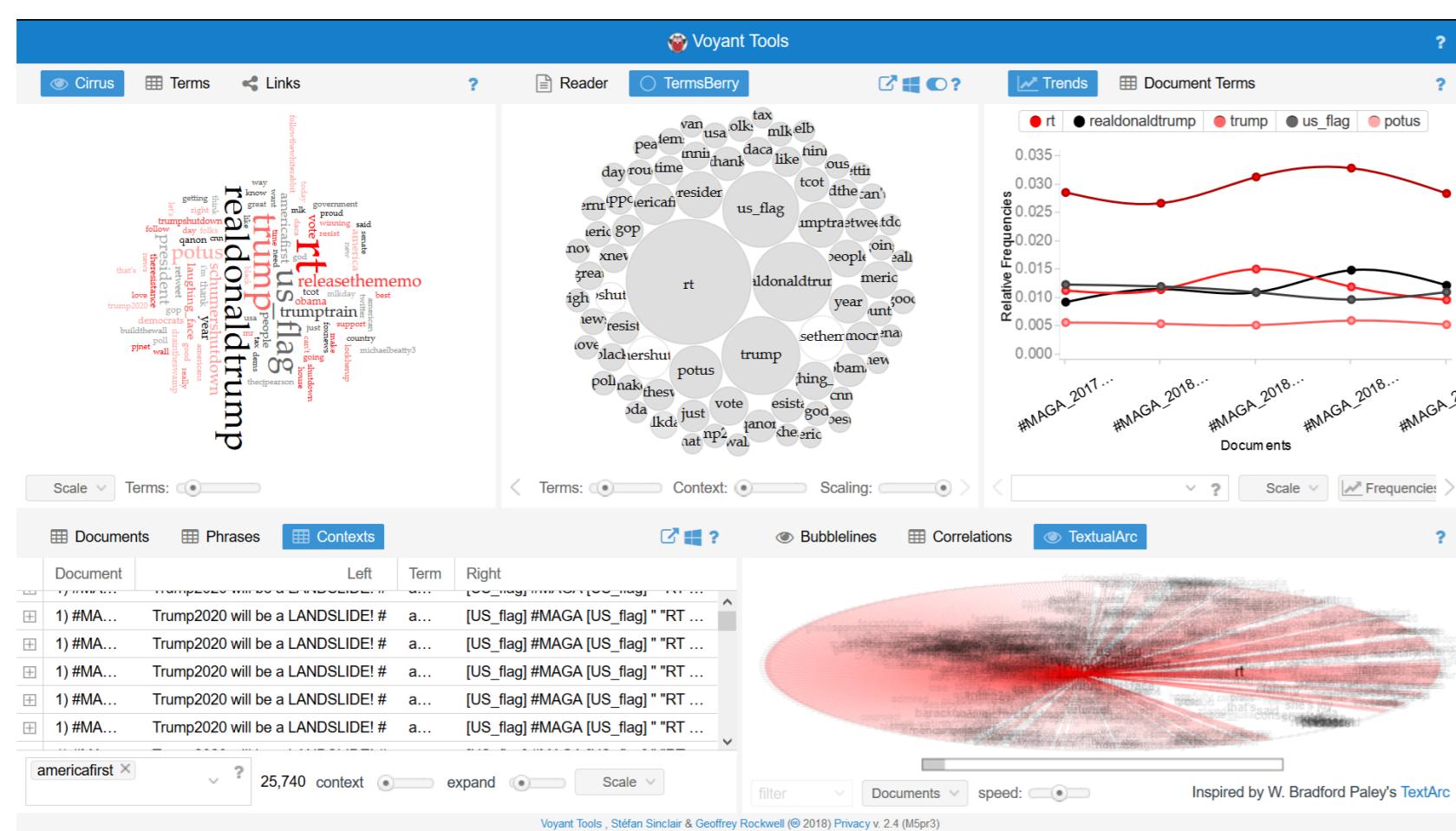


INTRODUCTION

The iconic slogan of Trump's presidential campaign has proved remarkably versatile, capable of being taken up by a diverse number of groups for a diverse number of purposes. Its lack of semantic precision allows "Make America Great Again" to act as a blank canvas for the projected hopes of Trump's followers: as journalist Conor Lynch notes, "to an evangelical Christian, it stands for making America devout and dogmatic again; to a blue-collar worker in the Rust Belt, it means making America a manufacturing powerhouse again."¹ The objective of the "Shades of #MAGA" project is to gain insight into the slogan's discursive construction on Twitter, a key site of its circulation and use.

METHODS

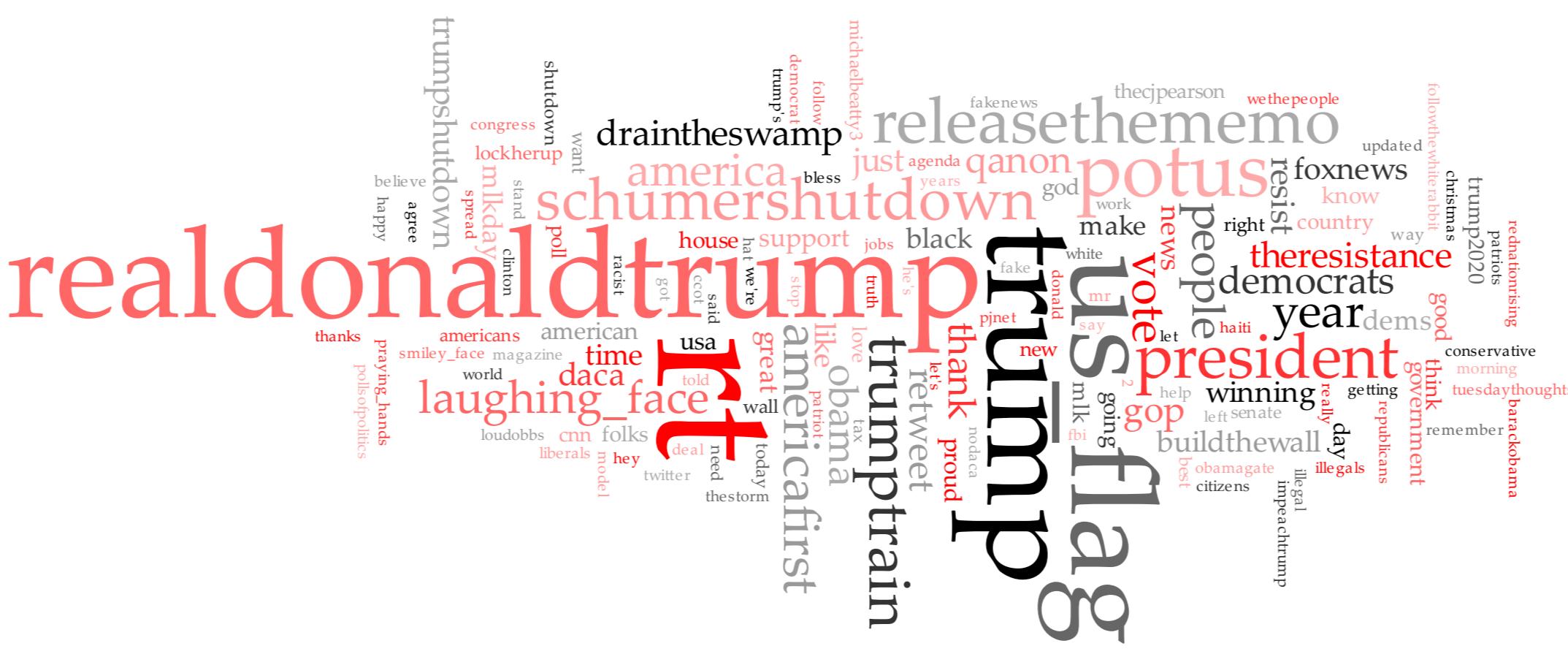
The project is an exploratory visual analysis of Twitter data containing the #MAGA (“Make America Great Again”) hashtag. It is being undertaken in two phases: the first was during the Fall 2017 offering of ARST 575H: Information Visualization and Visual Analytics, and the second phase is ongoing. Phase 1 involved the textual and social network analysis of twitter data using Voyant, Gephi, and Jigsaw2. Although the results of both sets of analyses were promising, a consequential error in the harvesting of the tweet content (see Data Collection below) necessitated a second phase of the project. Phase 2 is currently underway with a new dataset; text analysis with Voyant is in progress, and semantic and network analyses are also planned.



Screenshot of the phase 2 corpus in Voyant, a web-based text analysis tool

DATA COLLECTION

The dataset consists of data from tweets referencing the hashtag **#makeamericagreatagain** and its more popular shortened version, **#MAGA**. The tweets were harvested over a period of five consecutive dates for phase 1, and for five non-consecutive, representatively sampled dates in phase 2. Important events, such as the anniversaries of Trump's electoral victory (November 8th) and inauguration (January 20th), were included. I used a Python script from Alexander Galea to gather the tweets;² however, changes by Twitter to the allowed character length of tweets during data collection for phase 1 resulted in the tweet content of the dataset being truncated (i.e. only registering the first 140 characters). For phase 2, I updated the script to capture the full text of the tweet. A comparison of truncated and non-truncated tweets in phase 2 showed that the most frequently used words were not impacted but variations could be seen after the top 15 words.



A word cloud displaying the 145 most frequently used words overall in phase 2 of the project reinforces what we might expect to find. What is surprising is the increased visibility since phase 1 of conservative conspiracy theory-esque hashtags like #rednationrising, #qanon, #followthewhiterabbit and #thestorm.

SHADES OF #MAGA

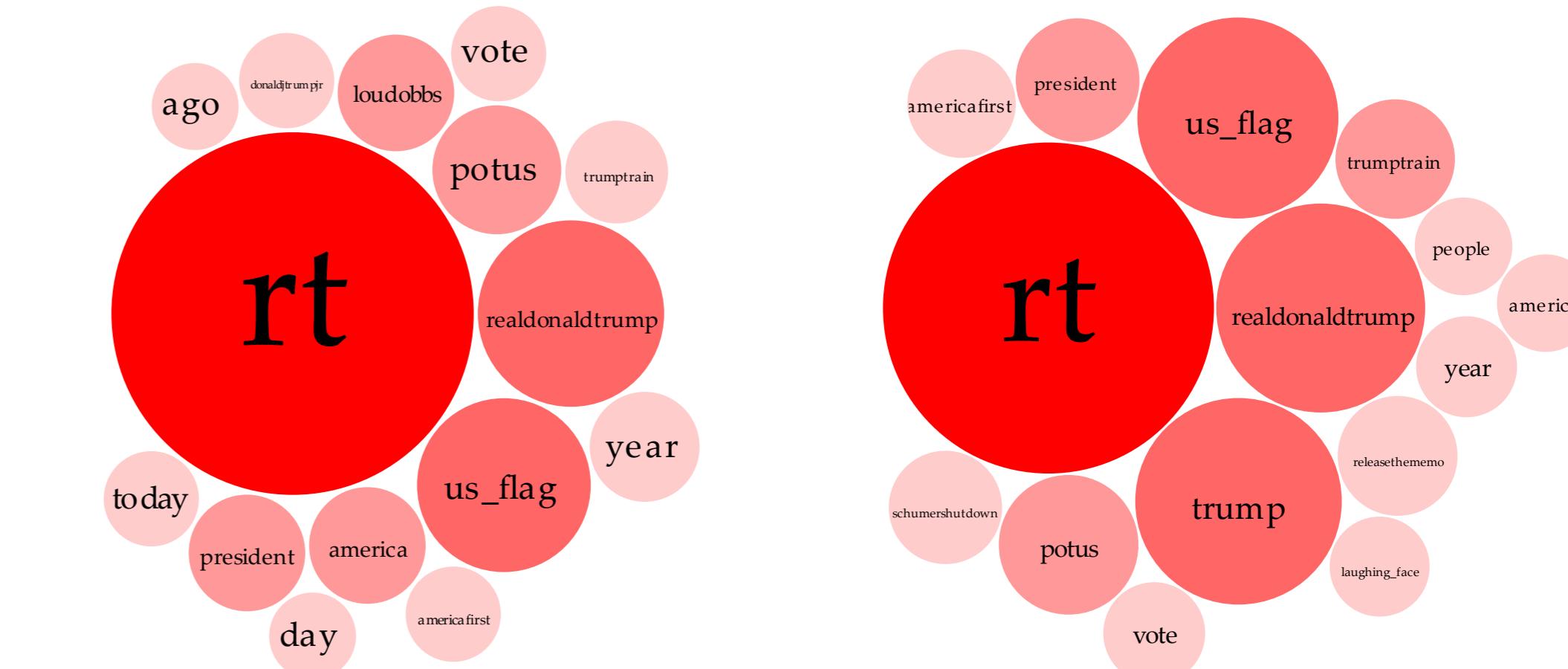
KEY FINDINGS

From the visualizations, a number of preliminary observations can be made:

- the overrepresentation of the retweet (“RT”) acronym within the corpus suggests that – rather than being a site of new knowledge creation – the #MAGA hashtag tends to function more as an echo chamber
- the words most frequently used with the #MAGA hashtag communicate little about the values or ideas associated with it beyond a generic – and jingoistic – patriotism already implied by the slogan itself; even the political party affiliated with the slogan is unclear based on word frequency alone
- indeed, if it can be said to mean anything, the #MAGA hashtag seems to be a reflection of Trump’s public persona – big on self-referentiality, hazy on specifics
- oddly enough given his prodigious use of Twitter, Trump himself did not use the #MAGA hashtag once in the ten days of data collection – in spite of the golden opportunity to reinforce his message on both anniversaries

DATA PREPARATION

The collected data was output to a JSON file; I modified a Python script by Sean Dolinar to export the required fields to CSV.³ Because, as part of the data collection process, diacritics and emoticons were escaped as Unicode characters (e.g. “é” = “\xe9”) I wrote a Python script to restore as much information as possible (e.g. “us_flag” for the American flag emoticon), and to remove URLs and convert HTML entities (though by default they are filtered out by Voyant’s stopword list). In phase 2, I refined the cleaning script to leave more words intact.



Exported from Voyant, a “terms berry” (bubble plot) illustrating the relative weight of the fifteen most frequently used keywords in the corpus from phase 1 (left) and phase 2 (right) shows that they remain fairly constant, in spite of the truncated tweet content in phase 1. Beyond about 10 or so terms, however, keywords start to diverge, changing in response to contemporaneous events (e.g. “releasethememo”). “RT” is by far the most heavily used term, followed by @realDonaldTrump and the US flag emoticon.

LIMITATIONS

The reliance upon visualizations grounded in word frequency, though revelatory in their own way, has led to a somewhat superficial engagement with the project objective: because the sense in which most words are intended can be ambiguous, **semantic analysis** of the tweet text would enrich the findings considerably. Regrettably, free and open-source tools like those in Voyant and Jigsaw2 were stymied by the size of the corpus. I isolated and analyzed a smaller subset of the tweet corpus that contained the keyword “white” using Jigsaw2 to investigate the degree to which **#MAGA is being mobilized by white nationalists and white supremacists**; here topic modelling yielded interesting insights. The omission of non-textual information – photos, videos – similarly diminishes a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of #MAGA, but is more difficult to analyze at scale.

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