AIDS-dissidents in the social networking service ‘VKontakte’

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Who are AIDS-dissidents?

- AIDS-dissidents or AIDS-denialist movement: people, who deny the existence of HIV-virus or connection between HIV and AIDS. They believe that ‘HIV’ and ‘AIDS’ were made up as a result of international conspiracy.
- AIDS-dissidents exist almost in every country in the world.
- They are engaged both in online and offline activities
- They are well represented in Russia, especially in some areas such as Irkutsk
- There are lot of online activities going on in this movement– web portals, groups in SNS etc.

Why study AIDS-dissidents?

- It is a serious problems for public health because:
- Influence of AIDS-denialists leads to:
  - refusal of some people of HIV testing
  - risk sexual practices
  - antiretroviral therapy refusal (that slows down AIDS development among HIV positives) and other practices.
- Which results in more deaths from AIDS and further spread of HIV among the population!
- There are some estimates that around 10% of people who need necessary HIV treatment do not take medicines because they believe in AIDS-denialists' tenets
- Online presence of AIDS-dissidents is growing

Object of study

- The most numerous group of AIDS-dissidents in ‘Vkontakte’ SNS – around 13 000 people
- There are 219 topics in this group of various nature – legal issues, pregnancy issues, how to deal with medical institutions, ‘facts from participants’ lives that disprove the HIV ‘orthodox’ theory’ and many others.
- The most active and hot discussions usually take place on the group “Wall” part.

Research objectives:

1. Gaining general descriptive network characteristics of the group
2. Construction of the map of friendships with the aid of the ‘VKminer’ program developed in our lab.
3. Determination of ‘peripheral’ members of the group under the assumption that they are not ‘hard-core’ AIDS-dissidents, and, consequently, are POTENTIALLY more susceptible to interventions directed to dissuading them from AIDS-dissidents’ beliefs.
4. Determination of how the group interacts with the newcomers.
5. Gaining knowledge on how people become AIDS-dissidents

RQ: Determination of ‘peripheral’ members of the group

- Measuring centrality of all members in friendships network. It is assumed that the less the centrality’s value of a network member then more peripheral this member is. For finding out peripheral members it is useful to determine all centrality measures - *degree, betweenness, closeness, Page Rank, eigenvector.* It is necessary to determine the threshold below which a member is defined as peripheral.
- Calculation of each network member’s clustering coefficient under assumption that the less a network member’s clustering coefficient the more peripheral this member is.

RQ: Determination of 'peripheral' members of the group (cont'd)

- Calculation of each network member's clustering coefficient under assumption that the less a network member's clustering coefficient the more peripheral this member is.
- Community detection. After determination of different clusters in the group we can classify them as 'strong clusters' (high density) and 'weak clusters '- low density and weak ties with strong clusters.' It is assumed that being a member of a week cluster can be a measure of peripheral status of the network member.

RQ: Determination of 'peripheral' members of the group (cont'd)

- Data collection on communicative activity of the group members (number of posts, number of comments received to posts, number of comments to other members' posts, number of 'likes' received by a group member, number of 'likes' that a group member gives). (This will be done with another program developed in our lab).
- Communicative activity can be an indicator how strongly or weakly a group member is involved in the group. These data will be added to the map of friendships and juxtaposed with other measures of determining of peripheral members, e.g. measures of members' centrality

RQ: Determination of how the group interacts with the newcomers.

- This task will be realized by analyzing content of the posts and comments.
- It will allow to determine rhetorical strategies used by the AIDS-dissidents for recruiting newcomers in their rows.

RQ: Gaining knowledge on how people become AIDS-dissidents.

- Conducting 60 semi-structured interviews with HIV+ members of the group. Theoretical sampling will be used.
- How and why HIV+ become AIDS-dissidents (online and offline factors)
- How HIV+ AIDS-dissidents behave in real world (e.g. don't disclose their status to their sexual partners, persuade other other people not to test for HIV)
- Formulation of qualitatively grounded hypotheses for quantitative comparative study of HIV+ dissidents and HIV+ non-dissidents

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