

Twitter, City Slickers, and Political Vigor: Competing Dialectal Landscapes During Occupy Wall
Street

Erik Brown

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Professors Swinth and Hernandez

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I. Introduction:

“It's easy to think of things that need to be done, but they all have a prerequisite, namely, a mass popular base that is committed to implementing it.”

- *Noam Chomsky, Occupy, 2012*

On September 17th, 2011, hundreds of activists gathered around Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan to advocate for a radical restructuring of our socioeconomic system. The demonstration itself lacked formal leadership; however, the activists were all able to coalesce around the title of the protest, Occupy Wall Street.

Inspired by this movement in New York, people facing similar issues across the country gathered together to form their own occupy protests in over five hundred cities and even gained popularity outside of the US making it one of the largest protests to date. At its peak, the movement boasted over five million protestors across the globe. However, New York City was unique as the starting point of this movement and in many ways its head. An organizational body, the New York City General Assembly, was created to help organize the movement in the city as well as be a model and supporter of similar movements across the globe. This body would also publish and disseminate documents that came directly from the movement's participants throughout the occupation.

Apart from its size, this movement was notable on account of its use of a new form of communication through social media. Between October 1st, 2011, and February 15th, 2012, over six million messages that explicitly mentioned the movement were posted and shared on the social media platform Twitter alone. As a result of the massive scale of both the on-the-ground protests and the online discussions, two distinct spaces of conversation began to develop. This then leaves us wondering what the key messages and topics of these two spaces were and how

they potentially impacted one another. Ultimately, Twitter discussions embodied some of the sentiments of the on-the-ground movement, but the two existed as separate communities in terms of the content of their discussions. While on the ground, the movement was able to focus itself on a few key issues, messages, and demands due to the organizational structure of the New York General Assembly, online the discussion was disorganized and unable to reach consensus on many key topics such as strategy, theory, and goals, due to its lack of a rallying voice. This also left the discussion online ripe to infiltration by outsiders and dissidents who would use the same hashtags and keywords to spread their own messages as well as speak negatively about the movement.

II. Background:

OWS was a protest movement against economic inequality and the influence of money in politics. Gary Gerstle outlines how the movement grew from just an idea by founders of the anticapitalist newspaper *Adbusters*, Kalle Lasn and Micah White, to the movement we now know today. Due to the crash of 2008, many young people with their career aspirations on hold were forced to work intermittently for less pay. As a result, they turned to political organizing in the form of mobilizing against municipal budget cuts and sought ways to reimpose regulation on the financial markets which led them to such disarray after the crash.¹ Lasn and White would eventually spread the word about a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest corporate influence on democracy, the lack of legal consequences for those who brought about the global crisis of monetary insolvency, and an increasing disparity in wealth through an *Adbusters* blog post, on July 13, 2011.² Then on September 17th, 2011, hundreds of protestors gathered in lower

¹ Gerstle, G. *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era*. The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era. Oxford University Press, 2022.

² "#OCCUPYWALLSTREET: A shift in revolutionary tactics". *Adbusters*. Archived from the original on November 15, 2011. Retrieved March 8, 2012.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20111115012739/http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>

Manhattan to advocate for a reduction in the influence of corporations on politics, a more balanced distribution of income, more and better jobs, bank reform, the forgiveness of student loan debt, and the alleviation of foreclosure under the mantle of Occupy Wall Street. One survey of these protestors by Ruth Milkman found that white, highly educated young adults were overrepresented among the on-the-ground OWS participants. Furthermore, many of these participants were facing issues of under-employment, layoffs, and carrying substantial debt, especially student loan debt. These factors likely influenced their politics, as the same report found that many “were deeply skeptical of the mainstream political system as an effective vehicle for social change,” but remained politically active and engaged anyways.³

Some, however, argue that the history of OWS spans even further than Lasn and White. For these people, rather than being the result of specific circumstances during the late 2000s and early 2010s, OWS was the culmination of years of oppression and class warfare. Noam Chomsky published his book *Occupy*, which argues that OWS was a reaction by members of the working and middle classes to the “class war” that had been waged against them by the upper class who controlled the commercial sector since the 1970s. During that time, the nation's wealth became increasingly concentrated among a tiny percentage of the population, primarily those in control of the financial sector, while the rest of the population suffered higher workloads, unsustainable debt, a weakening benefits system, and stagnating incomes and real wages.⁴ Offering further historical perspective in 2020, Ronald Mendel published his essay “The Occupy Wall Street Movement in the American Radical Tradition,” which outlined the similarities between OWS and other American social movements such as the late Nineteenth Century Populist movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left in the 1960s, the Anti-Nuke movement in the 1970s

³ MILKMAN, Ruth & Luce, Stephanie & LEWIS, Penelope. (2014). *Changing The Subject: Occupy Wall Street's Achievements and Prospects In Comparative Perspective*, pp 4.

⁴ Chomsky, Noam, *Occupy*, pp 8. Westfield, New Jersey: Zuccotti Park Press, 2013.

and the Anti-Globalisation movement at the turn of the century. Mendel argues that OWS's critiques, organization, objectives, and strategies can all be linked to previous American radical movements. In drawing from all these previous traditions OWS, “ambitiously sought to build a “movement of movements” against multiple forms of oppression, and in the process demonstrated in its day to day operations that another liberated world was possible.”⁵

Twitter is a social media platform that started in 2006. Its most distinctive feature is the hard limit of 140 characters that a user can use per public post, or tweet. Users are not limited by what file types they can share, however, as tweets can and often do contain links, videos, images, and gifs, for example. For these reasons, Twitter developed its own sort of ecosystem of messages that would often prioritize multimedia sources, and users would have to adjust their tweets to be both concise and effective, given their character limitations. In September 2011, the month when the occupation of New York City began, Twitter boasted that it had over 100 million users worldwide. This number would only continue to grow exponentially as, on March 21, 2012, Twitter celebrated its sixth birthday and announced that it had 140 million users and 340 million tweets per day. This was a 40% increase in only six months, proving the website's massive scale and influence during this time. An abundance of research also points to the idea that OWS participants used Twitter extensively during this time.⁶

III. Literature Review:

There exists robust literature on Occupy Wall Street (OWS) from a historical and sociological perspective and the role of social media in the movement, as well as computational studies of social media data during and around the time of OWS. Both of these provide useful insight on where future research ought to go but also have their own unique weaknesses, which I will

⁵ Mendel, Ronald. 2020. “The Occupy Wall Street Movement in the American Radical Tradition.” pp 27

⁶ Wasserman, Todd. "Twitter Says It Has 140 Million Users". Mashable. March 21, 2012.
<https://mashable.com/archive/twitter-has-140-million-users>

correct with this research. While existing literature has observed the conversations occurring online and on the ground as separate, few have chosen to look at how the two may have impacted and been impacted by each other. This research will address that gap.

In their essay, “Social Media and Social Movements”, authors Dustin Kidd and Keith McIntosh outline the three dominating theoretical perspectives on the impact of social media on collective action: techno-optimism, pessimism, and ambivalence. Each of these perspectives can be used to understand social media's impact on collective action.

Kidd and McIntosh argue in favor of an ambivalent approach, which, prioritizing the weighing of the evidence of a specific situation, argues that the link between social movement success and social media is tenuous at best and a two-edged sword at worst.⁷ Researcher Zeynep Tufekci also supports this perspective in her book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. In it she argues “digital tools are powerful instruments for organizing and for public expression, but they are not sufficient to bring about political change,” citing a mix of theoretical thinking with firsthand experience from nearly all the leftist anti-authoritarian movements of the past five decades.⁸ The techno-ambivalent approach, however, overlooks the importance of social media on social movements. One study, “How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks,” headed by John Jost, found that “structural characteristics of online social networks... have important implications for information exposure and the success or failure of organizational efforts.”⁹ This implies that the impact of social media on the success of a movement cannot be so

⁷ Kidd, Dustin, and Keith McIntosh. “Social Media and Social Movements.” *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 9 (2016): 785–94. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12399>.

⁸ Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, pp 8. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.

⁹ Jost, John T., Pablo Barberá, Richard Bonneau, Melanie Langer, Megan Metzger, Jonathan Nagler, Joanna Sterling, and Joshua A. Tucker. “How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks.” *Political Psychology* 39, no. S1 (2018): 85–118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12478>.

quickly overlooked as so many in the techno-ambivalent camp tend to do. Practically speaking, this approach is also not very useful. While being logically cautious before jumping to any wide-sweeping conclusions, this approach does not allow for predictions on how social media will impact a movement.

Other approaches are able to fill in those gaps and hypothesize about social media's impact. In Manuel Castells' *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, he states that social media gives the power of communication to its programmers and users rather than oligarchs like in the past, arguing in favor of a techno-optimist perspective.¹⁰ This hypothesis is seemingly supported by some studies, such as one study by Hyesun Hwang and Kee-Ok Kim found that "social media improved the social capital which moderates the relationship between social media use and social movement participation."¹¹ If one were to adopt such an approach when analyzing OWS, they might predict that social media allowed for a more diverse set of voices to participate in the movement and shape its message. Further analysis would be needed to confirm this hypothesis. Despite Castells' very prominent writing and Hwang and Kim's study, some in the field remain unconvinced, and these conversations continue to this day.

A group of researchers headed by Helen Margetts at the University of Oxford express their dissent with the techno-optimist view in their book *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action* in 2017, outlining how, as people go about their daily lives, they are bombarded with political information and invited to undertake smaller acts of political participation (liking, sharing, tweeting, retweeting, following, uploading, viewing, signing and so

¹⁰ Castells, Manuel, 1942-. *Networks of Outrage and Hope : Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2012.

¹¹ Hwang, Hyesun, and Kee-Ok Kim. "Social Media as a Tool for Social Movements: The Effect of Social Media Use and Social Capital on Intention to Participate in Social Movements." *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 39, no. 5 (2015): 478–88.

on) which then can scale up to large mobilizations. While Margetts argues that these currents of information broaden political experience, they also exacerbate issues of inequality by making the experience too heterogeneous and individualized in what she calls “chaotic pluralism.”¹² This form of pluralism is still predicated on the unequal contest between the powerful (educated, wealthy, majority) and the weak (uneducated, poor, minority), thus skewing influence away from the bottom. In addition, while these tiny acts have the potential to scale up to mobilizations, Margetts is skeptical of how frequently this can happen and if these movements can be sustained without a clear leader. A techno-pessimist approach to analyzing OWS might predict that social media exacerbated already existing power imbalances that were present in the movement and without a clear leader to address these issues, these imbalances had an even greater impact on the movement as a whole. Existing computational analysis of OWS seems to point in this direction; however, my analysis hopes to more clearly address this question in particular.

One study by Jilin Chen and Peter Pirolli, looking at 18,611 accounts and 3,200 tweets per account during Occupy Wall Street, found users’ general activity level, geographic location, topic interests, and interpersonal interactions had a measurable impact on users’ engagement during Occupy Wall Street.¹³ Another study by Michael Conover used 1.82 million tweets produced by 447,241 distinct accounts to find that online the movement tended to elicit participation from a set of highly interconnected users with pre-existing interests in domestic politics and foreign social movements, but their interest began to fizzle out during the later months of the movement despite their initial interest.¹⁴ Further evidence of the inequality of

¹² Margetts, Helen, Peter John, Scott A. Hale, and Taha Yasseri. *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

¹³ Chen, Jilin, and Peter Pirolli. “Why You Are More Engaged: Factors Influencing Twitter Engagement in Occupy Wall Street”. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 6, no. 1 (August 3, 2021): 423-426. Accessed December 22, 2021. <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/14324>.

¹⁴ Conover MD, Ferrara E, Menczer F, Flammini A. The digital evolution of occupy wall street. *PLoS One*. 2013 May 29;8(5):e64679. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0064679. PMID: 23734215; PMCID: PMC3667169.

conversations on Twitter is confirmed by Cheng-Jun Wang's study, which looked at 1,353,413 tweets of Occupy Wall Street over the course of September 24, 2011, to October 10, 2011, to find that a small proportion of users dominate public discussion on Twitter.¹⁵ This seems to give credence to Margetts' earlier hypothesis that the "chaotic pluralism" of online discourse did not allow for all voices to be heard, and without clear leadership the discourse could not sustain itself. According to these studies, not everyone was engaged during OWS, and instead, only those who were active in activist spaces at the time had the chance to discuss and participate in any online discourse and dominate the conversation. While these studies offer key insight about who was participating in the movement online, they also fail to analyze the content of the tweets during this time. There is an abundance of research on the content of tweets during this time however.

One study by Benjamin Gleason, which used 144 tweets from a 15-min time period on November 7, 2011 and 150 tweets from a 2-min time period on October 11, 2011 to explore informal learning of about OWS, found that tweets with the hashtag #OWS at this time fell into six thematic categories, or family groupings: OWS Tactics, Rationale for OWS, Critique of OWS, Critique of Critique of OWS, and Connection to Social Movement.¹⁶ Another study Li Tan used keyword frequency analysis on a set of 431,187 publicly available tweets found that tweets on #occupy functioned as a newssource while tweets for #occupywallstreet functioned for the organizing and campaigns in support of OWS.¹⁷ While these studies provide numbers and data

¹⁵ Wang CJ, Wang PP, Zhu JJ. Discussing Occupy Wall Street on Twitter: longitudinal network analysis of equality, emotion, and stability of public discussion. *Cyberpsychol Behav Soc Netw*. 2013 Sep;16(9):679-85. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2012.0409. Epub 2013 May 8. PMID: 23656222; PMCID: PMC3776622.

¹⁶ Gleason, Benjamin. "#Occupy Wall Street: Exploring Informal Learning About a Social Movement on Twitter." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (July 2013): 966–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479372>.

¹⁷ Tan, Li, Suma Ponnamm, Patrick Gillham, Bob Edwards, and Erik Johnson. "Analyzing the Impact of Social Media on Social Movements: A Computational Study on Twitter and the Occupy Wall Street Movement." In *Proceedings of the 2013 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining*, 1259–66. ASONAM '13. New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2013.

behind the online conversations around OWS they lack a coherent analysis of the online discourse.

Researchers Joel Penney and Caroline Dadas performed 17 in-depth interviews with people involved in OWS, to present a typology of how Twitter was used in the service of protest. These interviews revealed “how the rapid digital circulation of texts allows protestors to quickly build a geographically dispersed, networked counterpublic that can articulate a critique of power outside of the parameters of mainstream media,” and that by emphasizing the forwarding of existing messages over the drafting of original ones, “these Twitter users worked to expand the circulation of information building and sustaining an OWS counterpublic.”¹⁸ In his book, *Social Media Freaks: Digital Identity in the Network Society*, Dustin Kidd further expands on how this counterpublic was sustained through hashtags and “memes.” Kidd argues that OWS functioned as a meme by: 1) Adding #Occupy to posts about a wide range of ideas, 2) Adding place and ideas to #Occupy #OccupyPhilly #OccupyArt #OccupyDisney and 3) Using Occupy and #Occupy outside of social media as a cultural reference point. As a result “Occupy demonstrated the efficacy of using social memes to quickly spread a movement, shifted the political debate on the fair distribution of wealth, trained a new generation of activists who went on to be the base for movements ranging from campus fossil fuel divestment to Black Lives Matter protests...”¹⁹ This content however fails at the final step of analyzing how the online counterpublic influenced the on-the-ground organizing efforts and where it diverted, if ever, from these efforts. My research hopes to take that final step and fill this gap between what was being discussed by those present at OWS and those who participated in the movement virtually over Twitter.

¹⁸ Penney, Joel, and Caroline Dadas. “(Re)Tweeting in the Service of Protest: Digital Composition and Circulation in the Occupy Wall Street Movement.” *New Media & Society* 16, no. 1 (February 2014): 74–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813479593>.

¹⁹ Kidd, Dustin. *Social media freaks : digital identity in the network society* / Dustin Kidd Westview Press Boulder 2017

IV. **Methodology:**

The methodology for my thesis is threefold. First, is the analysis of tweets to understand the dialogue that was occurring online during OWS. Second, is the analysis of the Occupy! Gazette and the New York General Assembly's condensed documents to understand the conversations that were occurring on-the-ground, during OWS. Last, is the synthesis of these two dialectic landscapes to better understand how the two worked in conjunction or against each other and hypothesize their influence, both on each other and broadly on the success of the movement.

The tweet dataset was supplied by researcher Cheng-Jun Wang of Nanjing University. The dataset comes from his team's research project, "*Discussing Occupy Wall Street on Twitter: Longitudinal Network Analysis of Equality, Emotion, and Stability of Public Discussion.*" It features over six million tweets posted between October 1st, 2011, and February 22, 2012. These tweets were obtained through Twitter's open API by R-shief.²⁰ Each tweet contains keywords relating to OWS, such as #ows, #occupywallstreet, and #occupy. Notably, my data set is missing tweets from September 2011, when the occupation of New York City began. Ideally I would have liked to include tweets from that time in our analysis; however I did not have access to them at the time. Even without those tweets, I still feel that our analysis was quite comprehensive of the online discussions at the time though, a future study may choose to recreate my analysis on tweets relating to OWS posted during September 2011.

The analysis of the tweets was done in four steps. First, high-level statistics were drawn out of the data, including the most common words, the number of tweets per day, and the number of retweets, tweets that included multimedia content, and tweets that mentioned another user. This step also identified the most commonly retweeted tweets. This step offered a breadth-first

²⁰ Wang CJ, Wang PP, Zhu JJ. Discussing Occupy Wall Street on Twitter: longitudinal network analysis of equality, emotion, and stability of public discussion. *Cyberpsychol Behav Soc Netw*. 2013 Sep;16(9):679-85. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2012.0409. Epub 2013 May 8. PMID: 23656222; PMCID: PMC3776622.

approach to my data and allowed us to get an idea of what ideas were being expressed through what means.

My second step was to build a topic clustering model to identify what key topics were being discussed online during OWS. Topic modeling is a technique that discovers abstract topics that occur in a collection of documents, or corpus, using a probabilistic model. I decided to use a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) Model for reasons I will outline later. LDA is an unsupervised topic modeling technique that views documents, or in my case tweets, as bags of words where order does not matter. It works by first assuming there is a user-defined number of topics across all tweets, then distributing a topic to each tweet by assigning each word in each tweet a topic. It then looks at each word in each tweet and assumes it is assigned to the wrong topic, and tries to assign it to the correct topic using what topics appear in the tweet and how often a word is assigned to a specific topic. This entire process is then repeated a user-defined number of times.

I chose to use LDA for three reasons. First, because R-shief only returns unlabeled Twitter data, our options were limited to unsupervised modeling techniques such as LDA. LDA has two primary advantages over other unsupervised modeling techniques, though. First, one does not have to know in advance what the topics will look like. This meant that I could explore many topics and clusters by changing and adjusting the LDA parameters.²¹ Secondly, the number of parameters to estimate for an LDA model scales with the number of topics, while in other models, such as Latent Semantic Indexing, the number of parameters that have to be estimated scale linearly with the number of documents making LDA better suited to working with large data sets such as our tweets.²²

²¹ Eric Nguyen, Chapter 4 - Text Mining and Network Analysis of Digital Libraries in R, Editor(s): Yanchang Zhao, Yonghua Cen, Data Mining Applications with R, Academic Press, 2014, Pages 95-115, ISBN 9780124115118, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-411511-8.00004-9>.
(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780124115118000049>)

²² https://pythonhosted.org/trustedanalytics/LdaNewPlugin_Summary.html#lda1

Ultimately, I went through eight iterations of our LDA model, where I adjusted my corpus and number of topics. Each model was evaluated using perplexity score—how hard it was to predict each sample, coherence score—degree of semantic similarity between high-scoring words in the topic, and reasonable intuition. My final corpus contained over one million original tweets (i.e., not retweets) that did not contain multimedia content and were shared between October 1st, 2011, and February 22, 2012. Each tweet had any words that appeared in the nltk²³ list of English stop words, and any of the eight most common words (#ows, people, #occupywallstreet, #occupy, #tcot, like, get, and p2) removed because they were too frequent to ignore but too vague to derive any useful information. I decided to use 8 topics as they offered a high coherence score and aligned with my hypothesized number of topics. I then used this model to assign each tweet a primary topic which it best fit under.

My third step was to perform a sentiment analysis on our tweets at the topic level to understand the emotion and opinions expressed around each topic. Sentiment analysis is a textual mining technique used to analyze online pieces of writing to determine the emotional tone and opinions of the author. I decided to use Valence Aware Dictionary for sEntiment Reasoning (VADER) model to complete this task. VADER is a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool that is specifically attuned to sentiments expressed in social media such as Twitter.²⁴ VADER is able to tell both the polarity (positive/negative) and intensity (strength) of emotion of a tweet. VADER works by deciding the sentiment category or score of each word in the sentence based on the scores of approximately 7,500 words, emoticons, emojis, acronyms, and commonly used slang, then finding the score of the whole sentence based on those words. I then looked at the

²³ Bird, S., Klein, E., & Loper, E. (2009). *Natural Language Processing with Python: Analyzing Text with the Natural Language Toolkit*. O'Reilly Media, Inc. <https://github.com/nltk/nltk>

²⁴ Hutto, C.J. & Gilbert, Eric. (2015). VADER: A Parsimonious Rule-based Model for Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Text. *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, ICWSM 2014*.

ratio of positive, negative, and neutral tweets within each topic, the number of tweets per topic each day, and the top words in positive, negative, and neutral tweets within each topic.

My final step was a granular analysis of our tweet dataset. Using my topic classifications, I picked out the 10 tweets with the highest confidence value per topic and for the whole data set. Then using my sentiment classifications, I picked out the 10 tweets with the highest and the 10 tweets with the lowest composite sentiment scores per topic and for the whole data set. I then analyzed these tweets and placed them within the context of OWS and their topic to obtain a representative sample of the tweets in my dataset and within each topic.

The second part of my methodology is an analysis of the Occupy! Gazette (O!G) and the New York General Assembly's condensed documents. O!G was a newspaper inspired by OWS and written in association with the magazine n+1, a New York-based magazine that publishes social criticism, political commentary, essays, art, poetry, book reviews, and short fiction that found its start in 2004. O!G was founded by Astra Taylor, Keith Gessen, and Sarah Leonard.²⁵ Taylor is a filmmaker, editor, and writer who most notably made the film *Zizek!*. She also published her account of the experience at OWS in her book, *Occupy! Scenes From Occupied America*.²⁶ Gessen is an editor, writer, and academic who most notably was one of the founding editors of n+1. Today he works as a George T. Delacorte Assistant Professor of Magazine Journalism at Columbia University in New York City.²⁷ Leonard is senior editor at the Nation, and a contributing editor to Dissent, an American Left magazine founded in 1954, and to The New Inquiry, a popular online magazine. Today she also serves as a part-time faculty member at New

²⁵Potts, Billie. A Sociological Analysis of Themes in the Occupy! Gazette. Swarthmore College Department of Sociology and Anthropology. May 2021.

²⁶ Taylor, Astra. 2020. "Astra Taylor." The Nation. Retrieved December 10, 2022 (<https://www.thenation.com/authors/astra-taylor/>).

²⁷ Gessen, Keith. n.d. "Keith Gessen." Keith Gessen | Columbia Journalism School. Retrieved December 10, 2022 (<https://journalism.columbia.edu/faculty/keith-gessen>)

York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Majors.²⁸ O!G published five issues from October 2011 to September 2012, with a commemorative sixth issue published in May 2014, to support OWS activist Cecily McMillan during the sentencing phase of her trial. Each issue is 40 pages.

The New York General Assembly's condensed documents were three statements, "The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City", "The Principles of Solidarity", and "The Statement of Autonomy" published by the New York General Assembly. The New York General Assembly was a decision making body tasked with discussing and deciding on things during OWS through consensus. Together the general assembly was able to draft and accept the three documents. First, "The Principles of Solidarity", was accepted September 23, 2011. The second document, "The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City", was accepted September 29th, 2011. The final document The Statement of Autonomy was accepted November 12, 2011.

I chose these two sources to represent the movement on the ground for two reasons. First, I feel as though they are a good representation of the movement. The New York General Assembly's statements were only published after consensus was reached, so I assume that a considerable amount of participants agree with what was published. O!G features the writings of populations who were overrepresented at OWS. Academics and students who were present at the movement wrote most of the submissions. According to a survey of participants at OWS, 76% of respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher, showing that participants of OWS were highly educated and present in academia.²⁹ Similarly, 24% of participants were students, an overrepresentation compared to the number of active full time students in New York City at the

²⁸ Leonard, Sarah. n.d. "Sarah Leonard." Sarah Leonard > Faculty > People > NYU Gallatin. Retrieved December 10, 2022 (<https://gallatin.nyu.edu/people/faculty/srl3.html>).

²⁹ MILKMAN, Ruth & Luce, Stephanie & LEWIS, Penelope. (2014). Changing The Subject: Occupy Wall Street's Achievements and Prospects In Comparative Perspective, 10.

time. Because these groups were the ones most present, I felt that O!G accurately represented their opinions and conversations. The second reason I chose these two sources was that they represented conversations and concerns not only within the movement but also adjacent and outside of it. The New York General Assembly's statements came directly from the movement while O!G published statements and feelings from many different authors and participants. I felt that getting sources that could offer both perspectives would most accurately represent the conversations and concerns of the participants.

The analysis of O!G was done in three steps. First, I performed a broad overview of each issue and took down what types of media were being shared, and what the central themes of each article seemed to be. I then compiled the central themes of each article per issue to determine what major concerns and topics each issue discussed. Lastly, I performed a close reading of the first issue to determine more granually what was being discussed. I chose to perform this close textual analysis on only the first issue, as I felt it best represented the original message and intent of the participants. I also chose the first issue because it was published October 21, 2011, before the protestors were forced out of Zuccotti Park on November 15, 2011. A close textual analysis was performed on "The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City", and "The Principles of Solidarity". I chose not to analyze "The Statement of Autonomy" as I felt it lacked the same vision as the first documents and was only meant to clarify rather than express explicit thoughts and opinions of the participants.

The final step of my methodology was a synthesis of our analysis of the Twitter and the on-the-ground dialectical landscapes. I compared the key themes that appeared in both landscapes and looked for similarities and differences. Where there seems to be overlap I came to the conclusion that the two worked in harmony with each other; while where there was

disjunction or disagreement, I felt that the two spaces acted separate from one another. Finally, we analyzed how these two landscapes impacted the success of OWS as a movement based on their lasting affects.

V. **Results:**

A. Twitter Analysis:

Throughout the occupation of New York, Twitter remained a consistent and lively space for dialogue. Most of the dialogue on Twitter during OWS came in the form of multimedia content (53%). Users would share videos of police violence, links to online news sources and leftist literature, and pictures of themselves in solidarity with other protestors across the country. This content became an important part of communication between users during the movement; however our analysis chose to focus primarily on textual tweets. Within the textual tweets, discussion was not limited to just the occupation of New York City, but rather inundated with messages and updates on similar protests across the country.

Users would often mention the police, Occupy Oakland, the Tea Party, and Ron Paul. Users would share updates on arrests and the police violence that protestors faced on the ground in response to their peaceful occupation. Xeni Jarden, an American weblogger, digital media commentator, and tech culture journalist, posted on October 16th, “#OWS Fact: More people have now been arrested for protesting financial crimes than the # of bankers arrested for committing those crimes.” This became one of the most retweeted messages during these months being shared over three thousand times. Users agreed that the financial crimes of the banking industry continued to go unpunished, while the police continued to crackdown on protestors. Another user 10 days earlier posted, “wow. watching footage from todays march #OWS police were swinging batons like baseball bats. your days are numbered police slaves,” threatening the

police who they felt were being unnecessarily viscious during the protests. This tweet also highlights how non-participants were also viewers of the movement online. Nowhere does the tweet mention that the user is present at OWS (though this was possible), yet they still are able to view the movement and show support behind their computers. I go more in-depth on discussions of the police later in this section.

Occupy Oakland (OO) was a movement inspired by OWS that started in October 2011. During the months I looked at, users would often share and post messages and updates to and about the California-based movement. One user posted “Hey #Oakland, we have one of the most diverse populations in the nation, let's use that #oaklandish spirit and #occupyoakland #occupy #ows”. Most of the tweets about OO were similarly positive in spirit; however many also discussed their dissent with the Oakland police department’s response to the protest. The Twitter page for Anonymous, a decentralized international activist and hacktivist collective and movement, posted on October 26th, “The world needs to know that Oakland PD is tear gassing the elderly, the disabled, children, and the press. #PoliceState #OccupyOakland #OWS,” a message that would be retweeted and shared over three thousand four hundred times, showing that users were moved by the exceptional violence of the police at OO. We go more in-depth on discussions of the occupation of other spaces later in this section.

While a lot of the discussions were focused on OWS and other inspired movements, online users also shared messages pertaining to other political figures and movements, mainly Ron Paul and the Tea Party. Paul is an American author, activist, physician and retired politician who represented Texas in the US House of Representatives, and unsuccessfully ran for president as the Libertarian candidate in 1988 and as a Republican candidate in 2008, and 2012. Many attribute him to being one of the primary intellectual inspirations for the Tea Party movement.

The Tea party was an American fiscally conservative political movement within the Republican Party that began in 2009. Its primary policy concerns were lower taxes and a reduction of the national debt and federal budget deficit through decreased government spending, as well as anti-interventionism. Users would discuss Ron Paul and the Tea Party at length under OWS related hashtags. Some users seemed to welcome the Tea Party and Ron Paul supporters as unlikely allies against the establishment, while others recognized stark differences between the Tea Party and OWS' platforms and dissuaded any form of cooperation with them. One user posted in January 2012 reflecting on OWS, "To dismiss the similar core values of the Occupiers, Tea Partiers, and Ron Paul Supporters would be unwise. #ows #occupy #ronpaul #teaparty," expressing what they saw as overlap between the two movements. I discuss the conversations on Twitter pertaining to other political movements more in-depth later in this section.

Users often opted to retweet other messages rather than make their own content. They would scroll through Twitter and share the messages or multimedia content that resonated with them. Users also did not often use public Twitter as a means of direct communication. They would seldom mention another user when not retweeting, and most of the messages were not in direct response to a previous message forming what is known as a thread. Users were however inspired by the events on the ground. The number of messages per day saw a number of peaks, on days when major events occurred. The first peak was October 10th, 2011, when OO started its initial occupation. The second peak came after October 25th, 2011 when OO's initial occupation was shutdown. And the final peak came on the days following November 15th, 2011, when the NYPD began removing protesters from the Zuccotti Park, arresting over 200 people, including a number of journalists. During this final spike of tweets, George Zornick, an editor at The Nation, tweeted, "NYC authorities clearly feel #OWS eviction is just and reasonable. That's why they are

doing it at 2am and barring all press.” This message came at the right time, from the right person, and had the cynical and sarcastic tone that was in line with the movement and resonated with other users. It also addressed one of the key issues OWS aimed to focus on, homelessness and eviction. These factors allowed it to become the most retweeted message about OWS during the next few months, being shared well over four thousand times. An interesting thing to note is that one of Twitter’s staple features, quote retweeting, was not added until 2015, four years after OWS. We can only imagine how this feature would have impacted the online dialogue at the time.

Tweets about OWS during this time usually fell into one of seven categories: 1) Other political groups and movements, 2) Policy discussions, 3) On-the-ground updates 4) Occupying other spaces 5) Police violence 6) Occupy strategy and theory, or 7) Solidarity and support. Other subcategories, such as the 2012 election and mainstream politics, likely also existed; however, these seven represented the most distinct and popular topics discussed by users during this time. In the next section, I explore each of these topics more in-depth.

1. Other Political Groups and Movements:

Users would often discuss other political movements using the same hashtags and keywords as OWS. The main groups discussed were Ron Paul supporters, the Tea Party, and the hacktivist group Anonymous. Members and supporters of these outside groups would often participate in these discussions to represent themselves and spread their message. Tea Party supporters often spoke about their views on the dangers of government tyranny under the same hashtags as OWS. One user wrote, “Subservient societies neither maintain nor deserve freedom for long #RonPaul #OWS #TeaParty #Anonymous.” Despite using the hashtag “#OWS,” this tweet is coming from Ron Paul Republicans and Tea Party supporters and does not represent many of the

self-identified members of OWS. This same observation can be made about many of the fiscal policies that were also mentioned in tweets which discussed other political movements. This can clearly be observed in tweets around the Federal Reserve, a common talking point for the Tea Party. One user tweeted, “The uncertainty caused by the Federal Reserve does help some people – professional traders on Wall Street for example #RonPaul #OWS.” Despite the many differences between OWS and other political movements being discussed at the time, many of these movements also shared some views with OWS, and these views were also being shared and spread in tweets relating to other political movements. Ron Paul and Tea Party supporters expressed many anti-war sentiments, for example. One user writes, “American taxpayer paid to bomb Baghdad and now will pay to rebuild Iraq its schools, hospitals, prisons, roads, and more #RonPaul #OWS.” In any case, other political movements remained a hot topic in online discussions during OWS.

2. Policy Discussions:

Another common topic discussed among users was centered around government policy and demands. Users would often discuss what they felt were unfair tax policies for corporations. One user tweeted, “Exxon made \$19 billion in profits in 2009, paid no federal income taxes and received a \$156 million rebate from the IRS. #ows #occupy.” Another shared, “Bank of America received a \$1.9 billion tax refund from the IRS last year, even though it made \$4.4 billion in profits. #Occupy #ows.” Messages such as these, which called out specific corporations, expressed users’ dissatisfaction with the current economic system. On top of this, users would also express their dissatisfaction with the current sociopolitical system by calling out specific policies such as the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), and the Protect IP Act (PIPA). One user tweeted, “#SOPA is the federal govs way of

censoring #ows #wikileaks #anonymous and the #NDAA is their justification for brutality and subversion.” Users did not only use this opportunity to express their disappointment but also to share what they felt were solutions in the form of lists of demands. Consensus was never reached on any of these lists, however, and instead, users would just share their own personal demands online. One user wrote, “My current #ows “demands” 1. Publicly funded elections 2. Infrastructure repair 3. Manufacturing jobs for technology and renewable energy,” and another “#ows demands 1.ban private contributions2politicians.2.Reverse Citizen United decision.3.National Healthcare.4.DREAM Act.5.Recall Military.”

Despite all of this, it was also clear that OWS supporters were not the only ones participating in these policy discussions. Once again, Tea Party and Ron Paul supporters also took the opportunity to share their own policy stances. One user tweeted, “Budget cuts are meaningless without FED transparency #RonPaul #OWS #TeaParty #Anonymous,” again expressing what they felt was the need to address issues surrounding the Federal Reserve. Another user tweeted, “I think its a good idea that we dont have taxpayers bailing out eternally institutions that are bankrupt #RonPaul #OWS #TeaParty #Anonymous,” expressing their dissatisfaction with the corporate bailout system practiced in the past, such as during the 2008 financial crisis. Other users also took this opportunity to complain about the impact that OWS was having in terms of cost to the local city. One user shared, “I bet #OWS has now caused more damage costs than they have paid in taxes! #taxpayers #wethepeople #tcot #ocra #liberal #union #p2.” Policy discussions remained an important part of the online discourse and came from people of varying political ideologies.

3. Occupy Strategy and Theory:

Users would often participate in conversations surrounding abstract theory relating the OWS and real-world strategy. Marxism was a common theoretical framework adopted and discussed by online users at the time. One user tweeted, “Marx and Engels were only two individuals, and yet in those early days they already declared that capitalism would be overthrown #OWS,” expressing how they felt that OWS was the realization of Marx’s theories on the fall of capitalism. Users would also discuss what they felt would be the best real-world strategies that OWS should adopt. One user posted, “#OWS needs to direct its attention towards the government, you aren't teaching the #Corporations a lesson if you're still using their stuff,” while another shared, “I don't think #OWS needs a list of legislative demands but vision in demanding better unionization laws & equal access to healthcare.” Similar to discussions around demands, online users were not able to reach a consensus on what strategies the movement should employ.

These discussions on strategy and theory were also infiltrated by dissenters. One user tweeted, “I oppose #OWS. Started by fools my age, taken over by Unions and others. People want to destroy corporations that make their lives possible,” expressing what they felt is an unfair characterization of corporations which they feel are necessary for service delivery and to maintain quality of life. Another user tweeted, “In #OWS world: rape, drugs, breaking windows, and shutting down businesses should be allowed. Having more money than them shouldn't,” expressing the user’s feelings on the inadequate focus OWS put on personal safety and their perceived linear understanding on the ethics of wealth accumulation. Users such as these provided staunch pushback to discussions of strategy and theory while using the same hashtags as OWS supporters.

4. On-the-Ground Updates:

Twitter served as an important medium for on-the-ground updates during this time as well. Users would update one another on what supplies they needed, the weather forecast for the next few days, and updates on when the New York City General Assembly and Spokes Council would meet. These updates played an important role in communication between on-the-ground participants in lieu of megaphones at the occupied locations.

5. Occupying Other Spaces:

Social media served as a meeting place for occupy movements across the US and, at times, even across the globe. Users would share updates on how their movements were progressing online and be able to hear stories of other movements' successes and shortcomings. One user captured the scale of the movement when they tweeted, “@Occupy_Boston #OccupyOakland #OccupySouthAfrica stands shoulder2shoulder #standwithOakland #OCCUPYSA #OccupyAfrika #OWS #OTW #OccupyBSmedia.” From New York City to Boston, Massachusetts to Oakland, California to even South Africa, the movement stood shoulder to shoulder with one another, supporting each other.

Users also used these online spaces to discuss their dissatisfaction with the attention they were receiving from both mainstream media and platforms such as Twitter. One user tweeted, “@CBSNews Would be nice if you reported on real news, and history being made, instead of stand up comedy #OWS #OccupyPortland,” expressing what they felt was inadequate news coverage of OWS and similar movements across the country. Another user shared, “Twitter won't show when #OWS is trending but they do suggest I follow @Walmart in the “Who to follow” section. #nice.” This user echoed the feelings expressed by many users that Twitter's

algorithms were, at best, not giving OWS its due attention and, at worst, explicitly censoring them.

6. Police Updates:

One experience that remained seemingly consistent between occupy movements, no matter the location, was violent interactions with the police. Users would use social media to share messages about the brutality they faced in an attempt to gain public sympathy. As previously stated, some of the most commonly retweeted messages were centered around police violence. Other messages updated on-the-ground organizers about how police were moving so that the protestors could respond accordingly: “Several police went in, closed off all exits/entrances to ZP, won't allow anyone to leave the park. Officers won't answer questions #ows.” Other tweets updated each other on who had been arrested, “New York Times reporter arrested. News helicopters forcefully grounded. #ows #solidarity.” While these messages were, at times aiming to garner public support, they also served the purpose of keeping protestors up-to-date and safe throughout the occupation. In response to the violence from police, some online users alluded to or called for violence against their transgressors. One user tweeted, “wow. watching footage from todays march #OWS police were swinging batons like baseball bats. your days are numbered police slaves.”

Not every tweet that talked about the police was on the side of the protestors, though. For example, one user tweeted, “#OWS protesters are fucking cowards they toss bottles of piss at cops then bitch and moan when they get tear gased #chumps.” Another tweeted, “#OccupyOakland = criminals. Using bottles, rocks, & paint guns to attack police. THROW OUT THE TRASH!!! #OWS #Wlunion #p2 #tcot #teaparty.” While most of the tweets

mentioning police did side with the protestors from our observations, there were many who took the side of the police as well.

7. Solidarity and Support:

Messages of solidarity and support were the final major topic discussed by users online. Users would often take to Twitter to share messages of appreciation and encouragement for the protestors on the ground. One user tweeted, “#Solidarity with all #OWS sites and worldwide strikes & protests. It has begun! Love to all. Good night.” Another shared, “We are NOT comfortable occupying, but we still do, because we believe in a cause: humanity before profits! #occupycanada #ows #cdnpoli.” These messages captured the spirit of Occupy, which was a coming together of all people from all walks of life to advocate for a better future. In these messages, they lived out those principles of love and support, which a better future has to be built upon. While some messages in the opposite direction calling for the protestors to give up and go home were posted, these messages were dwarfed by the number of messages shared offering love and support to the on-the-ground activists.

B. On-the-Ground Analysis:

On the ground, discussions were mostly organized and centered around the New York General Assembly and its many working groups. Manissa Maharawal outlined her experience at the General Assembly in her article, “Standing Up.” She writes:

On Wednesday night I attended my first General Assembly. Seeing 300 people using consensus method was powerful. Knowing that a lot of people there had never been part of a consensus process and were learning about it for the first time was powerful. We consensed on using the money that was being donated to the movement for bail for the people who had been arrested. I was impressed that such a large group made a

financial decision in a relatively painless way.³⁰

This space allowed people to voice their opinions and concerns and have them addressed by others in the meeting through consensus. Attendees would vote on initiatives relating to the organization of the occupation and the General Assembly's official statements. This allowed for a unified voice to be formed amongst the protestors that would effectively speak on their behalf. Despite this unifying voice, individuals still retained their own views and opinions, which sometimes conflicted with that of the consensus. These individual views were not necessarily expressed by the General Assembly, but authors of articles in O!G expressed many of their own individual views in their writing. These articles offer us a glimpse into some of the popular individual views that the protestors had that were not touched on by the General Assembly. The main topics addressed and discussed by both individual protestors present at OWS and by the General Assembly were 1) Police, 2) Movement concerns, 3) Theory, Strategy, and Messaging, and 4) Goals.

1. Police:

At the occupation of Zuccotti Park, discussions around the police were quite common. Many protestors seemed capable of maintaining and engaging with the police in nuanced and complex ways. Before the occupation of Zuccotti, the General Assembly came to the conclusion that no formal liaison with the police should be established. However, as the days continued, some participants suggested that victims of theft or assault in Zuccotti Park should not be discouraged from reporting these crimes to the authorities. This idea was discussed by the participants extensively, and eventually, it was decided that peacekeeping ought to be done internally to avoid providing justification for the police to shut down the protest. Despite retaining their stance that there cannot be any liaison with the police, the fact that these conversations still had occurred

³⁰ Manissa Maharawal, "Standing Up," The Occupy Gazette, October 2011.

and had been brought to the General Assembly is evidence that the participants understood that there could be some benefits to interacting with them; it was only a matter of if those benefits were worth the potential harm.

Individual actors at the protest also seemed split on the issue of police. Jeremy Kessler authored an article, “The Police and the 99 Percent,” where he describes why he felt that winning over the police could help provide the protest with both longevity and diversity. He also penned a letter, “To the Men and Women of the New York City Police Department,” where he attempted to play into their sensibilities to get them to side with the occupation the day before the announced date that the protest would be cleared out on Mayor Bloomberg’s word. Kessler wrote:

Every religion, every ethical code, recognizes that there are times when the commands of self-interested officials are not worthy of obedience. Tomorrow morning is such a time. We appeal to your conscience as men and women and to your sense of justice as American citizens. If you are ordered to disperse the Occupy Wall Street protesters, please refuse.³¹

At the same time, others were less optimistic about the idea of getting the police to side with the occupiers. Authors Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, and Annie McClanahan responded to Kessler’s article with their own piece, “Percentages, Politics, and the Police.” In it they agree that “it is hard to imagine anyone denying that it would be a good thing if the police were to take the side of the occupations;” however, they just don’t think that is possible on account of the police’s continued violence against the protestors since the movement’s very beginning. They write:

³¹ Jeremy Kessler, “The Police and the 99 Percent,” *The Occupy Gazette*, October 2011.

...what Kessler proposes has already been contradicted by the very situation he describes.

The occupation in Zuccotti Park began as a relatively small encampment, and the initial police response was, as Kessler himself observes, “brutal.”³²

Kessler also spoke about a young man who in response to the idea that occupiers should be able to report certain crimes to the authorities, spoke at the General Assembly and shared unequivocally: “I hate the police.”³³ It seems then that Kessler’s views were in the minority; however, the fact that the debate occurred at all still shows that there was at least some disagreement and discussion among individuals at the protest.

2. Movement Concerns:

Conversations surrounding concerns about how the movement and occupation were organized and executed were very common in person. Because the occupation aimed to be largely self-sufficient, many meetings were spent discussing how to best allocate resources and funds. Marina Sitrin wrote in her article, “One No! Many Yeses”, about the many hats the movement seemed to wear:

On any given day, education is organized, food cooked and distributed to more than 1000 people, legal advice given, livestreaming continuous, and people’s physical and mental health cared for (we have a team of volunteer nurses and psychologists who are working with us), translation into seven languages including sign language available.³⁴

Due to the scale of these operations, conversations about how to best accomplish all these tasks were quite frequent.

Concerns about issues other than resource allocation or service delivery were also frequent. For example, conversations on how to best address privilege and make the movement more

³² Jasper Bernes et al., “Percentages, Politics, and the Police,” *The Occupy Gazette*, October 2011.

³³ Jeremy Kessler, “The Police and the 99 Percent,” *The Occupy Gazette*, October 2011.

³⁴ Marina Sitrin, “One No! Many Yeses,” *The Occupy Gazette*, October 2011.

inclusive were very common. Manissa Maharawal wrote about how she felt some of the wording in the “Declaration of the Occupation of New York City” was not inclusive and the process she and others had to go through to change it. She wrote:

...in that circle, on that street-corner, we did a crash course on white privilege, structural racism, oppression. We did a course on history and the Declaration of Independence and colonialism and slavery. It was hard. It was real. It hurt. But people listened. We had to fight for it. I’m going to say that again: we had to fight for it. But it felt worth it.³⁵

Ultimately, she was successful and her edit was made to the document. She writes, “It was hard, and it was fucked up, that we had to fight for it in the way we did, but we did fight for it and we won. The line was changed, they listened, we sat down and re-wrote it and it has been published with our re-write.”³⁶ Maharawal’s experience gives us just one example of how concerns about inclusivity were able to influence the General Assembly’s official statements. Similarly, though, concerns about inclusivity relating to the organization of the occupation were also common. Author Ellie Smith shared, in her article “Women’s Caucus”, her concerns with the sleeping arrangements at the movement and the absence of spaces separate or safer spaces for women to sleep to no avail. On the topic of representation at the occupation, she wrote:

This is the first movement space where I’ve ever really felt the need to deal with gender issues. I mean, I’ve sat and listened to tons of panel discussions with four or five white men telling us what we should care about and been subjected to long one-on-one lectures from older men telling me what I should be doing, but I’ve never felt as marginalised and unsafe as the first night I arrived at OWS.³⁷

³⁵ Manissa Maharawal, “Standing Up,” *The Occupy Gazette*, October 2011.

³⁶ Manissa Maharawal, “Standing Up,” *The Occupy Gazette*, October 2011.

³⁷ Ellie Smith, “Women’s Caucus,” *The Occupy Gazette*, October 2011.

In response to this complaint, the Women's Caucus at OWS set up a meeting for others to voice their concerns; then, set up separate sleeping spaces for women. Concerns about inclusivity remained a key topic of discussion throughout the movement.

3. Theory, Strategy, and Messaging:

On-the-ground organizers were able to form a coherent and unified theory, strategy, and message through the use of the General Assembly. In terms of theory, organizers drew from many different frameworks; however, they did not commit to a singular ideology so as not to exclude potential participants. The General Assembly was structured on anarchist organizing principles without pre-defined leaders, according the General Assembly's own "Frequently Asked Questions" page.³⁸ The movement's understanding of how corporations exploit workers and how the workers must unite to redefine labor was very reminiscent of Marxian theory. Despite these similarities and inspirations, the General Assembly avoided ideological labels and instead attempted to just frame itself as "the 99 percent."

The strategy around the movement drew from a similar theoretical corpus. The strategy centered around non-violent occupation. Non-violence remained a key characteristic throughout all of the General Assembly's statements. First, in the "Principles of Solidarity", they state, "Today, we proudly remain in Liberty Square constituting ourselves as autonomous political beings engaged in non-violent civil disobedience and building solidarity based on mutual respect, acceptance, and love,"³⁹ once again emphasizing their non-violence. Then in "The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City", they urged others to "exercise your right to peaceably assemble; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face, and

³⁸ "Occupywallstreet - FAQ". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/6339/20130208193214/http://occupywallstreet.net/learn>

³⁹ "Occupywallstreet - Principles". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/6339/20130208193214/http://occupywallstreet.net/learn>

generate solutions accessible to everyone.”⁴⁰ Beyond that the strategy was also to build a coalition across the nation. “The Declaration of Occupation of New York City” states, “We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies.”⁴¹ This line placed them not only in solidarity with those in the US, but also across the world.

Furthermore, the declaration stated that, “To all communities that take action and form groups in the spirit of direct democracy, we offer support, documentation, and all of the resources at our disposal.”⁴² This support can be seen clearly through the individual participants who frequently shared updates on similar movements happening in other cities. O!G features articles that detail occupation in Oakland, CA; Atlanta, Georgia; Philadelphia, PA; and San Francisco, CA. Participants were also focused on getting the word out and supporting each other online.

The messaging of OWS was very populist in nature. This populist messaging was established very early in the “Principles of Solidarity,” when they identified “the blatant injustices of our times perpetuated by the economic and political elites”⁴³ as their reason for protesting. “The Declaration of Occupation of New York City” then further built out their populaist message and philosophy. The declaration clearly identified corporate power and actions as one of the major causes for today’s issues. They wrote, “We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments.

⁴⁰ "Occupywallstreet - Declaration". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/6339/20130208193214/http://occupywallstreet.net/learn>

⁴¹ "Occupywallstreet - Declaration". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

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⁴² "Occupywallstreet - Declaration". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/6339/20130208193214/http://occupywallstreet.net/learn>

⁴³ "Occupywallstreet - Principles". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/6339/20130208193214/http://occupywallstreet.net/learn>

We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known.”⁴⁴ The declaration went on to list many of their grievances with corporations relating to exploitation (ie “They have continuously sought to strip employees of the right to negotiate for better pay and safer working conditions”), discrimination (ie “They have perpetuated inequality and discrimination in the workplace based on age, the color of one’s skin, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation”), and violence (ie “They have participated in the torture and murder of innocent civilians overseas”).⁴⁵ The document effectively stated that all issues society faced at that time were caused by corporations. Ultimately, through the use of the on-the-ground movements’ overarching structure, protestors were able to establish a unified theory, strategy, and message.

4. Goals:

The same cannot be said for the goals outlined by the movement. Despite having the structure, the movement was never able to reach a consensus on what their goals or demands were. There is some inconsistency on if they even intended to establish a list of demands. At the end of the “Principles of Solidarity”, they state, “We are consolidating the other proposed principles of solidarity, after which demands will follow,”⁴⁶ which implies that they did have intentions to publish a list of demands; however, in the General Assembly’s “Frequently Asked Questions” they also state, “We do not have one or two simple demands, though many demand them of us. Why? Because we believe that making demands of a corrupt system makes our success contingent on the will of others. It legitimizes the corrupted, it disempowers us. Our

⁴⁴ "Occupywallstreet - Principles". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/6339/20130208193214/http://occupywallstreet.net/learn>

⁴⁵ "Occupywallstreet - Declaration". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

⁴⁶ "Occupywallstreet - Principles". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

actions are our demands,”⁴⁷ which seems to imply that no such document was ever meant to be published. Either way, the General Assembly never approved an official list of demands. Instead, on the ground participants were encouraged to discuss their own goals amongst themselves. Author, Eli Schmitt, talked about the demands that his discussion group came up with in his article “Wanting Something.” These demands included, “To repeal the Citizens United Supreme Court decision (through a Constitutional amendment),” “Some form of debt cancellation (either for everyone or just for students),” “Pay-as-you-go military intervention,” “Universal care centers (for children and the elderly),” and “Greater political transparency in general.”⁴⁸ These are just some of the demands that Schmitt’s group at OWS was able to agree upon, and many different groups had different lists of demands. Ultimately though, the General Assembly never did approve one singular list of demands, either by choice or by some other factor.

C. Comparative Analysis:

Ultimately, the two landscapes seemed to have many overlapping topics of conversation. Both featured extensive conversations about the police, solidarity with similar movements, resistance strategy, political theory, and their demands. The primary difference online versus on the ground however seemed to be a direct result of the General Assembly. In-person, the General Assembly was able to act as a unifying body, giving the protestors a collective voice. Online however, no such voice existed, creating a vacuum for other individuals or groups to fill. Organizers would often use social media as a means of getting the word out about General Assembly meetings; however the actual statements and stances from the General Assembly were often drowned out as a result of the massive number of tweets per day from across the globe. Due to these differences, some topics were exclusive to the conversations either on the ground or in-person

⁴⁷ “Occupywallstreet - FAQ”. Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/6339/20130208193214/http://occupywallstreet.net/learn>

⁴⁸ Eli Schmitt, “Wanting Something,” The Occupy Gazette, October 2011.

however. On the ground for example conversations about how the supplies ought to be distributed were very common, but this seemed absent from the online movement, likely because there was no primary physical space that all the interlocutors were inhabiting together. Similarly, conversations about how OWS can be made a more inclusive and welcoming movement to people from all walks of life seemed noticeably absent online, while on the ground participants would often use the General Assembly to voice their concerns about inclusivity. Without this explicit space to voice these concerns, it was likely that the minority voices were often drowned out by the magnitude of voices from those whom were better represented.

Online discussions were unique in that they often discussed other political movements. It is worth noting that mention of other political movements was absent from any official documents put out by the General Assembly. The closest mention was in the “Statement of Autonomy” where the General Assembly spoke out against, not dissenters such as the Tea Party, but rather a splinter group of the General Assembly who had begun posting statements at nycga.net. The official General Assembly seemed keenly concerned with not legitimizing other movements such as the Tea Party with anything even as simple as a mention. This can be contrasted with online, where the Tea Party was free to share its messages wherever it saw fit, without having to answer to anyone.

Beyond just a description of the topics, how each landscape engaged with each topic differed wildly. During discussions about police, online participants seemed to be more hostile than those on the ground. The sentiment analysis revealed that the topic of police had the most negative sentiments out of any of our clusters. An in-depth look at specific tweets revealed that online some even called for violence against police. This actually stood in direct opposition to the on-the-ground discussions where non-violence was always fundamental to the movement and

discussions of compromising this fundamental trait were nonexistent. Furthermore, all three documents published by the General Assembly specifically mention how the movement is non-violent and similar sentiments are shared throughout many of the articles in O!G. In addition, on the ground, it seemed as though participants were capable of holding nuanced views of the police. We know that some, such as Kessler, wanted to ally the movement with the police and saw them as potentially useful to the occupation, while others were skeptical of the feasibility of such an alliance. We also know that the General Assembly discussed if protestors should feel comfortable going to the police in the situations where a crime might have been committed. Ultimately, however, they decided against encouraging police involvement at the occupation. Despite this, the fact that these discussions occurred at the level of the General Assembly at all, seems to be proof enough that feelings surrounding police were complicated to say the least, which once again is in contrast with the online discussions where sentiments were overwhelmingly negative.

During conversations on strategy and theory, the General Assembly remained consistent in its stances. The primary strategy of the movement was non-violent occupation, and coalition building. The “Declaration of the Occupation of New York City” made this abundantly clear when they wrote, “Exercise your right to peaceably assemble; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone,” and “To all communities that take action and form groups in the spirit of direct democracy, we offer support, documentation, and all of the resources at our disposal.”⁴⁹ During discussions of theory, they would often utilize Marxian principles of class warfare to describe what they viewed as exploitation by corporations, and anarchist organizing principles in the organization of their

⁴⁹ "Occupywallstreet - Declaration". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

movement and the General Assembly itself. While the General Assembly claimed to not be “affiliated with any established political party, candidate or organization,” it was clear that they were politically left-wing in their ideology.⁵⁰ Online however, no such consensus on strategy and theory was ever met. With some online calling for violent retaliation against the police, and others wanting to remain peaceful, even the most basic tenants of the movement seemed to come into question. Similarly, while some seemed to be influenced by or explicitly mention Marxist ideas in their tweets these people were a minority. Ideologically speaking however, one thing that the movement online and in-person had in common was their use of populism. Online users would often tweet about the tax breaks that corporations received, or how the market unfairly prioritized those in power who have rigged the system in their favor. These ideas were echoed not only by those who agreed with OWS online, but also many of the other online groups who were present at the time such as the Tea Party, Ron Paul-ers, and Anonymous. Similar sentiments were also echoed by the General Assembly when they address the “economic and political elites” who are perpetuating “blatant injustices.”

Returning to conversations about other political movements, as previously stated, the General Assembly seemed keenly concerned with not legitimizing other movements such as the Tea Party with anything even as simple as a mention. Some individual actors on the ground did seem infatuated with the idea of these parties however. Author Mark Rudd in his article “Dear OWSers:”, wrote “You may have shifted conventional politics to the left, as both Republicans and Democrats fear or welcome, respectively, the rise of a populist progressive movement analogous to the influential (but illogical and ridiculous) Tea Party on the right,”⁵¹ equating the occupation and movement which started in New York City, to the right wing populist Tea Party

⁵⁰ "Occupywallstreet - FAQ". Occupy Wall Street - Live From the Occupations of New York City. Archived from the original on Feb 08, 2013.

⁵¹ Mark Rudd, “Dear OWSers:,” The Occupy Gazette, October 2011.

movement. Journalist, Beka Economopolous, further echoes this message when she suggested that during “Phase 3” of the movement, “Media coverage attributes power to movement, queries whether it’s a Tea Party for the left, whether it will gain electoral power and legislative victories.”⁵² Others however expressed their disagreement with the Tea Party in O!G. Doug Henwood, wrote in his article “Mend It, Don’t End It: Some Facts on the Fed,” “But allow me to file a bit of a worry. I have noticed some strange, Ron Paul-ish stuff about the Federal Reserve floating around OWS. Friends tell me that it’s also been prominent at other Occupy events around the country,”⁵³ expressing explicit concern that the movement might be echoing the talking points of another party. Similarly, Taylor wrote in her article, “Occupation Breakdown,”

“Should the movement continue to amass support over the coming weeks and months, opponents will step up efforts to distract from and damage it, diluting the focus. There will be misinformation, smear campaigns, and malicious attacks well beyond what we have seen ... We should be ready for this, all the while keeping in mind how eager we have been to believe the most out-there Tea Party cranks represent the truth of the rightwing.”⁵⁴

Here she delegitimizes the Tea Party as a serious political movement that represents truth. While the General Assembly did not seem as concerned about other movements, its clear that they were a common point of conversation among individuals in-person. Online, the other movements, especially the Tea Party, were able to establish themselves as a consistent entity in conversations about OWS. During conversations of strategy, theory, and goals, the Tea Party’s stances were frequently expressed by its supporters on Twitter, examples of which were covered in the analysis of the Twitter landscape.

⁵² Beka Economopolous, “Internal Memos,” The Occupy Gazette, October 2011.

⁵³ Doug Henwood, “Mend It, Don’t End It: Some Facts on the Fed,” The Occupy Gazette, October 2011.

⁵⁴ Astra Taylor, “Occupation Breakdown,” The Occupy Gazette, October 2011.

Lastly, one thing that users both online and in-person both saw was a lack of clearly defined goals. Online without the unifying voice of the General Assembly, users were not able to unite under a single list of demands. Users would often share their own personal list of demands; however these tweets were almost always sent into the void without having any real impact. To make matters worse, other political movements, such as the Tea Party, were able to capitalize on the absence of a clearly defined goal and use the same hashtags and keywords as OWS to spread their own demands and talking points, such as abolishing the Federal Reserve and support of isolationism. The General Assembly also chose not to publish a list of demands stating, “Our actions are our demands.” Despite this, on the ground participants did have some discussions about what a hypothetical list of demands would look like, such as the one outlined by Schmitt in “Wanting Something.” The General Assembly’s choice to not publish a list of demands may have contributed to

VI. Conclusion:

My analysis revealed that despite having very similar topics of conversation, how these topics were addressed varied wildly online versus on the ground. Without a unifying voice, discussions surrounding goals, strategy, and theory, were all but pointless in their attempts to contribute to the overarching narrative in any meaningful way. Similarly without a clearly defined leader, many voices, in particular the voice of vulnerable populations, were often drowned out by other better represented populations. Lastly, the movement’s choice not to have a clear list of demands left it particularly vulnerable to attacks and co-opting strategies from other political movements such as the Tea Party and Ron Paul supporters. Ultimately these issues all seem to be the result of the idea of “chaotic pluralism” which was laid out by Margetts in *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*. In this way, this research seems to establish OWS as a

case study for how the techno-pessimist perspective on social media and social movements likely holds true.

Today every political and social event occurs twice simultaneously. Once in-person between people who are present at the event and once online. By looking to past movements we are able to identify how we can best utilize social media to follow and support the causes we care about. Organizers should be cautious of their movement being infiltrated online. However they can and should use social media to get the word out about events and updates. Media consumers should make sure that the messages they read and spread about a movement come from those within the movement and not just those coopting it. If we are able to practice these principles today then it is possible for us to go against the idea of techno-pessimism in the near future. If these issues are addressed social media can provide an amazing platform to spread the word about mass movements in person and establish solidarity with those across the globe. We ought to strive towards this goal going forward if we want to see social media and social movements continue to work hand in hand for the betterment of our society.

Appendix

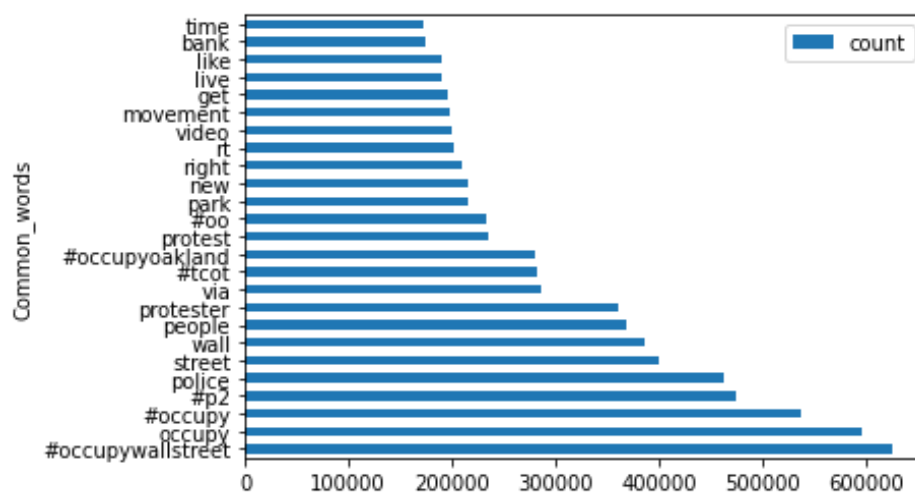


Figure 1. Most Common words in all Tweets (including retweets)

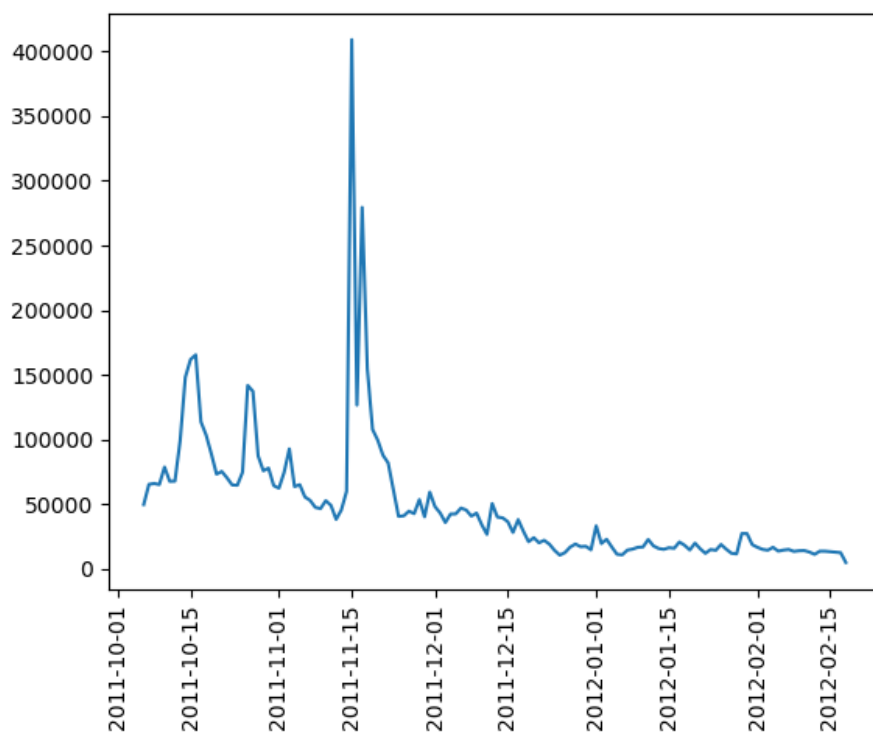


Figure 2. Number of Tweets per day (including retweets)

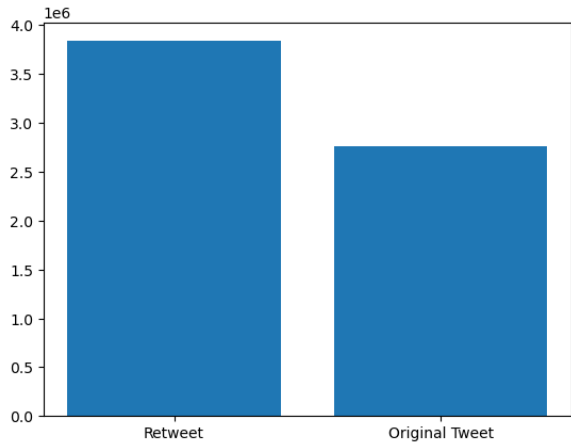


Figure 3. Number of Retweets vs Original Tweets

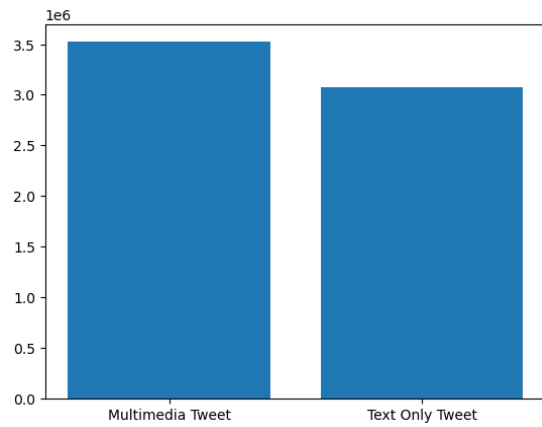


Figure 3. Number of Multimedia vs Text Tweets

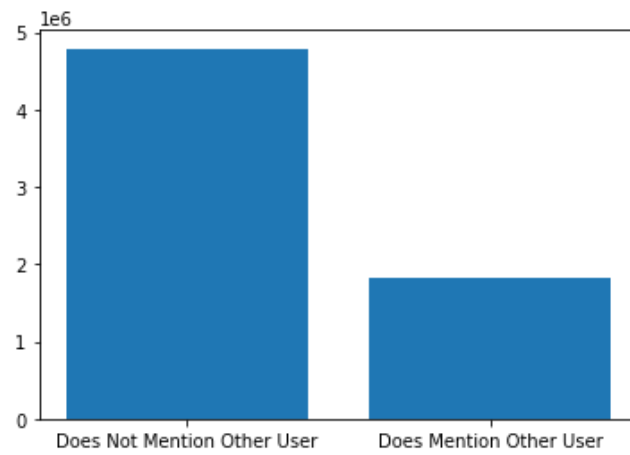


Figure 4. Number of Tweets with Mentions

Topic	Title	Sample Tweet
1	Noise	I guess Obama showed you protesters what side he is on. He just signed a trade agreement for Wall Street. SUCKERS ! @cspanwj #ows #cspj #p2
2	Occupy Strategy and Theory	People who are liberals approve of Marxism, but are not prepared to practice it or to practice it in full #OWS #occupywallstreet
3	Solidarity and Support	@OccupyWallSt When I went to Zuccotti for the first time, the protestors I met were like family after just the first day, love you #ows
4	Occupying other spaces	You are alive, breathing, creating capable beings of light. Your idea your project. #OccupyLA #occupyvenice #ows #OccupyOakland #occupysf
5	Police Updates	175 arrests and counting over at Zucotti. Protesters vs. police coming to a head. #ows
6	Policy Discussions	ALEC grants politicians "scholarships" to ALEC events so corporate lobbyists gain access & influence & the ability to write state laws #ows
7	Other Political Groups and Movements	Depending on monetary fraud for national prosperity is riskier than depending on the lottery #RonPaul #TeaParty #OWS #OccupyWallstreet
8	On-the-ground updates	Forecast for NYC Thursday night: Mostly clear. Low temp: 42F. #OWS #sgp #tlot

Table 1. Tweet Topic Modeling Samples (Topics correspond with Figure 5)

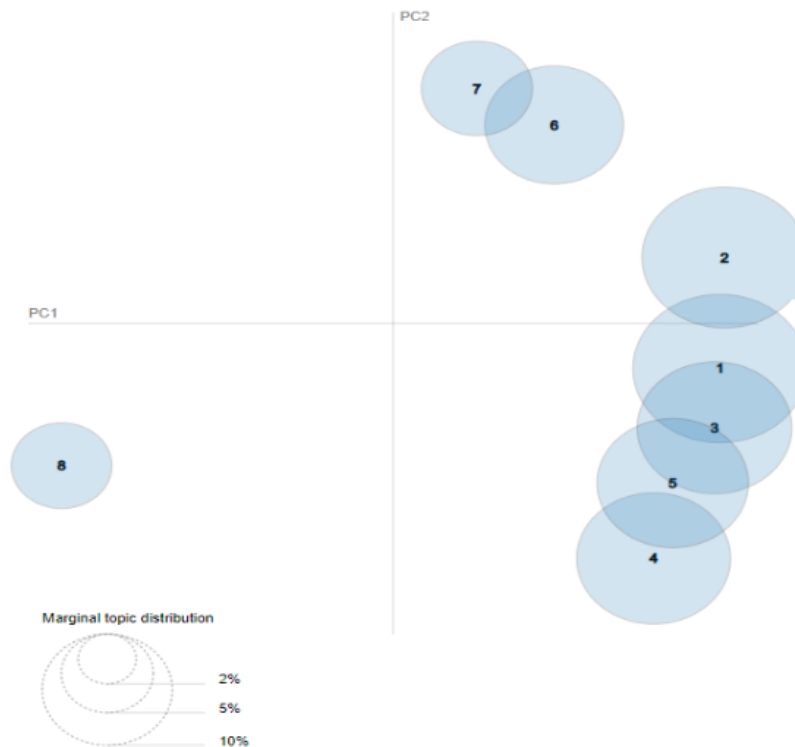


Figure 5. Intertopic Distance Map (via multidimensional scaling)

Topic	$\lambda = 1$	$\lambda = 0.5$	$\lambda = 0$
1	[obama, street, wall, think, occupy]	[obama,wall,street,party,think]	[obama,wall,party,tea,house]
2	[want, 1%, 99%, #n17, work]	[want,#n17,1%,99%,work]	[#n17,business,capitalism,greed,credit]
3	[#oo,love,world,us,go]	[#oo,love,stay,world,thanks]	[#oo,happy,strong,safe,god]
4	[oakland,occupy,news,#nycga,today]	[oakland,news,#nycga,#nycsc,twitter]	[#nycga,#nycsc,twitter,ga,austin]
5	[police,protester,park,cops,nypd]	[police,protester,park,cops,nypd]	[police,cops,nypd,arrest,arrested]
6	[#ronpaul,tax,usa,war,state]	[tax,usa,war,class,state]	[tax,war,class,million,middle]
7	[#ronpaul,#teaparty,#anonymous,freedom,free]	[#ronpaul,freedom,#opdx,#teaparty,free]	[#opdx,freedom,speech,lies,#tpot]
8	[nyc,temp,forecast,#gop,#tlot]	[temp,forecast,nyc,high,#tlot]	[temp,forecast,high,low,#topprog]

Table 2. Most relevant terms per topic (Topics Correspond to Figure 5)

Topic	# Positive Tweets	% Positive Tweets	Average Positive Vader Compound Score	# Neutral Tweets	% Neutral Tweets	Average Neutral Vader Compound Score	# Negative Tweets	% Negative Tweets	Average Negative Vader Compound Score
Full Dataset	423970	33.69	0.5521	480441	38.18	-0.0030	354101	28.14	-0.5578
7	17752	32.78	0.5760	22962	42.40	0.0041	13438	24.82	-0.5566
6	32811	28.27	0.5294	44059	37.96	0.0018	39188	33.77	-0.5785
8	8352	21.33	0.5059	21031	53.71	0.0073	9772	24.96	-0.4025
4	70167	37.42	0.5270	88689	47.29	-0.0029	28681	15.29	-0.4969
1	81957	30.76	0.5360	95319	35.78	-0.0033	89156	33.46	-0.5712
5	37558	21.13	0.5070	70819	39.83	-0.0181	69407	39.04	-0.5762
2	75737	33.97	0.5516	76784	34.44	-0.0006	70428	31.59	-0.5644
3	99636	51.24	0.6074	60778	31.26	0.0025	34031	17.50	-0.5442

Table 3. Sentiment Analysis Results (Topics Correspond to Figure 5)

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