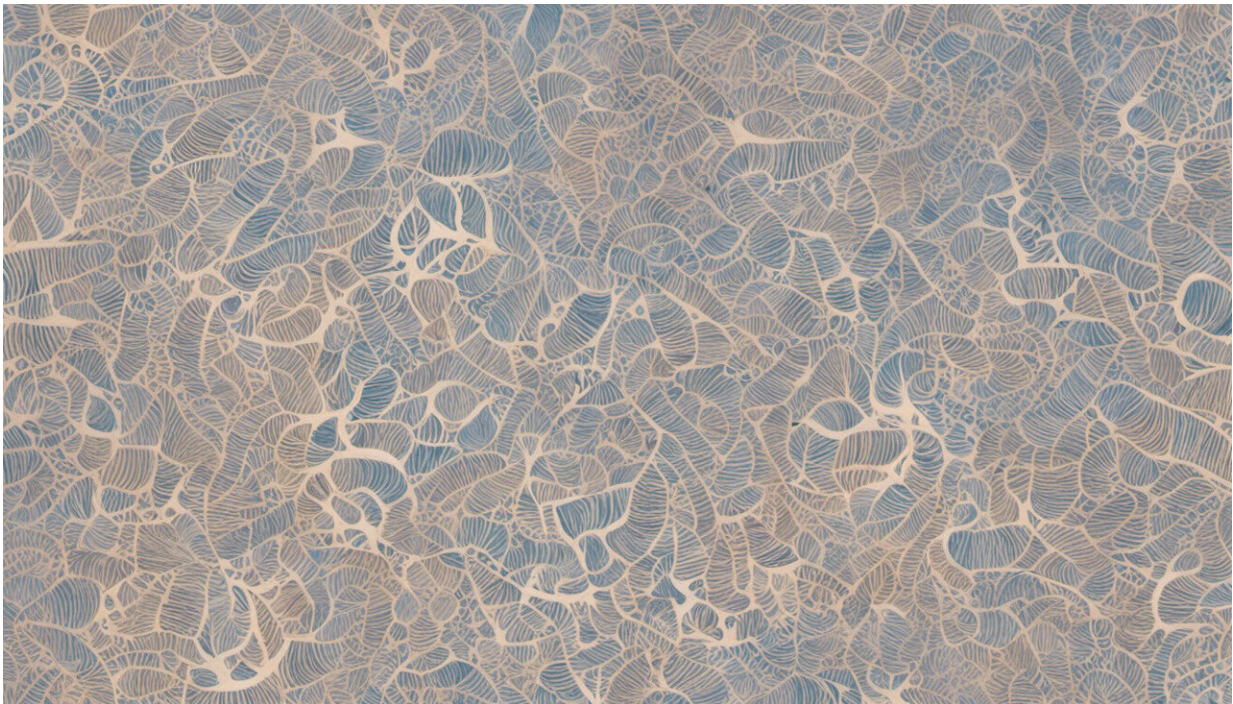


Researchers analyze use of social media to influence politics during uprising

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When the people of Puerto Rico took to the streets after a series of government corruption scandals this past July, a group of researchers took the opportunity to determine the role of social media in the organization and dissemination of the protests, marches and other activities that occurred.

The resulting set of data and analysis set the stage for the first academic study on social [media](#) and its influence on political uprising in Puerto Rico, according to researcher Alexis Santos, assistant professor of human development and [family studies](#) and demography and Social Science Research Institute cofunded faculty member at Penn State.

As the uprising began, resulting in the ousting of Puerto Rican Gov. Ricardo "Ricky" Rosselló, Santos contacted a colleague, Danilo Perez-Rivera, laboratory technician at the University of Puerto Rico—Medical Science Campus Institute of Neurobiology, about collecting Twitter data.

"As the protests began, Dr. Santos and I started to notice patterns in social media activity. I began collecting all data available, and produced some initial results that intrigued Dr. Santos to the extent of formalizing the work into an actual research project," said Perez-Rivera.

"We observed Puerto Ricans on the island and around the world engage in this social movement, mainly under the hashtag #RickyRenuncia (Ricky Resign), with a small counter movement under the hashtag #RickySeQueda (Ricky will stay)," Santos explained. "Our goal was to illustrate the magnitude and grassroots nature of the political movement's [social media](#) presence, as well as the characteristics and structures of both movements."

The researchers found that #RickyRenuncia was used approximately 1 million times in the period of analysis, while #RickySeQueda barely reached 6,000 tweets.

"We discovered the pervasiveness of cliques in the #RickySeQueda tweets, showing concentrations in these types of tweets dedicated to promoting support of Gov. Rosselló, while the #Ricky Renuncia tweets were much more distributed and decentralized with little to no interaction between authority groups," Santos explained. "Surprisingly,

we also observed almost 40 percent of all geo-located tweets originated from persons living outside of the island."

The researchers also analyzed tweets from suspected pro-government troll accounts and how posts were coordinated, becoming what appeared to be an echo chamber of crafted support for the government. The data confirmed that these posts seemed to be a continuation of an alleged public opinion manipulation campaign by suspicious accounts that appeared to be acting in coordination with government officials, and how they were trying to move the needle to favor the government.

"Social media affords all of the citizenry an effective platform for organization, but as we found, not all movements are created equal," Perez-Rivera said. "Decentralized distributions of activity, as was the case of #RickyRenuncia, are more successful, while centralized practices, such as those employed by #RickySeQueda, tend to be ineffective."

"Social media is becoming more and more crucial in politics," said Santos, who added that, by documenting this case, the researchers hope to provide clues that would help in the development of tools that can identify this type of apparent influencing behavior in the future.

The other researcher on the project was Christopher Torres-Lugo, graduate student at the University of Indiana Bloomington. The research is currently published on *SocArXiv*.

More information: Danilo T Perez-Rivera et al. Engaging for Puerto Rico: #RickyRenuncia (and #RickySeQueda) during El Verano del 19 and digital identities, *SocArXiv* (2019). [DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/wdk9u](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/wdk9u)

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