

# The role of charismatic influencers in online political polarisation

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# My journey



UNIVERSITATEA  
„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA“  
din IAȘI



© Raul Trifan - 2008

# Australia – from 2000 to 2019



# Scotland since 2019



Sunniest place in Scotland!



University  
of Dundee

# My research

- Social identity & political participation
- Collective action & social change
- Radical group behaviour – the far-right movement
- The role of technology – online communities
- Online polarisation

Discovery Dundee: <https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/en/persons/ana-maria-bliuc>

Google Scholar Profile:

<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=ESsb1HgAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>

# Open Research Practices in my previous research

- Measures made available: e.g., <https://www.nature.com/articles/nclimate2507#Sec3>

LETTERS

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 2 FEBRUARY 2015 | DOI: 10.1038/NCLIMATE2507

nature  
climate change

## Public division about climate change rooted in conflicting socio-political identities

Ana-Maria Bliuc<sup>1\*</sup>, Craig McGarty<sup>2</sup>, Emma F. Thomas<sup>3</sup>, Girish Lala<sup>3</sup>, Mariette Berndsen<sup>4</sup>  
and RoseAnne Misajon<sup>1</sup>

# Open Research Practices in my previous research

- Code made available:

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0230302#sec017>

**PLOS ONE**

 OPEN ACCESS  PEER-REVIEWED

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The effects of local socio-political events on group cohesion in online far-right communities

Ana-Maria Bliuc  , John M. Betts , Nicholas Faulkner, Matteo Vergani, Rui Jie Chow, Muhammad Iqbal, David Best 

Published: March 30, 2020 • <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230302>

# Open Research Practices in my previous research

- Pre-registered research: e.g., <https://osf.io/fkp4t>

The screenshot shows the OSF preregistration page for the study 'A latent profile analysis of motivations to engage in collective action'. The page is titled 'Preregistration Template from AsPredicted.org' and is in 'Public registration' mode. The left sidebar contains navigation options: Overview (selected), Metadata, Files, Resources, Wiki, Components (0), Links (0), Analytics, and Comments (0). The main content area is divided into sections: 'Data collection' (with a note that 'Yes' is discouraged), 'Hypothesis' (discussing motivations for collective action), and 'Contributors' (listing Lisette Yip, Emma F Thomas, Ana-Maria Bliuc, Anna Kende, Morgana Lizzio-Wilson, Gerhard Reese, and Laura G. E. Smith). The 'Description' section states the study examines how autonomous and controlled forms of motivation predict pro-refugee social identification and collective action, and how emotions predict profile membership. The 'Registration type' is 'Preregistration Template from AsPredicted.org' and the 'Date registered' is not yet specified.

## A latent profile analysis of motivations to engage in collective action

Public registration ▾ Updates ▾ 🔗 📖 🔄

- 🏠 Overview
- 📄 Metadata
- 📁 Files
- 📁 Resources
- 📄 Wiki
- 🔗 Components 0
- 🔗 Links 0
- 📊 Analytics
- 💬 Comments 0

### Preregistration Template from AsPredicted.org

#### Data collection

Have any data been collected for this study already? Note: 'Yes' is a discouraged answer for this preregistration form.

It's complicated. We have already collected some data but explain in Question 8 why readers may consider this a valid pre-registration nevertheless.

#### Hypothesis

There are likely to be a range of motivations for engaging in collective action. People may participate because they care about the cause and want to achieve social change to express their core values (see also Hornsey et al., 2006). It is also possible that some people participate for more self-serving reasons – for example, to look good to others, mitigate feelings of guilt, or to feel good about themselves. The insights of self-determination theory may help us to understand these motives and how they predict collective action.

#### Contributors

Lisette Yip, Emma F Thomas, Ana-Maria Bliuc, Anna Kende, Morgana Lizzio-Wilson, Gerhard Reese, and Laura G. E. Smith

#### Description

A latent profile analysis examining how autonomous and controlled forms of motivation predict pro-refugee social identification and collective action, and how emotions predict profile membership.

#### Registration type

Preregistration Template from AsPredicted.org

#### Date registered

# My current project: online political polarisation



Dr John Betts  
Faculty of Information  
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Department of Psychology  
University of Dundee, UK



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Research Council**

# A polarised world



Photograph: Torsten Blackwood/AFP/Getty Images



Getty Images

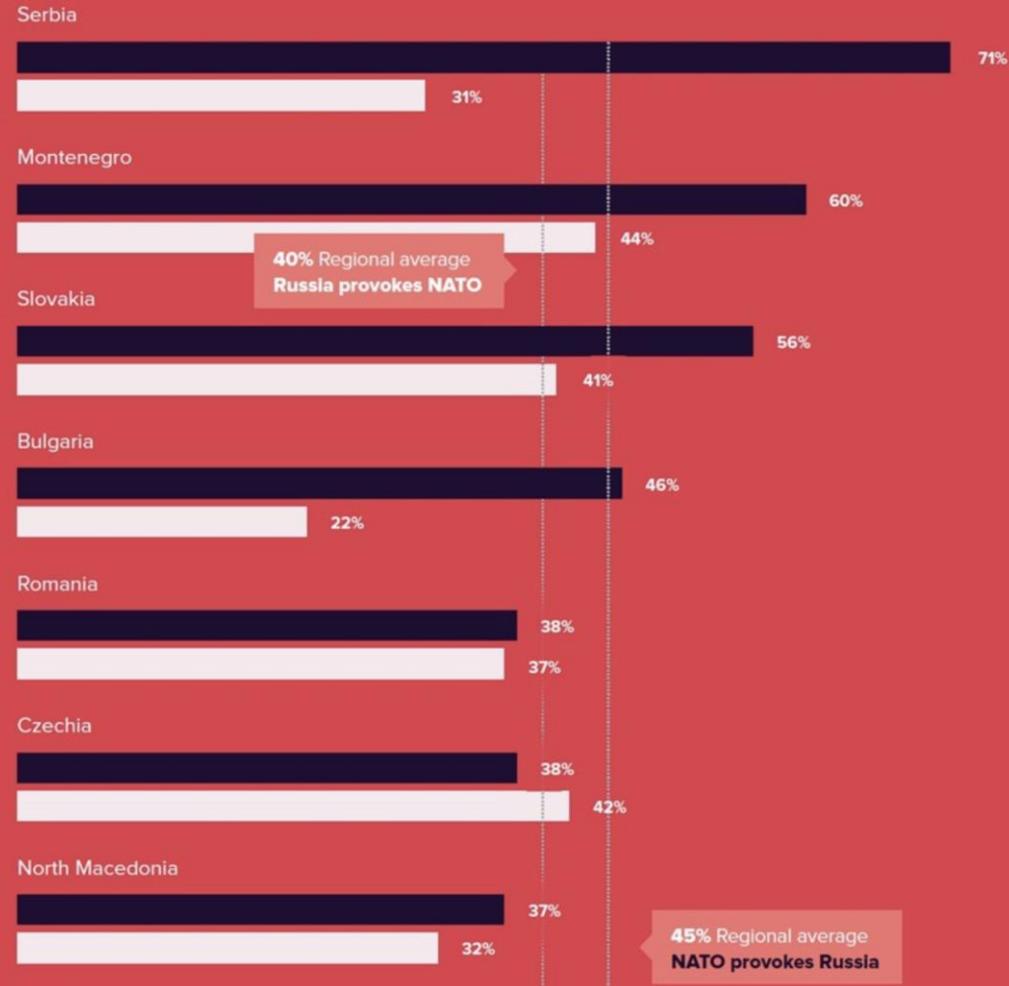
# A polarised Romania





## Russia vs. NATO

- NATO deliberately provokes Russia by encircling it with military bases.
- Russia deliberately provokes NATO by initiating conflicts in Eastern Europe.



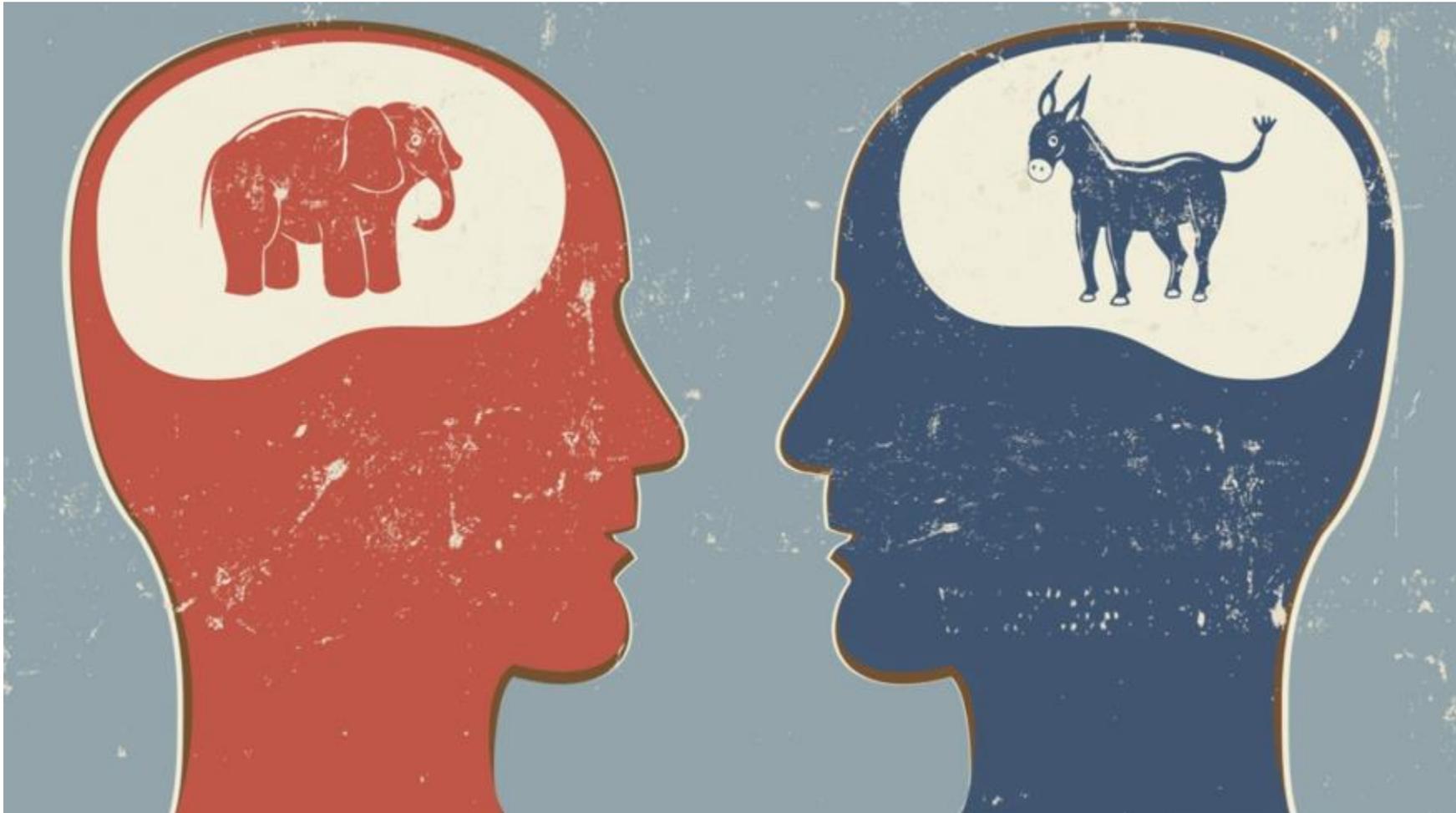
Broadly, polarisation = increasing distancing  
between opposing groups

Two ways to understand polarisation

# Affective polarisation - driven by “outgroup hate rather than ingroup love”

- Conceptually, it is based on the distinction between ingroup-outgroup (“**us versus them**”).
- Applied to US partisan politics, it refers to distancing because of the tendency of Democrats and Republicans to **dislike and distrust** each other (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019).

# Affective polarisation between opposing political parties and their political party supporters



**‘principled dislike toward the outgroup’** (Iyengar, 2012)

# Issue-based polarisation

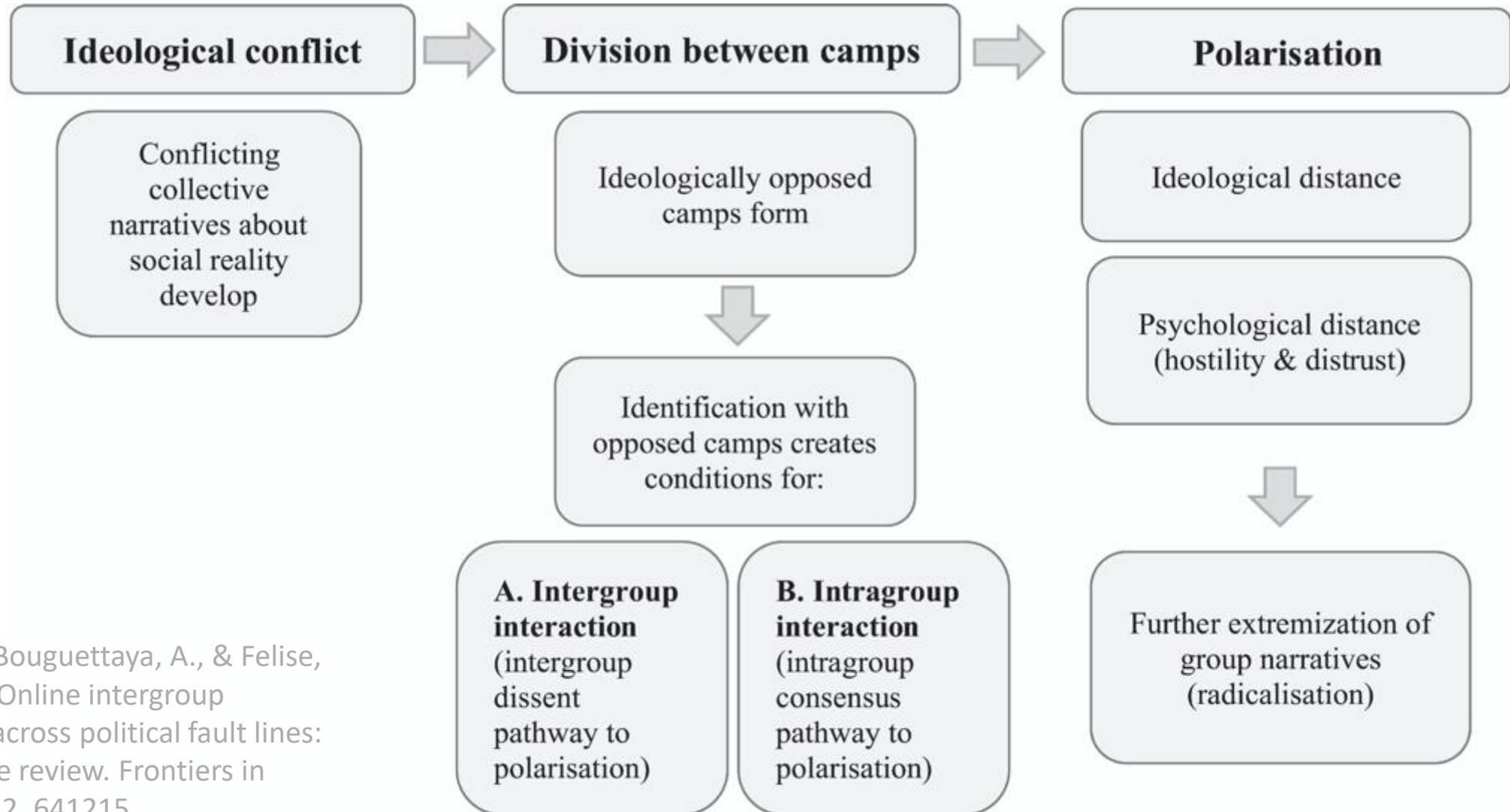
- It refers to the bi-modal clustering of positions on important policy or social issues (Duffy et al., 2019).
- *Also known as ideological polarisation* - when distancing between groups is driven by disagreement on policy issues which can go across party lines, e.g., Brexit.





Polarisation can be understood as both affective and issue-based.

# Polarisation between ideologically opposed camps

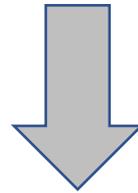


Bliuc, A. M., Bouguettaya, A., & Felise, K. D. (2021). Online intergroup polarization across political fault lines: An integrative review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 641215.

How can this dual conceptualisation of polarisation help us?

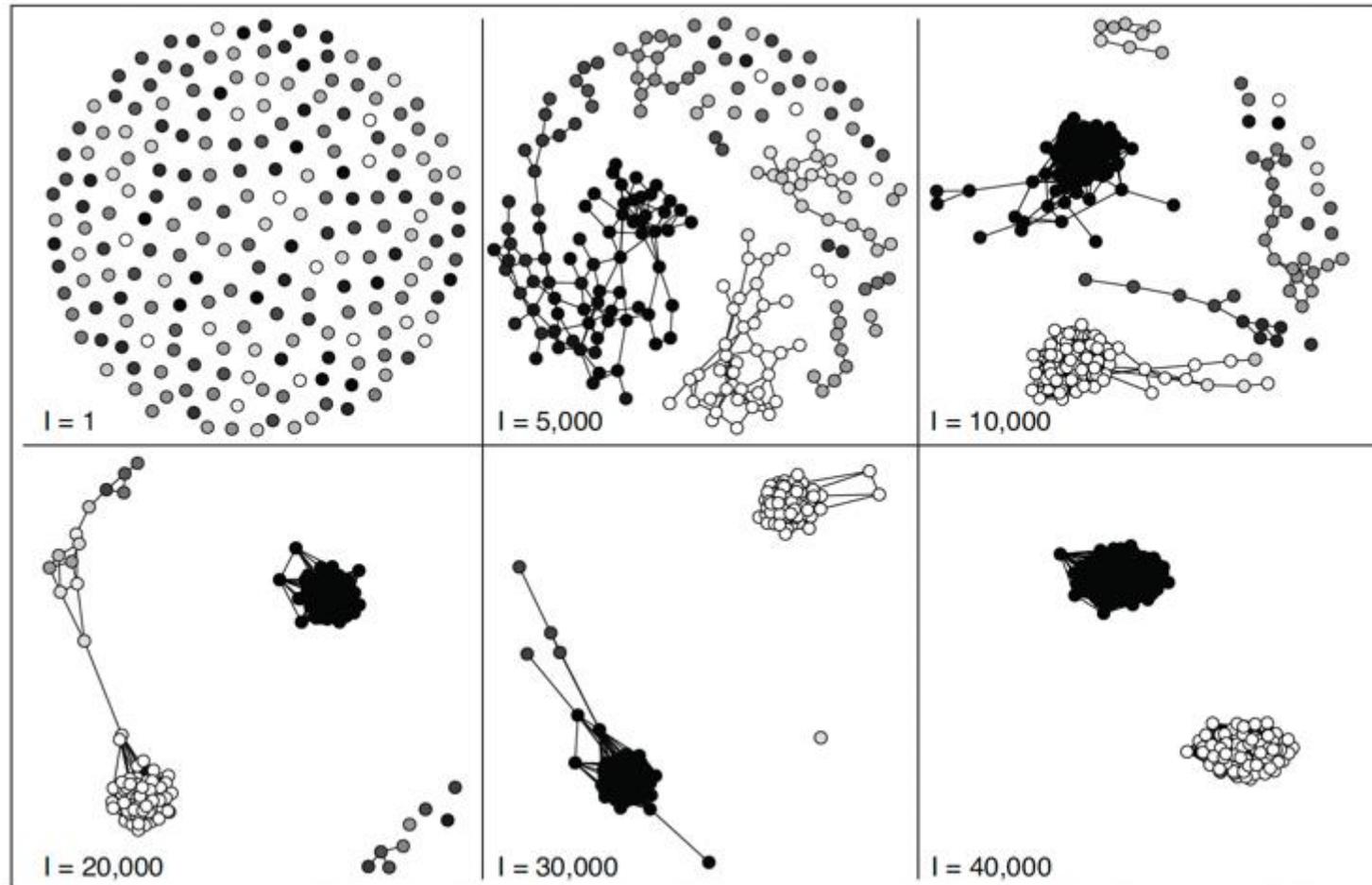
# One way to study polarisation – modelling/computer simulations

- Agent based modelling (ABM) is particularly good to study group dynamics because we can set up:
  - the properties of agents
  - how they interact (the rules of interaction)



**To observe societal outcomes  
(such as polarisation)**

# Modeling polarisation in an artificial society

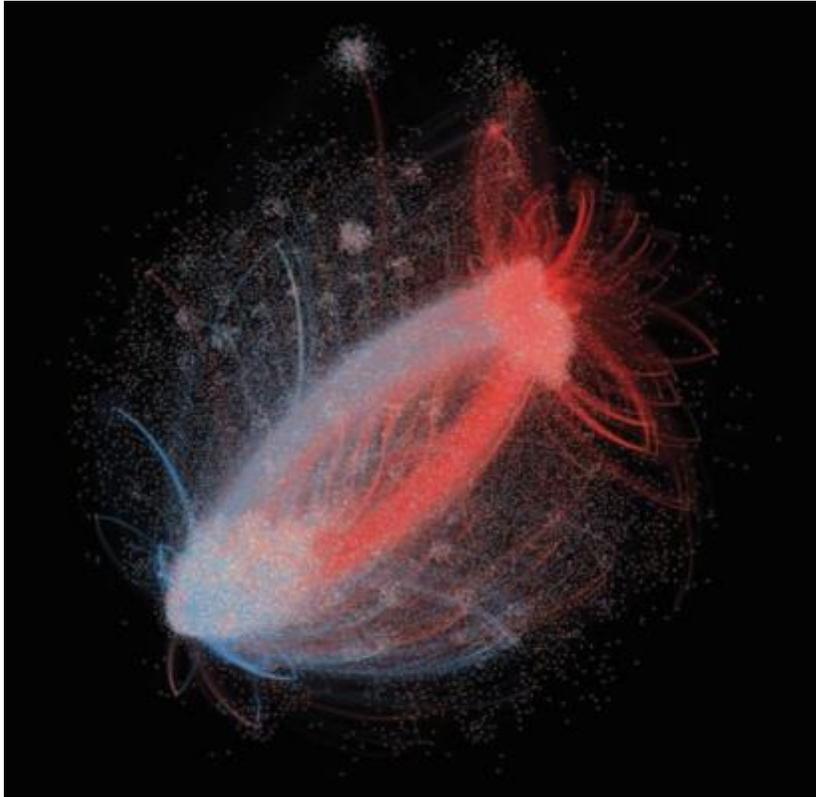


Betts & Bliuc, 2022

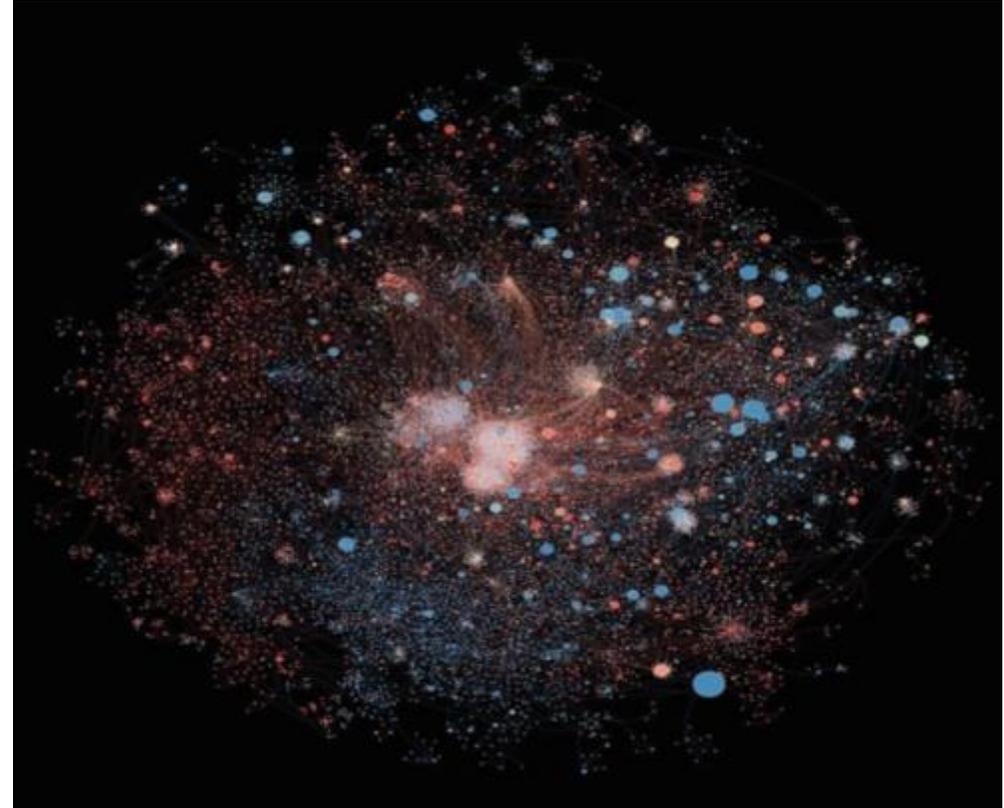
Evolution of the social network from initialization and then at selected intervals, showing the formation of increasingly polarised clusters, and complete polarisation at  $I = 40,000$  iterations.

# What does it mean?

- Without intervening in societies divided across ideological fault-lines polarisation seems inevitable.
- Also, social media can further boost polarisation – especially on issues which are important in the society.



**Retweet networks for the 2012  
US election**



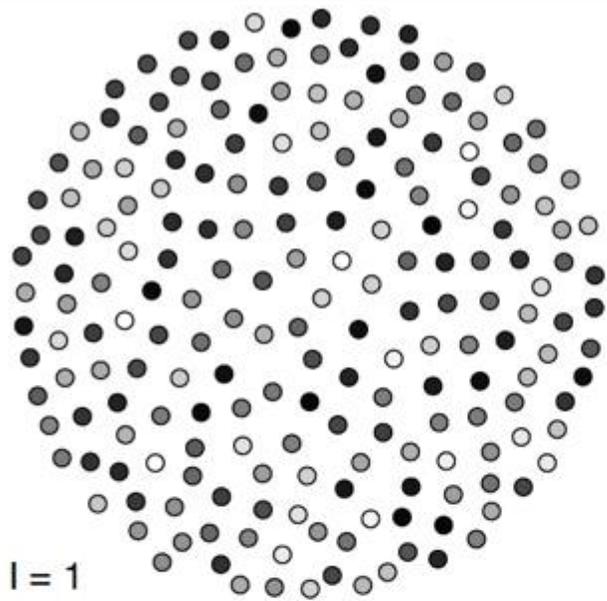
**Retweet networks for the 2014  
Super Bowl**

Barberá, P., Jost, J. T., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. A., & Bonneau, R. (2015). Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber?. *Psychological Science*, 26(10), 1531-1542.

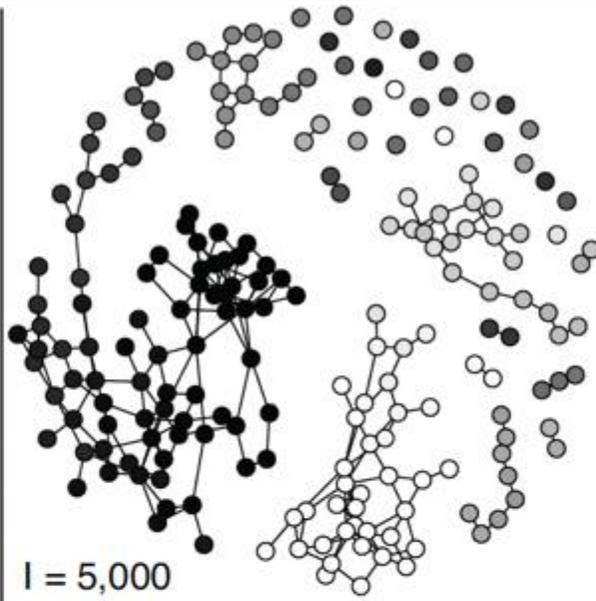
Echo-chambers seem only to form when the content of communication is aligned with a salient political identity.

**Echo-chambers** - people are only exposed to information from the ingroup

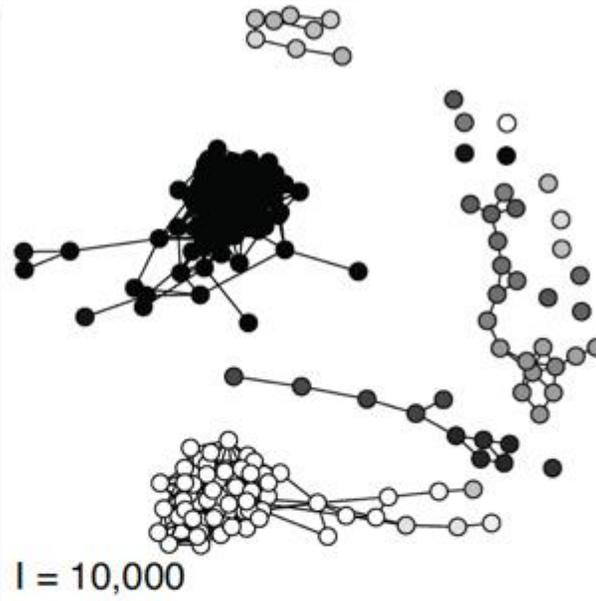
However, there are some promising potential solutions/ways to slow down polarisation.



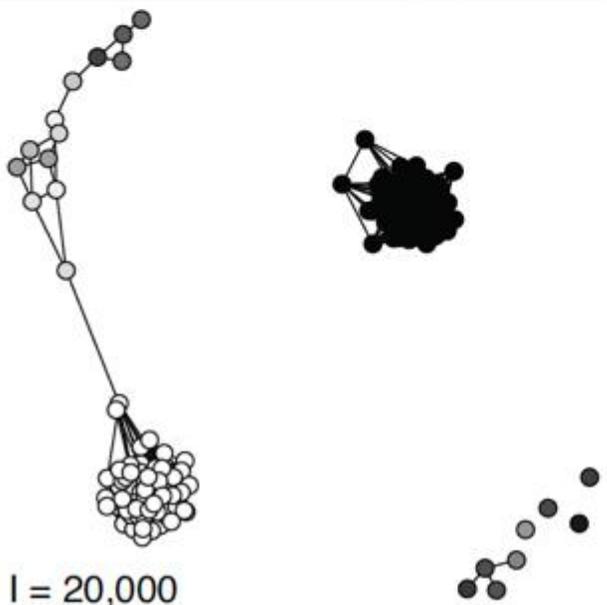
$l = 1$



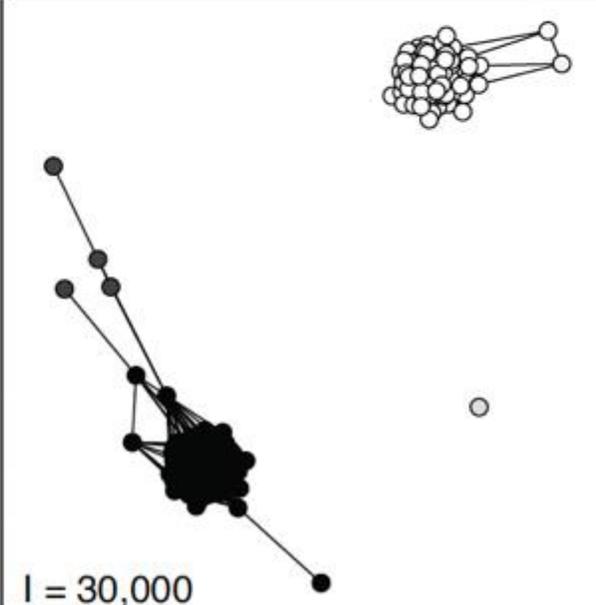
$l = 5,000$



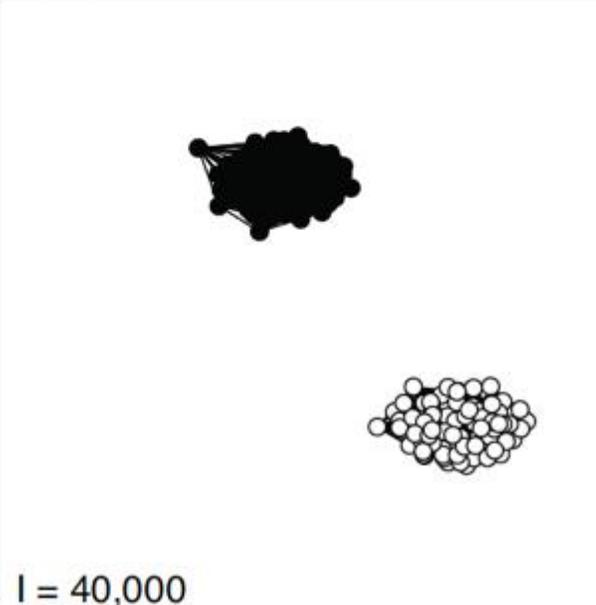
$l = 10,000$



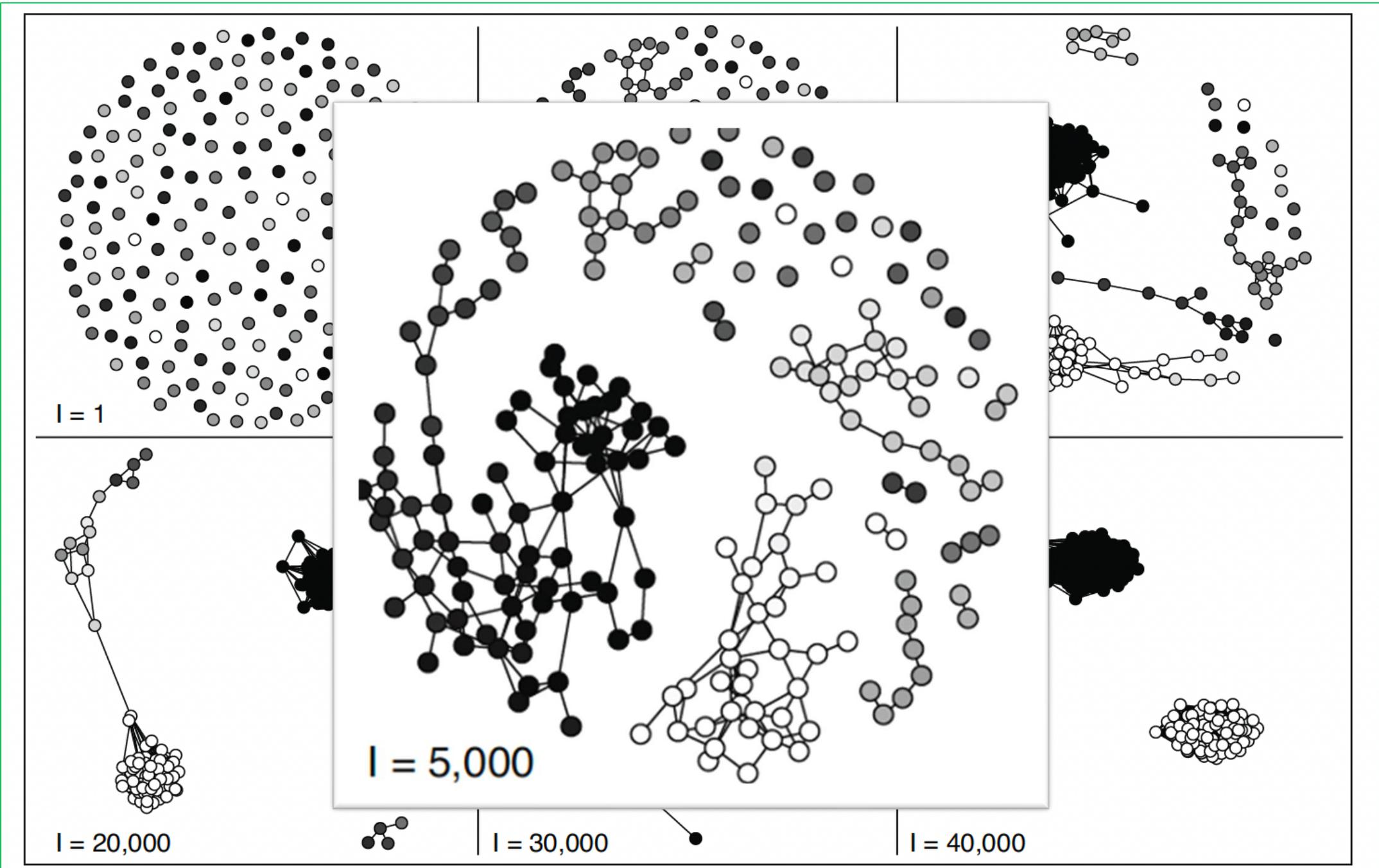
$l = 20,000$



$l = 30,000$



$l = 40,000$



# How can we preserve and support civil disagreement to slow down polarisation?

- Create platforms that facilitate the expression of ideological dissent but avoid or minimize affective polarization – *how?*
  - One possible answer: by harnessing the **power of influencers** on social media platforms that support/facilitate inter-group communication.

# Influencers on social media

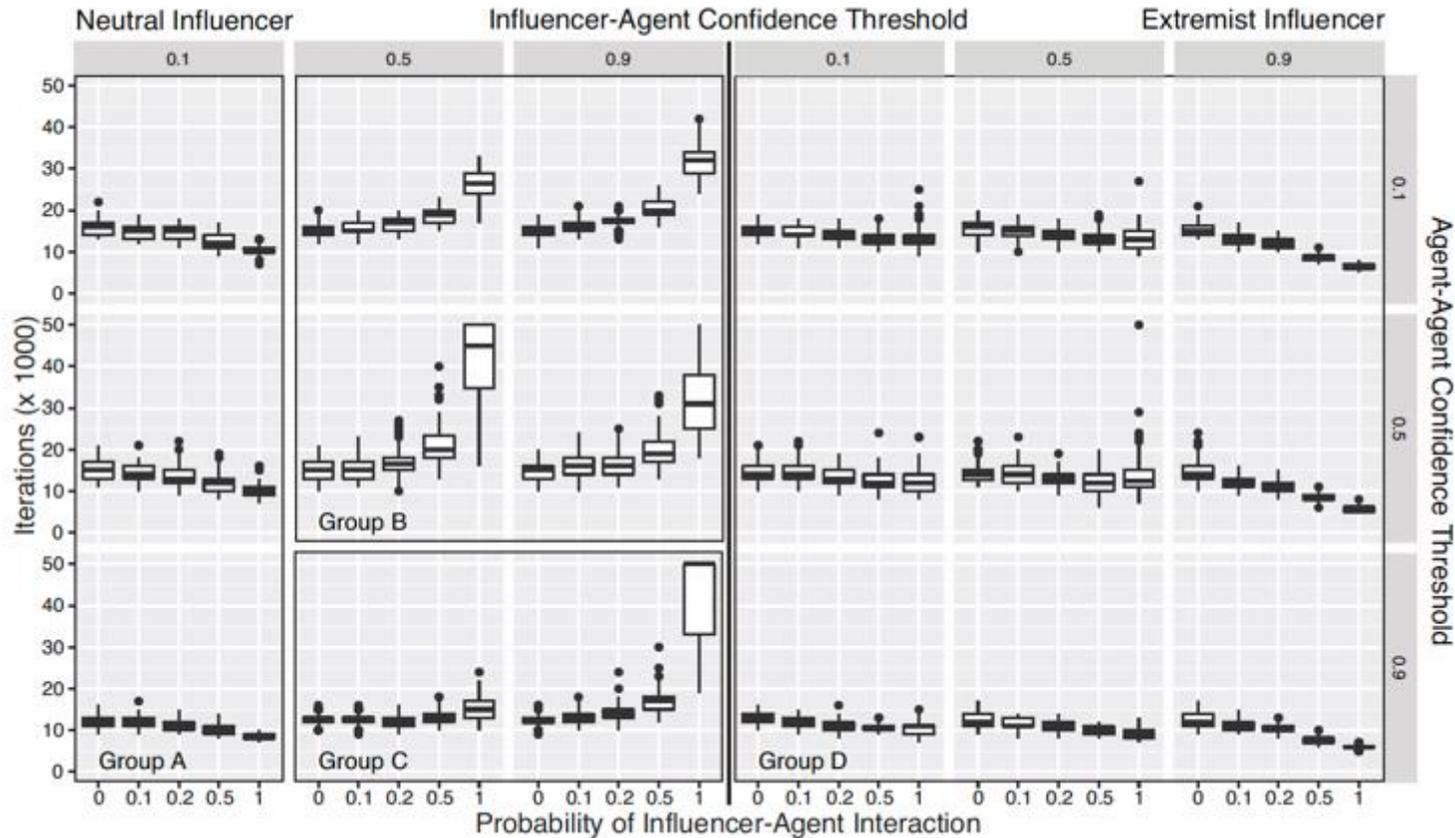


Andrew Tate in house arrest: Manosphere explained

# Modelling the influence of influencers in a society

- What we considered in the model:
  - Type of message: neutral (moderate) or extreme
  - Level of influencer's charisma (i.e., influencer-agent confidence threshold)
  - Type of society: degree of openness/tolerance to different views (i.e., agent-agent confidence threshold)

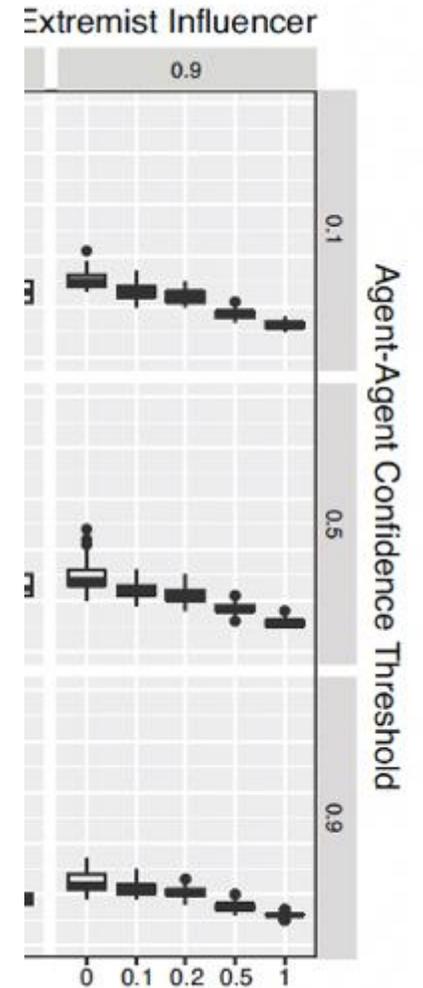
# Findings



The number of iterations by which agent belief has polarised, for approximately 80% of agents, by agent-agent confidence threshold, influencer-agent confidence threshold, probability of influencer-agent interaction and whether the influencer's message is neutral (LHS) or extremist (RHS)

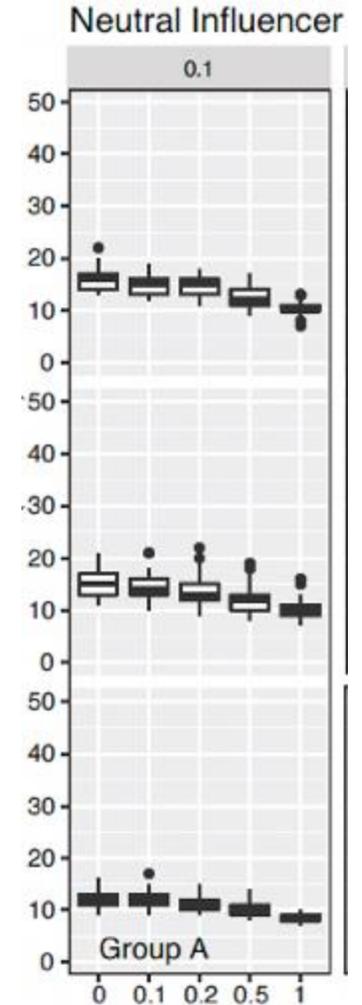
# Findings(1)

- Extremist influencers always increases the rate of polarisation regardless of their levels of charisma.
- This confirms the commonly held concern that messaging by extremists of any political persuasion or ideology will increase the likelihood of polarisation within communities.



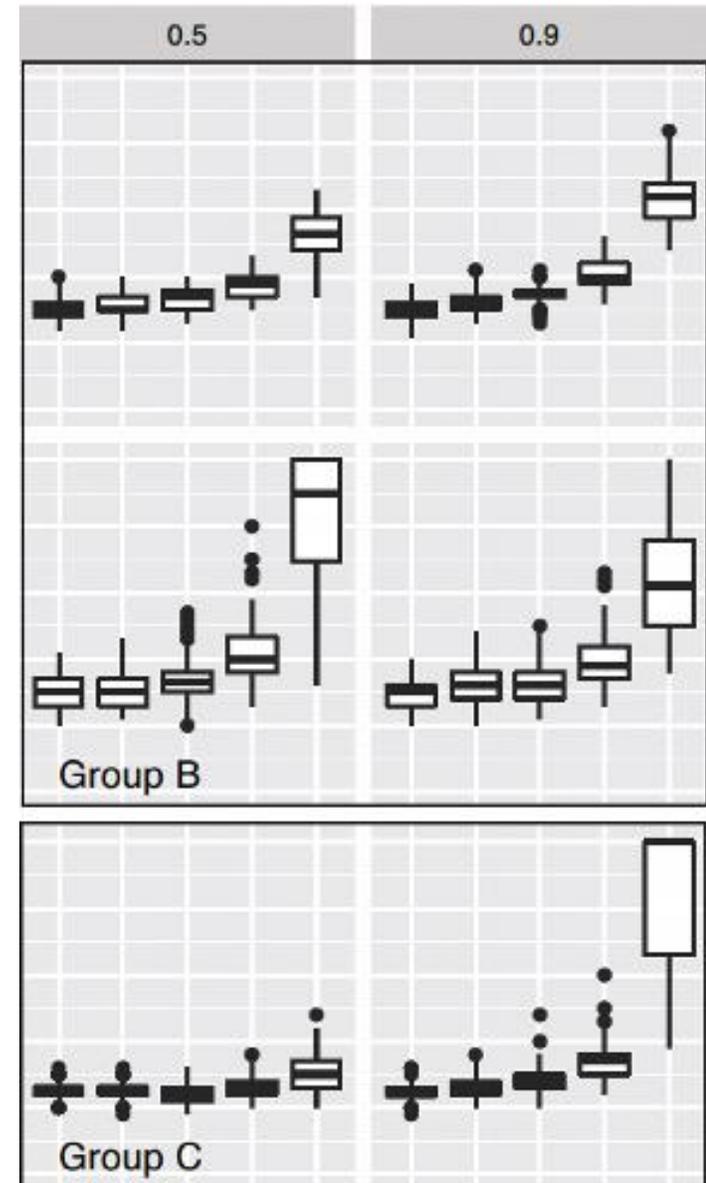
# Findings(2)

- A moderate influencer who is not charismatic will increase the rate of polarisation, due to the largely repulsive influence of the interaction.
  - An unpopular (unconvincing) communicator is likely to be seen as an outsider, and hence unreliable, by both camps leading to increased polarization in both.



# Findings(3)

- Finally, increased activity by a moderate and charismatic influencer will always reduce the rate of polarisation.
- In this case cluster formation (polarisation) is slowed.



These findings show that not only the message of the influencer is important (moderate message better than extreme), but also how charismatic the influencer is.

- Charisma will affect how wide the message of the influencer can reach.

# Open science approach for this project

- The design of the simulation is described in detail in the article
- Similarly, the the simulation algorithm is available in the article – so that the agent-based modelling can be easily replicated based on that information (see: <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/10015491> )

## 3.3 The Simulation Algorithm

### Algorithm 1 Agent-Based Model with Influencer

```
 $B(X_i) \sim U(-1, 1)$  for all  $i \in \{1, 2, 3, \dots, n\}$   
 $N(X_i, X_j) = 0$  for all  $i, j$   
set  $CT_X, CT_Y, B(Y), p_Y$ , randomize  
for  $I = 1$  to total iterations do  
  # agent-agent interaction  
  randomly choose  $X_i$  and  $X_j$  where  $i \neq j$  and  $B(X_i) \geq B(X_j)$   
   $\delta_a = B(X_i) - B(X_j)$   
  if  $\delta_a \leq CT_X$  then  
     $B(X_i) \leftarrow \max(B(X_i) - r\delta_a, -1)$ ;  $B(X_j) \leftarrow \min(B(X_j) + r\delta_a, +1)$   
     $N(X_i, X_j) \leftarrow N(X_i, X_j) + 1$   
  else  
     $B(X_i) \leftarrow \min(B(X_i) + r\delta_a, +1)$ ;  $B(X_j) \leftarrow \max(B(X_j) - r\delta_a, -1)$   
     $N(X_i, X_j) \leftarrow \max(N(X_i, X_j) - 1, 0)$   
  end if  
  # influencer-agent interaction  
  if  $x \sim U(0, 1) < p_Y$  then  
    randomly choose  $X_i$   
     $\delta_i = B(X_i) - B(Y)$   
    if  $|\delta_i| \leq CT_Y$  then  
       $B(X_i) \leftarrow B(X_i) - r\delta_i$   
    else  
      if  $\delta_i \geq 0$  then  $B(X_i) \leftarrow \min(B(X_i) + r\delta_i, +1)$   
      if  $\delta_i < 0$  then  $B(X_i) \leftarrow \max(B(X_i) + r\delta_i, -1)$   
    end if  
  end if  
  # periodic reporting  
  if  $I \bmod \text{reporting interval} = 0$  then calculate and report statistics  
end for
```

# Future directions: how influencers communicate – white supremacist forums

- Research on the most enduring threads on Stormfront.org and their authors

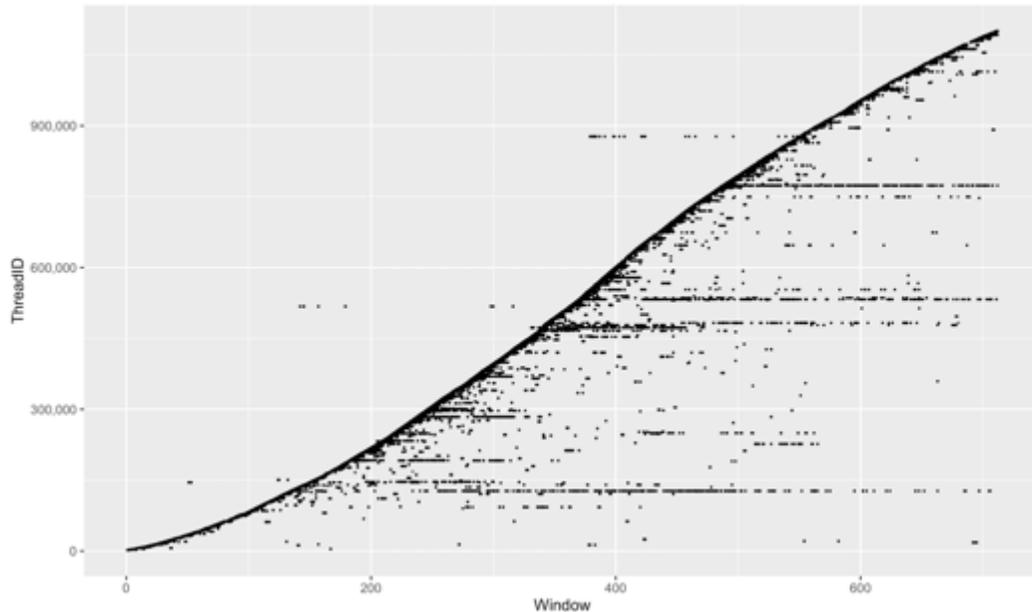


Fig1: Stormfront Downunder, all posts over time (by ThreadID and Time Window - most threads aren't active beyond the first few period after initiation, but there are a few that have longevity.

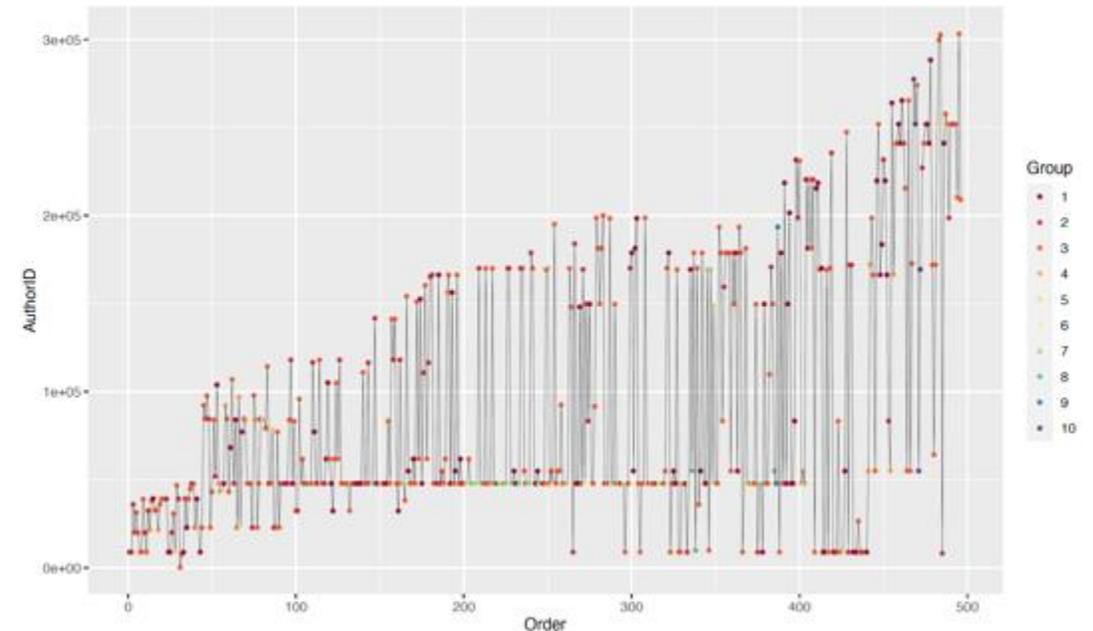


Fig 2: Patterns of communication in the most enduring of the four threads identified.

# Conclusions

- Social media platforms can enhance and speed-up polarisation unless we find ways to use them in ways which promote **civil disagreement** – they must encourage communication from across political spectrum (express ideological dissent/issue-based dissent) but avoid affective polarisation.
- Influencers who are widely liked and promote moderate messages can help achieve that.
- A better understanding of the language use of influencers can help in crafting effective messages communicated by institutions.



**Thank you!**

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