The Commons

an intervention to depolarize political conversations
on Twitter and Facebook in the USA

A BUILD UP Λ project

What is The Commons?

The Commons project is a response to the current, challenging political and social climate in the United States. Many people are observing and experiencing a decrease in constructive conversations, respect and open-mindedness in their everyday interactions, in the media, and in politics. Among the different factors contributing to this are the ways that social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, are built and shape our communication and interactions. These platforms make it easier for us to surround ourselves with like-minded people, interact with people with differing views in ways that emphasize our differences, and generally deepen political divides.

The core premise of The Commons is that we believe a majority of people in the USA are not actively driving polarization. Rather, polarization is happening to us. Through the last decade, researchers working to understand the impacts of emerging information and communications technology (ICTs) posit that political groupings have become siloed, increasing the polarization of public discourse. Moving people from passively accepting a context that escalates conflict to constructively engaging in mediating dialogue in their society is an enormous challenge. In the USA, a plethora of initiatives that leverage ICTs to encourage constructive dialogue and engagement online have emerged over the past few years. However, many of these initiatives reach very few people, and mostly people who already predisposed to depolarized behaviors.

That's the gap we are trying to fill: finding people who don't realize polarization is happening to them. The Commons identifies people engaged in political discussions about the USA on Twitter and Facebook, analyzes the likelihood that they are at risk of polarization, and organizes a network of facilitators aided by automation to engage them in conversation. Our facilitated conversations seek to help people understand and make different choices in their interactions, online and offline, particularly around political differences, and offer skills and resources to promote constructive conversations, listening and respect.

The Commons is a project of Build Up, a non-profit that works to transform conflict in the digital age. The approach was piloted with funding from the City of The Hague in 2017, and an evaluation of the pilot is available here. Throughout 2019 it was funded by the Omidyar Network.

The Commons on Twitter

We start with a list of seed handles: a core group of content creators and trendsetters that are at the center of political conversations in the USA. This core group was identified by Build Up by scanning Twitter conversations on US politics, through inputs from a survey sent out via our networks, and further refined at in-person design workshops. Each seed handle is assigned an ideology score between 1 and 5; scores for political figures were taken from VoteView, which

calculates political ideology of Senators and Representatives from voting history, and the rest were derived from the Media Bias Ratings provided by AllSides.

From this list of seed handles, we generate what we call our base population, which are handles with the following characteristics: follow a seed handle, have retweeted a seed handle at least once, have at least 20 followers and at most 5000 followers, have tweeted at least 100 times. The base population are average Twitter users (i.e. not influencers or celebrities) who are interested in US political conversations on Twitter.

From the list of seed handles, we also generate a list of the top hashtags (by tweet count) used in the previous two weeks, and a list of the top hashtags (by tweet count) that co-occurred with these. Each hashtag is assigned an ideology score which is the average of the ideology scores of the seed handles that tweeted it in the past two weeks. The list gives us a sense of the top political conversations taking place on Twitter, and which of these are likely to be spaces of polarization (defined here as hashtags used only by people at the poles of our ideology scale). The Commons team manually filters the hashtag list at the start of every intervention period to identify a short-list of intervention hashtags.

With this information, we identify what we call our lead population, who are handles that are part of the base population and have used one of our intervention hashtags. Leads are then randomly assigned to a treatment group (who we call candidates) and a control group (for evaluation purposes). The seed and base population stayed the same throughout the program; the intervention hashtags were regularly updated and the lead population was dynamically generated.

Once a candidate is identified, they are automatically assigned to a conversation

facilitator. Facilitators receive a notification in our automation platform (see below for details) that includes a link to the tweet that resulted in their identification. Facilitators then tweet at the candidate (tagging with @handle) to start a conversation. Facilitators aim to provide candidates an experience of a more constructive way to have conversations about issues and values that are important to them and in society. Facilitators only continue to engage if they receive a response, and from there conversations unfold in a variety of different ways and lengths. When a conversation leads to positive engagement with a candidate, the facilitator will typically recommend resources that can help the candidate to take further action towards depolarizing conversations online and offline. Once a facilitator considers that a conversation has ended, they close it in the automation platform indicating the close-out type and (if relevant) including a close-out note.

The Commons on Facebook

We start with a list of counties across the USA identified from two databases related to polarization factors (Moonshot CVE's list of the 10 counties with the most number of online searches for far right terms and PredictWise's list of counties with the most partisan prejudice[1]) and two databases related to political factors (Politico's ranking of most Democrat and most Republican counties[2] and Crowdpac's ranking of most Liberal and most Convervative cities[3]). This list is used for geographic targeting on Facebook, with audiences created either by targeting one polarized county or matching two counties with differing political leanings. Audiences are also filtered to target people who are over 18 and regularly engage with political content.

KAG, MAGA, Trump2020... If the past 5 years are any indication, constructive conversation about the upcoming election is going to be hard to find.

Do you feel that your perspective on this is heard by people you know who are on 'the other side'?

[1] Ripley, Tenjarla and He. The Geography of Partisan Prejudice. The Atlantic, 4 March 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/03/us-counties-vary-their-degree-partisan-prejudice/583072/?utm_source=twb
[2] Huffington Post. The Most Republican County in Each State. 21 October 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-most-republican-county-in-each-state_b_580a6271e4b0f8715789fa03?guccounter=2 and Huffington Post. The Most Democratic County in Every State. 21 October 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-most-democratic-county-in-every-state_b_580a6935e4b0f8715789fa11
[3] Phillips, Amber. The 10 Most Liberal and Conservative Cities in the US - as Judged by Campaign Donors. Washington Post, 14 December 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/14/the-10-most-liberal-and-conservative-cities-in-the-u-s-as-judged-by-campaign-donors/?noredirect=on

We then post on the same topics identified through the hashtag process in Twitter. Posts include text indicating this topic is divisive, a question directed at readers to prompt comments, and a related image to make them more visible. Each post is boosted to one audience, with a budget of about $50 for one week. Each post is assigned to one conversation facilitator.

Facilitators receive a notification in our automation platform (see below for details) every time someone comments on a post they have been assigned. The notification includes the text of the comment and a link to it. Facilitators respond to every comment, and to subsequent comments in a thread. As on Twitter, the aim of facilitators is to provide candidates an experience of a more constructive way to have conversations about issues and values that are important to them and in society. Facilitators only continue to engage if they receive a response, and from there conversations unfold in a variety of different ways and lengths. The main difference with Twitter is that on Facebook we consider every top-level comment the start of a separate conversation (which then continues in sub-comments), which means conversations often involve more than one person. When a conversation leads to positive engagement, the facilitator will typically recommend resources that can help anyone on the thread to take further action towards depolarizing conversations online and offline. Once a facilitator considers that a conversation has ended, they close it in the automation platform indicating the close-out type and (if relevant) including a close-out note.
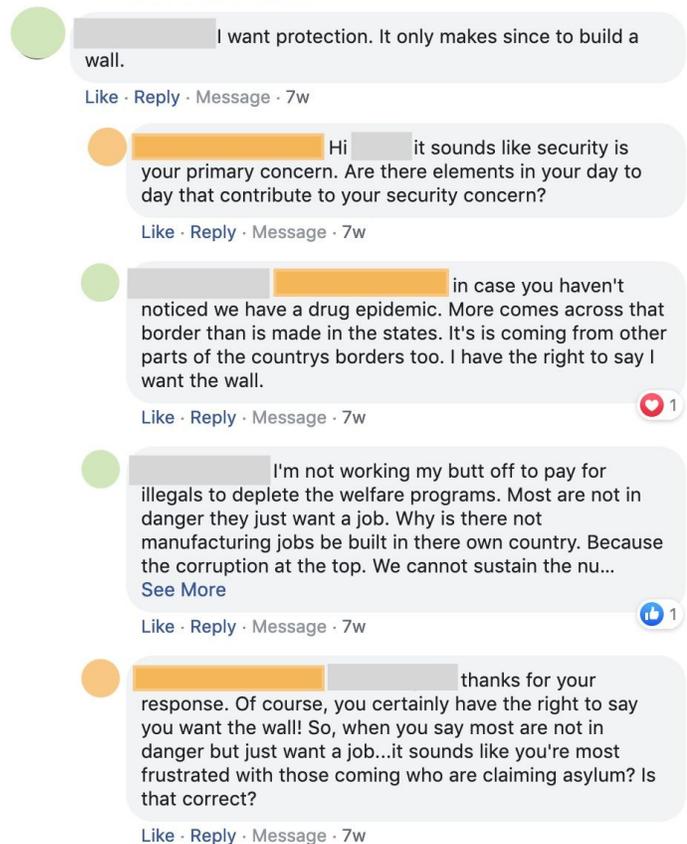
People, training and resources

The team of 8 conversation facilitators for The Commons came from across the USA and spanned the ideological spectrum, with the extremes not represented. Two of the facilitators acted as coordinators, organising the workload, preparing training materials and resources, and running regular debriefs to incorporate facilitator insights to the program design. Facilitators were given a core mission to model constructive conversations online, and encourage their

conversation partners to take further action towards depolarization, concretely this mission was articulate through four aims:

- Facilitators serve as **guides** that help people move into uncomfortable and traditionally conflictual territory to explore their own and others' worldviews.
- Facilitators act as **bridges,** connecting people together in conversation that otherwise couldn't or wouldn't be.
- Facilitators are **citizens** that care about remediating polarized communities and are actively working to practice what they preach.
- Facilitators are **multi-partial[4] process leaders;** they model, support, facilitate, and create the conditions that allow others' conversations to succeed.

Facilitators had access to a number of resources, including:

- A facilitator manual that outlined guidelines for conversation structure and suggested prompts to start conversation (based on The Commons pilot and iterated through program experience), language guidance (based on primary research conducted by Build Up), good practices for constructive conversation (based on a review of relevant literature), facilitation tools (based on dialogue facilitation practices from other Build Up peacebuilding projects), and a code of conduct;
- A list of curated resources (publicly available [here](#)) and FAQs (publicly available [here](#)) that they could point conversation partners to;
- A closed Facebook group to brainstorm ways to engage in specific conversations and request support from a dedicated peacebuilding advisor from Build Up; and,
- An automation platform, explained below.

Automation platform

In its original design, The Commons relied heavily on automated posting to both Facebook and Twitter. Through a combination of design considerations that we arrived at during our [pilot phase](#) and changes to the Facebook and Twitter APIs, we dropped much of the automated posting and substituted it with a set of automation tools (brought together on an platform) that enable our conversation facilitators to work more efficiently and track all the conversations for monitoring and evaluation purposes.

Concretely, the platform performs the following tasks:

- Dynamically identifies hashtags, using the parameters described above;
- Dynamically identifies the lead population, using the parameters described above;

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[4] Multi-partiality, in contrast to neutrality or impartiality, means that one can both maintain one's own opinion while giving equal weight to all perspectives voiced in the conversation even if they differ dramatically, regardless of the facilitator's own background or biases. Facilitators practicing multi-partiality can analyze an issue from multiple viewpoints and give equal attention to multiple identities and experiences, including outside perspectives not represented by those 'in the room.'

- For facilitators working on Facebook, notifies them every time a post they have been assigned receives a comment, tracks all sub-comments in one place, enables facilitators to indicate how that conversation thread was closed out by them;
- Tracks metrics for all Facebook posts, for internal monitoring;
- For facilitators working on Twitter, provides them a list of candidates that meet the criteria described above, a link to the tweet that led to their identification, a suggested response tweet, and a way to indicate how that conversation was closed out by them; and,
- Tracks metrics for every conversation started on Twitter, for internal monitoring, and for a control and treatment group of candidates, for evaluation.

What did The Commons set out to achieve?

The ultimate objective of The Commons is to affect the overall polarization of political conversations on social media in the USA by eliciting a change in the behavior of social media users that encourages more critical reflection on how they are engaging online, productive strategies for healthy conversations, and identification of shared values of civility and respect. We believe this objective can be achieved by modeling conversations on Twitter and Facebook and using these conversations as an entry point to provide further resources and avenues for action towards depolarization. In addition, they become cross-cutting conversations that adjacent users on social media are exposed to.

Principles

In order to develop our theory of change, we conducted desk research, primary research via survey and design workshops, and internal conversations to apply peacebuilding principles to the current environment in the USA. Through this process, we arrived at a set of principles that explain what we are (and what we are not) working towards.

Polarization is a process that drives groups' political opinions and / or personal values towards opposite poles characterized by: 1) the absorption of neutral actors into increasingly more rigid and extreme positions taken in opposition to other factions; 2) strengthening convictions in different factions, making it less likely for someone to break from their personal value system; and, 3) distorted perceptions and simplified stereotypes along with diminished trust or agreement with other factions over basic facts and realities, all contributing to limited opportunities or desire for shared dialogue. Well-established models of conflict escalation signal that these constitute warning flags for future violent confrontations.

Differences in political opinions and polarization are not the same thing. Differences in opinion are part of polarization, in that the "poles" are themselves different viewpoints. But you can have differences in opinion *without* having polarization. Differences of opinion can be expressed in constructive, curious, neutral or damaging discussions; polarization always points to a damaging discussion that is getting more divisive. Polarization matters because of how it affects

relationships and decisions at different levels. When there is polarization, relationships become more fragile and aggressive, people with different political opinions are driven further and further apart. Equally if not more worrying is how increasing divides play out in decision-making and policy-making, from the community to the national level. In polarized environments we listen less, we find it harder to share and discuss our different viewpoints openly with certain people, and we're damaging relationships because of political opinions. Depolarization is therefore a way of describing efforts to bridge those same divides, and promote better listening and open-mindedness even (especially!) when we disagree.

Polarization is experienced differently across the political spectrum. People across the political spectrum have experienced the negative impacts of deepening political divides and are expressing concern about it - especially around damaged relationships with family and friends who have different views, or how toxic political content has gotten on the news and on social media. However, different people may relate to polarization differently. Those more supportive of our current administration might not feel such an urgent need to address growing political divides; this could result from feeling comfortable with the direction things are headed. Opponents of the administration might experience the opposite - that it's important and urgent to bridge divides in order to be heard and have an opportunity to influence decisions.

Conversations on social media are contributing to polarization in the USA. In the course of our primary research, people indicated a variety of driving factors on social media that had specifically affected their relationships in the current political climate - and thus their strategies for responding. Replies included avoidance (blocking, unfriending, avoiding posts or commenting), limited dialogue around opinions or experiences, emotional response that makes it difficult to speak logically, and frustration with social media's tendency to simplify a narrative and also embolden people to share their opinion. When we surveyed people in the United States about their experiences using social media in the current political climate, they reflected:

> "There are people that I like and respect in person, but when they post something on social media that I know is politically inflammatory, has no scientific basis, or is contrary to something I believe strongly in, I tend to think of that person as less reliable or as someone who would not accept me for what I really believe in. Instead of making me want to engage in conversation, I feel like there's no way to talk reasonably about it."

> "Certain social media contacts have become much more outspoken on political issues using FB as a platform. Almost as if they feel more empowered or brave to take a vocal public stance either 'sharing' or agreeing to a post. I've blocked several family members as a result."

> "My aunt has a different political perspective than us. She frequently posted articles that were from fake news sources that distorted or simply lied about the truth. When we pointed this out to her online she became very defensive and even abusive. She

eventually unfriended us, which mirrored a social rift that we experienced in our lives with her as well."

Once polarization becomes widespread, many people experience it as inevitable. In a climate of growing political and social divides, we're likely to find ourselves sticking more closely to those like us. We may create or experience a kind of peer pressure within our group to share certain opinions or support / oppose certain policies or decisions or public figures in order to 'win' against 'the other side." It becomes easier to lump everyone on "the other side" together, and to stop listening for the individual human experience and complexity behind different perspectives. When we don't feel heard or respected, we may get pushier about our opinions and less open to those of others, even within our own group. As political and social divides grow, there is a snowball effect between groups with different opinions. Conversations between these groups get more toxic, or may stop entirely. We may stereotype, blame, or label people belonging to "other" groups as enemies. Without connections and communication between differing groups, groups may feel freer to be harsh towards one another. Finally, like a snowball, more and more people that were once on middle ground are drawn into the poles, and the divide continues to grow.

Depolarization and activism are not at odds with each other. Some people, including some activists, see polarization as a practical strategy for creating change; specifically by making differences and injustices more visible in a way that pushes citizens and decision-makers to take a position and action. From this standpoint, depolarization might be seen as compromising or softening of legitimate demands. Our experience shows that in many situations depolarization can strengthen activism. Non-violent activism or direct action can play a critical role in awareness-raising, agenda-setting and accelerating change, while efforts to bridge differences of opinion and to create a common ground for listening and dialogue are critical to a healthy democratic political and community culture.

Theory of change

A healthy political system and society benefit from the active involvement of people who have different backgrounds, experiences and opinions - so long as we can find respectful, non-violent ways to understand one another and find solutions together. In The Commons, we aim to strengthen a "multi-partisan" or 'multi-partial" culture online and offline, in which people can be more skilful in how they express their views, communicate and work together with others. Our theory of change is that **if** we can elicit a change in the behavior of individual social media users that encourages more connection across the political spectrum, exposure to a diversity of views, and identification of shared values of civility and respect, **then** we will contribute to a healthy political system and society in the USA.

Our theory of change is strictly focused on behavioral change at the individual level, and we are aware this has limitations. The current political and social dynamics in the United States are complex, involving different institutions, media outlets, leaders, movements, communities, and

issues. These can all be seen as "entry points" for efforts to create positive change. The Commons project targets individuals, because we know that many are either unaware that polarization is happening to them or stumped about what to do differently to lessen divides. In 2018, nearly 170 million people in the United States used Facebook and nearly 70 million used Twitter. With increased awareness and bridge-building skills, people can be empowered to make different decisions to reflect their values of listening, constructive engagement and respect, and this has the potential to have a big effect on how conversations are happening online and offline. This is just one approach; we follow, support and are inspired by others' efforts that use different strategies to create positive change.

Pathways to and definition of impact

Our theory of change is translated into a core strategy to model conversations that offer civility and respect on Twitter and Facebook. This is the strategy that we use to engage our target candidates, providing them with an opportunity to experience a new way to have conversations about issues and values that are important to them and in society. Through these conversations, candidates begin to see others and themselves more clearly, and in a new way: as reasonable, multi-faceted, and value-driven. After a conversation with The Commons, candidates are more likely to in turn model civility and respect on Twitter and Facebook.

We therefore define the impact of our engagement with candidates in three ways:
● Experience of a more positive conversation:
  ○ Candidates report that the conversations they experienced with our facilitators were more positive than other conversations they have on social media;
  ○ We observe that candidates are sharing positive feedback about their interaction unprompted;
● Interest in taking further action to promote civility:
  ○ Candidates report that the conversations they experienced with our facilitators increased their interest in taking further action to promote civility;
  ○ We track the number of candidates accessing resources offered by facilitators to promote civility online and offline;
● Change in the way they engage with people on social media:
  ○ Candidates report that the conversations they experienced with our facilitators changed the way they engage with people on social media;
  ○ We observe that candidates behave differently on social media, including connecting more across the political spectrum and listening to differing viewpoints.

Finally, we also track the secondary effects The Commons might have on raising awareness about polarization among a wider public. Many people are passive consumers of social media content, but do not engage in commenting or posting. However, being exposed to polarized conversations can affect behavior in offline conversations. By contrast, being exposed to civil, respectful conversations may also positively affect their behavior offline. Although we have no

way to measure this impact directly, we do measure the number of people exposed to the initial prompts that start a conversation.

Results & Impact

"I strongly believe the strategy of the Commons is the exact strategy that everyone in America should be looking to in order to change our current, divisive, toxic and polarized political environment." -- The Commons Facilitator

From April to November 2019, we ran six interventions for The Commons. At the end of each intervention, we paused for one or two weeks to monitor results. Each intervention tested a slightly different targeting, content and conversation strategy, allowing us to use A / B testing to iterate our strategies. Interventions 1 - 5 each ran for a period of 2 weeks; Intervention 6 ran for 4 weeks, and was an attempt to demonstrate we could maintain the pace of conversations if we sustained an intervention for a longer period. The results below are aggregated across all interventions. Intervention 1 is omitted for Twitter, because the intervention strategy failed completely for technical reasons (related to a change in the Twitter API) and had to be re-thought for Intervention 2 and onwards.

The **results** demonstrate that our targeting strategies and monitoring system enable facilitators to engage in conversations on Twitter and Facebook at scale, and at a reasonable cost. Overall, approximately 500,000 people were exposed to the initial reflection prompts from our facilitators. Building on these prompts, facilitators had 2122 conversations, at an average length of 6 to 7 replies back and forth. The average cost of a conversation was $7: on Twitter (where cost includes facilitator wages only) it was $5; on Facebook (where cost includes Facebook ad + facilitator wages) it was $10.

When we designed this program, we set a **target** to have 6000 - 7000 conversations. Our estimate was that with 7 facilitators, we could have 40 conversations per person per week, and that we would have 21 weeks of active intervention. At 2122 conversations, we fell short of this target. Part of this has to do with the technical challenges at the start of the program, which meant we were active for about 14 weeks on Facebook and 12 weeks on Twitter, of which 2 weeks on Facebook and 6 weeks on Twitter were technical trials where we were not operating at scale. Even at our peak performance (during Interventions 5 and 6), facilitators only managed an average of 25 - 30 conversations per person per week. These results will help us better plan for scale in 2020.

An **evaluation of impact** based on behaviors we can directly observe on Twitter shows that our interventions had a positive effect on people we engaged in conversation. Specifically, a comparison in the retweet behavior of control and treatment groups for Intervention 5 shows that connections across groups with different ideologies increased more for people who we engaged in conversation, and that this increase is clearest for those we invited to action. We cannot

perform a similar evaluation of impact on Facebook, but a qualitative assessment by our facilitators suggests that the conversation experience was similar on Facebook and we might expect a similar impact. We attempted a survey of people who we engaged in conversation on Facebook, and respondents report that conversations were experienced as positive, increased some people's interest in taking further action to promote civility, and changed the way they engage with people. However, the number of survey respondents is too small to provide a solid measure of impact.

Finally, 991 people accessed **resources for further action** that our facilitators recommended at the end of a conversation with them. This measure is likely incomplete (we rely on a combination of link-tracking and self-reporting) and is not disaggregated by platform (Facebook vs. Twitter). However, it allows us to draw some further conclusions about the impact of The Commons interventions: 48% of the conversations we had resulted in people accessing resources for action recommended by our facilitators.

Results and impact on Twitter

Initial tweets	4161
Conversations	1064
Replies in conversations	8598
Average conversation length	8.08
Cost per conversation	$4.70
Cost per invite to action	$7.05
Conversation close out notes:	
Invited to action	709
Responded negatively	31
Stopped responding	262
Facilitator did not engage	20
Left open	30

Twitter only introduced a measure of impressions for tweets half-way through our program, so we did not systematically gather this metric for all the tweets sent. We did ask facilitators to report impressions for a selection of "intervention tweets" (i.e. the initial tweets they send out to start a conversation) with different levels of engagement, and found that the average impression of an intervention tweet is 54. From this, we can extrapolate that impressions from all the intervention tweets were in the range of 225,000.

We tracked the behavior on Twitter of all the handles our facilitators engaged in conversation. For comparison, we also tracked a random selection of handles with the same base

characteristics (i.e. handles that were also part of our "lead population" as defined above) that our facilitators did not engage in conversation. Comparing before and after behaviors for these treatment and control groups clearly signals the positive impact of The Commons interventions on individual behavior on Twitter. This analysis is only relevant for Interventions 5 and 6, where the numbers were large enough to allow for some conclusions. For Intervention 5, our main conclusion is that when we look at retweets before and after our interventions, we notice that for our control group there is an increase in connections within the group while for our treatment group there is an increase in connections across groups. This increase is clearest when we further filter our treatment group to those "invited to action", excluding those that "stopped responding". Overall, this result suggests the intervention had a positive effect on inter-group contact and reducing polarization. A detailed account of this analysis is available in Annex 3. Intervention 6 finished on November 8, so data collection to complete the analysis is still ongoing.

We collected lengthy qualitative data from our facilitators on the impact they observed throughout the interventions. The main consensus among facilitators was that the experience of being listened to with empathy had a profound effect on the individuals they engaged with; one that might change their behavior on Twitter. This corroborates the behavior change signalled by the quantitative data. Facilitators noted:

> "One of the most memorable conversations I had was with a man who I believe had used the hashtag #MAGA, and in my original engagement tweet I had asked him what it meant to him. He replied with what it meant to him and then said, 'You may be the first person in 2 years to actually ask me what it means to me.' This was a powerful experience because it speaks to just how rare these types of respectful approaches/engagements online are for some people, and how needful they are."

> "When users would share that they have never had such a civil conversation about politics, or have never been asked about their views like I was asking them, I felt they were impacted. I am hoping that the conversations I engaged in on Twitter were eye openers for the users I was discussing with."

Results and impact on Facebook

Ads posted	111
Impressions from all ads	293,914
Total conversations	1058
Total comments	4951
Average conversation length	4.7
Cost per conversation	$9.68
Cost per invite to action	$27.92
Conversation close out notes:	
Invited to take action	367
Responded negatively	17
Stopped responding	291
Facilitator did not engage	77
Left open	60

Given the data privacy constraints on Facebook (that we fully support), it is impossible to track individuals who our facilitators engaged in conversation with in order to compare their behaviors in conversation before and after The Commons interventions.

Instead, we attempted to collect data on self-reported impact by posting a survey to all the conversation threads our facilitators engaged on. The survey received a very small number of responses (26); we report the results with full understanding that they cannot be attributed any significance. When asked "In comparison to other conversations you have on social media about sensitive topics, how positive would you say your conversation with The Commons was?" 61.6% report this was a more positive conversation. 23.1% of survey respondents indicated that they have changed the way they engage with people as a result of the conversation and 65.4% indicated that they are interested in taking further action to promote greater civility, listening and respect as a result of the conversation.

Given this challenge with quantitative data, our assessment of the impact of conversations on Facebook is largely qualitative.[5] Since our facilitators worked on both platforms, we were able to ask them whether they believe the experience was comparable. Their consensus is that - although the platforms make for very different conversation styles - the quality and depth of engagement is similar enough to that on Twitter that we might expect the Facebook intervention to have a similar effect on individual behavior. Concretely, facilitators shared a sense that the

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[5] Insights in this section are drawn from internal meetings run by Build Up and from an external research project that interviewed facilitators (Interview Themes: The Commons Facilitators," Rachel Laird, November 2019, draft)

intervention on Facebook impacted people through small, incremental ways that may shift how those individuals choose to engage across differences.

> "One of my best conversations was around gun violence. The participant and I disagreed, but were able to have a constructive conversation around the topic. We shared our views and were able to find common ground."

> "I definitely think this has had an impact on some of the people I spoke to, especially those who allowed it to impact them. There were some great people open to The Commons' work, and who I think were genuinely thankful for our constructive dialogue and the resources I shared with them."

Facilitators also shared that by engaging people who had not self-selected into the dialogue space and therefore were not automatically on-board with the nature and theory of the work, the intervention on Facebook reached a broader demographic scope with a basic message about polarization.

> "For those I engaged with online that were positively impacted, I'd say that the impact is largely that they have polarization on their radar and understand that there is something they individually can do to combat the phenomenon."

A common reflection was that impact could occur through the modelling of how a conversation across difference might unfold. Many facilitators shared that the typical conversation dynamic was when a participant wished to voice their opinion and point of view without an exchange of ideas or input. In the words of one facilitator: "Of the people that will respond back, generally it tends to be the people who are 'all caps' expressing their opinions." However, there was a feeling that by opening space to hear the participants views, and allowing them to express their experiences, the facilitator might create a positive outcome.

> "A lot of people will be like 'wow, I have never had anybody listen to me or ask me these questions or want to hear my side'... because they just want to be heard on their perspective and know that it's okay to have their perspective."

> "I had many people that responded saying that they had never been asked about their perspectives in such depth, which was cool to hear them acknowledge and appreciate! I have hope that people still appreciate the conversation and its differences from their other political conversations."

Move to Action

The original program design envisaged that when facilitators closed out their conversations with an "invite to action," these invites would be one of two options:

- Resources addressing a specific issue that came up in conversation, drawn from our curated list of resources; or,
- An invitation to a video call to discuss further.

Following Intervention 3, we decided to drop the invite to a video call. Facilitators reported that the jump from social media to a live call was too much and we needed to develop a more incremental approach. The original design had envisaged that those invited to a video call would, at the end of the call, also be offered the option to join an online course on depolarization. The course would provide basic skills to facilitate difficult conversations online and offline, and an opportunity to practice these skills in a safe environment with participants from across the political spectrum.

Instead, we decided to experiment with two more incremental ways to deliver both skills and opportunities to continue interacting in civil conversations. We created a closed Facebook group - The Commons for Conversation - where a dedicated facilitator continues to issue prompts for reflection on polarizing political content, and facilitate conversations. The group, which is currently by invitation only, has a small (53) but deliberate and growing membership. Of those members, the group has been successful in maintaining a balance of membership from across the political spectrum with equivalent levels of activity. We also created training micro-content based on the core skills that our facilitators use in their conversations. This micro-content can be shared as either a Facebook card / post, a Twitter thread, or a short animated video. We've so far reached over 6000 people with the content, and generated some kind of engagement with the content from 435 people.

Our conclusion from these experiments - which were not the core of The Commons program - is that we need to think of the "move to action" piece of our intervention as "coaching at scale," and continue to find incremental and creative ways to build the skills and experience of civility and respect on social media.

Impact on facilitators

An unexpected outcome of this project is the deep impact it has had on our team of facilitators. Interviews with facilitators conducted by an external researcher concluded:

"For those who felt that their ability to hold conversations across differences had improved, they specifically cited; being able to ask probing and thoughtful questions, and an increased understanding that lived experiences shape beliefs and opinions. For some, the work with The Commons also brought a greater depth of appreciation into why people in their networks might hold certain viewpoints. Some interviewees mentioned a higher comfort level with engaging people who they might disagree with when, in the past, they may have avoided that conversation. Now they feel they can engage across differences in dialogue instead of argument.

The majority of facilitators found that their work with The Commons provided the opportunity to reflect on their viewpoints and consider what informs those perspectives. This work offered the chance to reflect on how their backgrounds have shaped them. In some cases, that act of reflection has brought a greater depth or nuance to how they describe their own identities and where they fit in the social and political fabric of the United States. It has also allowed the opportunity for them to articulate, both for themselves and for their conversation partners, why they believe certain things, and what makes something a reliable 'fact.' By reflecting on their views and narratives, it opens up further critical awareness of their 'side,' perhaps shifting them into a place where they can more readily bring nuance into their conversations and ask questions that they may not have thought of before. This critical awareness also surfaced as facilitators spoke of increased understanding of how 'both sides' contribute to polarization in these spaces whereas before they may not have considered 'their side' to be quite as problematic as 'the other.'"[6]

Additional feedback directly from facilitators to the Build Up team corroborates this finding:

> "In general, my experience was positive and enjoyable! I appreciated the opportunity to take a type of conversation I find myself having in my personal social media to a more structured, strategic space. The process allowed me to remain critical of my own language around political issues and question assumptions that I have about those one may identify as 'polarized.' It was also beneficial to have experience reframing a political discussion and continue what are at times challenging conversations."

> "I definitely believe this project had a positive impact, especially on me. In a political environment where myself and peers discuss how intangible political change can feel, the project gave me an outlet and platform to engage those that I would never engage otherwise. This allowed me to experience the same type of multi-partisan dialogue that we are hoping those we engage participate in as well, making the experience almost communal and mutually beneficial."

> "This project gave me a chance to interact constructively with those I disagree with. My biggest take-away from this project is that people's experiences shape their opinions. Even if I think their opinion is wrong or I don't understand why they hold a certain opinion, I have gained a greater understanding of how people come to believe their opinions. I have also learned that it is possible to have a constructive conversation with people whose views are drastically different and even sometimes find common ground."

The personal transformation of facilitators has been so profound that we believe a key avenue to increase the impact of this work is to offer opportunities for people with whom our facilitators engage in conversation to join the facilitation team. This is reflected in the strategy outlined in the next steps section.

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[6] Interview Themes: The Commons Facilitators, Rachel Laird, November 2019, draft.

Playbook

This section summarises the targeting, content and conversation strategies we learned on the basis of regular monitoring and A / B testing throughout the project. In summary, we have identified a fairly clear playbook on both Twitter and Facebook that can be replicated and scaled.

Playbook for Twitter

"My experience with The Commons project both reaffirmed and challenged my opinion of Twitter as a social media platform. Twitter hosts a very strong echo chamber - an ever present political rally. It felt very intimidating to enter that space. However, I greatly appreciated the facilitator experience, which asked me to enter with curiosity. It made it possible to enter that space, have some constructive conversations, and hear from people that I would not normally talk with." -- The Commons Facilitator

"Another gentleman I spoke with acknowledged how he used Twitter. Something to the effect of 'I'm an old man shouting at the sky.' It so perfectly captured the single hashtag tweets that I saw over and over again. I so appreciated his self awareness. He went on to explain that he lived in a state and worked in a job environment opposite of his own personal political beliefs. Twitter allowed him a voice where he couldn't otherwise speak up." -- The Commons Facilitator

Targeting

Hashtags about the general state of political affairs work best. With some exceptions, conversations on Twitter worked best on hashtags that are generically about the state of political affairs rather than about a specific topic. The following hashtags had the lowest average conversation length: prolife, buildthewall, forthepeople, tradewar, education, immigration, lgbt, iran, climatechange, russia, china, israel, metoo, healthcare. The table below lists the hashtags where facilitators had the longest conversations (often also deepest / most likely to result in a move to action):

hashtag	longest conversation	average length	ideology
bernie2020	75	22.8	liberal
climatestrike	23	18.6	liberal
trump2020	34	15.7	conservative
2a	22	14	middle
medicareforall	28	13	middle
congress	20	12	liberal
republicans	20	10.9	conservative
impeachtrump	36	9.7	middle
greennewdeal	21	9.3	middle
venezuela	12	9	liberal
resist	23	8.8	liberal
maga	42	7.8	conservative
kag2020	23	6.2	conservative
trump	66	6	middle

Liberal, conservative and contested hashtags all work well, but there may be a liberal slant to conversations. There is no obvious difference between hashtags used predominantly by liberals and those used predominantly by conservatives, although facilitators report that they were interacting most with liberals. Some hashtags used by both sides also had long and deep conversations - most of these hashtags appear to have "middle" ideology scores not because they are used by moderates, but because they are contested (i.e. used by both conservatives and liberals).

Initial content

Initial tweets need to make people feel heard. Over multiple iterations, facilitators honed in on strategies for initial tweets that all revolved around making the person they contacted feel they were truly being heard, in a personal way. In the words of two facilitators:

> "Beginning by recognizing the value in an original tweet or message appeared helpful in reducing the walls that a user had up and lead to a reply. More often than not I would rely on general questions (i.e. 'Do you talk about this often? How do those conversations go?') to provide a space for a user to take the conversation where they'd like to, to encourage responses."

> "Either asking about their views on the topic or sharing my own views were much better received than asking how often they discuss this topic with those with different views."

Playbook for Facebook

"I had a fun and challenging conversation where two people were arguing. I inserted myself in mid-argument, and in a series of threads and sub threads, needed to play several different roles. In one thread I was a conversationalist, on another a mediator, on another offering resources, on another scolding for language. It was a bit dizzying, but overall positive I believe. I was thanked and confirmed that they accessed invites to different resources." -- The Commons Facilitator

Targeting

Conservative, liberal and match geographies all work well, but there may be a conservative slant to conversations. Geography type - conservative, liberal, most prejudiced or match of conservative - liberal - does not appear to make a difference in the number of conversations, although facilitators reported they were having more interactions with conservatives (and with older people). Targeting to "likely to engage with political content" had a strong impact on performance by comment and conversation counts.

Spending more on an ad results in more impressions, but not necessarily more reactions or more comments. At a cost of about $50 per ad, cost per impression leveled out to $0.01 to $0.03, cost per reaction ranged from $0.4 to $3.57, and cost per comment ranged from $0.27 to $5.56.

Ad approval policies require careful monitoring and adjustment. We initially ran into some trouble with ad approval that seemed hard to explain.[7] In later interventions, ad approval was smoother and we seemed to have worked out all the requirements for effective ad posting

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[7] For example, content in these two ads passed:
> *Obamacare is part of one of the most politically divided issues in the US. What isn't the other side understanding about it? Do you think it is difficult to have constructive conversations about healthcare?*
> *Obamacare is currently a controversial topic in the US. Why is it difficult to have constructive conversations about healthcare? What are the roots of this problem?*

Content in this ad *did not* pass initially (passed once we added the disclaimer: "paid for by How to Build Up"):
> *Why does the issue of Obamacare matter to you? Do you feel that your perspective on healthcare is actually heard or understood by the other side? Do you think that your point of view is being heard?*

This ad was submitted on May 6, but was not approved until May 11, two days before its scheduled expiration on May 13:
> *We want your opinion: Is gun control easy for you to talk about in mixed political groups? (link)*

This ad was also submitted on May 6 and passed the same day:
> *Guns are a really hard thing to talk about in America. I want to hear from you - what do you think the 'other side' isn't understanding about it? What would you say to a loved one to help them understand your opinion on gun rights? (link)*

(including reallocating funds to ads that were performing better out of a total fixed budget for all the ads running in a week). However, on our final intervention week there was a change to the ad posting policies, and all our ads got cancelled ahead of schedule.

Engagement on ads does not translate to page followers. We have been hovering around 70-80% of our rate limit for the Facebook API to read our Page data. This limit is linked to the number of follower activity on the Page within specific time windows, among other things. Our model does not encourage Page followers and follower engagement, and therefore does not encourage specific growth of the rate limit. As we work to scale up the number of posts, we could explore further how to effectively manage the rate-limit requirements.

Initial content

All-time controversial topics result in more conversations than time-specific topics. Although we tried dozens of ad topics, 8 of the top 10 best performing ads (by number of conversations) were all on the topics of immigration, gun control, and Trump / Make America Great Again. These three topics systematically outperformed any other ad topics, throughout the year. Ads on abortion, Mueller and Recession / Trade War also performed well during specific time periods. Ads on healthcare and international issues performed very poorly.

There is a balance to be struck between using controversy as a hook and garnering conversations that can go deep. The quantity of comments or conversations doesn't always match the quality of conversations. We tried more click-bait / bombastic content in one intervention, and saw the quality of conversations as reported by our facilitators drop dramatically. The Trump / Make America Great Again ads were challenging because they mostly attract Trump supporters who want to proclaim their support for Trump, but don't engage after their first comment. One facilitator reported "I have tried asking what motivates them to support Trump and about how their experiences having conversations about Trump with others go. I usually have good conversations with those that respond to those questions, but the response rate is maybe 10%." Immigration and abortion ads could also be similarly challenging, as reported by facilitators:

> "I continue to see A LOT of similar responses on the immigration posts. They typically start with a short simple statement along the lines of, 'legal immigration!' I'd say it's about 50 - 50 if people will engage with me past that initial statement."

> "It's difficult to vary my engagement tactic to avoid being robotic with posts like immigration or abortion where many initial comments sound so parallel."

Playbook for conversations[8]

Good conversations fall into two broad categories: talking about how to have respectful discussions or modeling a respectful discussion. For the first kind, facilitators open up an exchange of ideas around how to have productive and healthy discussions across the political spectrum, often leading to the candidate sharing how the political divide has personally impacted their relationships. For the second kind, facilitators model what a conversation across difference can look like by opening an exchange of ideas and perspectives, expressing sincere curiosity about different viewpoints and how those opinions had formed, and exploring how a shared value had shaped each of their views and why the same value could be interpreted differently by each of them.

Affiliation and transparency about intent matters to constructive conversations. Timely transparency about their role with The Commons helped facilitators build trust with their conversation partners. At times, providing the information about their role and affiliation too early in an exchange resulted in people backing away from the conversation and no longer engaging. If shared at the right moment in the conversation, then the affiliation provided some credibility about the facilitator's genuine interest in an open conversation (rather than intention to change the candidate's mind on a topic). Providing context as to why they were engaging and asking specific questions also helped contribute to an understanding of the nature of the conversation that led to greater openness on the part of some candidates. "One of my favorites was a conversation where I was flagged as, 'TROLL for trump alert.' After quickly introducing my affiliation with the Commons and what our project is, he was 'fascinated.'"

Bringing in personal experience and identity makes for more authentic conversations. Facilitators found that conversations cannot be authentic without including elements of their own identity, because they felt they would not be perceived as believable or trustworthy by candidates if they positioned themselves as "neutral" in a conversation. "If we are talking about the challenges related to depolarization, one of them is dehumanization of the other... So yeah, I think that having our identities open and tied to our work is really central in helping that humanization process."[9] Transparency about their identity also enabled facilitators to intentionally draw on their lived experience when specific arguments were made, in a way that created the opportunity to surface assumptions or generalizations and move the conversation to a deeper level. "I found that in order to keep the individuals engaged in their conversation with me, I had to do more than ask questions. I needed to reveal something about myself to establish authenticity or add just a touch of opinion into my responses in order to keep them engaged. The conversations with zero tension were dropped out of lack of interest I think." "I found myself using myself and my identity as a tool in a really helpful way this time around. For example, if a

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[8] Insights in this section are drawn from internal meetings run by Build Up and from an external research project that interviewed facilitators (Interview Themes: The Commons Facilitators," Rachel Laird, November 2019, draft)

[9] Interview Themes: The Commons Facilitators, Rachel Laird, November 2019, draft

tweet would include a comment about how 'all liberals are [x]' in a dismissive or derogatory way, I would often say 'Well, I identify as liberal and don't feel [x] way.' A specific example, one individual said that liberals don't care or talk about policy, to which I said that my peers and I often talk about policy and provided a quick example."

Difficult conversations require commitment to go deep over a longer period of time. When a conversation is combative or aggressive, facilitators need to have the stamina to stay engaged and employ the tools they have at their disposal to move the conversation towards a greater depth of nuance beyond talking points, or into a dialogue of the personal experiences that have shaped the candidate's views. "So really, despite who you are talking to or despite what they are throwing at you, you are staying centered and committed to listening and helping that be a positive conversation, as much as possible."[10] If a candidate seemed upset or aggressive, the facilitator might ask them why they felt that way and allow space for reflection by inquiring about what conversations with people who disagree with them looked like in the past. Some difficult conversations were sustained over many days, with facilitators experiencing lulls and circling back to re-engage.

On Facebook, the nature of group conversations often breeds position-taking and polarization. In the words of a facilitator: "I had one conversation that was interesting in how it highlighted for me what tone we take in conversation when we feel our view is backed and validated by others. I was speaking with someone regarding immigration and felt we were having a very respectful and productive, although disagreeing, conversation. Once a third person stepped in with a more forceful conservative view that supported this original participant's view, the original participant's tone seemed to change to less respect and more black and white assertions."

Inviting people to action can be a natural way to end a conversation. One of the key pieces that people come back to across conversations is: what can I do now? We have curated resources that facilitators can point people to, often through a personal invite, such as: "I often framed one of the take action resources as something that has really helped me in my conversations with family members." We have also created content, building off of peacebuilding practices and non-violent communication strategies, that facilitators can directly share as a tool for people who want to learn how to act in a polarized conversation / context.

Conclusion & way forward

Our conclusion from this internal evaluation of The Commons is that we have designed and tested a model that delivers results and impact at a reasonable cost and can be scaled. Concretely, we believe the model has five core strengths, which also present opportunities for further development:

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[10] Interview Themes: The Commons Facilitators, Rachel Laird, November 2019, draft

1. **Tested targeting strategies** that demonstrably enable facilitators to engage in conversations on Twitter and Facebook at scale, and at a reasonable cost - and an opportunity to develop further targeting strategies on Facebook that use the personal networks of facilitators;
2. **Impact on individual behaviors** that can be observed on Twitter, and that is reported by facilitators on both platforms - and an opportunity to develop a stronger impact evaluation measure on Facebook.
3. A solid **learning model**, backed by regular monitoring and adjusting, that allows us to A / B test multiple targeting, content and conversations strategies, adapting to changes in both the political climate and platform terms of service;
4. An **automation platform** that provides the basic infrastructure to support facilitators in doing their work efficiently - and an opportunity to make it more stable and add features; and,
5. **Training content** on how to have constructive conversations on social media, based on peacebuilding best practices and non violent communications - and an opportunity to share this more widely.

We are currently seeking funding to scale The Commons with a particular focus on the Presidential election. The Presidential election in 2020 presents a unique challenge to polarization, and we believe The Commons is well positioned to make a significant impact on political conversations on social media that contributes to reducing the risk of further division (or even violence) around the election. In order to make an impact that is most strategic to the tensions likely to arise before and after the 2020 Presidential election, we would focus on contested or polarized hashtags on Twitter and contested or polarized counties on Facebook.

Our aim would be to have a minimum of 20,000 conversations. This may seem like a small proportion of the US electorate, but even this number of conversations gives a strong chance of creating civil spaces where those are most threatened. We have seen that these conversations can elicit a change in the behavior of individual social media users that encourages more connection across the political spectrum, exposure to a diversity of views, and identification of shared values of civility and respect, such that our intervention will contribute to a healthy political system and society in the USA. We would also build out a "coaching at scale" strategy that would include developing and sharing more training content on how to have constructive conversations online, growing The Commons for Conversation Facebook group, and inviting some people we enter in conversation with to become volunteer facilitators for The Commons. Finally, we would design and test a strategy for Instagram, building from what we have learned on Twitter and Facebook. A full concept note for this work is available by emailing team@howtobuildup.org.

Any questions or comments about this report can be directed to the same email address.

Annex 1: examples of conversations on Twitter

Jul 10 — Yeah... This is usually how it goes for me too. Do you feel that even if you can't agree that those conversations are beneficial for society anyway? Or do you feel it would be better to not engage in the conversations?

Jul 11 — It sometimes helps me not to demonize Trump voters. I do believe they have lower moral standards *in some respects* (e.g. about children being detained), but in many other areas they can be really fine and honorable people.

So, yeah, in many cases, engaging is a good thing.

Jul 12 — I love this perspective. I suppose if anything, constructive conversations can help us humanize others. I work with the @commons_project, and we facilitate discussions for this purpose. We do regular calls, would you be interested in joining? I think you're a good candidate.

Jul 12 — I'm very honored that you would consider me, but I at this point, I do not wish to go beyond tweeting and I also wish to remain anonymous, so I am very sorry that I have to respectfully decline your offer.

But your project definitely has my support and I'll follow it.

Sep 19 — I don't care if I offend anyone who supports white supremacy, no matter their demographic.

Sep 20 — That's fine. I get the value of speaking truth to power un-apologetically. What my question was getting at is my own hesitancy to generalize so broadly. Those kinds of 'single stories' are a dynamic of what I see as problematic polarization (more here bit.ly/2PIAMFM)

The Commons - FAQs
The Commons: FAQs What is The Commons project about? The Commons project is a respons...
🔗 docs.google.com

Sep 20 — I get that and I appreciate this conversation.

Replying to
Me too, thanks for the time!

9:26 PM · Sep 22, 2019 · Twitter Web App

Jul 2 — #Trump campaign raises $105 million.

Trump re-election campaign raised $105 million in second quarter
President Trump's re-election campaign and the Republican National Committee hauled in $105 million during the second quarter and ...
🔗 nypost.com

· Jul 5 — Why does #trump matter to you? Do you feel that your perspective on this is heard by people you know who are on 'the other side'?

Replying to
I do have exchanges with Trump voters. Not very often, but it happens.

12:41 PM · Jul 5, 2019 · Twitter Web Client

1 Like

· Jul 8 — Replying to
I have a few too. They are often really hard conversations for me, I admit. It is almost easier to never have these conversations, but then that isn't the best thing for unity on small and big scales. How do your conversations with Trump voters usually look when you have them?

Jul 9 — Not very spectacular in most cases. I state my opinion on the matter, they state theirs and I usually then say we are not going to convince each other and we have to agree to disagree.

· Jul 10 — Yeah... This is usually how it goes for me too. Do you feel that even if you can't agree that those conversations are beneficial for society anyway? Or do you feel it would be better to not engage in the conversations?

Left column

@POTUS the PEOPLE'S President!
#KAG2020
#MAGA

Jul 8
President Trump surprises White House tour group.
I am so proud of our President, and all his supporters! We are the RIGHT ones celebrating our beloved country, and it's leader!

If you want to follow me, I do follow back.

President Trump Surprises White House Tour Group

What Happens Next Is PRICELESS

1:34 19.9K views

9:56 PM · Jul 8, 2019 · Twitter for Android

1 Like

Jul 14
Replying to
Constructive conversation on #maga is hard to find, but it would be easier if people listened to each other. What isn't the other side understanding about it?

♡ 1

Jul 15
My .02 ... The rhetoric against the President is much more strident than the reality. All of the labels that have been based on things blown out of proportion by activists and a media that both profit from our division. He's not perfect but he is trying to do what he promised.

♡ 1

Jul 16
I hear ya - and it's important that he lives up to what he promised. How do you discuss this with people who are different from you, though? I have trouble connecting to people who disagree with me on him!

♡ 1   ♡ 1

Jul 16
Candidly, I can't find any liberals willing to discuss him rationally. They refuse to give ANY quarter in a discussion. Base assumption is we're wrong and they're right which and that we blindly "follow him which is insulting - nothing but blind hatred on their part.

♡ 1

Jul 25
I hear ya - and I bet a lot of people feel the same, that there's blind hatred on 'the other side' as well. If you're interested in having better dialogue, my org has resources I can send your way if you'd like!

♡ 1

Jul 30
I try to have reasonable conversations but those who hate the President do not. Nothing makes them reasonable, nothing. All they care about is regaining power and attempting to finish what Obama started, redistribution of wealth and cradle-to-grave government.

♡ 2

Right column

Sep 15
-ALL TRUMP SUPPORTERS ARE WHITE SUPREMACISTS-

#ISaidWhatISaid

#BloodOnYourHands   #InsecureRacist
#WhiteNationalist   #RacistPOS

I said what I said.

GIF

♡ 1

Sep 16
What makes you say that?

♡ 1

Sep 17
Trump should have been cancelled when:

-the Central Park 5 were exonerated
-birtherism
-he called Mexicans rapists
-called for a Muslim ban
-claimed to be "the law & order candidate" (and other dog whistles)

Jul 24, 2018
Trump opening his campaign on a racist platform alone should have disqualified him in the heart of every voter. But many white people, yet again, were/are willing to throw people of color under the bus if they believe they have something to gain. I'm not sorry; reap what you sow. twitter.com/

Show this thread

♡ 1

Sep 19
Yeah, I also see all those things as very racist, and feel the frustration of having that not be a disqualifier in people's minds. I'm not making the jump with you though, but am very curious about where you're coming from. What do you think the black or latinx Trump supporter...

♡ 2

Sep 19
hears when you are calling them white supremacists? What is your intention / motivation behind making that accusation? Thx in advance for explaining.

♡ 1

Sep 19
I don't care if I offend anyone who supports white supremacy, no matter their demographic.

♡ 1   ♡ 1

Annex 2: examples of conversations on Facebook

..Strawwoman 😉 ...no one is saying desperate people don't need help...but a bleeding heart eventually runs out of blood 🙂 (your explanation of them turning themselves in at the border as in accordance with BO's law was helpful...i wondered why people kept saying they were not illegal, thank you)

Like · Reply · Message · 4w   👍 1

Thank you for sharing your perspective! I appreciate the respectful and civil conversation. Just to follow up, what has shaped your perspective on the way you see immigration and asylum?

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

Appreciate you all sharing the way you view immigration. Would love to hear your individual insights on what experiences have influenced the way you see immigration. How do you see this issue affecting your families, communities, etc?

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

I listen to different new perspectives, and so my view is not the norm. But, I believe that the immigrants that are coming over are by and large much like our values. Families (we need younger children), workers, tax payers. I am 50 something n... See More

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

Thank you, for asking the question on my view of immigration. 1st I find it absolutely necessary to define what is immigration vs trespassing aliens or financial/economic refugees & individuals who actually apply and are where ... See More

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about how difficult it is to have constructive conversations with those who see things differently. We think polarization plays a big role in this. Here is some more info. http://bit.ly/2UYYCTB What do you think?

The Commons: FAQs

DOCS.GOOGLE.COM
The Commons - FAQs

Like · Reply · Message · 6w

#WarSawPacAntComingBac

Like · Reply · Message · 6w

I believe that everyone is entitled to an opinion and that free speech is a good thing. I believe that the polarization was based on the fact that there are those who do not respect the election process. I also believe there is a movement in this count... See More

Like · Reply · Message · 6w

PS, and I believe we should love one another and make allowances for being so human. LOL

Like · Reply · Message · 6w

One idea we have for more constructive conversations is to ask friends and relatives what experiences shape their opinion.This helps both parties to share their personal story instead of debating opinions as fact. If you are interested in discussing this more and having the opportunity to have constructive conversations online, I invite you to join https://www.facebook.com/groups/337499327124319/

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

[name] I appreciate your sentiments and ability to recognize some common ground between all of us. ❤️ Just wanted to pass along some resources I have found helpful in my political discussions, to help others better understand me and vice versa. If you check them out, let me know! Would love feedback on if they are of use to you or not. http://bitly.com/commonsresources

THE COMMONS
RESOURCES FOR ACTION FOR P
WHO WANT TO BUILD A STRONG
CIVIC FABRIC IN THE USA

DOCS.GOOGLE.COM
Resources for Civic Fabric

Like · Reply · Message · 3w

[name] We'd really like to thank you for joining and engaging in this conversation on The Commons Project page! We know that engaging in civil dialogue about political and social issues can be really difficult. We are a … See More

The Commons: FAQs

DOCS.GOOGLE.COM
The Commons - FAQs

Like · Reply · Message · 3w 😮 1

[name] thank you, I have added your documents to my drive.

Like · Reply · Message · 3w ❤️ 1

[name] They are full of hate and combative

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

[name] Thank you for sharing your perspective. I am a facilitator for The Commons Project. We are concerned about how difficult it has become to have constructive conversations about politics. One idea we have for better conversations with those who see things differently is to listen for the human behind the opinion. Ask, "Can you tell me more about where you are coming from on this?" If you try it, comment here and let me know how it goes.

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

[name] I just can't get a grip on why grown women and men put on vagina hats for a rally

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

[name] Well, they were cat ears, but there was some symbolism 😊 Perhaps ask those who participated in these rally to share why they chose to do so. Understanding the personal story behind a person's views can help encourage constructive conversation even when you don't agree.

Like · Reply · Message · 4w

The Commons Project [name] Thanks for joining the conversation at The Commons Project page. We are a group of concerned citizens working to challenge polarization and stop the trend of destructive divisions by encouraging constructive conversations. You can read more in our FAQs: http://bit.ly/2UYYCTB Let us know what you think.

[name] I love our law enforcement!! They deal with the worst parts of society and still get up every day and go to work.

Like · Reply · Message · 13w 👍 2

⌄ Hide 11 Replies

[name] I agree, police officers have a difficult job. I am concerned about the overuse of physical and lethal force by some. What do you think?

Like · Reply · Message · 13w

[name] I think that, as with any issue, there are individuals who are just brutal. There needs to be help for officers to decompress. To take a step back, they get battle weary just like soldiers. Also I think that people should follow the officers directions It isn't optional!

Like · Reply · Message · 13w 👍 2

[name] I agree that there needs to be help for officers to decompress and also better training. Mistakes will still happen, but there should be consequences for intentional brutality.

Like · Reply · Message · 13w

[name] must be nice to have that privilege

Like · Reply · Message · 13w

[name] What privilege are you referring to?

Like · Reply · Message · 13w

Annex 3: impact analysis for Twitter Intervention 5

We built a graph of candidate-retweets of seed handles. Each node on the graph is a candidate or a seed, and edges are drawn between seeds and candidates. (Fig. i)
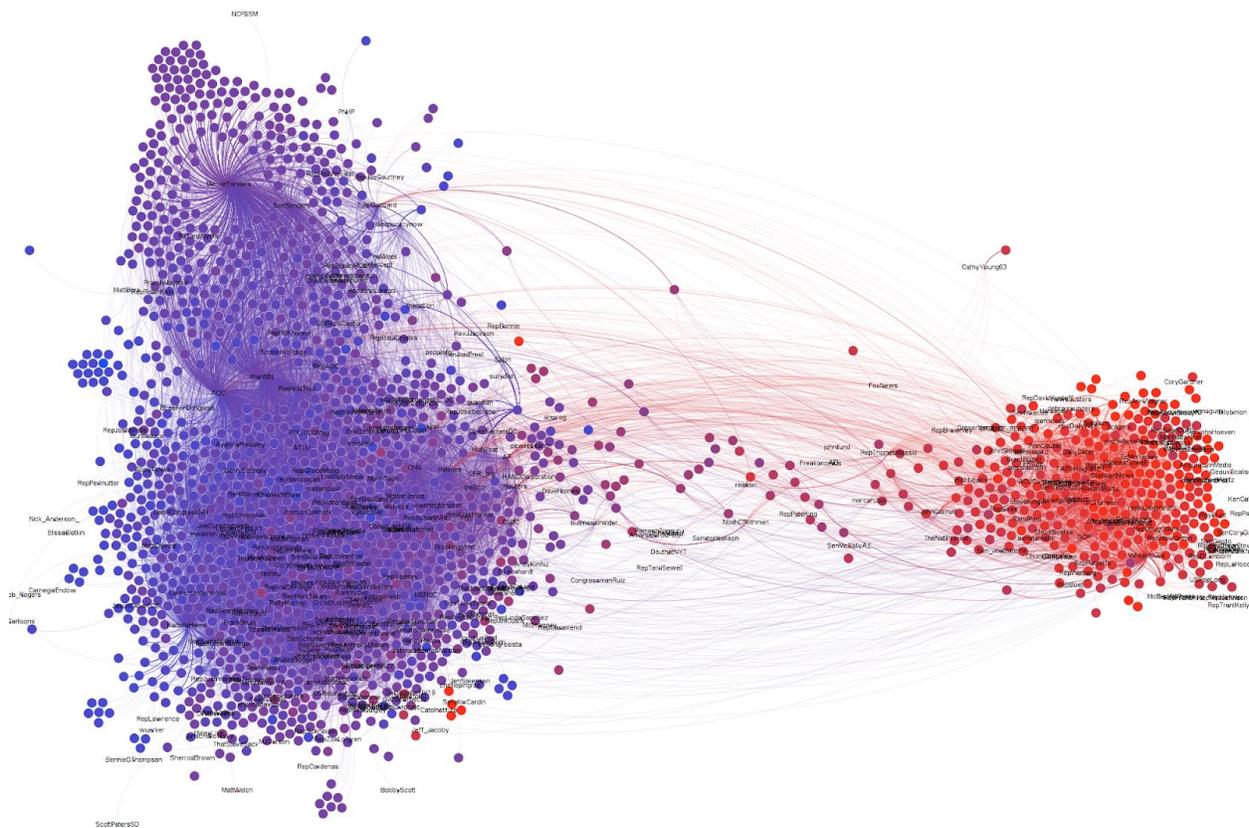

Figure i. - Node connections by retweet of seed handles, coloring based on node ideology. A clear polarization emerges across two axis - first, political right to left, then in the left cluster, a breakaway contingent emerges from the top defined by Bernie Sanders.

We then implemented a modularity algorithm (Fig. ii) on the nodes with their edges from before the intervention, to reveal community groupings undisturbed by our project. These groupings are

clusters that have higher numbers of connections within than with outside groups. The five major groupings were verified by sampling the seeds within each, and can be broken down into the following categories (see Fig. ii): Center and center-left media (pink); Center-left politicians and personalities (blue); Leftist cluster around Bernie Sanders (orange); Leftist cluster around AOC (gold); and, Right wing cluster (green).

Figure ii. The original graph colored by modularity class. Five clusters emerge: Center and center-left media (pink); Center-left politicians and personalities (blue); Leftist cluster around Bernie Sanders (orange); and, Leftist cluster around AOC (gold), Right wing cluster (green).

We then examined the number of edges internal to clusters and between clusters. Each edge is a retweet, and we conceptualize retweets as <u>endorsements</u>, because they boost a message to a

user's followers, and provide for no editorializing, as quote tweets do. We understand endorsements within a cluster to contribute to in-group cohesion, whereas cross-cluster endorsements contribute to cross-group understanding. We see rising in-group cohesion and falling cross-group understanding as a possible sign of heightened polarization.

Candidates in our control groups received no contact, and candidates in our treatment groups received an initial tweet from a facilitator and possibly a follow-on conversation depending on the candidate's responses. In Intervention 5, the overall quantity of retweets *rose* from before to after the intervention. With that in mind, here are some broad findings:
- In-Group: For all groups except one from before to after, the in-group retweets were lower in the treatment and were higher in the control.
    - The exception was the smallest cluster around AOC, in which in-group cohesion seemed to rise.
- Out-Group: Between nearly all groups, the opposite was true - change in retweets were higher in the treatment group, and lower in the control groups. The rise was notable between both Leftist and Center-left clusters and the Right wing cluster.
    - The exception was generally between the AOC cluster and other groups, in which change in retweets across groups were lower for the treatment group and higher for control groups. The change was most dramatic between the AOC cluster and the Right wing cluster.

Overall, this result suggests **the intervention had a positive effect on inter-group contact and reducing polarization**.

The exception is notable, and some significant learnings can be taken forward. We noticed in a separate graph of candidate use of hashtags analyzed in a similar fashion that the hashtag "#AOC" garnered significant use by right-wing hashtag users and few others before the intervention, who were joined by a large number of left-wing hashtag users after the intervention. We expect this is due to real-world events that precipitated a weaponization and then reclamation of the Congresswoman as a symbol. The specific patterns in the data, and a brief examination of the hashtag show a very toxic and polarizing conversation. Understanding this pattern of small-group polarization and specific-hashtag takeover can guide future iterations of the Commons project to see where interventions are most needed.
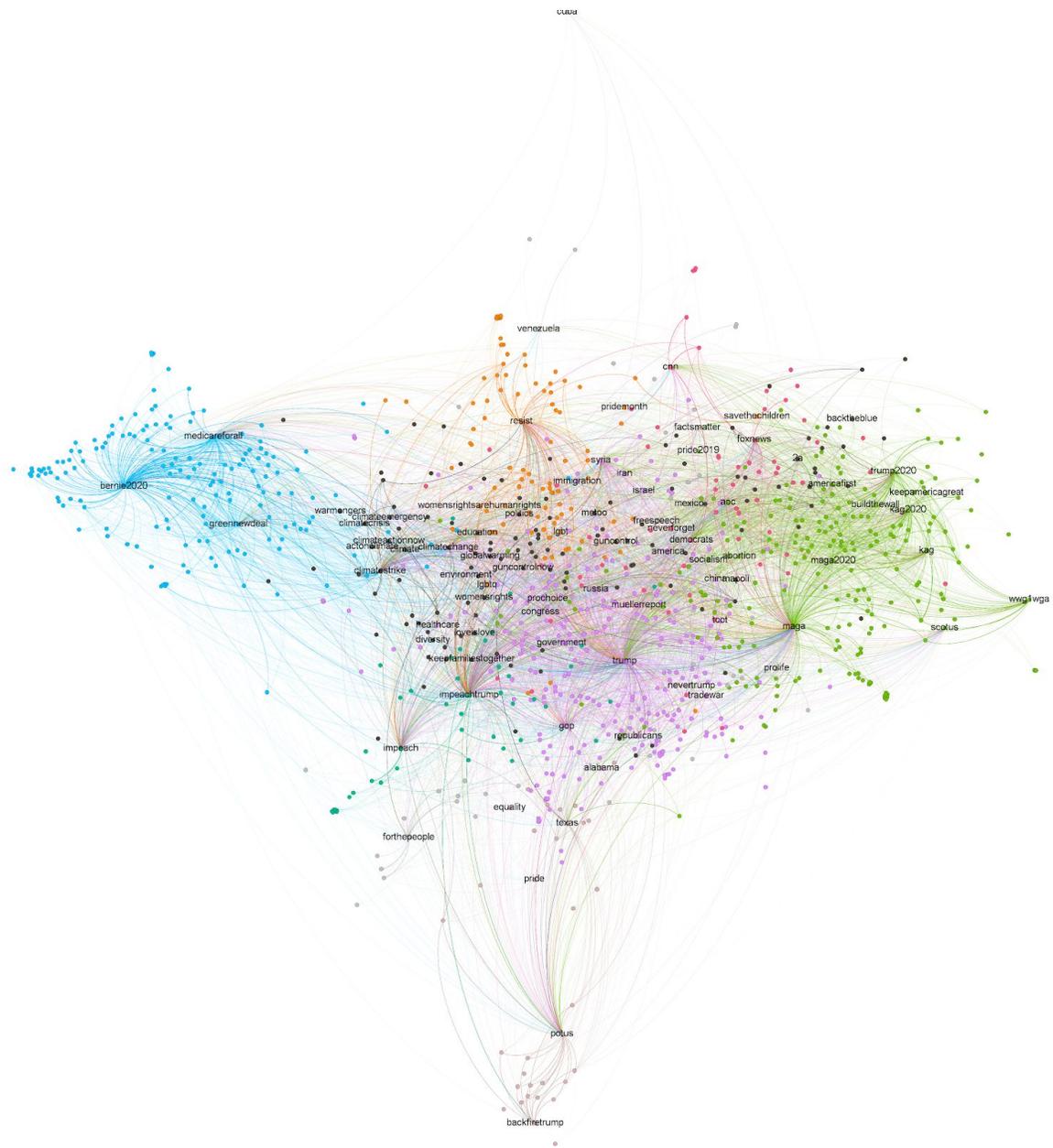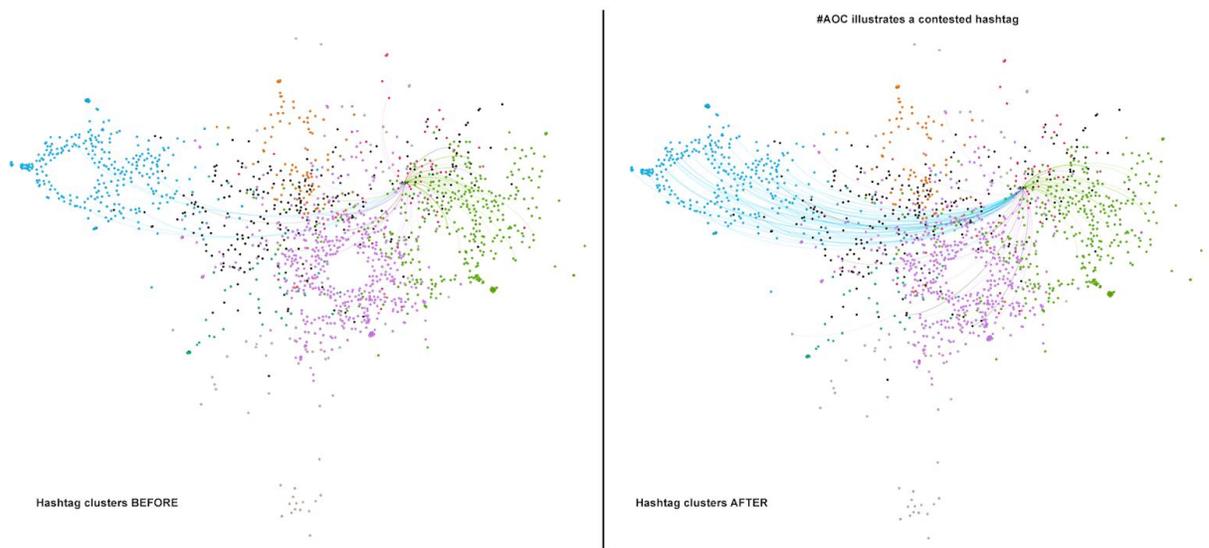
Figure iii - Hashtags by modularity class - distinct groupings emerge.

Figure iv - Examination of #AOC reveals characteristics of a hashtag highly contested between two extreme poles: High connections between two different groups, but low connections with other groups.

We then examined the data on a more granular level, looking at the change in retweet behavior for the subgroup of treatment candidates we had conversations with, specifically comparing conversations closed with "Invited to Action" versus those closed with "Stopped Responding." Overwhelmingly, this subgroup shows a higher rate of retweets within their own grouping among those who were "Invited to Action" compared to those who "Stopped Responding," with the Sanders Leftist cluster as an exception.
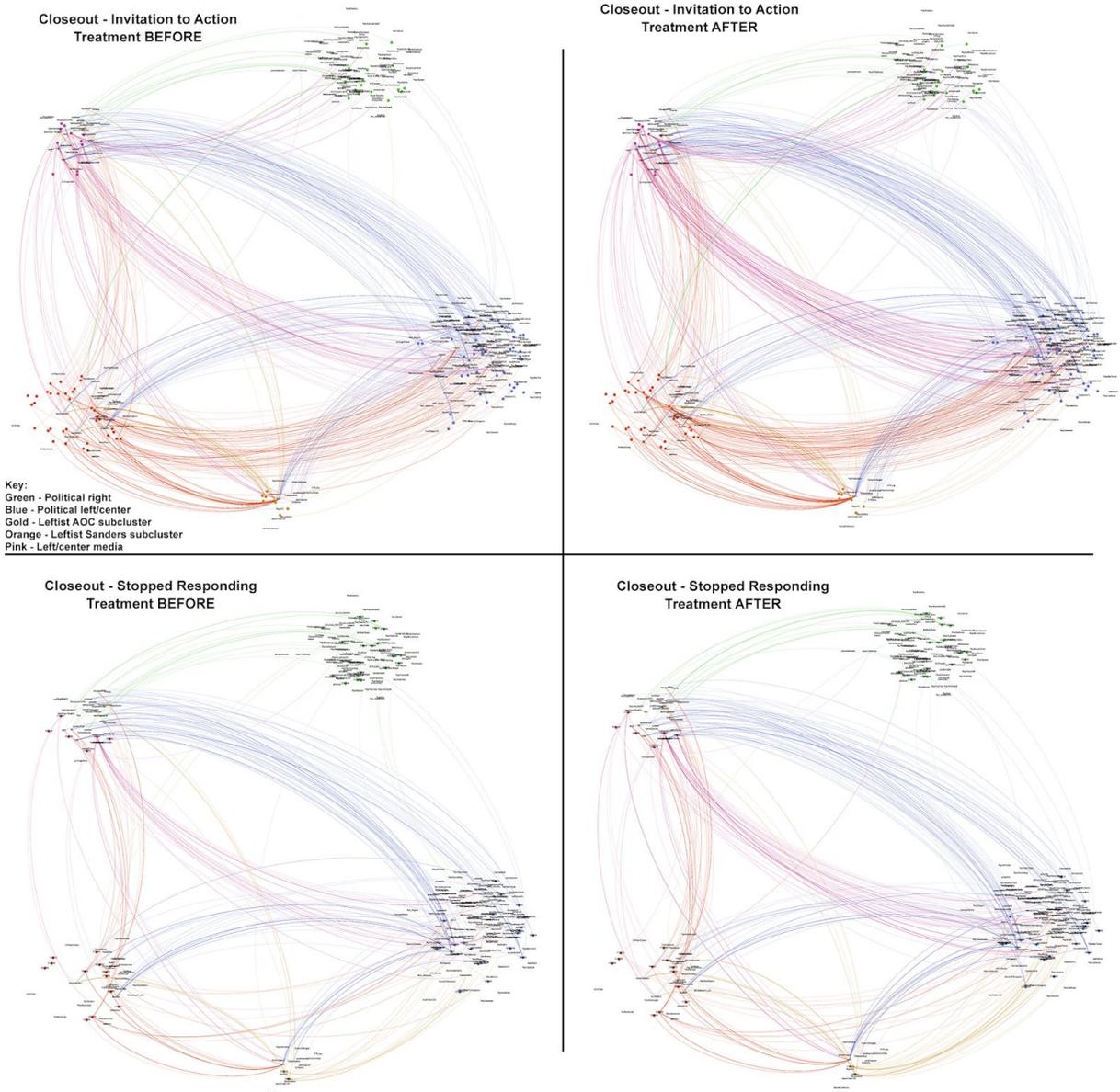
Figure v - Between-group connections of subgroups "Invited to Action" and "Stopped Responding."

The between-group conversations at this granular level require a bit more of a nuanced view. The results are mixed, with just over half the pairs having higher retweet rates after being "Invited to Action." It's notable that through this filter, most of those with higher rates of retweets after "Stopped Responding" are clusters including the AOC Leftists, and we previously discussed other exceptions with this grouping.

One interesting outcome is the noticeable rise in tweets between the Left-center cluster and the Right cluster for those that were invited to action (Fig. iv).
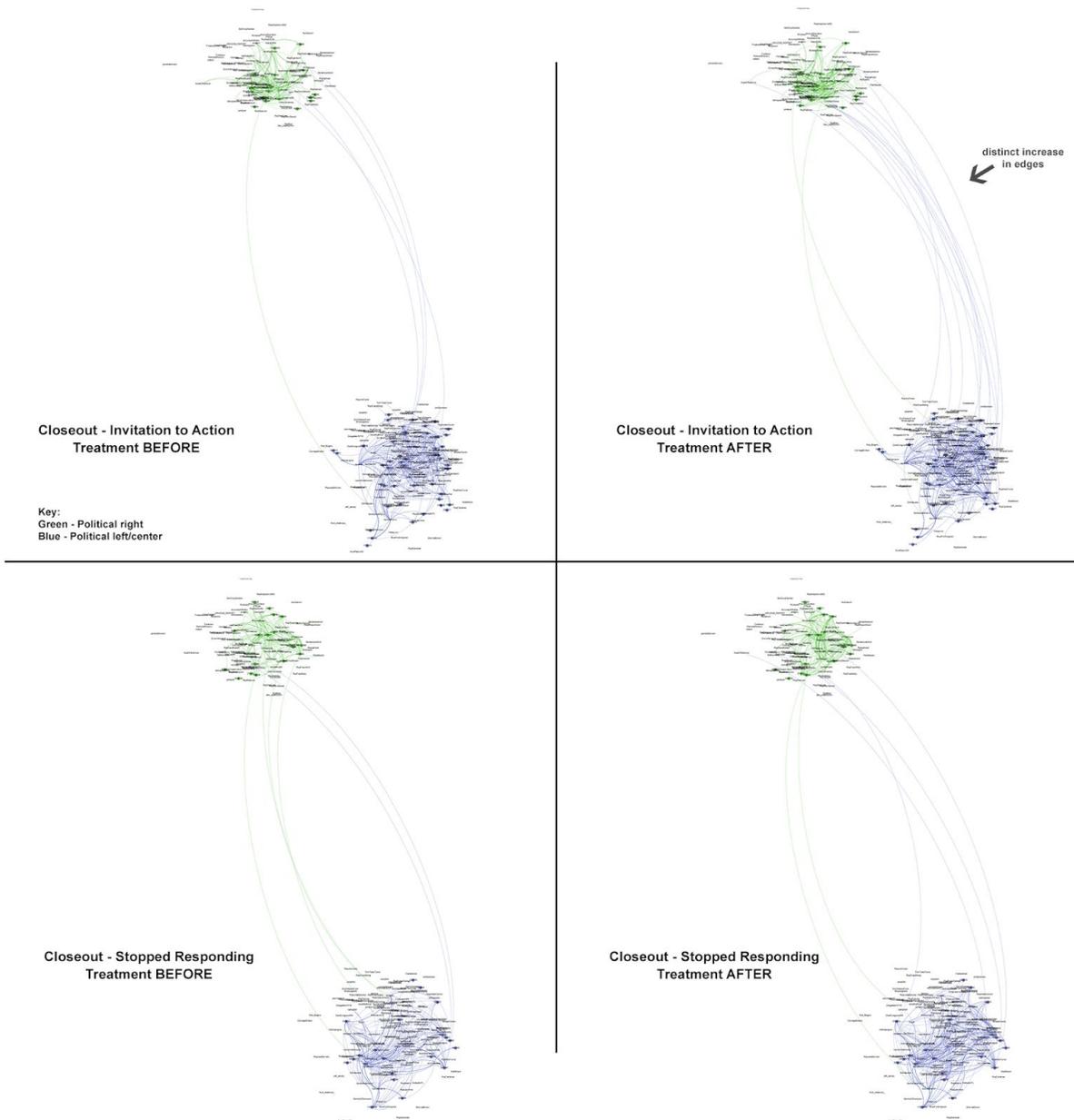
Figure vi - Edges for treatment nodes that were invited to action, zoomed in on political right to center/left retweets. An uptick in Center-left retweets of the right is immediately noticeable in the top left quadrant of this visual.

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