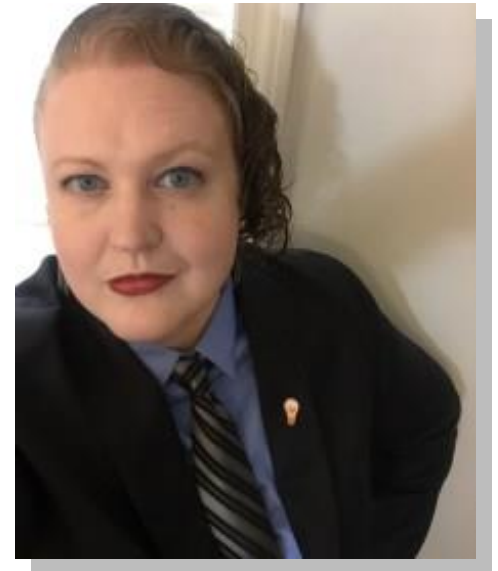# CoCo Seminar Series
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Pandemics, Protests, and Publics: Demographic Activity and Engagement on Twitter in 2020

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Online (Zoom meeting link available on http://coco.binghamton.edu/)

When researchers collect and aggregate social media data, they are making explicit decisions about the populations and behaviors under study. However, there is little available guidance to ensure that these methodological choices are conceptually and empirically grounded. For example, how should researchers conceptualize a topical sample of social media content? Can it be understood as a self-contained world? Can we interpret individual accounts as participating in the same discourse? Should we disaggregate specific mechanisms of user activity and engagement? In short: when do researchers need to consider variation in user experience and behavior, and when can they meaningfully aggregate over such behavior? Leveraging a panel of 1.6 million Twitter accounts matched to U.S. voting records we provide empirical guidance on these questions. We focus on the first nine months of 2020, giving particular attention to the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining the demographics, activity, and engagement of 800,000 American adults who collectively posted nearly 300 million tweets, this work paints a picture of Twitter as a fluid, contextual environment best conceptualized as networked publics and characterized by enormous variety in user identity, activity, and engagement. While there are no self-contained "Twitter publics" around which perfect boundaries can be drawn, our findings provide valuable empirical guidance to researchers grappling with the conceptual implications of their methodological choices.

Dr. Sarah Shugars is a computational political scientist, developing new methods in natural language processing, network analysis, and machine learning in order to examine questions of how people express their political views, reason about political issues, and engage with others around matters of common concern. They are currently a Faculty Fellow at NYU's Center for Data Science (CDS) and an affiliated Research Fellow in the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. They received their Ph.D. from Northeastern's Network Science program in Spring 2020.

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