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Affective publics and structures of storytelling: sentiment, events and mediality

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I further explicate the construct of affective publics by drawing elements from two case studies, the first focusing on uses of Twitter leading up to and following the events surrounding the resignation of Hosni Mubarak via #egypt, and the second one focusing on online iterations of the Occupy movement, and specifically #ows, one of the more connective and central tags of the movement. I explore what mediated feelings of connectedness do for politics and networked publics in the digital age, and explore their impact on structures of storytelling, sentiment, and the mediality of events broadcast through different platforms. Technologies network us, but it is our stories that connect us.

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Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run, but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant. – Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (p. 64)

As I am writing this, the tag #ThisIsACoup is trending worldwide. Greece is wrapped in intense negotiation talks with member countries of the Eurozone. After a tenuous process that has lasted months produced an unprecedented number of meetings and drama, and captured the attention of media, politicians, and various publics, a deal has been reached at the end of a 14-hour-long meeting of Eurozone countries. But it is a bittersweet deal, a hollow, or *Pyrrhic* victory for the Greeks. Even though the deal sets the terms for remaining within the Eurozone, the terms themselves reiterate, reinforce, and reproduce politics of austerity that have guided how the European Union has navigated the financial crisis of past few years.

Commentators worldwide rush to recognize this, marking their comments on Twitter with the tag #ThisIsACoup, meant to signify that the measures proposed are severe to the point that they threaten the sovereignty of a country. Indeed, the measures stipulate important reforms and intensive monitoring by Eurozone groups, ensuring that local politicians will have no room for maneuvering, postponing, or deviating from the specified recipe. And yet, as a child born in the in the middle of a military coup in my country,

I am bothered by the casual use of the term *coup d'état*. I wonder: Have any of the people using the term had to live through an actual *coup d'état*? Yet, the term, used as an *open signifier*, draws support from a number of networked publics following the developments. Some people employ it to express sympathy for the Greeks, others to criticize the Germans, among other Eurozone countries, for strong-arming the Greeks into the deal. Within Greece, people use it to criticize the Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, for looking into the abyss an exit from the Eurozone would signify, and then taking a bad deal to avoid a catastrophic outcome. Sympathizers of the Left, within Greece and beyond, lament the failure of the Left to seriously challenge the neoliberal paradigm. I am both relieved by the outcome and concerned about the future. Feelings are mixed, everywhere, but sentiment drives #ThisIsACoup, now being reappropriated to support all types of rhetoric.

There are countless stories of how media serve as conduits for affective expression in historical moments that promise social change. These are typically stories of connection and expression. Hashtags can serve as empty signifiers that invite ideological identification of a polysemic orientation (Colleoni, 2013). I would extend this claim to argue that hashtags like #ThisIsACoup, but also #BringBackOurGirls, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #HandsUpDontShoot, #BlackLivesMatter, and countless others are actually signifiers not empty, but open to definition, redefinition, and re-appropriation. They serve as framing devices that allow crowds to be rendered into publics; networked publics that want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms. These networked publics come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment, and I describe them as affective, convening across networks that are discursively rendered out of mediated interactions (Papacharissi, 2014). They assemble around media and platforms that invite affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression, like Twitter. In doing so, media do not make or break revolutions, but they do lend emerging publics their own distinct *mediality*. Mediality shapes the texture of these publics and affect becomes the drive that keeps them going.

The circumstances that drive each of these public formations are different, but it is a public display of affect that unites, identifies, or disconnects them. This essay builds on thoughts and research findings first presented in *Affective publics*, published by Oxford University Press in 2014. It is based on my keynote remarks, delivered on the occasion of the Protest Participation in Variable Communication Ecologies conference, convened in Alghero, Sardegna, in June 2015. My goal is to show the contemporary traction the concept of Affective Publics has, and expand on the days initially presented in the book, offering greater clarity and utility to the concept. Therefore, in this essay, I further explicate the construct of affective publics by drawing elements from two case studies, the first focusing on uses of Twitter leading up to and following the events surrounding the resignation of Hosni Mubarak via #egypt, and the second one focusing on online iterations of the Occupy movement, and specifically #ows, one of the more connective and central tags of the movement.

I am ultimately interested in what these mediated feelings of connectedness do for politics and networked publics in the digital age, and explore their impact on structures of storytelling, sentiment, and the mediality of events broadcast through different platforms. I begin by describing the theoretical framework and detailing our methodological approach. I then further define *affective publics* and outline their dominant features,

focusing on afterthoughts I have had prompted by current events since first embarking on this project.

(Soft) structures of storytelling

Our interest in Twitter was initially driven by an effort to understand it as a medium for storytelling, enabling collaborative story-writing or co-creation, but in most cases, facilitating collaborative filtering or curating of the news.¹ We stumbled on affect as an explanation that fit our findings as those began to emerge. Our theoretical framework was designed to help us think about collectively *produced* news feeds, rendered by citizens committing independent or coordinated *acts* of journalism, as an important alternative to the dominant news economy, in particular as many mainstream media news bureaus have to shut down or cut back their international bureaus due to financial constraints. Finally, we were guided by research and current events suggesting that, in situations where access to other media was restricted, controlled, or otherwise not trusted, Twitter quickly emerged as a platform for news sharing and information dissemination.

A considerable amount of research has focused on Twitter, and the body of that work most pertinent to our framework indicates that established news values guide the use of Twitter. Most mainstream media use the platform to deliver the same news, especially when the story is changing so quickly that TV or print media do not have the time to develop a fully sourced story (Armstrong & Gao, 2010, 2011). Researchers study how the platform is used in news breaking situations, in anticipation or *premediation* of events that are about to happen or are in the process of happening, thus further contributing to and cultivating a culture of instantaneity in news reporting. *Premediation* played a central part in how we conceptualized our research design and interpreted our findings. Grusin (2010) developed the term to describe the form that events take, before they turn into stories. Premediation is rich in affect, and has driven news storytelling post 9/11, at least in the US. Grusin points to the news scroller, now a permanent fixture of news reporting, as an example of premediation. This drive for instantaneity in news reporting fills news stories with intensity, but rarely with substance.

Homophily further drives how people use Twitter, meaning that like-minded people tend to listen to like-minded others online (e.g., Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt, & Puschmann, 2013; Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). The platform provides peripheral awareness for news on public affairs but also news of a social nature, typically making no distinction between the two, and thus further remediating infotainment tendencies (Erickson, 2010). It serves as an ambient, always on news environment, with 'diverse means to collect, communicate, share and display news and information, serving diverse purposes ... on different levels of engagement' (Hermida, 2010, p. 301). At the same time that it reprocesses old media tendencies, it manages to introduce hybridity in news values and news production (Chadwick, 2013; Russell, 2011), in ways that bear important consequences to political hierarchies and potential power redistribution.

Research has also documented that in uprisings, Twitter is typically used as electronic word of mouth news sharing (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). Researchers typically follow who says what to whom with what effect approach, tracing information flow patterns (e.g., Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Hansen, Arvidsson, Nielsen, Colleoni, & Etter, 2011; Weller et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2011). This is essential, as the platform affords visibility

and voice to publics and issues that are marginalized elsewhere. Needless to point out, what is important is not just who is broadcasting news and disseminating information, but also who is able to listen in. The practice of following opinion leaders on Twitter has been likened to emerging disciplines of listening in social media, characterized by background listening, reciprocal listening, and delegated listening (Crawford, 2009). In this manner, the practice of listening may strengthen connectedness with others (Henneburg, Scammell, & O'Shaughnessy, 2009), resemble the practices of conversation (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; Steiner, 2009), and add elements of physicality to web design (Hohl, 2009). Lacey (2013) has developed the notion of listening publics as understanding the networked dynamics and agency that may develop as previously uninformed publics become more cognizant of developments in local or distant environments.

Finally, locality thus further shapes the tone and tenor of flows organized by hashtags. Local tags may display denser social connectivity between posting users (Yardi & Boyd, 2010a). In conversations around controversial topics, replies between like-minded individuals tend to strengthen group identity, whereas replies between different-minded individuals reinforce in-group and out-group affiliation (Yardi & Boyd, 2010b). With all this in mind, we set out to understand the form that news took on as it was broadcast to the rest of the world via twitter through a number of tags. In this paper, I specifically use our work on #egypt and #ows as examples.² In the process, we realized that the form of content streams or news streams generated is affective in nature (see, e.g., Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012), and these streams serve to *discursively call in to being* public formations, that I refer to as affective publics. They serve as storytelling structures that sustain a modality of engagement that is primarily affective.

My argument is grounded in research suggesting that social media facilitate feelings of engagement (Dean, 2010; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). To put it plainly, social media help activate and sustain latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics. Online activity, however, does not present a guaranteed avenue to impact. It may bring about disruptions to the stability of powerful hierarchies that grant a movement momentum, which may accumulate over time. It typically does so in tandem with offline activity, and it really makes no sense to separate the two, or to treat social media as a space separate from the goings on of everyday social activities. Thus, within the sphere of everyday political and social activities, online activity may connect disorganized crowds and enable the formation of networked publics around communities, actual and imagined (e.g., Howard & Hussain, 2013). These publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however evanescent those feelings may be. The connective affordances of social media thus awaken what Arendt might refer to as the in-between-bond of publics. They also invite forms of expression and connection that frequently help liberate the individual and collective imaginations.

Dean (2010) employs the construct of affect to help explain a circulatory drive that characterizes networked publics, in that they become what they are and simultaneously 'a record or trace' of what they are (p. 22). Driven by an ambient, self-sustaining mode of reflexivity, generated and re-generated by accumulating and imbricated digital layers of expression, affective traces persist and bind networked publics long after the initial events that called them into being. Dean explains that while affective attachments to media cannot produce communities, they may produce 'feelings of community' (p. 22).

Depending on context, these affective attachments may either self-propagate a movement to generate community, and/or entrap people in a loop of sustained spectatorship.

My own thinking is further enlightened by the work of Williams (1961) on structures of feeling. I am interested in how structures of feeling are both rendered and reorganized by the soft and networked architectures of online media, what Williams (1961) understands as a form of social experiences in solution that each generation is borne out of. The moods, instantiations, and singular space-time blocks that mark *kairos*; the affectively sensed and internalized atmosphere of the here and now; and the ways in which this is collaboratively, digitally, and inadvertently imprinted into our personal and collective subconscious. The soft, networked structures of feeling that help us tell stories about who we are, who we imagine we might be, and how we might get there. The same stories that may inspire powerful disruption, accumulate and diffused intensity and tension, or simply, serve as an organically generated digital manifestation of who we are, and who we might like to be.

Affective publics

Our interpretations are driven by an understanding of affect as a form of pre-emotive intensity subjectively experienced and connected to, in this context, to processes of pre-mediation or anticipation of events prior to their occurrence. We drew from the work of Damasio (1994) and Tomkins (1995) to trace how affect provides and amplifies intensity by increasing our awareness of a certain mind or body state that we, as adults, learn to label as a particular feeling and express as a given emotion. Without affect, feelings essentially do not 'feel', for it is affect that provides the intensity with which we experience emotions like pain, joy, and love, and more important, the urgency to act upon those feelings (Damasio, 1994; Tomkins, 1995). We further drew from the work of Massumi (2002), Protevi (2009), Grusin (2010), Grossberg (1997), and most importantly, Seigworth and Gregg (2010), to understand how, depending on sociocultural and political context, affect is suggestive of not-yet-fully-formed possibilities and potentialities, 'regimes of expressivity' ... tied to 'resonant worldings and diffusions of feelings/passions' (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 8). Because of its not yet element (Spinoza, in Seigworth & Gregg, 2010), affect contains anticipation, promise, hope, and potential, or, what Seigworth and Gregg term 'an inventory of shimmers' (p. 9). This liminality renders individuals powerful and potentially powerless at the same time because of its ephemeral and transient nature. The potentiality imparted through affective flows is communicative of affect's futurity. Affect is habitually rhythmic, via the connected assemblages of habituated interpretations and practices. Yet, it is also performatively evocative of would-be reactions, which become a 'bridge of not yet, to the next' (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 14). There was considerable intensity, rhythmicity, and potentiality in the streams that we studied and the publics that they discursively called into being, which led us to interpret the streams and the publics rendered as affective (see, e.g., Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012 or Meraz & Papacharissi, [in press](#)).

I understand affective publics as networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment. Influenced by Boyd's (2010) conceptualization of networked publics, I am further interested in the tonality the soft structures of storytelling, afforded by Twitter, impart on publics affectively rendered. Beyond the fact that these publics are networked, what tonality does this

modality of networking afford? What happens to the mode, the texture of expression? What do networked publics sound like and how do they talk? What are prevailing tendencies of expressivity and connectivity, as these publics attempt to effect impact, assert agency, and claim power?

Therefore, I present and explicate the following five propositions on how we might interpret the civic materiality and gravitas of affective publics:

(1) *Affective publics materialize uniquely and leave distinct digital footprints.*

The digital texture of support mobilized through affective publics varies, depending on sociocultural context and political economy systemic factors. This may be an obvious point, but it is one frequently forgotten when generalizing about the impact of social media. We assume that social media use will have the same results for all types of movements or publics – it does not. There are similarities, but there are also important differences in how the digital aspect of a movement unfolds online, and across different platforms. Social media presence does not convey the same impact for all issues, publics, and movements.

Consider, for example, the graph below, depicting the volume and flow of content on #egypt.

The graph depicts the total volume of tweets, broadcast during the period surrounding and leading up to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. Early activity was minimal and involved activists on the ground, coordinating about where to meet, diverting the police they suspected was monitoring the stream, and rejoicing when their protesting strategies worked (Figure 1).

The fairly flat line in activity that follows represents the time during which the internet was shut down. By the time the internet was turned back on, the stream had transformed into a

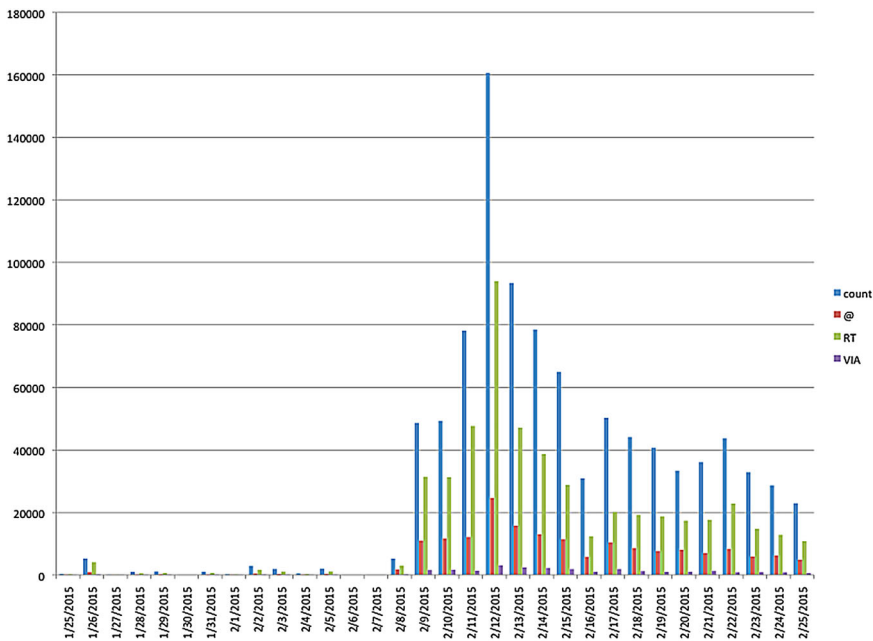


Figure 1. Networked rhythms of content.

different event, being turned into a story. The whole world was watching. Activists on the ground were offering instant reports as they happened and sympathizers from abroad were listening in, retweeting, curating, and commenting. The peak for this stream was reached at a little over 160,000 tweets, on the day that the resignation of Mubarak was announced.

This particular stream was characterized by a prevalence of retweets, which, as our research showed, reinforced messages of solidarity and helped to frame the movement as a revolution well before it had resulted in regime reversal. The prevalence of retweeting could be interpreted as reflective of the high spreadability and virality of the stream. The fairly high volume of mentions could indicate a level of conversationality, indicating that the people participating in the stream were collaboratively co-creating a story about the event. The retweeting structure allowed thought leaders to be crowdsourced to prominence, and we saw figures like Gigi Ibrahim, who reported events on ground, Andy Carvin, who curated information from abroad emerge as influential, along with Wael Ghonim, who rarely tweeted, because he was incarcerated during most of the time, but was heavily retweeted when he did. The stream attained a pace and rhythmicity that was emotive, phatic, and intense, with activity that sustained an ambient, always on pulse for the movement, even when little new was going on the ground.

On the other hand, the Occupy movement, more massive and widespread in nature, was characterized by a number of different streams, some local, some global, and some glocal in nature, reflecting iterations of the movement across the world. The stream examined, #ows, was one that served as a conduit of activity between local and national streams, and activity on that streams is depicted in [Figure 2](#).

In this particular case, we followed the stream over a lengthier period of time, due to the nature of the movement, and observed multiple peaks. The volume of mentions and retweets varied, indicating that in this stream, there was a prevalence of mentions. This could imply that people were more likely to use the mention marker when retweeting and when contributing to the stream. I am not suggesting that retweets were lower for this stream, because they could be contained within the mentions. But what we did find is that the retweeting structure that characterized this stream revealed an overall reluctance to frame the movement or to elevate thought leaders to prominence. This tendency

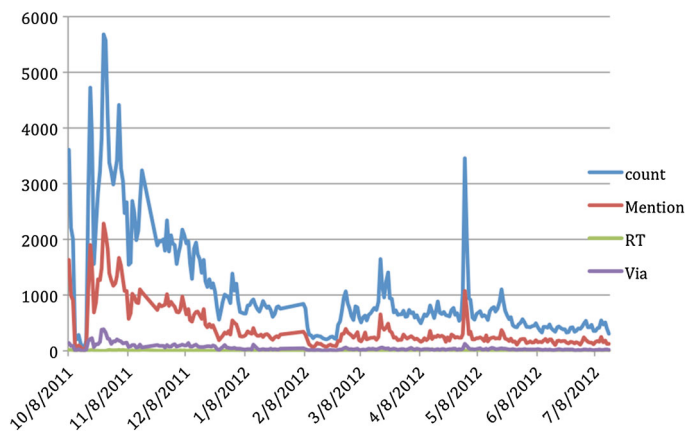


Figure 2. The networked rhythms of #ows.

mirrored the ideology of the movement on the ground, which rejected hierarchies and ensured that all participants in ground assemblies were granted equal rights. It also demonstrated the ideological openness that the movement advocated and was frequently criticized for. #Ows intended the central message of ‘Occupy’ or ‘We are the 99%’ to serve as an open signifier that would embrace all supporters of the movement and allow them to stand up and be counted. The differences between #ows and #egypt stem from differences in goals, ideology, and context for the two movements, and reflect how social media presence varies across movements.

(2) *Affective publics support connective yet not necessarily collective action.*

Connective action emerges out of personal frames on current affairs coalescing via the expressive and connective affordances of networked platforms, including Twitter (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). These platforms serve as conduits for connection, but they do not facilitate the negotiation of collective identity. As a natural outcome of individualization tendencies that require people to structure and reflexively restructure their own lives, connective action practices permit people to express interest in or allegiance to issues without having to enter into complex negotiation of personal versus collective politics. The streams studied sustained such forms of expression. They connected individual viewpoints and in so doing organically assembled collaborative but not collective narratives.

Consider, for instance, the semantic mapping of the most prominent words on #egypt and connections traced between those words. Heavier lines indicate a connection of a more dense nature. There are a number of interesting tendencies depicted in this mapping, but the most striking one concerns the central placement of the word revolution, especially when contrasted to the peripheral positioning of the word protest. Through processes of retweeting, primarily, and not through collective deliberation and debate, networked publics framed this movement as a revolution well before it had actually resulted in regime reversal. Through connective, not collective practices, these frames were crowdsourced to prominence (Figure 3).

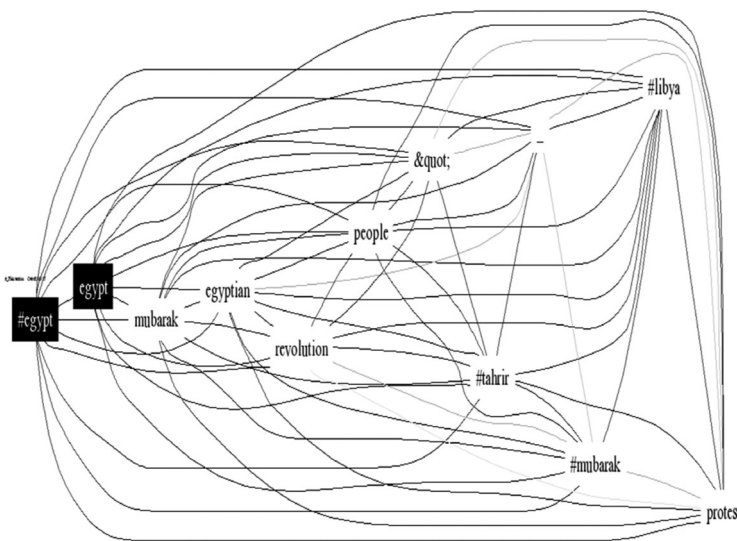


Figure 3. Semantic mapping of #egypt.

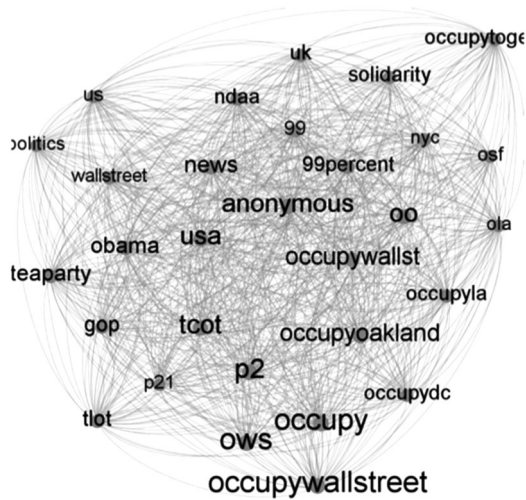


Figure 4. Support and contestation within #ows.

In the case of occupy, narratives weaved collaboratively through #ows connected and disconnected, identifying publics and counter publics, and thus discursively rendering publics within and beyond or against the tag articulations depicted in Figure 4. The figure shows the most utilized tags, with mapped connections in between, revealing connectedness, in betweenness, and centrality. Hashtags #ows (occurred 212,157 times), #occupy (occurred 71,476), and #occupywallstreet (occurred 41,174) are sized larger (node size and label size), and their popularity sustained the persistence of the movement's message. Popular hashtags also emerged to sustain a homophilic, local, or strong-tie association to framing of the movement by territory, both in New York and in Oakland (#occupyoakland, #oo and #occupydc). This local binding did not impact the global reach of the movement's message (#usa and #uk). Hashtag prominence also worked to capture the central concerns of the protesters through reference to existing US political movements (#teaparty, #anonymous), US political parties (#tcot, #p2, #gop, and #tlot), US political officials (#obama), and US tactics towards restraining US protestors (#ndaa). These hashtags worked together to echo and amplify the discord that the protesters felt toward organized US politics and the US economic system, specifically toward conservative, right-leaning politics.

General-level hashtags such as #ows, #occupywallstreet, and #occupy have high degree centrality, suggesting that they are used more prominently than other hashtags. However, high betweenness also suggests that these global-level occupy hashtags played a significant role as a bridge between disparate information flows, connecting the local to the global feel of the movement. What is interesting is that top tags, such as occupy, ows, occupywallstreet are cross-referenced by both #tcot and #p2, representing conservative (Tea Party) and progressive tendencies.

Subsequent qualitative analysis revealed that there was no deliberation going on here. For conservative leaning tweets tagging #tcot, the prevalent tendency was to use affective claims, typically sarcasm and unsubstantiated emotive claims. These content injections were aimed at delegitimizing the movement by infiltrating it through cross-referencing

its tag. Progressive tweets tagging #p2 tended to use affective endorsement of the movement, typically followed by sharing a link to more content, information, and ways to become involved with the movement. Whereas the networked rhythms of #egypt produced solidarity for the collaborative frame of a revolution, those of #occupy were ideologically open enough to invite both support and discord, the latter frequently creating a stop-and-go pace for the movement as time went on.

(3) *Affective publics are powered by affective statements of opinion, fact, or a blend of both, which in turn produce ambient, always on feeds further connecting and pluralizing expression in regimes democratic and non.*

The collaborative storytelling structures that discursively call affective publics into being are characterized by an ambience, an always on presence, that sustains an online home for a movement even when there is little happening on the ground. At times, the presence sustained for a movement via its twitter feed feels like an imbricated layer to the event, or, depending on developments, its own parallel version of a story about the event. So we can think about the event as it is unfolding on the ground, the event as broadcast via television, the event as depicted through the conventions of newspaper storytelling, and the event as it unfolds through the collaborative narrative structures of platforms like Twitter. The mediality of the story told lends form, shape, and texture to the event, as the event is being shaped into a story or stories. One is reminded here of the classic Lang and Lang (1953) study of the MacArthur day parade in Chicago, where the Langs compared the experience of people participating in the parade on the streets to the experience of people watching the parade from their home on TV. They found that people on the streets experienced a chaotic, disorganized event that left them feeling frustrated. They recalled the General as being distant and detached, whereas the people at home recalled an orderly and enjoyable event, that had them describing the general as personable and approachable. It is these subtler differences in the tonality, rhythm, and texture of the story that emerge as we examine the narrative infrastructure of Twitter, and raise interesting questions about how events are depicted, *but also about the form of engagement these depictions invite.*

For example, [Figure 5](#) reflects tweets broadcast via #egypt, in intervals of five minutes, with a peak reached at a little over 10,000 tweets, on the day of Mubarak's resignation. The tweets during this peak do not represent new news; they mostly consist of the same news, of the resignation, repeated over and over again, retold in a subjective manner and driven by affective reactions to what is going on. This online loop of activity sustains an always on, socially driven presence for the movement. The affective form of the stream, depicted in [Figure 6](#), displays a variety of emotions, all marked with an intensity that leads us to term this form of news storytelling as affective, and the publics participating in it affective.

Affect is not emotion. It is the intensity with which we experience emotion. It is the slight tap on our foot when we hear a song but have not yet cognitively processed that we like it. It is the phatic nod we produce when we are listening along to what someone is saying, but we have not yet decided whether we fully agree or not. More precisely, it is the drive or sense of movement experienced before we have cognitively identified a reaction and labeled it as a particular emotion. Its in-the-making, not-yet-fully-formed nature is what invites many to associate affect with potentiality. In this particular storytelling structure of #egypt, affect is present through the intensity that permeates the

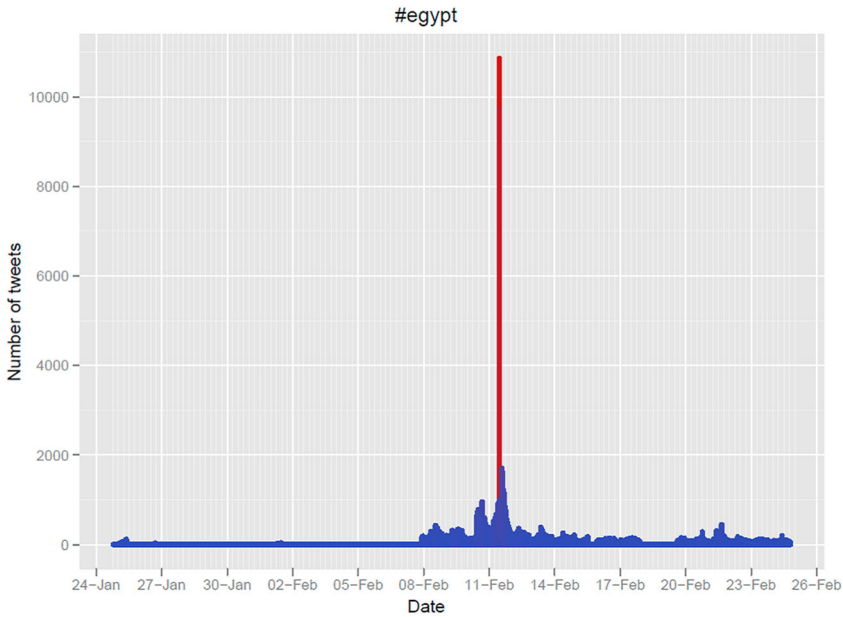


Figure 5. Affective (soft) structures of storytelling.

stream and the networked rhythms of storytelling that emerge. It is present in the rhythm and pace of storytelling, which is instant, emotive and phatic, frequently taking the form of a nod, a clap, a nudge, and other forms of affective expression.

RT @pakinamamer: The Eagles are here!!!!!! Mubarak is down down down!! We won! We won! #Jan25 #Revolution #Egypt
RT @AJEnglish: Breaking: Omar Suleiman announces that Mubarak has resigned - http://aje.me/ajelive #Egypt #cairo
RT @BBCBreaking: President #Mubarak has stepped down as president of #Egypt Vice-President Suleiman announces
RT @BBCBreaking: President #Mubarak has stepped down as president of #Egypt Vice-President Suleiman announces
RT @RPPNoticias: RT @el_pais URGENTE: Mubarak dimite #egypt #egypt
RT @cnnbrk: #Mubarak has decided to step down from presidency of #Egypt Vice President Suleiman says. http://on.cnn.com/ek14HK
Mabrouk ya masr #Jan25 #Egypt #tahrir
Mubarak has stepped down as President long live #Egypt people power rocks:D
Amazing. They're going to transition from dictator to democracy. Truly heartening scenes a month ago you would have scoffed at. #Egypt
RT @washingtonpost: BREAKING Suleiman: Hosni #Mubarak has decided to step down http://wapo.st/dMQYtv -- more details to come #Egypt
Mubarak down now they gotta get The Torturer out and not trust the military dissolve Parilement #Jan25 #Egypt #Cairo
Great. Now what? RT @spartagrrl: Suleiman "Mubark has gone" #Egypt
RT @asteris: Suleiman 3' ago "under those hard circumstances pres Mubarak decided to step down" #Jan25 #Egypt
RT @npnews: Breaking: Egyptian VP announces Mubarak has resigned delegated responsibilities to the Supreme Military Council. #egypt #Jan25
RT @YahooNews: BREAKING NEWS: Egyptian VP says President Hosni Mubarak steps down. (AP) #Jan25 #EGYPT
RT @bilalr: Cairo erupts - watch Al Jazeera for live reactions: http://aje.me/ajelive #Egypt #Mubarakresigns
RT @BBCBreaking: President #Mubarak has stepped down as president of #Egypt Vice-President Suleiman announces
RT @rkrytall: Tears in my eyes. The protesters succeeded. #Egypt
Congratulations #Egypt
cnnbrk: #Mubarak has decided to step down from presidency of #Egypt Vice President Suleiman says.
Egypt has set the example! I wish you all the freedom in the world!! #Egypt #Jan25
RT @AJEnglish: Breaking: Omar Suleiman announces that Mubarak has resigned - http://aje.me/ajelive #Egypt #cairo
RT @monaeltahawy: Is he gone?? Seriously?! Good riddance #Mubarak! Now the regime can follow him too! Yalla #Egypt! #Jan25
Yalla Mubarak#Egypt
Inspired by #Egypt's ability to take control of their future!
RT @TimRothLieToMe: MUBARAK STEPS SOWN!!!!!!Spread the word...Love to #EgyptRT this
RT @HalaGorani: Breaking: Mubarak steps down. #Egypt.
RT @EgyptRevolt2011: #EGYPT Protesters Furious Over Mubarak Refusal to Quit: As Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak beg... http://bit.ly/FT ...
RT @MaddowBlog: MUBARAK RESIGNS. RT @MaddowBlog MUBARAK: Waives office of president puts military in charge. #EGYPT FTW!
e o egito vai pro agito #Egypt #Jan25
RT @BBCBreaking: President #Mubarak has stepped down as president of #Egypt Vice-President Suleiman announces
RT @HalaGorani: It took 18 days to bring down what was thought to be one of the most stable autocracies in the Arab world. #Egypt
IT'S OFFICIAL: MUBARAK HAVE LEFT! I think he had gont to Sharm el Sheij to pick up his things. #Egypt
Kan de NOS eindelijk gaan schaatsen #egypte
RT @BBCWorld: President #Mubarak has stepped down as president of #Egypt Vice-President Suleiman announces

Figure 6. Affective (soft) structures of storytelling.

Refrains reinforce affect, and in the case of #egypt, repetition reinforced the affective pace of the movement online, producing and reproducing the collaborative chant of a revolution, well before one could process whether what was going on was actually a revolution. It did not matter, because it felt like one. The chant of a revolution resembled the chorus in a Greek tragedy, typically tasked with repeating the same word or phrase over and over again, for emphasis, and to drive the main point home. The collective chorus that emerged reinforced the theme of a revolution, and produced a narrative that blended news, fact, drama and opinion into one, to the point where telling one from the other was impossible and doing so missed the point.

(4) *Affective publics typically produce disruptions/interruptions of dominant political narratives by presencing underrepresented viewpoints.*

The narrative structures of Twitter lend form to affective modalities of storytelling. Here, it is essential to emphasize that affect is not an event. It is a layer to an event, or better yet, to paraphrase Robinson (2009), it is a way for citizens to *feel* their way into a story. It is problematic when affect is reported as the story or as the event, because this produces news accounts of an event that are driven by instantaneity, fast news, redundancy, sometimes inaccuracy, and in general, little substance. At times of collaborative mobilization, affect can sustain feelings of community, that can reflexively drive a movement forward, or entrap it in a state of engaged passivity.

The stream of #egypt, under a given context, possessed a certain rhythmicity that harmonized the diverse voices that populated it, from abroad and within. This is not a phenomenon we encounter consistently, nor is it a feature of all streams. Subsequent streams about developments on Egypt were more divided. More recent streams, developing around #ThisIsACoup, #ThisIsADeal, and the financial crisis in Greece are equally divided. In our work on Occupy, we noted similar tendencies in content injections that interrupted the online pace of the movement, divided publics, and emanated from conservative factions opposed to the movement.

It is worth emphasizing that Occupy as a movement sustained multiple streams, and each of those but also all of them combined presented cumulative and cascading expressions of connective action, which may result in more substantial forms of political impact, depending on context. The iterations of the movement, online and offline, were central to presencing underrepresented viewpoints. This was captured perfectly in the semiological economy of their central refrain, 'We are the 99%', signifying that the movement is underrepresented, but it also is representative of a majority.

This open signifier, however, as the movement grew, invited both positive support and negative criticism, as depicted in Figure 7. The narrative structure of Twitter presenced support for the movement, but also enabled disagreement, which frequently annihilated the accumulation of positive sentiment online, and over time, and created a stop-and-go motion within #ows. This was not the case for more localized tags and the streams they produced, although it was present in tags that served to interconnect local and global streams of the movement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014). These comments mirrored the opposition and criticism the movement received through other media and more conservative factions in general.

(5) *The streams sustain publics convened around affective commonalities – Impact is symbolic, agency claimed semantic, power liminal*

5/1/12	#####	2131577	libertymakes	Tweet Butto	Tell Pres. @BarackObama: Don't give Wall Street crooks a "get out of jail free" card. http://t.co/Z6UouKyU #p2 #ows #ffraud
5/1/12	#####	2131578	nnelken	web	#OccupyWallStreet 's #MayDay Tactical Kit http://t.co/be46fDLq #ows
5/1/12	#####	2131579	_cypherpunk	Safari on iOS	May Day Portland: Occupy Portland to 'liberate' a property #ows #mayday http://t.co/2akLiptc
5/1/12	#####	2131580	LetaForemar	Mobile Web	#ows ;) Geez guys did you see this video? :PP http://t.co/K0Sw5T4L
5/1/12	#####	2131581	RuthVang1	Mobile Web	#occupy Omg! I can't believe this really is back again! http://t.co/aa0Bxvej
5/1/12	#####	2131582	BrianBrownN	Tweet Old P	Plz Flw @DailyBrian: #Occupy Wall Street Plans A Huge Day Of Protest To Grind New York To A Halt... http://t.co/DvaNIU8p #store #tomor
5/1/12	#####	2131583	ianrosen	Twitter for i	Phones seem to outnumber the 8 or so #OWS idiots in front of Bank of America 2:1 http://t.co/HFvhQOsn
5/1/12	#####	2131584	pixiemona	Tweet Butto	No Work, No Shopping, #Occupy Everywhere: #MayDay Special on #OWS, #Immigration, #Labor Protests http://t.co/ZvO9hA2F @democr
5/1/12	#####	2131585	kevanfl2	TweetCaster	@kevanfl2: #OWS Live ustream Timcast http://t.co/pWC2esxj @OccupyWallStNYC Shared via TweetCaster
5/1/12	#####	2131586	gaia417	HootSuite	We won't have equity in our society until we have equity in our streets. http://t.co/tFQF4Zvk #bikenyc #ows #M1GS
5/1/12	#####	2131587	Vote_Online	twitterfeed	#Occupy #OWS The Report Of Bo Xilai's Wife Dressing As An Army General After Neil Heywood's Murder Is Completely... http://t.co/Zvns0t
5/1/12	#####	2131588	delexilio	Facebook	New Yorkers: what's the mood like out there, with #OWS clashing with police?
5/1/12	#####	2131589	SomeMetryC	Tweet Butto	#BMI artist Some Metry Guy: Exposing Goldman Friggin Sachs To The Beat #GetMoneyOut [feat. @BuddyRoemer]: [audio] http://t.co/ueN
5/1/12	#####	2131590	OccupySteve	Twitter for A	Half of the crowd here at #BryantPark. Hundreds of people with tons of other stuff going on. #OWS #Mayday http://t.co/hRjgNjRX
5/1/12	#####	2131591	jacobbperry	web	As @comradescott just pointed out, the #ows hippies don't appear to be very active in states with concealed carry laws. #tcot
1/5/04	#####	2131592	marychastair	web	Hey #OWS mutants! Our gov supplied the Mexican drug cartels with guns. Protest that you ungrateful selfish dipshits.
5/1/12	#####	2131593	TeaPartyBro	web	I'm sick of the perpetually out-raged & offended...I'm offended they can afford to take a day off work to WHINE! #OWS #99%
5/1/12	#####	2131594	Kelve	web	#Occupy @CliqueVodka
5/1/12	#####	2131595	sarahcgoldst	Twitter for B	Hey Occupy please refrain from rape today. #ows
5/1/12	#####	2131596	justinmkrebs	Twitter for A	liberalism is a mental disorder counterprotest #ows #m1nyc maybe I should make a shirt of that http://t.co/MDpgqk4O
5/1/12	#####	2131597	RuthVang1	Mobile Web	#occupy Finest Frivolity Ever http://t.co/aa0Bxvej
5/1/12	#####	2131598	OccupyAustii	TweetDeck	#MayDay Teach-Ins, Eastwoods Park, Dean Keeton & Harris Park: 3pm Discussion on the Unpaid #Labor of #Women. #OccupyAustin #OATX
5/1/12	#####	2131599	AmberAnnh	web	So, #OWS is protesting the 1% by buying ad space from a site worth about 8 billion. Not following that logic. #PromotedTrend #CorporateG
5/1/12	#####	2131600	ColetteMadd	Mobile Web	#occupy Haha... This will be f'n funny http://t.co/cjIPon4L
5/1/12	#####	2131601	expedience2	TweetCaster	@Democrats might be out-spent. But we can't be out voted. @dccc #p2 #OWS #CTL #wiunion
5/1/12	#####	2131602	brady_crem	TweetDeck	It's becoming more and more apparent that being American and being intelligent aren't in correlation in the least. #OWS
5/1/12	#####	2131603	Modern_Rigl	web	@Tgurnz Leftists always ignoring facts. Are u stating that #OWS did not do the things I said they did?

Figure 7. Content injections and affective delegitimation of a movement.

The affective storytelling streams enabled via Twitter and similar platforms sustain publics convened around affective commonalities, leading sometimes to the affectively charged claims of the Tea Party, or the broad ideological refrains of the Occupy movement, or in tandem with offline activities, to regime reversals. The power of a movement like Occupy is derived from its ability to semantically renegotiate some constants, some fixed aspects of a particular field, the terms of a particular habitus, and render them more fluid more flexible. On the other hand, the movement imprinted via #egypt harmoniously claimed a revolution before it had resulted in regime reversal, but did not, in the long durée, produce a revolution.

The practices of these networked, affective publics present a departure from the rationally based deliberative protocols of public spheres, and help us reimagine how we may define and understand civic discourse among networked crowds in a digital era. While emotion has never been absent from the construction of political expression, romanticized idealizations of past civic eras magnify the significance of rational discourse and skim over the affective infrastructure of civic engagement. My effort here involves synthesizing research findings to present a theoretical model for understanding *affective publics*: public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds.

The impact of these publics is symbolic, and that is no small achievement. In order to make revolutions and change institutions, we must reimagine them first. The agency affective publics claim is semantic, and is discursively appropriated through platforms like Twitter. The process of reimagining society cannot occur without first negotiating and redefining what societal institutions represent and what their role should be. Finally, the power affective publics attain is of a liminal, transient nature. It is a form of power attained in a liminal state of heterarchy that renders all actors equal, as we transition from one societal state to the next (Turner, 1974).

Affective publics and (soft) structures of feeling

Raymond Williams, in the *Long Revolution*, described structures of feeling as 'social experiences in solution, reflecting the culture, the mood, and the feel of a particular historical moment'. Williams pointed to the industrial novel of the 1840s as an example of one structure of feeling that emerged out of the development of industrial capitalism and summed up middle-class consciousness.

Structures of feeling open up and sustain discursive spaces where stories can be told. Affective publics are networked publics mobilized and connected (or disconnected) through expressions of sentiment, as these expressions of sentiment materialize discursively through the medium of Twitter. Structures of feeling, the storytelling structures of feeling supported and sustained by spreadable technologies afford *texture*, *tonality*, *discursivity*, and *narrative modality* to networked and affective publics.

Structures of feeling can be traced back to forms and conventions shared by those living through a particular era, but they should not be reduced to what is frequently idealized as the spirit of an age. They could be potentially understood as structures of experience, in that they are derivative and referential of experiences, but they really pertain to

Characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought; but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelated continuity. (Williams, 1977, p. 133)

In the same manner, we may understand and further interpret collaborative discourses organized by hashtags on Twitter as structures of feeling, comprising an organically developed pattern of impulses, restraints, and tonality.

Reflecting back on Williams' work, but also our continuing work on affective publics, I have come to understand the impact of social media not as a function of their affordances, but more so as the outcome of our own expectations from technology. We are frequently swayed by the virality that social media afford movements. These platforms amplify voice and visibility, and along with those, they amplify our expectations. The speed, the spreadability of information frequently, wraps us up in expectations that just because a story about a movement unfolded and spread quickly through social media, it should be followed by immediate political, legislative, systemic change. When that does not occur, we blame social media and assert that they have no political impact, all the time failing to realize the fallacy in our reasoning. It is not social media that have misled us, it is our own expectations that have let us down.

Change is gradual. Revolutions may spark instantaneously, but their impact is not instant; it unfolds over time, and for good reason. Revolutions are meaningless unless they are long. They have to be long to acquire meaning. Understanding social media as structures of feeling, as soft structure of storytelling, permits us to examine them as soft structures of meaning-making practices that may be revolutionary. Perhaps they constitute no more than an imparting of a sense of being there, a feel for the tone and the mood of the moment. Possibly, they help publics collaboratively reimagine a shared future. Overtime, and together with systemic and contextual factors, they may progressively lead to change. For the time being and in the moment, they are our means for feeling our way into worlds we cannot experience directly, and as such, they mean something.

Notes

1. See relevant studies, conducted with various colleagues, including: Meraz and Papacharissi (2013), Papacharissi (2012), Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012), Papacharissi and Blas-iola (in press) and Meraz and Papacharissi (in press).
2. For #egypt, we worked with the totality of tweets broadcast in the period ranging between 23 January and 24 February 2011, and conducted a frequency analysis, using R, of a total of 1.5 million multilingual tweets. We also ran a variety of computerized content analyses (semantic, focused on addressivity markers, examining the flow of information), and drew a sample of 300,000 tweets that we conducted a subsequent discourse analysis on. For #ows, we worked with a stratified random sample representing 10% of total activity ranging between October 2011 and July 2012. We ran frequency analyses (using SQL scripts), computerized content analysis (using SQL scripts and running semantic analyses on addressivity markers and hashtag frequency), and discourse analysis on isolated episodes of high addressivity/peaks, examining content, addressivity patterns, the focus of conversation and conversational tendencies. For further detail on our data gathering methods, please see: Papacharissi (2012, 2014), and Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012).

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