"Build That Wall!" Social Media and the Materialization of Collective Identity

Abstract

Do social media make a difference in the organizing process of collective identity—i.e. the ongoing articulation of "who we are" and "who we are not"? And if yes, how? The paper investigates this question through a practice-based performative lens. It proposes a process model of the materialization of collective identity as the perpetual and contested iterations over different configurations of four boundary dynamics—*unification, fragmentation, inclusion,* and *exclusion*—performed in social media practices. The model is derived from an in-depth investigation of the emergence and evolution of TCOT—a social media-based community of conservatives which became integral in organizing the United States' Tea Party Movement in 2009. The findings show how TCOT was materially enacted in a multiplicity of interrelated practices and how through those practices social media technologies came to play multiple, emergent, and contingent roles in materializing TCOT's process of collective identity. The study contributes to organizational literatures on collective identity, (socio)materiality and social media.

Keywords: *Collective identity, boundaries, material-discursive practice, social media, materiality, Top Conservatives On Twitter (TCOT)*

Introduction

The process of collective identity—i.e. the ongoing differentiation of "who we are" from "who we are not" as a group, organization, movement, or even nation—has wide currency in social sciences and commentaries (Hunt & Benford, 2004). In organization theory, collective—i.e. extra-individual—identity has become a "root construct" (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000, p. 13) with profound relations to a variety of other key concepts, such as knowledge (Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007), learning (Brown & Starkey, 2000), collaboration (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005), strategy (Ravasi & Phillips, 2011),

institutionalization (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003), and organizational forms (Hsu & Hannan, 2005). Conveying a situated sense of coherence and distinctiveness of an entity, collective identity provides a basis for, and shapes the patterns of, individual and collective action in organizational settings (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011; Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013). Collective identity is particularly important in newer forms of organizing (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Faraj, Jarvenpaa, & Majchrzak, 2011), which are often enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and characterized by loose, virtual and/or mass collaboration, contested membership, and permeable boundaries (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007).

While there has been considerable research interest in collective identity, its dynamics and organizational implications (see for a review Gioia et al., 2013), we currently know little about how ICTs play a role in the process of collective identity and with what consequences (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Tripsas, 2009). Prior research mostly conceives of collective identity either in cognitive (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) or linguistic (Hardy et al., 2005) terms, as the *sense* or the *talk of we-ness*, respectively. When it does credit technology, it is as facilitators of or occasions for identity dynamics (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Fayard & DeSanctis, 2010; Tripsas, 2009)—without itself making a difference in those dynamics. However, as novel and algorithmic ICTs, such as social media, are increasingly reconfiguring how social interactions materialize, it is imperative to go beyond treating technology as passive objects and instead investigate how, and with what consequences, their specific materialities make a difference (Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Yoo, Boland, Lyytinen, & Majchrzak, 2012) in the process of collective identity. That is, we need to approach collective identity in sociomaterial terms, as the *materialization of we-ness*.

This paper investigates the process of collective identity in organizing through social media. To account for the role of social media technologies in this process, I build upon a burgeoning body of work that takes materiality as constitutive (Barrett, Oborn, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2011; Beane & Orlikowski, 2015; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014) and adopt a practice-based performative perspective (Barad, 2003; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Latour, 2005). From this perspective, technology does not refer to well-defined propertied objects that simply support, afford, or mediate independent organizing processes (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Instead the implications of a technology for an organizing process are determined

through the ways in which that organizing process is differently performed as the bundle of practices that constitute that technology materialize *in situ* (Beane & Orlikowski, 2015; Introna, 2013). As such, social media's implications for the process of collective identity are neither pre-given nor automatic but are emergent, temporally accomplished, situated, and practice-dependent. Therefore, this research aims to address the following question: *how does the process of collective identity materialize in social media organizing practices?*

This study proposes a process model of the materialization of collective identity, conceptualized as the perpetual and contested material-discursive enactment of boundaries in everyday practice. The model was developed through an in-depth investigation of the emergence and evolution of Top Conservatives On Twitter (TCOT)—an amateur ranking of conservative Twitter users, which evolved into a collaborative-competitive community, and then in 2009 an organizer of the United States' Tea Party Movement. I traced how TCOT was materially enacted in a multiplicity of interrelated social media practices, identified four boundary dynamics performed in those practices, and characterized different phases in TCOT's materialization of collective identity in terms of different temporal configurations of those boundary dynamics.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it proposes a processual model of the materialization of collective identity in practice, which accounts for the constitutive role of materiality by focusing on how such an ongoing, contingent, and contested process is performed as social media-related practices materialize in situ. Second, it contributes to the work on sociomateriality of organizing by offering a coherent formalization of the central concept of intra-action (Barad, 2007) and an analytical explanation of how it works—foregrounding therein the issues of politics and contestation. Third, through a relational and practice-based lens, it offers a grounded empirical understanding of how different social media practices come to have different consequences for the materialization of collective identity.

Theoretical Foundations: Collective Identity and Materiality

Collective Identity

The origins of the concept of collective identity is found in classic works such as Marx's class consciousness, Durkheim's collective conscious, Weber's party, Mead's dialectics of self and society, and Berger and Luckmann's social construction of facticity (see Hunt & Benford, 2004). In organization theory it is considered a "root construct" (Albert et al., 2000, p. 13) with implications ranging "[f]rom the formulation of strategy to the enactment of leadership, and from the genesis of intergroup conflict to the pride felt by employees" (Ashforth et al., 2011, p. 1144). Focusing on labels and meanings (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), overt assertions (Whetten & Mackey, 2002), or audiences' cognitive categories (Hsu & Hannan, 2005), much of the organizational writing on collective identity define it as those features of an organization that are viewed as central, distinctive, and enduring over time (Albert & Whetten, 1985). However, recent work depicts collective identity as an ongoing accomplishment that needs active maintenance (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010; Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). It also calls for drawing insights from social movements studies (Gioia et al., 2013).

Collective identity is integral in explaining social movement emergence, trajectories, and impacts (Hunt & Benford, 2004; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). It is defined as a shared sense of "we-ness" and collective agency (Snow, 2001) that "derives from members' common interests, experiences and solidarity" (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 105) and denotes "cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285). While pointing to various aspects of and assumptions about collective identity, these definitions mainly draw upon Alberto Melucci (1995, 1996) who "developed arguably the most systematic, comprehensive and influential theory of collective identity in social movements" (Flesher Fominaya, 2010, p. 394). Melucci problematized the givenness and reification of movements as entities and argued that the empirical unity of a movement is not the manifestation of some essence but the outcome of repeated interactions, negotiations, and conflict among actors. He thus conceptualized collective identity, not as a property of a movement, but as the *very process of constructing a collective actor* whereby "social actors [come] to act as unified and delimited subjects and to be in control of their own actions" (Melucci, 1995, p. 46). Thus, a collective identity is about distinguishing a collective "self" from "others" and getting

recognized by those "others" as such. It is the process of demarcating and maintaining boundaries between a collective "self" and "others".

Melucci's conceptualization of collective identity offers several insights to organization theory. First, it foregrounds conflict, contestation, and compromise rather than shared interests, as drivers of collective identity. It thus allows organizational scholars to provide richer accounts of identity processes as struggles over meaning and resources driven by heterogeneous and competing forces supporting non-unified and non-coherent collective actors (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008). Second, besides cognition it accounts for the roles of shared lived experience and emotional investments in collective identity. It can thus balance the overly cognitive treatment of identity processes in organization theory (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). Third, by shifting from entities to processes it allows exploring novel forms of collective action that lie outside traditional forms of movements and/or organizations (Faraj et al., 2011; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Finally, although Melucci's work is silent about technology (Kavada, 2015), his processual conceptualization is compatible with a performative perspective on materiality. Such a hybrid view can contribute to organization theory related to the role of materiality of technology in identity (Tripsas, 2009) and boundary dynamics (Barrett et al., 2011; Harquail & King, 2010).

Social Media, Materiality, and Performativity

Extant research about the role of technology—and specifically social media—in collective identity mainly finds itself in social movement studies (Earl, Hunt, & Kelly Garrett, 2014) or the communication literature (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Some studies argue that by diffusing information, mediating social pressures, or providing safe spaces, social media allow for maintaining already existing offline collective identities (Reid & Chen, 2007). Others point that by design the individualizing dynamics of social media or their "logic of connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) hamper the formation of collective identities (Fenton & Barassi, 2011) and instead give rise to aggregations of individuals around causes (Juris, 2012). Yet others argue that social media are "key site[s] where protest identities are created, channeled, and contested" (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015, p. 866) and that the individualizing trend, the lack

of formal organizations, the blurred membership criteria, etc., are but key aspects of contemporary collective identity processes (Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015).

These studies, while different in their conclusions, are united in their treatment of technology as distinct from the social processes it affords or mediates. Specifically, they "black box" social media into a given well-defined propertied object that produces generalizable effects on collective identity, mostly untethered from other factors such as where, how, and by whom it is used. Specifically, they either take social media as supporting sites wherein collective identity is constructed or focus on the effects of built-in design rules, encoded worldviews and interests, or pre-given affordances on collective identity. Such a separationist assumption, however, is limiting as social media increasingly challenges our habituated divisions between the realms of the social and the technological (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014; Slack & Wise, 2005). They increasingly make it unclear where the role of humans ends and the role of technology begins, and vice-versa.

To overcome this limitation, I mobilize a practice-based performative perspective (Barad, 2003; Callon, 2007; Latour, 2005). This perspective aims to account for the materiality of social phenomena through a processual and relational ontology that inverses the conventional priority given to entities before processes and relations (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). In this view, materiality and sociality are entangled—i.e. they lack independent existence and only work through each other (Barad, 2007). Materiality does not refer to solid eternal substances or to properties of well-defined objects, but instead to substance and properties in their perpetual becoming in situated practice. Therefore, the materiality of a social phenomenon is not about interactions between pre-given and stand-alone material and social entities. Rather it concerns how materiality acquires form and meaning in everyday practices, and how social practices materialize in situated times, spaces, bodies, artifacts, texts, screens, networks, infrastructures, and so on (Beane & Orlikowski, 2015; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014).

In this view, technology does not merely afford or mediate pre-existing self-contained social practices. Rather, the two are always already constitutive of each other—not as things-in-themselves but as accomplishments in an unfolding meaningful relational totality (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Therefore, instead of abstract and universal properties or affordances of a technology, it is the specific ways in

which social practices materialize through and by that technology that have performative implications for a social phenomenon—with the technology itself also being enacted in those practices.

This paper combines a processual view of collective identity and a constitutive view of materiality to investigate the materialization of collective identity in social media practices. Through an in-depth investigation of the emergence and evolution of TCOT-related practices, I develop a process model of the materialization of collective identity, conceptualized as the perpetual and contested material-discursive enactment of boundaries in practice. Therefore, instead of focusing on pre-given properties or universal affordances of social media, this study accounts for the materiality of collective identity by focusing on how the boundaries between TCOT and its "others" were enacted as TCOT-related social media practices materialized in situ.

Context, Methods, and Analysis

Context—Technology Gap and the "Liberals' Paradise"

Leading up to Obama' landslide victory over McCain in the 2008 United States Presidential election, pollsters and pundits were divided across Party lines in their diagnoses of an "Enthusiasm Gap" or a "Technology Gap". The proponents of the former claimed that Obama's message of change was garnering more enthusiasm than McCain's, whereas the proponents of the latter claimed that the Democrats were using "New Media" much more effectively and have "discover[ed]…a better grassroots model". They held that the Grand Old Party (G.O.P.) had remained the "talk-radio Party" with traditional discipline of central and top-down communication and "staying on the message"; that much of what existed on the Right blogosphere consisted of pointless ideological debates and not organized efforts to raise money or "get boots on the ground" in electoral races; and that the Right's exclusion from the online game would continue to cost them elections and thus the future of the country.

A small-time IT project management consultant out of Tennessee and a firm believer in the Technology Gap, Michael Patrick Leahy was working at the time on the latest in a series of self-published books, in which he was provocatively calling out the "brain-dead Luddites who run [the G.O.P.]" for their lack of digital ground game. The self-described conservative "political junkie" professed that the G.O.P. leaders had failed "to convey a clear conservative message to under 30 voters using state of the art 21st century

communications tools and the language of imagery and symbolism they understand." He would often check Obama's number of followers (Twitter's most followed person at the time with around 140,000 followers) and compared that with McCain's—only to become more convinced about Twitter's power and the G.O.P.'s "not getting it". He believed that the G.O.P. assumes "the technology is not as important as the message whereas in fact [t]oday, the technology of delivery can be the message". And Twitter, for him, had become the embodiment of such a medium—itself being the message of innovation and progress. Alas, he felt, that Twitter was a lonely place for conservatives—it was the "liberals' paradise". As Leahy was getting increasingly obsessed with people's number of followers as a sign of *getting* Twitter, he began experimenting with the idea of creating *a grading system of conservatives on Twitter*. On November 28, 2008, he compiled a list of around 10 conservatives he knew, ranked them based on the number of their followers, put it out on a clumsy-looking blog, used a hashtag for his first time, and began tweeting about his list of *Top Conservatives on Twitter* (TCOT).

Methods and Data

This paper reports an historical ethnographic case study of the emergence and evolution of TCOT in practice. As an historical investigation, I studied events transpired in the past. I knew at the outset the relevant significance in time of some people and events and I could go back and forth in time. Nonetheless, as an ethnographical investigation, I directly observed what the TCOT participants did and said in the natural setting of the phenomenon and aimed to account for the insider meanings of actions, talks, and events.

The main data consists of tweets published during the period November 2008 and April 2009. These tweets constitute a very rich source of data. First, since Twitter was the main materialization of the TCOT community, the participants would almost always tweet what they were doing or thinking about as well as their interpretation of events and others' actions. In a very real sense the participants mattered in TCOT only in so far as they tweeted. Second, since TCOT emerged when Twitter was only one-year old and was not yet widely used, these tweets reveal considerable amounts of participants' experience and struggles with the new technology.

I have manually collected, read, and categorized more than 15,000 tweets from central as well as peripheral people involved in TCOT. I compiled my dataset through the following steps. First, I focused on the "founder of TCOT" and using Twitter's search engine went back in time to his very first tweets. I then read forward all tweets from or to him while taking notes and saving the tweets—effectively shadowing his Twitter character. Second, I added #tcot (as well as 'TCOT' and a few other short-lived hashtags) to the search criteria. This produced an extensive list of tweets of anybody who had participated in the #tcot stream during that period. Third, as I read forward the collected tweets, I often realized that a conversation had originally started somewhere else (i.e. without using #tcot) or that its participants did not use the hashtag on all their tweets. In those cases, I would conduct ad-hoc searches to collect all the tweets pertaining to each conversation. Fourth, whenever a person proved interesting or significant in a sequence of events, I followed them back in time mainly to observe their Twitter practices and get a sense of their Twitter character. In addition to tweets, I also collected participants' blogposts about TCOT. I transcribed several hours of radio and podcast interviews with the founder(s) of TCOT. Finally, I read books and articles on the emergence of the Tea Party written by scholars and serious journalists.

Faced with Twitter's changing policies regarding downloading historical tweets and my lack of access to reliable software for qualitative coding of tweets, I developed an application that allowed me to download, store, categorize, and retrieve tweets based on custom and ad-hoc queries. Especially important to me was the ability to observe tweets as tweets (with profile pictures, clickable links, etc.) and not, for example, as records in an Excel file. This application, shown in Figure 1, was integral to the early stages of my qualitative data analysis.

Figure 1 around here

Data Analysis

I began with a grounded theory approach to analyzing the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), informed by my focus on the constitutive roles of material-discursive practices, while remaining open to emerging ideas. I read the collected tweets, multiple times, while observing how TCOT emerged and was constantly enacted in practice through time. During my observations, I took ethnographic notes but also

coded the tweets using my application. The first round of coding consisted of open coding of tweets mainly based on emerging themes, significant events, recurring sequences of action, and other Twitter-related practices. Throughout this round I would systematically go back on Twitter and collect additional tweets (as explicated above).

Next, I began from the most central and/or the most relevant codes, combined related ones into second-order categories and wrote interpretive memos for each category. After iterations, each category was refined to account for a distinct TCOT*ing* practice—e.g. blanket vs. selective following, automating, hashtaging, rank competing, trending, on-the-go twittering, leader making, flagging & blacklisting, gatekeeping, and position taking. I then used these memos to write a descriptive narrative of the emergence and evolution of TCOT in practice. Based on observed qualitative differences in TCOT*ing* practices and their outcomes, I divided the narrative into three phases of serendipitous emergence, internal differentiation and external positioning.

In the third round of coding, to structure and formalize the insights that were emerging in the inductive and open-ended stages, I narrowed my focus on recurring themes across different categories of practices—themes such as new technology, boundary drawing and contestation, and community. To suitably account for the dynamics of these themes across different phases of TCOT, I became re-conversant with three streams of literature: (1) social movement studies on collective identity, to account for boundary production and community (2) sociomateriality and specifically Barad's agential realism, to account for the constitutive role of material-discursive practices, and (3) process philosophy (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), to account for the ongoing nature of those dynamics in an ontologically consistent way. Through iteratively reading my data and these theoretical insights through each other (Barad, 2007), I converged upon four *boundary dynamics* enacted in TCOT*ing* practices—namely, *inclusion*, *exclusion*, *unification*, and *fragmentation* as defined in Table 1.

In the fourth round of coding I mobilized these analytical concepts to hone my narrative of TCOT. I focused on how the four boundary dynamics were enacted in the material-discursive practices of TCOT*ing* and how different phases of TCOT can be mapped to different configuration of these dynamics. This helped me to sharpen the descriptions of and differences between different phases of

TCOT's process of collective identity. It also led to formalizing the four boundary dynamics, their ideal typical configurations, and their effects into a process model of the materialization of collective identity in practice, as presented below.

Table 1 around here

Materialization of Collective Identity in Practice

The proposed model characterizes the unfolding materialization of collective identity in terms of ongoing iterations of a *material-discursive intra-active relation between practice and boundary* (henceforth, the fundamental relation). This relational and processual ontological unit captures the mutual constitution (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) and the perpetual becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) of boundaries and practices. It is material-discursive since this relation determines the material conditions of possibility of meaningful action (Barad, 2007); its discursivity concerns enacting meaningful boundaries while its materiality denotes that those boundaries are materially enacted in, and consequential for, practice. Moreover, this relation is intra-active since it is an *a priori* relation through which the parties to the relation constitute each other (Barad, 2007); practices and boundaries do not stand before or outside this relation, but rather constitute each other within it. Thus, this ontological unit is concerned not with essences but with events (Deleuze, 1995)—e.g., with questions of how, when, where, etc. practices and boundaries constitute each other in different ways. The bold arrows in Figure 2 depict the fundamental relation: material-discursive practices enact meaningful boundaries (arrow (1)) while boundaries condition how practices materialize (arrow (2)).

Figure 2 around here

Although this ontological unit reaffirms the inherent inseparability of boundaries and practices, it nonetheless recognizes that explicating how this relation works inevitably entails *actively* cutting through its *inherent* inseparability. The provision of such a situated agential cut (Barad, 2007) makes the model relative to observation practices (Figure 2, magnifier); different observation practices can cut through the fundamental relation in different ways—e.g., by making some boundaries and practices

visible and others invisible (Introna & Hayes, 2011; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015). Below, I explicate one such agential cut made through my research practices. It led to identifying four boundary dynamics and a schema to organize our thinking about, and analyses of, different iterations of the fundamental relation in terms of different configurations of these dynamics.

The thin arrows in Figure 2 denote the outcome of this agential cut. Bundles of inter-related material-discursive practices *form* converging and diverging patterns of differentiation in a developing field of action (arrow (3)). A diverging pattern tends to demarcate boundaries in the field whereas a converging pattern tends to dissolve them. Taken together these patterns *enact* specific material-discursive boundaries (arrow (4))—giving form and meaning to specific inside/outside distinctions in the field. Once enacted, boundaries *bundle* the underlying patterns of differentiation (arrow (5))—articulating four boundary dynamics of unification and fragmentation (converging and diverging patterns inside the boundaries), as well as inclusion and exclusion (converging and diverging patterns across the boundaries. Finally, specific configurations of the four boundary dynamics *(re)produce* the bundle of interrelated practices (arrow (6)).

In this analytical dissection of the fundamental relation, the configuration of the four boundary dynamics (henceforth the UFIE configuration) is integral: it captures how the boundaries are iteratively enacted (loop (4-5)) and how the practices are reproduced (loop (3-6)). Therefore, it can serve as a proxy to characterize different iterations of the fundamental relation and analyze their consequences for the materialization of collective identity. To explicate some possible UFIE configurations, I mapped the four boundary dynamics along two axes as shown in Figure 3. This is not to say that other configurations are not possible, nor that the four dynamics form opposing pairs. However, mapping these dynamics as in Figure 3 helps charting the fundamental relation at any point in time in terms of two dominant boundary dynamics.

Figure 3 around here

Table 2 details these five ideal-typical UFIE configurations and their effects. *Assimilating* refers to **U**F**I**E configurations with dominating inclusion and unification dynamics. The enacted boundaries are outwardly expansive (pushing to include more on the inside) and inwardly integrative (pushing to unify

the inside)—marking off an inclusive and unified collective with a burgeoning identity. *Pluralizing* refers to U**FI**E configurations with dominating inclusion and fragmentation dynamics. The enacted boundaries are outwardly expansive and inwardly divisive (pushing to diversify the inside)—marking off an inclusive and diverse collective with an accommodating identity. *Purging* refers to U**FI**E configurations with dominating exclusion and fragmentation dynamics. The enacted boundaries are outwardly constrictive (pushing to exclude more to the outside) and inwardly divisive—marking off an exclusive and fragmented collective with a decaying identity. *Rigidifying* refers to **U**FI**E** configurations with dominating exclusion and unification dynamics. The enacted boundaries are outwardly constrictive and inwardly integrative—marking off an exclusive and unified collective with an uncompromising identity. Finally, *stabilizing* refers to UFIE configurations where the four boundary dynamics are in balance. The enacted boundaries and the marked off collective are stabilized versions of those produced in the corresponding underlying quadrants.

Table 2 around here

We can now think about iterations of the fundamental relation—and therefore the enfolding materialization of collective identity—in terms of movements between these UFIE configurations; that is, movements between different zones depicted in Figure 3. For example, materialization of collective identity can start with assimilating dynamics and then move towards an episode of pluralization. Alternatively, it can move towards episodes of rigidifying and purging. At any step, it can move in or out of the stabilizing zone.

Finally, one of the main drivers for such shifts in boundary dynamics in any field of action is contestation and reactions to it (Melucci, 1995, 1996). Boundaries are almost always contested. By creating inside/outside distinctions, boundaries create the conditions for contestation with both outsiders and insiders (since the inside is never completely unified). The diagonal arrow in Figure 3 indicates that different UFIE configurations are associated with different levels of contestation with insiders and outsiders. Outside the stabilizing zone, internal contestation and fragmentation positively reinforce each other as do external contestation and exclusion. These reinforcements lead to a tendency in any process of collective identity to drift upward and rightward as indicated with the small arrows between the

quadrants in Figure 3. However, these tendencies do not amount to deterministic rules as reactions to contestation—e.g. negotiations, compromises, eliminations, etc.—can decrease contestation and cause downward or leftward movements.

In what follows I use this model to organize and elaborate my findings in terms of different UFIE configurations that characterize distinct phases in the materialization of TCOT. For the sake of analytical simplicity each practice is presented in terms of performing one dominant boundary dynamic. (Throughout the following narrative italic font denotes tweets while quotation marks denote extracts from other sources of data.)

TCOT: The Configurations of Boundary Dynamics

Phase One: Burgeoning Identity

Shortly after its creation, Leahy's ranking received enthusiastic reactions—with people expressing how much they *love lists and scores*; asking about how the ranking is produced and how to *qualify* as a *Top Conservative*; as well as recommending others to be added to the list. In response, Leahy continued expanding and regularly updating the list and with that came more chatter and exposure for TCOT. Soon, a host of practices began congealing around the ranking, together enacting an *assimilating* UFIE configuration—i.e., dominating inclusion and unification dynamics. Below I present some of these practices and their performative consequences in constituting TCOT in phase one.

Inclusion

Blanket following. Shortly after the creation of the ranking, the enlisted, who had been thus far *lonely on Twitter,* began blanket-following everybody on the list. Relaying the news of their finding like-minded people on Twitter attracted more attention to this practice: *I just got through adding a bunch of #TCOT to my follow list. This is great!* This resulted in everybody on the list gaining followers. Soon it became a daily routine for most: *Just wanted to say hi to everyone. Daily I go to the list to follow the new folks. If I've missed you - @ me & I'll follow you.* This practice allowed conservatives to surpass extant boundaries of their *Twitter li[ves]* and enter each other's Twitter feeds: *where have you guys been all my twitter life? Felt oddly alone with both Obamamericans and libertatrians all around me!* Its inclusive dynamics was not only bolstering TCOT as an attractive follower-raising machine, but also as an

emotional catharsis: *who else should I be following...loving the connections being made, and I want to make more of them.*

Automating. The steep growth of the list (around 200 people in a few days) soon made it impossible for Leahy to continue to manually produce the ranking. He thus reached out to (*@ed*) Rob Neppell, a known conservative blogger and IT consultant, for help. Neppell agreed and shortly after rolled out a *fully automated* ranking algorithm interfacing with Twitter's server. The *sleek* automated ranking with its self-sign-up procedure strengthened TCOT's inclusive dynamics by keeping the growing list afloat and allowing more people to sign up and become part of TCOT.

Plugging. For many conservatives, who held that mainstream media is *dominated by Liberals*, talk radio was the ultimate source of political truth. TCOT's lucky break was that TCOT's co-founder, Neppell, was a regular "tech wizard" on the nationally syndicated Hugh Hewitt Show—and he soon brokered some airtime. Materializing a combination of enthusiastic, expert, and authoritative voices on a radio program touted as *the most intelligent, political talk show in the nation*, not only allowed for packaging and relaying TCOT's nebulous nexus of practices (see unification below) to a broader offline audience, but also elevated its political clout as the new *rallying point for conservatives*. It boosted TCOT's inclusionary dynamics by generating a virtuous cycle of legitimacy and exposure: *have no idea what i'm doing but since hugh hewitt says this is the greatest, i'm in!* The list went from 186 people to around 1500 in the following days. Since then every time Hewitt would plug TCOT, another *hughlance* of newcomers would ensue.

Unification

Hashtaging. Since its inception, the TCOT ranking was also tied to a hashtag—itself a new addition to Twitter at the time. (It involves adding a # sign in front of a word knowing that upon search or click the platform will render that tweet in a stream of all tweets bearing the same hashtag.) Soon people realized they could use that hashtag to socialize, share news and informal updates, ask practical questions, occasionally debate politics with like-minded people, or even *drive traffic* from the #tcot stream to their own websites. Though diversely motivated, the use of a single hashtag was unifying these acts into a meaningful broader performance, making the #tcot stream *where things are happenin' ;)* and *the place to be* if one was *conservative and on Twitter.* A normative explanation soon became the standard answer

to bystanders' questions as to what #tcot means: *[#TCOT is where you see] conservative folks banding together in community, action & dialogue.* Hashtaging was materializing TCOT as a *community* and was unifying the enlisted: *B4 twitter & #TCOT I was lone voice in TX. Now Im part of something bigger & I get to talk 2 conservatives all over USA. WOW!*

Collectivizing actions. Another main source of unifying dynamics in TCOT was the nexus of mobilizing, tracking, and aggregating politically motivated acts into broader instances of collective action. *Operation RNC Members on Twitter* was the first; a campaign to get all 168 members of Republican National Committee (RNC) to join Twitter. A relatively early success in getting seven to sign up on Twitter in one day, motivated others to join the effort and to propose similar undertakings. All carrying the prefix *Operation*, these *action projects* were as varied as producing a TCOT manual for newcomers and finding *new recruits*, to sending angry caricatures to Republican Congresspersons in favor of the bailouts, to, the most ambitious of all, identifying and supporting candidates to run in all the 435 congressional districts to gain a conservative majority in 2010. Involving practices such as making phone calls, writing emails to officials, creating manuals and documents, etc. these action projects were shifting TCOT from being *just [about] Twitter* and a *popularity contest* to a materialization of *focused energy*, *momentum*, and *organization* among conservatives. By lifting their spirits, TCOT(ing) began unifying the recently defeated conservatives who were blaming their Party for not having mastered technology sooner. They were congratulating each other on their successes, welcoming the newly joined, offering them training, and doing follower-raise for them. Through these materializations TCOT gained a *higher calling*: *Stay connected and have a hand in taking back the GOP!*

Rank competing. While in general the enlisted were gaining followers thanks to TCOT, different ranks offered different yields in terms of followers—and thus status, *reach*, and *influence*—since newcomers tended to start following from atop the growing list. Thus, securing higher ranking became *a high honor and responsibility*, one that *denote[d] importance to the cause*, whereas dropping was irritating: *Heh. I'm gaining followers, and losing rankings on #TCOT...but that's the way it should be. I'm a nobody compared to most.* This fueled a competition among the enlisted which surprisingly made TCOT(ing) more resonant for them. As one podcaster put it: "[competition] is a key word for conservatives… People before they didn't wanna collaborate…not all conservatives are collaborating and…you know…sharing

their toys etc., but when you inject competition in there […it's a different story]". While this competition was creating fragmentary dynamics by evermore skewing TCOT's differential yields (*Dang! 1300 followers is the entry level for #TCOT 50 - I was at 500 followers and in the top 40 last week. Crazy*) its ideological resonance for conservatives ultimately made it a unifying force in phase one. It made TCOT(ing) a manifestation of doing technology the conservative way, "the TCOT way".

In summary, phase one illustrates the emergence of a web of practices that performed an *assimilating* UFIE configuration—enacting outwardly expansive and inwardly integrative boundaries. Only one month after the election the conservatives were connecting with people they *never would have met any other way* and were replacing their loneliness and despair with joy, gratitude and empowerment: *Goes to show us all that there are far more Conservatives out that are going to make the difference in 2010 & 2012!* Through these practices, TCOT was materializing as an inclusive and unifying collective. This burgeoning identity was growing the *conservative voice in ways the* [*McCain*] *campaign failed to do.* TCOT was becoming *the New Media* for conservatives: *On Fire: #TCOT Wired: Twitter Tired: Facebook Expired: MySpace (I'm just sayin')*. Its momentum was heartening for those fed up with their side's technological incompetence: *and they thought we couldn't do it*.

Phase Two: Accommodating Identity

The growth and intensification of TCOT coupled with its contested mix of competition and collaboration soon eroded some of its constitutive practices—e.g., engaging with and blanket following list members. While in phase one unification was dominating fragmentary dynamics, mild contestations among the insiders about the toughening game had already begun eroding this domination (upward drift in Figure 3). The tipping point of this trend marks the second phase of TCOT's collective identity process, characterized with a *pluralizing* UFIE configuration—i.e., dominating inclusion and fragmentation dynamics. Below I present the main changes to TCOT's constitutive practices in phase two.

Inclusion

Trending. In addition to the previous inclusionary dynamics which mostly continued to play out during phase two, Twitter's trending algorithm also became a major contributor. In the aftermath of the Hugh Hewitt Show #TCOT became trending on Twitter. It was heartening for *TCOTers* to see their hashtag

among the most popular topics on Twitter: *#TCOT made trending topics! Woot! Watch out the libs are going to be very angry!* Soon, keeping #TCOT trending became another goal for them: *keep those keyboards hot!* Becoming trending meant that #TCOT appeared on the screens of many Twitter users. It opened TCOT to those strangers outside TCOTers' personal networks. The latter's questions about the indecipherable hashtag were responded by the standard answers about conservative *community, action & dialogue* as well as links to TCOT's website and blogposts about it. Trending also opened a way for conservative to reach out: *Note to #TCOT members, watch trending topics on search and join the conversations, we're preachin to the choir here, need to engage outside*. As many newcomers were joining TCOT and the tweeting was on an all-time high #TCOT continued to remain trending during December 2008 and eventually reached the top of the list. TCOTers would pat each other on the proverbial back for they have made *liberals on Twitter tremble in fear*.

Fragmentation

On-the-go twittering. While the inclusionary dynamics even increased in phase two, fragmentation dominated unification dynamics. The growth of TCOT meant more space-time investments were required from TCOTers who wished to thrive, or at least stay, in the game—one increasingly characterized with *no get back to it when I have time*. This acceleration was leaving some TCOTers with the feeling of being left out as they were losing ranking, missing out on news, conversations, and calls for actions, or were seeing new acronyms that they could not understand. It led to the routinization of on-the-go twittering practices among TCOTers—with some taking their laptops to the kitchen while cooking, others asking their family for a smartphone for Christmas, or yet others updating their blogs more frequently to stay relevant. Through these twittering practices TCOTers could maintain higher levels of *engage[ment] with the community* and become better off in the ranking game. However, those who did or could not make these space-time investments were pushed down in the ranking and aside in the community: *some people have actual lives and can't check their bberry every time they get a tweet. Especially when u have 100s folowrs*. Through on-the-go twittering some TCOTers distanced themselves from others by becoming trend setters both in conversations and in technology use.

Adding-on. The more TCOTers got into the habit of frequent twittering, the more difficult it was to keep up with the flow of TCOT which was *like taking a sip from Niagara Falls*. Thus, many TCOTers began

looking for ways to organize their *Twitter li[ves]*: *At 275 followers and following 433, I think I am reaching critical mass for needing to organize my twitter experience*. Some stopped at keeping a balanced following/follower ratio and only responding to @Replies and direct messages (DMs). Others, however, not willing to curtail serendipity, opted for the more tech-savvy solution of using add-ons to create groups and filters so as to keep track of multiple conversations, @Replies, DMs, and hashtags: *#tcot has forced me to learn to use @TweekDeck groups to maintain my sanity...and I only have 112 followers.* Adding on such services to their twittering practices led the latter group into becoming 'power TCOTers', differentiated from those increasingly *overwhelmed* by TCOT's *tweetstorm*. Their augmented versatility and responsiveness was not only improving their standing within TCOT, but was also redefining TCOT's standards of *community engagement* and *getting* social media.

Selective following. As the TCOT game was toughening, its first rule—i.e., "Follow everyone on the list" to help "grow the conservative community" on Twitter—was becoming untenable. It was increasingly more *tedious* to track the list and follow everyone. Automating this process was also off the table due to the suspicion that Twitter would flag such behavior and suspend the perpetrating accounts. Those who continued to follow everybody soon faced Twitter's 2000-follow limit, which prevented following more people before gaining around 1800 followers themselves. The limit effectively made following a scarce resource better spent on those *willing to reciprocate* and thus help one in *surpassing the ceiling*. The erosion of the blanket following practice was wrought with fragmentary dynamics leading to the consolidation of two contesting camps: follow-all and follow-some. The former would accuse the latter of violating *the spirit of TCOT community* by *only building their own followers with no reciprocal intent*. To them the follow-some camp was turning Twitter into *broadcast* instead of *dialogue*: *…And we wonder why the right online movement is lacking. Fail.* Similarly, the follow-some camp was accusing the others of *number hogging* and treating the community as a *popularity contest*. To them the follow-all camp was promoting *collectivist* and *herd mentality*—and *that [would]n't fly with* those who believed *following is a freedom, you follow those you engage*. As internal contestation was mounting among these camps, Neppell himself was called out to be a *non-follower*: *#tcot should remove [the rules] "1.Follow everyone on this list" and "6. If someone follows, follow them back" cause even @rneppell ignores*. The ensuing wave of discussions about proper following *etiquette* and *manners* ended with revisions to

TCOT's *following edict*. The first rule was thus changed to: "*1. Find the following strategy that works best for you…*".

In summary, phase two illustrates the evolution of TCOT's web of practices to perform a *pluralizing* UFIE configuration—enacting outwardly expansive and inwardly divisive boundaries. The uneven development or adoption of new practices among TCOTers intensified fragmentary dynamics and led to the emergence of diverse fractions such as power TCOTers, bottom of the listers, non-engagers, non-followers, etc. Episodes of contestation among these insiders eroded the unifying discourses of reciprocity and mutual obligation and replaced them with more pluralistic discourses of strategy, choice, and freedom. Through the practices of phase two, TCOT was materializing as an inclusive and pluralistic collective. Its accommodating identity contained diverse articulations of what TCOT(ing) is about—be it *community* or developing online personal networks, micro-fundraising and driving traffic or *the future [of political engagement]*. The thread that was binding this plurality was the almost unanimous appreciation of TCOT as a long overdue foray in new technology which was giving *confidence* to conservatives who had been *afraid of the internet*.

Phase Three: From Crumbling to Uncompromising Identity

TCOT began in earnest *for* conservatives on Twitter—a direction that already assumed a myriad of boundaries with people, ideas, and practices deemed as non-conservative. However, these outsiders mostly constituted an abstract notion of the liberal "other" and it was not until phase three that some of them became material in the everyday practices of TCOTing. When #tcot became trending in phase two it also attracted the attention of non-sympathizers. Rising unwelcomed attentions began to erode the domination of inclusion over exclusion dynamics (rightward drift in Figure 3), pushing TCOT's collective identity process to enter a third phase characterized with a *purging* UFIE configuration—i.e., dominating exclusion and fragmentation dynamics. Below I present the main changes to TCOT's constitutive practices in phase three.

Fragmentation

Leader-making. In phase three a diffused nexus of leader-making practices became another source of fragmentary dynamics in TCOT, in addition to those inherited from phase two. As TCOT was morphing

from being just a ranking to a *community*, it was also developing its own leadership apparatus and several factors positioned Leahy at the center of this emerging *community servant leadership* function. For example, many TCOTers occasionally thanked Leahy as the man who had finally opened the door of new media for conservatives and had kickstarted their "march to claim Twitter". Newcomers and bystanders repeatedly saw him referred to as the founder of TCOT and "the man with the list". Conservative radio shows and podcasts interested in covering TCOT solidified him as the go-to person for any questions about the direction and the future of TCOT. In addition, Leahy had put his agile project management training to practice and was constantly green-lighting *self-organized action projects*, delegating responsibilities to *Project Servant-Leaders (PS-L)*, demanding and showcasing progress reports, and moderating *leadership conference calls.* It did not take long before he began speaking to TCOTers *on behalf of the community*. These leader-making practices, however, gave rise to dissident voices especially as the stakes were rising (there was talk of ways to monetize TCOT e.g. by selling gear or charging advertising fees). Some dissidents took issue with their exclusion from decision-making processes by not being present on the *leadership conference calls*. Others took issue with Leahy's de facto leader*ing* of the community, accusing him of using TCOT for personal gain, pointing out that TCOT was indebted to all their participations and that he cannot take all the credit and reap all the benefit. Debates and contestation on these issues soon solidified two camps of supporters and opponents of Leahy as leader.

Exclusion

Flagging & Blacklisting. Meanwhile, the realization by non-TCOTers that *conservatives are really taking over the trends [with] #TCOT* was attracting wide-ranging attention to TCOT—most notably a wave of spamming and trolling attacks. The attackers aimed either at *flooding* the hashtag (*I'm thinking that it would be mighty funny if everyone utilizing twitter tagged their most filthy, deviant posts with #tcot. Just sayin.*) or at sowing discord among TCOTers while pretending to be conservatives. Since there was no organized liberal hashtag at the time for TCOTers to attack in retaliation, some used #tcot itself to confront the trolls—furthering the "Twitter war" that was engulfing TCOT. Calls for *holding to higher standards* and engaging in dialogue to *convert 10% to 20% of liberals who enter here* met with little enthusiasm as many TCOTers preferred to keep #tcot as their own safe space. Even *Operation Free*

Swim that was missioned to channel debate with liberals into a new hashtag (*#opfs*) met with little enthusiasm from both sides. Instead, what took hold was the practice of checking the profiles and previous tweets of suspect accounts and @mentioning anyone judged as a *liberal infiltrator* in a tweet tagged with *#tcot #shark*—collectively creating a blacklist of accounts for TCOTers to block.

Gatekeeping. TCOT's gatekeeping practices also enforced exclusionary dynamics against the outsiders. Besides Leahy's exclusive leadership conference calls, TCOT's website figured prominently among these practices. The website was home to the ranking, which had become the who's who of TCOT. Although after automation anybody could sign up for ranking, Leahy had retained the right to approve requests. This in time proved essential for keeping blacklisted or overtly liberal accounts away from TCOT. Moreover, the website contained the portfolio of Action Projects (e.g. showing their team members, deliverables and progress reports, comments on the project) and the repository of TCOT's defining documents (e.g. its 10 commandments, statement of purpose, project management methodology). The standard answer to inquiries about how to participate in TCOT had thus become: *Go to the website. Read the tips. Choose an action project. Contact its PS-L to volunteer*. While Twitter-based materializations of TCOT were extremely fluid, overwhelming, and vulnerable (e.g. to trolling attacks), gatekeeping the website and the conference calls served to enact more concrete and controlled boundaries to exclude those marked as outsiders. They constituted TCOT's floodgates in the *open ocean* of Twitter.

Position taking. TCOT's exclusionary dynamics in phase three were not limited to reactively ousting liberals. The G.O.P. establishment and its supporters were also to be proactively marked as outsiders. As TCOT's leadership was stabilizing, Leahy began publicly taking positions on political issues (e.g. the bailouts) on behalf of TCOT. Notably, he used a conservative radio show to start a campaign against then RNC chairman by referring to him as *utterly unqualified* for his job and asking him to abandon the race for re-election due to his lack of (Twitter) engagement with constituents (TCOTers): *I and everyone at #TCOT seek engagement…Mike Duncan is the only RNC candidate who has not engaged with #TCOT or me personally*. This ousting of the G.O.P. establishment, however, did not sit well with the fraction opposing Leahy's leadership. They began accusing him of *hubris*, questioning his right to speak on behalf of TCOT, and demanding that TCOT should not be used to take positions. Leahy's supporters in

turn embraced his approach: *in politics being on sidelines means not mattering, McCain tried that, #TCOT is new and unruly, but GOP needs to listen…[O]rganizing a group to unite conservatives, and then being upset that it takes positions seems unproductive to me*. In a battle deemed between the old and the new, they defended Leahy as they saw *the future being in things like #TCOT*—and its premise of engagement: *Right on Mike! #tcot is bridging a {{huge}} gap, for many, many of us! I don't think it unreasonable 2 expect reps 2 respond 2 us. I expect answrs frm my Reps, Senatorss & RNC. I gave 'em the job*. Soon, the dissidents became the new targets of the exclusionary momentum that was then in full swing against liberals. Namely, they were *vilified as Duncan Supporters* or even flagged as trolls, were shamed for their weak contributions to the community (e.g. not having *volunteered to be a PS-L*), and were increasingly told by Leahy and his supporters that *[y]ou are welcome to leave us any time.*

In summary, phase three illustrates the evolution of TCOT's boundary dynamics to a *purging* UFIE configuration—enacting outwardly restrictive and inwardly divisive boundaries. Besides the ostensive conservative-liberal divide, TCOT's leadership also began to position TCOT in a broader political field by disparaging the G.O.P. establishment in favor of their own version of Twitter-based politics. The enactment of these restrictive boundaries led to the consolidation of contesting political fractions in TCOT and (re)materialized the latter as an exclusive and fragmented collective with a crumbling identity.

Epilogue

TCOT began in earnest to give *a more accurate picture of the conservative universe on Twitter*, but through a serendipitous, contingent, and explorative process, wrought with internal and external contestation, it became a transformer of that same 'universe'. In this process, TCOT became a *popularity contest* useful to *find conservatives and gain followers*, a *community of conservatives that do action projects*, and finally an unruly *model of political engagement and activism*. It began reconfiguring some defining relations of the US conservatism: vis-à-vis the internet (not afraid of it anymore), the liberals (not tactically behind anymore), the media (not needing it anymore), and even the G.O.P. establishment (not following it anymore). The notions of engagement and following spilled over from Twitter to the 'real world'. What started as an expectation that G.O.P. politicians should engage with and follow us

back on Twitter ended up meaning that they must follow us, period: *It is our time to lead, and time for those with 'influence' to follow.* Between February and April 2009, TCOT lived up to its promise and became an organizer of what was to become the Tea Party Movement.

Figure 4 around here

Discussion and Implications

This study sought to address the question of how the process of collective identity materializes in social media organizing practices. Through an in-depth investigation of the emergence and evolution of TCOT-related practices, I developed a process model of the materialization of collective identity in practice, characterized as ongoing iterations between different configurations of four boundary dynamics. By focusing on how these boundary dynamics are performed as social media practices materialize in situ, the findings account for the constitutive role of materiality in the process of collective identity of TCOT. Figure 4 summarizes the findings. TCOT's process of collective identity began with the materialization of a burgeoning identity (inclusive & unifying) thanks to the emergence of a web of TCOTing practices that through performing an assimilating UFIE configuration, enacted outwardly expansive and inwardly integrative boundaries. Soon, however, the growth and intensification of TCOT and uneven adoption of new practices among TCOTers began to erode its unification dynamics. Intensifying fragmentation coupled with internal contestations drifted the process towards a pluralizing UFIE configuration, enacting outwardly expansive and inwardly divisive boundaries, thus materializing an accommodating identity (inclusive & divisive). As TCOT was making a buzz thanks to its relatively accommodating identity, it began pro- and re-actively shifting focus towards articulating its outsides by exclusion. This drifted the process towards a purging UFIE configuration that, by enacting outwardly constrictive and inwardly divisive boundaries, materialized a crumbling identity (exclusive & divisive). Finally, as the simultaneity of external and internal contestations was ever-more threatening TCOT, its leadership started to exclude internal dissent. This increased their hegemony for redefining what TCOT is and thus bolstered unifying dynamics among the remainers and future incomers (e.g. by drafting a statement of purpose and asking TCOTers to pledge allegiance to it). While a fourth phase was not thoroughly

reported in this study, the evidence suggests that this trend towards hegemonic unification dynamics was pushing the process towards a rigidifying UFIE configuration, materializing an uncompromising identity (exclusive & unifying).

While this study focuses on a social media phenomenon, the findings and the proposed model have implications for other contexts as well. Below, I elaborate on their significance for three domains of organizational studies concerned with collective identity, materiality of organizing, and social media.

Implications for collective identity

In line with recent organizational accounts (Gioia et al., 2010; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), this study treats collective identity as an ongoing accomplishment that needs active maintenance. It differs from these accounts by foregrounding the constitutive role of materiality in this process. The proposed model of the materialization of collective identity in practice goes beyond the cognitive and linguistic overtone of collective identity accounts in organization studies (Harquail & King, 2010; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013) and allows us to analyze how collective identity is performed as everyday practices materialize in situ. Such a constitutive view of materiality allows us to go beyond treating technology either as passive facilitator of or a foregone conclusion for collective identity dynamics, and instead attend to different ways in which they make a difference in those dynamics. As our analysis shows social media's implications for the process of collective identity are not straightforward and universal but complex, embedded and practice-dependent. Specific social media practices in different phases of TCOT came to make multiple, emergent, and contingent contributions to TCOT's materialization of collective identity.

The proposed model deals with this complexity by treating collective identity as the process whereby material-discursive practices and boundaries iteratively constitute each other. Thus, the model does not link collective identity to any essence, inherent attribute, or pre-given common interest of a collective entity. Instead by committing to a relational and processual ontology, it treats such collectives in a perpetual state of becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) as temporally accomplished in relation to other entities in an unfolding process of collective identity. Moreover, the model foregrounds how boundaries are specific material demarcations in time and space accomplished in practice (Barrett et al., 2011) and

how they perform material effects. Thus, it goes beyond treating boundary drawing merely as making abstract cognitive delineations about "who we are (not)" and focuses on the ways in which the "we" is materiality and meaningfully delimited from "others" in practice, and with what consequences. As the analysis shows, TCOTing practices enacted the boundaries of TCOT differently in each phase, while in turn those boundaries conditioned what is excluded and what is included in the emerging web of TCOTing practices. Moreover, ongoing iterations of such practice-boundary intra-actions were articulating a field of conservative twittering practices as well as reconfiguring broader fields of conservative online organizing.

The model further offers an analytical toolkit (see Table 2 and Figure 3) to help analyze the materialization of collective identity in terms of an ongoing and contested movement between ideal typical configurations of four boundary dynamics performed in practice (see Figure 4).

Treating the process of collective identity as performed through iterative intra-actions of boundaries and practices has other implications for accounts of collective identity as well. Not only such a view moves beyond collective identity-as-sense-of-we-ness or -as-talk-of-we-ness, to collective identity-as-the-materialization-of-we-ness, it also renders the latter as a de-centered performance. Such a view moves from treating collective identity as formed merely through the intentional actions of leaders and members and evaluated by outside audiences (Gioia et al., 2010; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). Instead it emphasizes how a multiplicity of distributed material-discursive practices, wittingly and unwittingly, make boundaries between trajectories of people, technologies, ideas, etc.—bringing some together in varying capacities to constitute a collective while differentiating them from others. For example, as the analysis shows, Twitter's trending mechanism, a practice that was not centered around TCOT or its others, played an integral role in TCOT's process of collective identity.

Finally, although the model views boundaries as not given but accomplished in practice, it refrains from necessarily describing them as porous, fluid, or fading—keywords in many accounts of novel forms of organizing (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Neither fluidity nor fixity are the *inherent* nature of boundaries, specifically those enacted in social media organizing. The forms and meanings of boundaries are the products of the configuration of underlying boundary dynamics. As the

analysis shows, boundaries of social media collectives can become porous or rigid, fluid or sedimenting, because of how they are enacted in the situated materialization of practices.

Implications for the (socio)materiality of organizing

This study joins the recent interest in the role of materiality in organizational studies. Specifically, it contributes to and has implications for the performative view of materiality (Barrett et al., 2011; Beane & Orlikowski, 2015; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). First, the model formalizes the fundamental concept of intra-action and offers a possible but coherent analytical account of how it works. It posits a *material-discursive intra-active relation between practice and boundary* as its relational and processual ontological unit. Material-discursive boundaries are enacted as practices materialize in situ while in turn enacted boundaries condition the materialization of practices. Ongoing iterations of this intra-active relation perform different configurations of four boundary dynamics in practice, through which entities become materially and meaningfully differentiated from each other in specific phenomena. This formalized ontological unit, the four boundary dynamics, and their different configurations are helpful analytical tools for thinking, analyzing, and communicating the complex ideas of a performative view of materiality. As such, they can potentially be used to study, analyze, and describe the constitution of sociomaterial entities, factors, and categories, in other organizing processes.

Moreover, the proposed model enriches the extant work on sociomateriality of organizing by foregrounding issues of politics, conflict, and contestation. Starting from the understanding that mutual constitution does not entail equal standing and/or equal yields (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), the model credits contestation as a main driver of drift and change in boundary dynamics—and by extension mutual constitution. Boundary dynamics are political. They are about including, excluding, unifying or fragmenting trajectories of people, technologies, ideas, etc., and therefore are always contested on both sides of the boundaries they enact. This provision makes the practice-boundary intra-action at the heart of the model non-deterministic; it is a relation that is always contested by the agencies constituted through itself. For example, as the analysis shows, internal and external contestations figured prominently in drifting the materialization of TCOT between different configurations of the boundary dynamics.

Implications for social media organizing

This study also offers insights to the organizational studies of social media. First, this study underlines the importance of a de-centered relational approach to studying social media. It makes a case for following the flow of action even if it takes the researcher away from what is ostensibly known as social media. Upholding pre-defined boundaries of what constitutes a social media technology, such as Twitter, obfuscates the ways in which that technology itself is enacted and works in a web of relations with other entities. For example, a social media phenomenon such as TCOT only worked through being part of a web of relations involving, *inter alia*, a myriad of other technologies, such as radio and podcasts, phones and conference calls, algorithms and add-ones, websites and emails, etc. In fact, had it not been for those other materializations that together constituted a balanced mix of flux and stability—attracting attentions and traffic in the flux but then channeling them into a more stable and structured nexus—TCOT would have been much shorter-lived and unsuccessful. Organizing is almost never carried out with or through one single technology. As they go about carrying out their work, people become entangled with diverse technologies forming relational and performative wholes. The latter constitutes a fruitful focus for the organizational studies of social media.

Second, with Orlikowski and Scott (2014) this study advocates a practice-based performative perspective for the study of organizing through social media. This view allows researchers to investigate, analyze, and report their findings not around pre-defined social media technologies, their features or affordances, but around social media practices—in which different entangled technologies and people contribute in emergent and varying degrees. As our analysis shows the implications of social media practices for organizing are multiple, emergent and contested. For example, specific twittering practices were implicated in performing different boundary dynamics both in the same and in different phases of TCOT. These roles were accomplished as diverse TCOTing practices materialized in situ and thus cannot be attributed to abstract or inherent properties of Twitter. Accordingly, this study refrains from attributing clear-cut roles to social media with sweeping statements such as "social media helps this" or "social media hinders that" in organizing. Instead, it promotes, and offers an empirical instance of, a

performative practice lens for tracing the myriad ways in which various *social media practices make a difference in organizing in various contexts*.

Third, this study shows how social media practices are not limited to linguistic speech acts. As the analysis shows, other social media practices such as ranking, hashtaging, following, blocking, or even scrolling, as well as trending, rating, suspending, or limiting come to make contingent yet consequential differences in the studied phenomenon. Therefore, organizational research on social media should not limit itself to linguistic analysis of social media content—treating social media as neutral channels of delivering messages. Instead it should focus on how different organizing processes are performed as social media practices materialize in situ.

Finally, this study draws attention to how the opaqueness of some social media practices, which result in the obfuscation of the agencies involved, has profound political implications. Consider the social media practice of trending. Trending hashtags are increasingly treated by media, activists, politicians, pollsters, and researchers as representing the pulse of public opinion. However, it seems that the goal for Twitter in this practice is not to represent the most popular hashtags but to promote those that are deemed as most likely the attract *new* attention. The mystery shrouding how trending materializes in practice has created controversies, which can serve to shed some light on the issue. For example, while becoming trending was one of the main forces that propelled #TCOT and conservatives' foray into twittering, dropping from that list was met with accusations of political censorship—and possibly not unfoundedly (Thielman & Bowles, 2016). Similarly, as early as TCOT's time, whenever a political hashtag has become trending its opposition has almost always attributed it to bots. (In a recent example, such accusations led many Iranians to tweet a picture of a contentious hashtag written on their hands along with the phrase "I am not a robot".) As social media practices increasingly gain the power to make or break snippets of reality, their integrity, transparency, and accountability become matters of public interest and cannot be sidestepped with appeals to trade secret.

References

Albert, S., Ashforth, B. E., & Dutton, J. E. (2000). Organizational identity and identification: Charting new waters and building new bridges. *Academy of Management Review*, *25*(1), 13–17.

Albert, S., & Whetten, D. A. (1985). Organizational identity. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *7*, 263–295.

Ashforth, B. E., Rogers, K. M., & Corley, K. G. (2011). Identity in Organizations: Exploring Cross-Level Dynamics. *Organization Science*, *22*(5), 1144–1156.

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *28*(3), 801–831.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Barrett, M., Oborn, E., Orlikowski, W. J., & Yates, J. (2011). Reconfiguring Boundary Relations: Robotic Innovations in Pharmacy Work. *Organization Science*, *23*(5), 1448–1466.

Beane, M., & Orlikowski, W. J. (2015). What Difference Does a Robot Make? The Material Enactment of Distributed Coordination. *Organization Science*, *26*(6), 1553–1573.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The Logic of Connective Action. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(5), 739–768.

Brown, A. D., & Starkey, K. (2000). Organizational Identity and Learning: A Psychodynamic Perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, *25*(1), 102–120.

Callon, M. (2007). What does it mean to say that economics is performative? In D. A. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa, & L. Siu (Eds.), *Do economists make markets?: On the performativity of economics* (pp. 311–357). Princeton University Press.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. SAGE.

Deleuze, G. (1995). *Difference and Repetition*. (P. Patton, Trans.) (New e.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Dobusch, L., & Schoeneborn, D. (2015). Fluidity, Identity, and Organizationality: The Communicative Constitution of *Anonymous*: Fluidity, Identity, and Organizationality. *Journal of Management Studies*, *52*(8), 1005–1035.

Earl, J., Hunt, J., & Kelly Garrett, R. (2014). Social movements and the ICT revolution. In H.-A. van der Heijden (Ed.), *Handbook of political citizenship and social movements* (pp. 359–383). Northhampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Faraj, S., Jarvenpaa, S. L., & Majchrzak, A. (2011). Knowledge collaboration in online communities. *Organization Science*, *22*(5), 1224–1239.

Fayard, A.-L., & DeSanctis, G. (2010). Enacting language games: the development of a sense of "we-ness" in online forums. *Information Systems Journal*, *20*(4), 383–416.

Feldman, M. S., & Orlikowski, W. J. (2011). Theorizing practice and practicing theory. *Organization Science*, *22*(5), 1240–1253.

Fenton, N., & Barassi, V. (2011). Alternative media and social networking sites: The politics of individuation and political participation. *The Communication Review*, *14*(3), 179–196.

Flesher Fominaya, C. (2010). Collective Identity in Social Movements: Central Concepts and Debates: Collective Identity in Social Movements. *Sociology Compass*, *4*(6), 393–404.

Fligstein, N., & McAdam, D. (2011). Toward a general theory of strategic action fields. *Sociological Theory*, *29*(1), 1–26.

Gerbaudo, P., & Treré, E. (2015). In search of the "we" of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(8), 865–871.

Gioia, D. A., Patvardhan, S. D., Hamilton, A. L., & Corley, K. G. (2013). Organizational Identity Formation and Change. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *7*(1), 123–193.

Gioia, D. A., Price, K. N., Hamilton, A. L., & Thomas, J. B. (2010). Forging an Identity: An Insider-outsider Study of Processes Involved in the Formation of Organizational Identity. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *55*(1), 1–46.

Gioia, D. A., Schultz, M., & Corley, K. G. (2000). Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability. *Academy of Management Review*, 63–81.

Hardy, C., Lawrence, T. B., & Grant, D. (2005). Discourse and collaboration: The role of conversations and collective identity. *Academy of Management Review*, *30*(1), 58–77.

Harquail, C. V., & King, A. W. (2010). Construing organizational identity: The role of embodied cognition. *Organization Studies*, *31*(12), 1619–1648.

Helin, J., Hernes, T., Hjorth, D., & Holt, R. (2014). *The Oxford handbook of process philosophy and organization studies*. OUP Oxford.

Howard-Grenville, J., Metzger, M. L., & Meyer, A. D. (2013). Rekindling the flame: Processes of identity resurrection. *Academy of Management Journal*, *56*(1), 113–136.

Hsu, G., & Hannan, M. T. (2005). Identities, Genres, and Organizational Forms. *Organization Science*, *16*(5), 474–490.

Hunt, S. A., & Benford, R. D. (2004). Collective identity, solidarity, and commitment. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 433–457). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Introna, L. D. (2013). Epilogue: Performativity and the becoming of sociomaterial assemblages. In F.-X. de Vaujany & N. Mitev (Eds.), *Materiality and space: Organizations, artefacts and practices* (pp. 330–342). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Introna, L. D., & Hayes, N. (2011). On sociomaterial imbrications: What plagiarism detection systems reveal and why it matters. *Information and Organization*, *21*(2), 107–122.

Juris, J. S. (2012). Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation. *American Ethnologist*, *39*(2), 259–279.

Kavada, A. (2015). Creating the collective: social media, the Occupy Movement and its constitution as a collective actor. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(8), 872–886.

Langley, A., Smallman, C., Tsoukas, H., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). Process studies of change in organization and management: unveiling temporality, activity, and flow. *Academy of Management Journal*, *56*(1), 1–13.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Leonardi, P. M., & Barley, S. R. (2010). What's under construction here? Social action, materiality, and power in constructivist studies of technology and organizing. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *4*(1), 1–51.

Melucci, A. (1995). The process of collective identity. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Milan, S. (2015). From social movements to cloud protesting: the evolution of collective identity. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(8), 887–900.

Nag, R., Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. (2007). The Intersection of Organizational Identity, Knowledge, and Practice: Attempting Strategic Change Via Knowledge Grafting. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*(4), 821–847.

Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2008). Sociomateriality: Challenging the separation of technology, work and organization. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *2*(1), 433–474.

Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2014). What happens when evaluation goes online? Exploring apparatuses of valuation in the travel sector. *Organization Science*, *25*(3), 868–891.

Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2015). The Algorithm and the crowd: Considering the materiality of service innovation.

Polletta, F., & Jasper, J. M. (2001). Collective Identity and Social Movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *27*, 283–305.

Rao, H., Monin, P., & Durand, R. (2003). Institutional change in Toque Ville: nouvelle cuisine as an identity movement in French gastronomy. *American Journal of Sociology*, *108*(4), 795–843.

Ravasi, D., & Phillips, N. (2011). Strategies of alignment organizational identity management and strategic change at Bang & Olufsen. *Strategic Organization*, *9*(2), 103–135.

Ravasi, D., & Schultz, M. (2006). Responding to Organizational Identity Threats: Exploring the Role of Organizational Culture. *Academy of Management Journal*, *49*(3), 433–458.

Reid, E., & Chen, H. (2007). Internet-savvy US and Middle Eastern extremist groups. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *12*(2), 177–192.

Sandberg, J., & Tsoukas, H. (2011). Grasping the logic of practice: Theorizing through practical rationality. *Academy of Management Review*, *36*(2), 338–360.

Schneiberg, M., & Lounsbury, M. (2008). Social movements and institutional analysis. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 650–672). London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

Schreyögg, G., & Sydow, J. (2010). Organizing for Fluidity? Dilemmas of New Organizational Forms. *Organization Science*, *21*(6), 1251–1262.

Schultz, M., & Hernes, T. (2013). A Temporal Perspective on Organizational Identity. *Organization Science*, *24*(1), 1–21.

Slack, J. D., & Wise, J. M. (2005). *Culture+ technology: A primer*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Snow, D. A. (2001). Collective identity and expressive forms. *Center for the Study of Democracy*.

Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. (1992). Collective identity in social movement communities: Lesbian feminist mobilization. In A. D. Morris & C. M. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (pp. 349–365). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Thielman, S., & Bowles, N. (2016). Facebook accused of censoring conservatives, report says. Retrieved August 3, 2017, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/09/facebook-newsfeed-censor-conservative-news

Tripsas, M. (2009). Technology, Identity, and Inertia Through the Lens of "The Digital Photography Company." *Organization Science*, *20*(2), 441–460.

Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, *13*(5), 567–582.

Whetten, D. A., & Mackey, A. (2002). A social actor conception of organizational identity and its implications for the study of organizational reputation. *Business & Society*, *41*(4), 393–414.

Yoo, Y., Boland, R. J., Lyytinen, K., & Majchrzak, A. (2012). Organizing for Innovation in the Digitized World. *Organization Science*, *23*(5), 1398–1408.

Zammuto, R. F., Griffith, T. L., Majchrzak, A., Dougherty, D. J., & Faraj, S. (2007). Information technology and the changing fabric of organization. *Organization Science*, *18*(5), 749–762.

APPENDIX: Tables and Figures

Table 1: Boundary Dynamics

Boundary Dynamics	**Description & *Effect***
Inclusion	Material-discursive dynamics that converges diverse trajectories of people, ideas, technologies, etc., to constitute the inside of the collective *Opens up the collective by enacting outwardly expansive boundaries*
Exclusion	Material-discursive dynamics that articulates the outside by differentiating it from the inside of the collective *Closes off the collective by enacting outwardly constrictive boundaries*
Unification	Material-discursive dynamics that discards differences inside the boundaries of the collective *Unifies the collective by enacting inwardly integrative boundaries*
Fragmentation	Material-discursive dynamics that forms new differences inside the boundaries of the collective *Diversifies the collective by enacting inwardly divisive boundaries*

Table 2: Ideal typical configurations of UFIE boundary dynamics and their effects

UFIE* Configuration	**Dynamics**	**Enacted Boundary**	**Collective Identity**	**Contestation**
Dominating inclusion & unification	Assimilating	Outwardly expansive & inwardly integrative	Burgeoning (inclusive & unifying)	Low
Dominating inclusion & fragmentation	Pluralizing	Outwardly expansive & inwardly divisive	Accommodating (inclusive & divisive)	High w/ insiders
Dominating exclusion & fragmentation	Purging	Outwardly constrictive & inwardly divisive	Crumbling (exclusive & divisive)	High w/ in-& outsiders
Dominating exclusion & unification	Rigidifying	Outwardly constrictive & inwardly integrative	Uncompromising (exclusive & unifying)	High w/ outsiders
Balanced UFIE	Stabilizing	Stabilized form of the underlying quadrant	Stabilized form of the underlying quadrant	Medium

* UFIE: Unification, Fragmentation, Inclusion, Exclusion

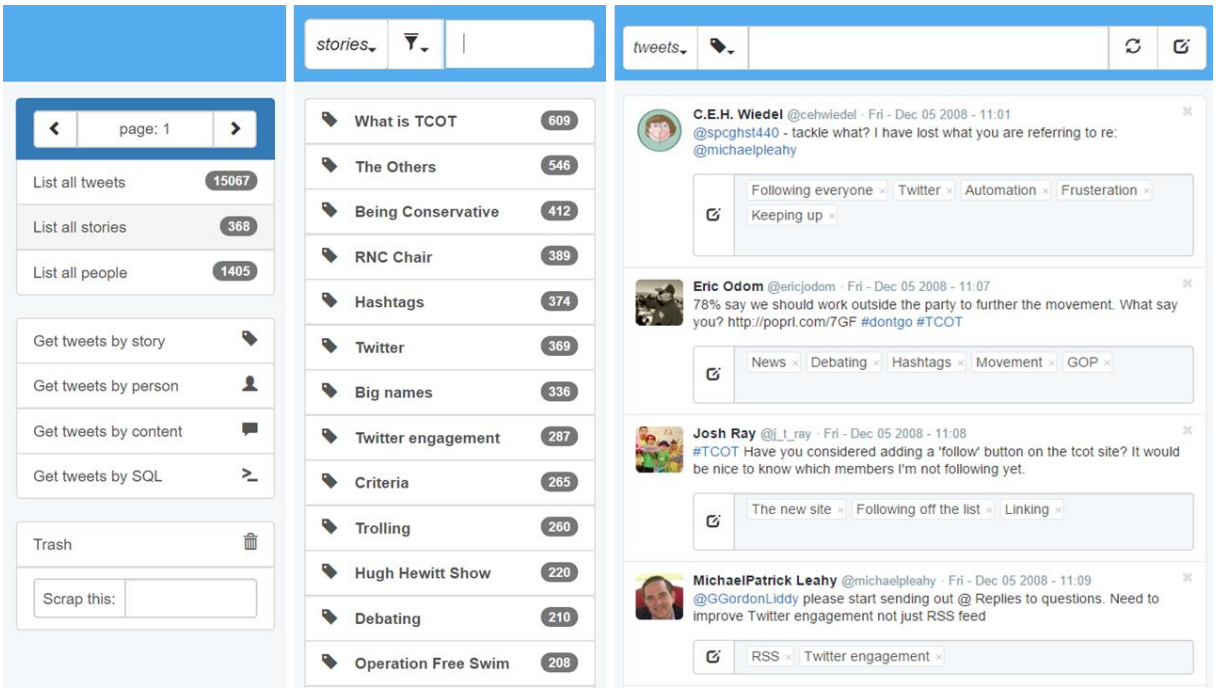

Figure 1: Software developed and used for categorizing tweets

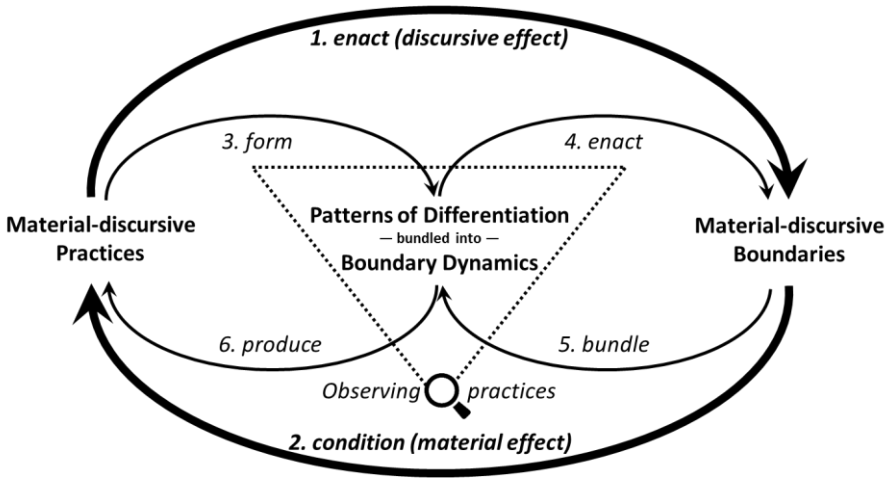

Figure 2: The fundamental practice-boundary intra-action

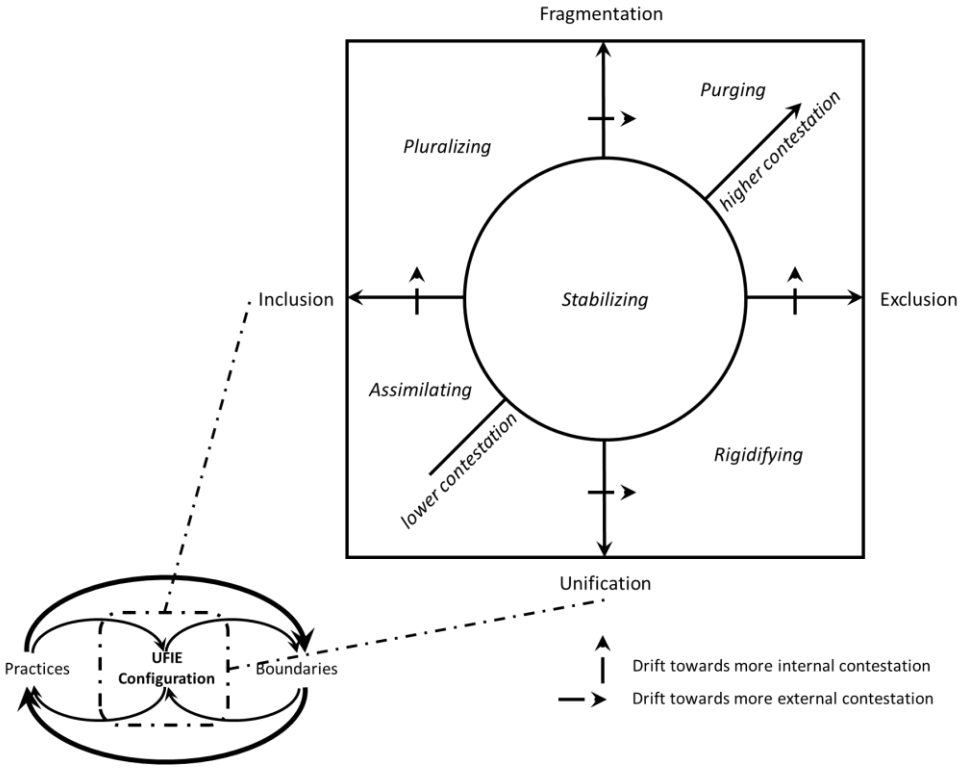

Figure 3: Ideal typical UFIE configurations

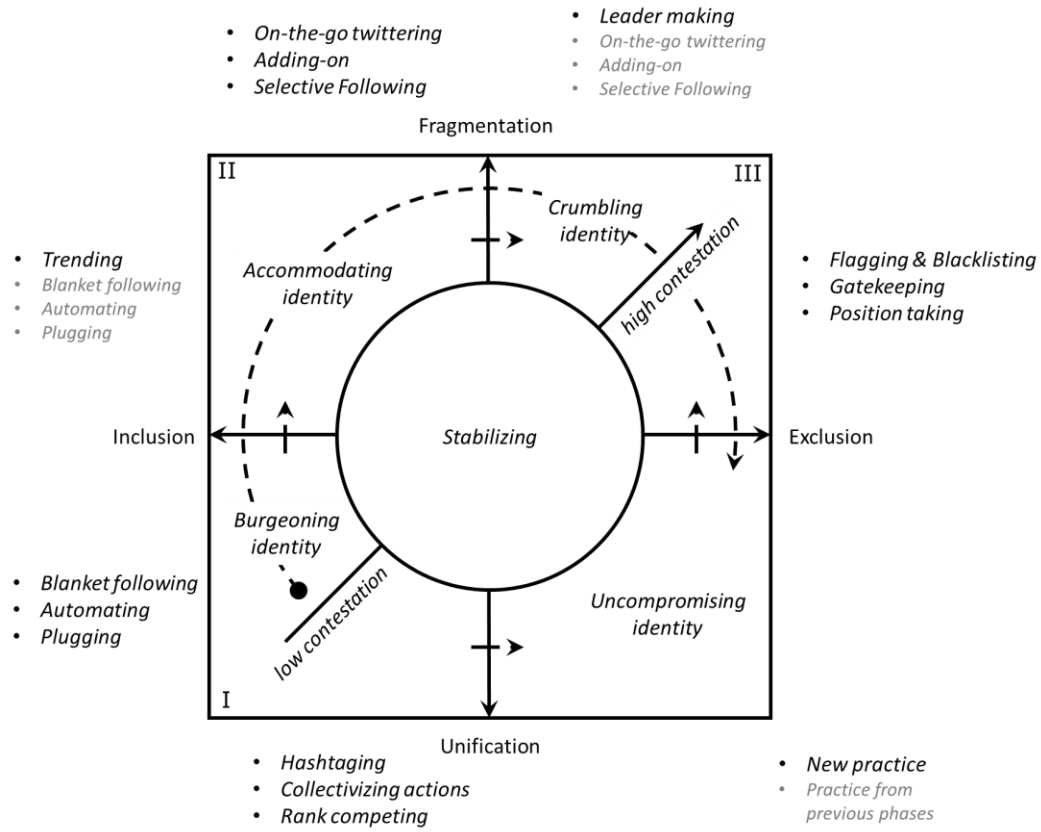

Figure 4: TCOT's materialization of collective identity in practice