in his shop in East Aleppo. He had been held prisoner by Jabhat al Shamiya brigade [affiliated with Nusra Front aka A...]
youtube.com

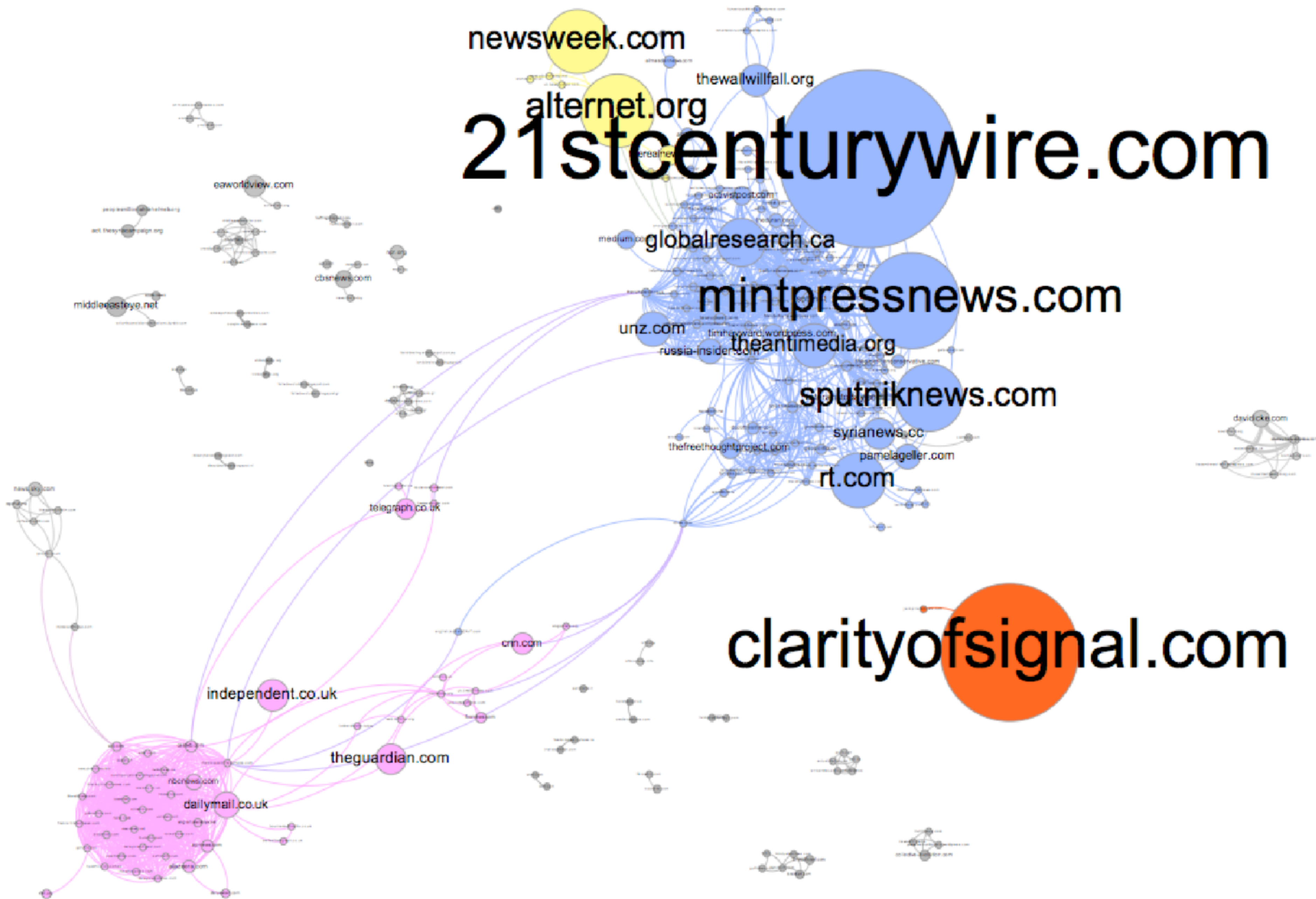
8:39 AM - 19 Aug 2017

189 Retweets 148 Likes

6 189 148

Information Operations during Conflict

Another View of the Alternative Media Ecosystem



“Independent” Media Hubs

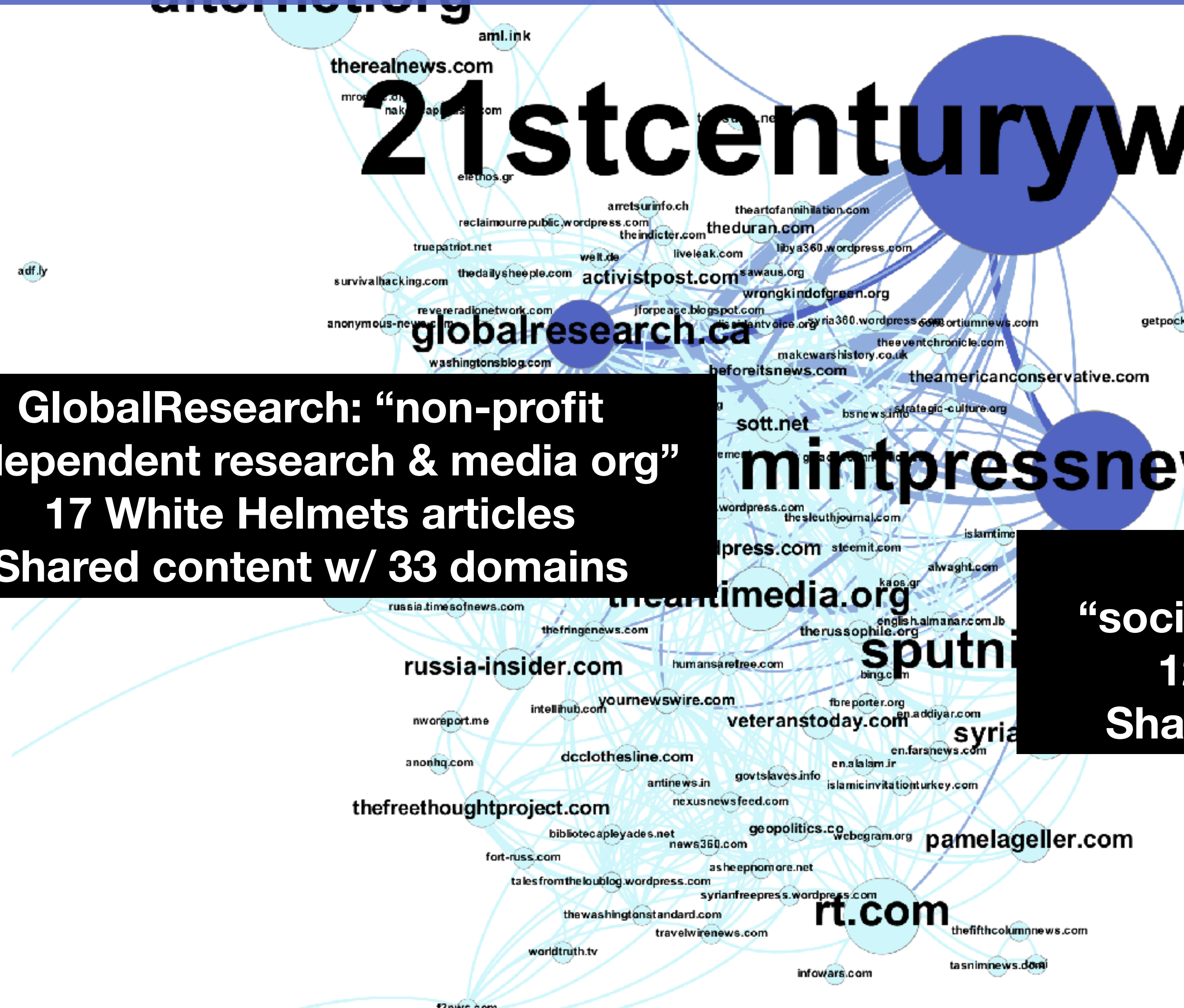
21stcenturywire.com

21stCenturyWire:
“News for the Waking Generation”
26 White Helmets articles
Shared content w/ 30 domains

GlobalResearch: “non-profit
independent research & media org”
17 White Helmets articles
Shared content w/ 33 domains

mintpressnews.com

MintPressNews:
“social justice and human rights”
12 White Helmets articles
Shared content w/ 22 domains



alter.net.org

21stcenturywire.com

mintpressnews.com

sputniknews.com

syrianews.cc

pamelageller.com

rt.com

thefreethoughtproject.com

russia-insider.com

theantimedia.org

unz.com

globalresearch.ca

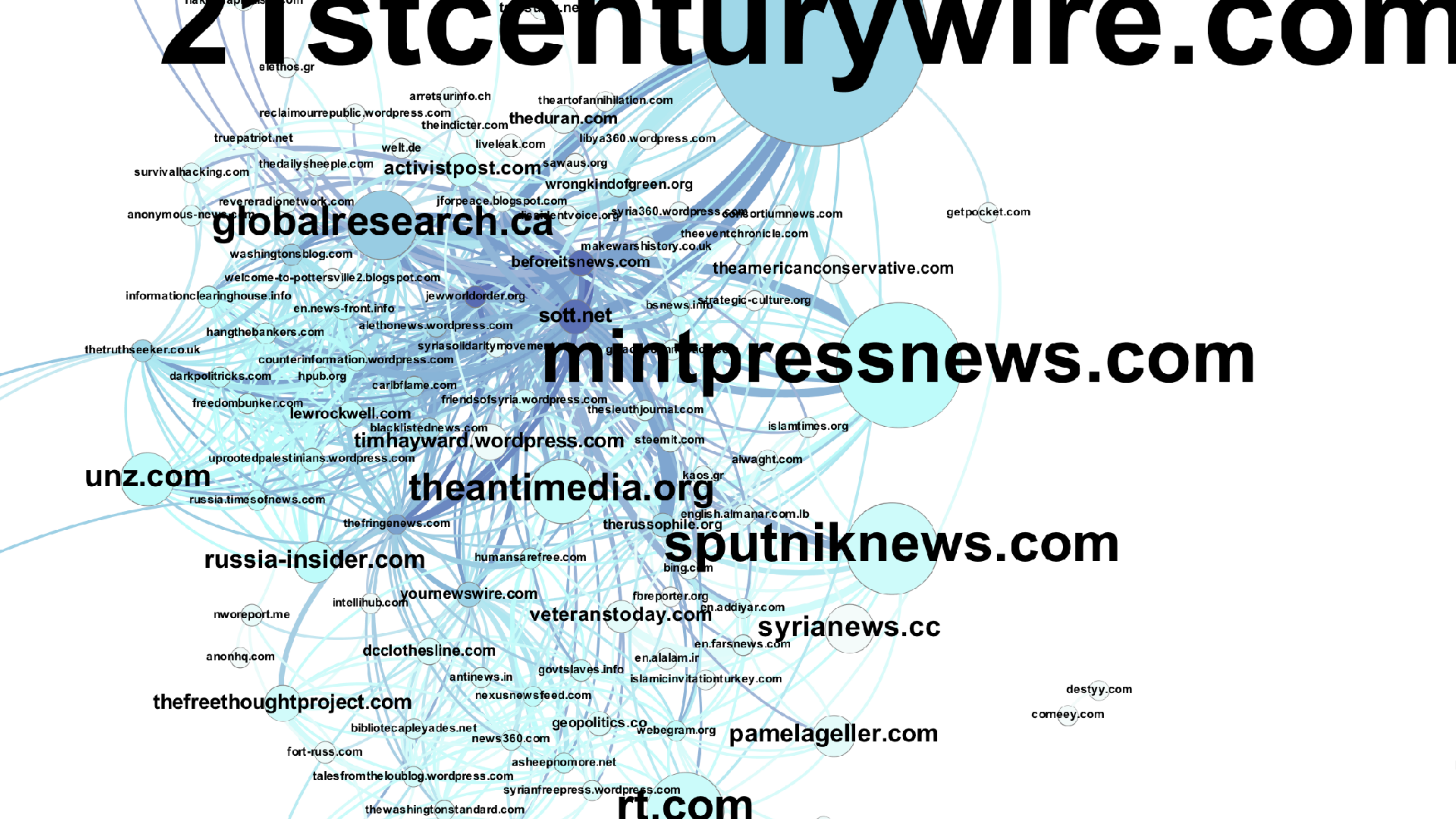
activistpost.com

eduran.com

therealnews.com

21stcenturywire.com

21stcenturywire.com



**Russian Government Media are Integrated into the
Alternative Media Ecosystem/Echo-System**

Disinformation

Disinformation

The purpose of disinformation is not to convince.

Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014

Disinformation

The purpose of disinformation is not to convince.
The purpose of disinformation is to confuse...

Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014

Disinformation

The purpose of disinformation is not to convince.
The purpose of disinformation is to confuse...
to create “muddled thinking” across society.

Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014

“As for who to believe, who you can’t believe,
can you believe at all — you can’t believe anyone.”

Vladimir Putin, July 16, 2018

Disinformation

The purpose of disinformation is not to convince.
The purpose of disinformation is to confuse...
to create “muddled thinking” across society.

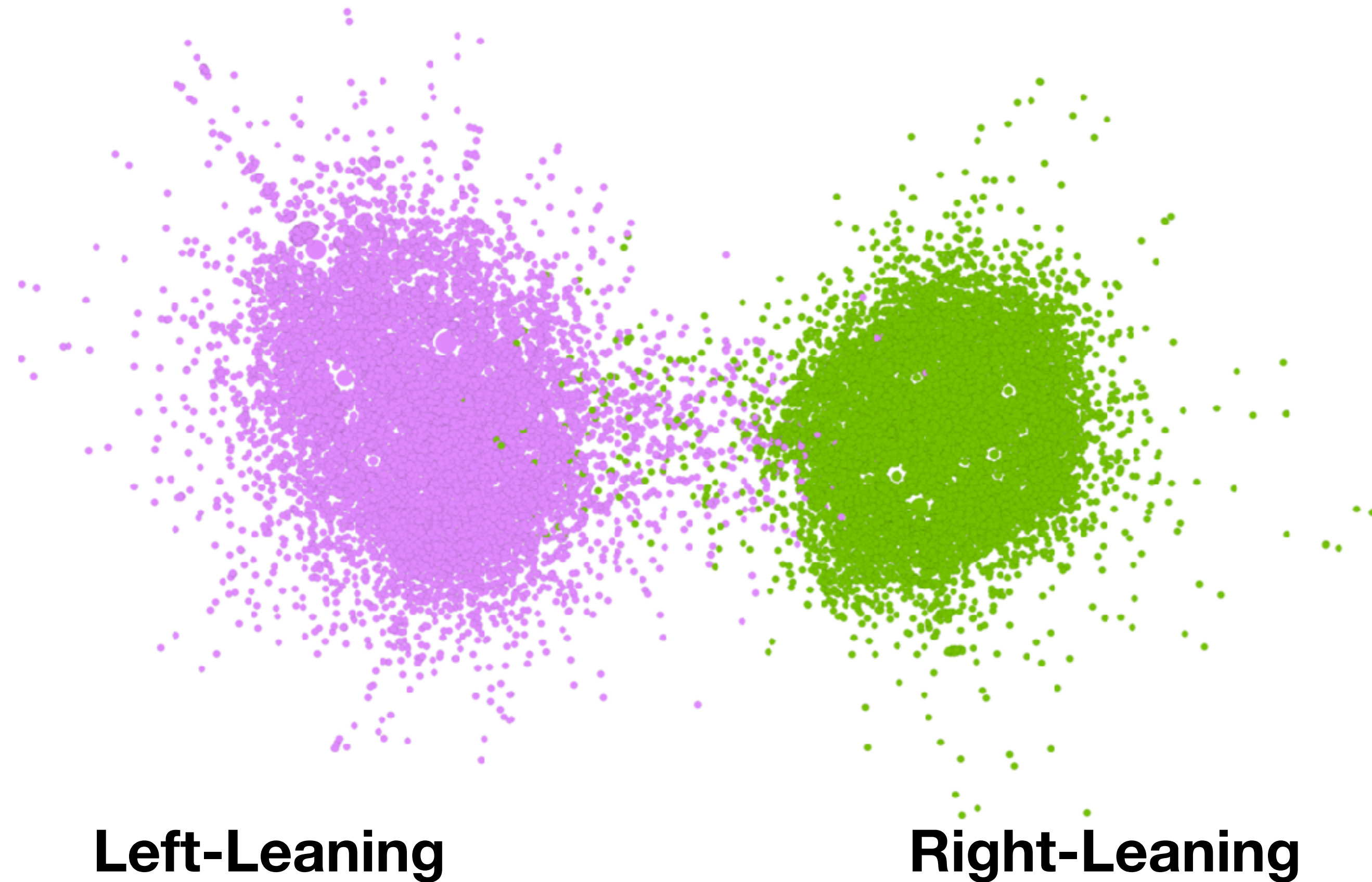
Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014

Information Operations

Disinformation as Sowing Division: The Trolls Among Us

Retweet Network Graph

2016 Shooting + #BlackLivesMatter/#BlueLivesMatter tweets

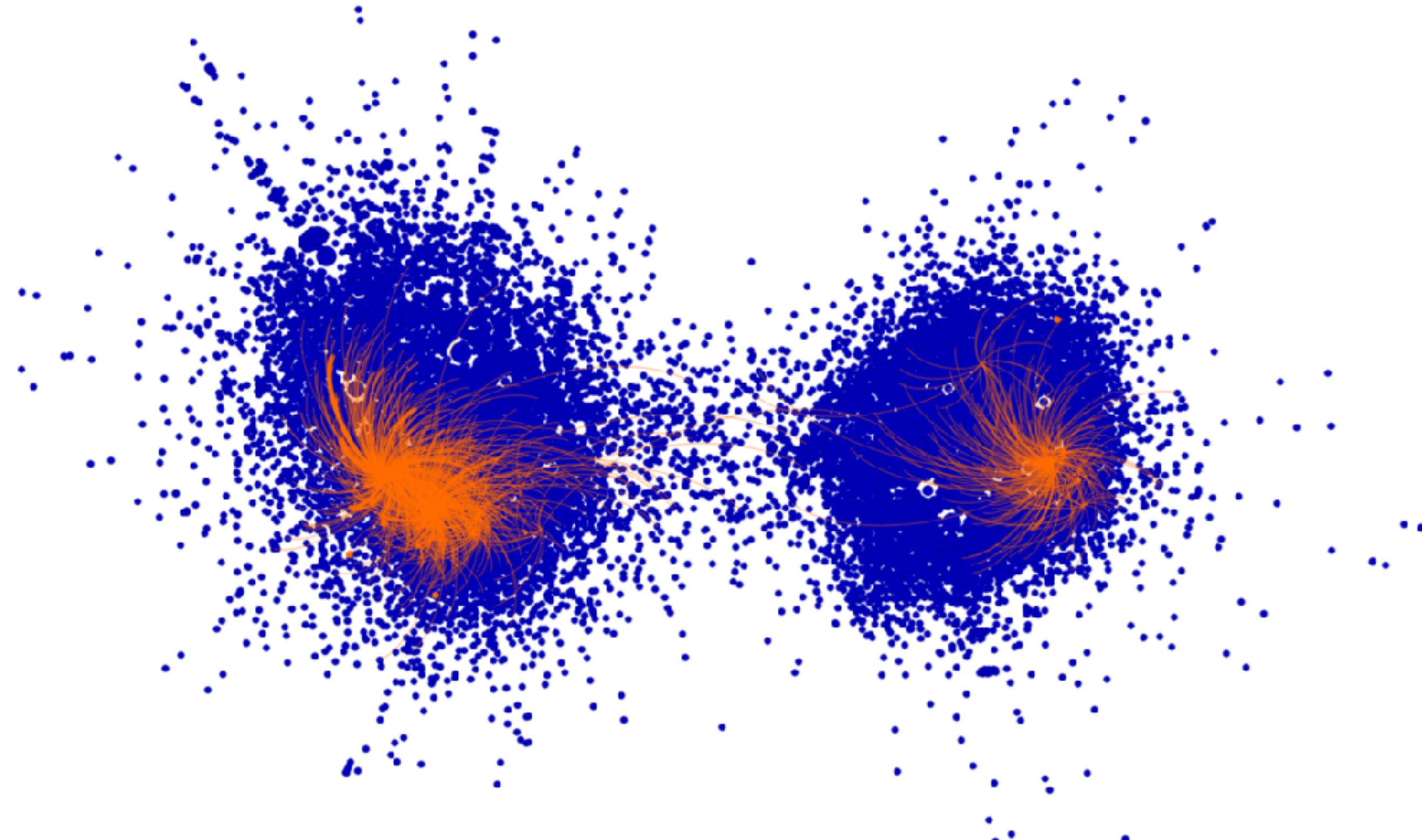


Leo G. Stewart, Ahmer Arif, A. Conrad Nied, Emma S. Spiro, and Kate Starbird. 2017. Drawing the Lines of Contention: Networked Frame Contests Within #BlackLivesMatter Discourse. *CSCW 2017*.

Retweet Network Graph

2016 Shooting + #BlackLivesMatter/#BlueLivesMatter tweets

RU-affiliated accounts in orange (w/ retweets)



Left-Leaning

Right-Leaning

Implications for Researchers

Thank you!

Students

Ahmer Arif, Tom Wilson, Leo Stewart,
Kaitlyn Zhou, Katya Yefimova, A. Conrad Nied, Katherine Von Koevering,
Jim Maddock, Isabelle Edwards, Stephanie Stanek
Many more students from HCDE and the iSchool who participated through
Directed Research Groups during 2013-2018

Collaborators

Emma Spiro and Robert Mason
SOME Lab - University of Washington

Kate Starbird

kstarbi@uw.edu

@katestarbird

emCOMP Lab

US National Science Foundation

IIS 1342252, IIS 1420255, IIS 1541688

Office of Naval Research

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Centered
Design &
Engineering

dubW

Note on Conducting Research on Disinformation

“Information Operations” as Online Activism