Investigating Independence vs. Control: Agenda-Setting in Russian News Coverage on Social Media

**Goal:** Test for strategic distraction by exploring whether agenda-setting is used by state-controlled vs. state-independent media outlets as a response to downtrends in the economy.

**Agenda-Setting: Setting News Coverage on Foreign Entities and the Economy in Relation**

- News on the Russian social media Platform VK
  - State-controlled: Russia Today (RT), TASS,
  - Independent: RBC, Meduza
  - Collected during time frame of 17.1-9.3.2018
  - 14,910 posts, distribution relatively uneven:
    - State-controlled: RT (7,632), TASS (3,555)
    - Independent: Meduza (1,900), RBC (1,823)
- International benchmark for Russian trading and economic performance
- Daily stock market closing prices for time frame 17.1-9.3.2018

**The Russian Media Landscape**

- Russian media ecosystem ≠ uniform propagandist system
- Agenda Setting in social media
  - Russia: social media became a relevant access point into digital media landscape

**Correlation Analysis: Experiments and Results**

- Post vs. Word Level
  - word level results oscillate around post level findings, exception: label CIS
- Impact of post length
- Manipulation of Time Variable
  - Mixed results for different time resolutions and time-lagged correlation analysis
- More coarse-grained time slices seem to help in capturing stock market trends

**Regression Analysis: Experiments and Results**

- Independence vs. Control // Country Label: not predictive
- VK corpus size, categorization?
- Considering each subset and country individually, time-lagged linear regression:
  - Independent: positive relations for North America and Mexico, inverse relations for the Near East, mixed relations Ukraine
  - State-controlled: inverse relations for the Near East, mixed relations Ukraine

**Qualitative Analysis**

- State-controlled
  - Fair amount of communication about military incidents, relevant political figures and moves, as well as Russia’s role in the matter
  - Concerning the Russian economy:
  - "Anti-Russian sanctions hit the Russian economy" like an "economic boomerang", doing Ukraine more harm than Russia
- Independent: Qualitative difference between the two independent outlets: RBC vs. Meduza
  - RBC tends to report more about Ukraine and provides a perspective that is closer to the state-controlled media outlets
- Meduza does not cover the topic Ukraine much, tend to focus on more positive events

**Conclusion**

**Strategic manipulation:** Indications for the use of targeted distraction as a strategy of manipulation in the VK corpus, using agenda-setting

**Independence vs. control:** Difference captured, qualitative difference between two independent news outlets

**and future work:**

- Collect a larger and more diverse dataset to further explore independence vs. control
- Investigate framing in VK Corpus: How are certain topics represented?
- Investigate how Russian media landscapes changes w.r.t. Russian invasion in Ukraine

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