

The leaders' mention network uncovered by the researchers. Credit: Iakhnis & Badawy.

Researchers at the University of Southern California (USC) have recently carried out a study investigating the interactions among different world leaders and influential political figures on social media. Their findings, pre-published on arXiv, provide interesting new insight about how government actors use social media, which could help to better understand the role of new technologies in diplomatic exchanges.

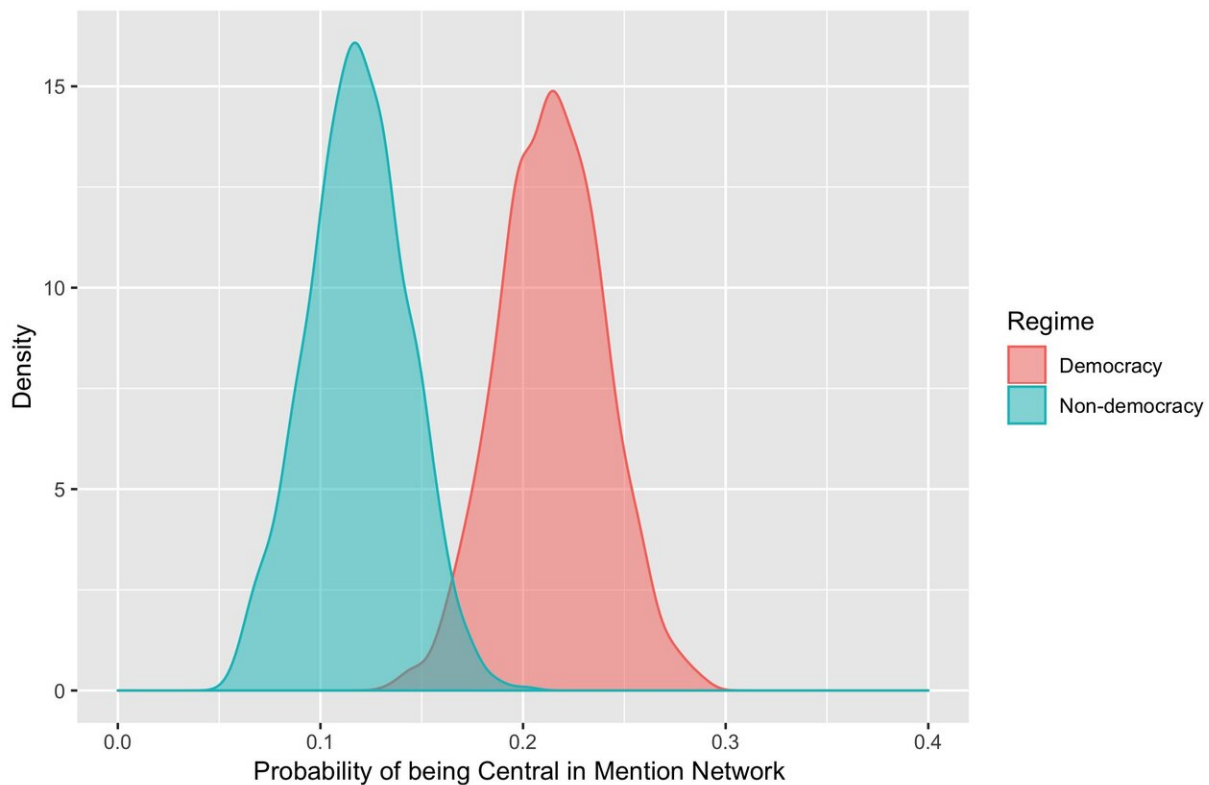
Many political leaders worldwide are now using social media platforms as tools for communication or propaganda. Although researchers have carried out many studies aimed at better understanding what [world leaders](#) post online, very few (if not none) of these studies have focused on the interactions among these leaders on social media. In other words, most literature has explored how political leaders communicate with the public, without taking into consideration how they interact with one another.

"Until now, there has been no systematic research exploring interactions between leaders on [social media platforms](#)," Adam Badawy, one of the researchers who carried out the study, told TechXplore. "Therefore, the primary goal of this paper was to provide a first look into the world leaders' interactions on social media. How and how much do leaders interact with each other on social media? Which leaders are most interconnected and why? Which leaders play a central role in the global social media network? These were some of the questions we set out to find answers to."

In their study, Badawy and his colleague Evgeniia Iakhnis specifically focused on interactions between different world leaders on Twitter. To

do this, they compiled a new dataset of Twitter interactions among world leaders (i.e. heads of state, government actors and ministers of foreign affairs) from 193 countries that are members of the United Nations (UN), taking place between 2012 and 2017.

The researchers tried to match every politically relevant name and institution from these 193 countries with its respective Twitter account, excluding those who are not present or active on Twitter. They successfully identified a vast amount of personal and institutional accounts, which world leaders use to communicate in both local and foreign languages.



A graph depicting the effect of regime on probability of network centrality.
Credit: Iakhnis & Badawy.

"Once we collected our dataset, we build a network based on leaders' mentions of other leaders," Badawy explained. "In other words, a direct link in a mention network indicates that one leader mentioned another in his or her post. Using this network, we analyzed leaders' interactions with each other and their importance in the network."

The analyses carried out by Badawy and Iakhnis yielded very interesting results. Firstly, they observed that the exchanges between world leaders on Twitter closely resemble their interactions offline. They also found that political regime is the main predictor of clustering between different countries on Twitter, a finding that is aligned with a philosophical construct known as the democratic peace theory.

"Our research shows that leaders form mention/retweet communities along regional lines and similar levels in political hierarchy," Badawy said. "We also found that the regime type plays a key role in the way Twitter communities are formed. Specifically, leaders from democratic states are more likely to engage with other democratic leaders."

In their analyses, Badawy and Iakhnis also tried to uncover patterns in the 'popularity' of world leaders online. Their observations suggest that leaders from democratic countries typically play more central roles on Twitter, while non-democratic leaders remain somewhat in the periphery.

The two researchers from USC are among the first to investigate patterns in how [political leaders](#) interact with one another online. Their findings, which have numerous interesting implications, could inform other research endeavors aimed at further enhancing our understanding of how politicians and government actors use social [media](#).

"So far, in our analyses we have treated both mention and retweet networks as static snapshots," Badawy said. "With more data across a

longer time period, we could treat these networks as dynamic ones, which could further increase our understanding of leaders' interactions on [social media](#)."

More information: Networks of power: analyzing world leaders' interactions on social media. arXiv:1907.11283 [cs.SI].
arxiv.org/abs/1907.11283

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