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Résumé

En accord avec l'intérêt récent porté aux mouvements sociaux dans la théorie des organisations et la littérature des systèmes d'information et face à la numérisation croissante des sociétés, j'adopte dans cette thèse de doctorat une perspective performative et post-humaniste pour étudier la matérialisation des mouvements sociaux avec, à travers et par les médias sociaux. En faisant cela, je vais au-delà des arguments communément entendus sur la question de savoir si les médias sociaux et leurs diverses fonctionnalités aident ou entravent la mobilisation et l'action collective, pour la simple raison que les médias sociaux défient des caractérisations aussi faciles que des relations de cause à effet. Tout comme les mouvements sociaux, les médias sociaux ont des frontières poreuses et des propriétés malléables. L'organisation dynamique, émergente et distribuée d'un mouvement avec, à travers et par les médias sociaux est un phénomène où il est de plus en plus indéterminé où se terminent les facteurs sociaux et se commencent les facteurs techniques. En reconfigurant la manière dont les interactions sociales se matérialisent, les médias sociaux fournissent non seulement de nouveaux sites pour le déroulement des processus organisationnels, mais participent également à la définition de leurs structures et de leurs résultats. Par conséquent, au lieu de séparer les médias sociaux des mouvements sociaux pour étudier leurs interactions - une manœuvre qui exclut toute enquête sur la constitution en place des deux - je reporte mon regard analytique sur les actions et les pratiques quotidiennes liées à l'activisme des médias sociaux. Empiriquement, je passe de insurrections progressistes ou antidictatoriales, souvent

étudiés, à une montée sous-étudiée, mais de plus en plus importante, d'un mouvement politique : celui de la droite. Plus précisément, j'étudie l'émergence via les médias sociaux du mouvement du Tea Party ; une branche radicale du conservatisme américain qui présente un cas intéressant et pertinent pour étudier la manière dont les médias sociaux ont participé à la matérialisation d'une nouvelle forme d'organisation dans le domaine hautement institutionnalisé de la politique américaine. Pour étudier le rôle constitutif de la matérialité et les implications performatives de telles pratiques dans ce cas empirique, chaque essai de ma thèse met en avant un angle d'un triangle de "collectif-individuel-technologie". D'un point de vue performatif et posthumaniste, dans chaque essai, je traite le sujet (identité collective, activiste / utilisateur de médias sociaux et technologie des médias sociaux) comme un accomplissement processuel et un effet relationnel plutôt qu'une entité substantielle. Cette thèse doctorale contribue à la littérature organisationnelle et aux systèmes d'information. Plus précisément, dans chaque essai, je développe une compréhension "matérielle-discursive" du sujet, basée sur la pratique, qui est utile pour engager, étudier et donner un sens aux phénomènes liés à l'organisation des médias sociaux et à leurs conséquences. La nouveauté et la pertinence de ma contribution pour la littérature en théorie des organisations provient de la prise en compte du rôle constitutif de la matérialité dans les processus organisationnels, tandis que la nouveauté et la pertinence de ma thèse pour la littérature en systèmes d'information provient de la prise en charge des problèmes de contestation, de politique et d'agence collective vis à vis des médias sociaux. Finalement, j'apporte une contribution particulière en enquêtant le contexte peu étudié des mouvements de droite.

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PREFACE

> In our media-dominated information society people employed in constructing and distributing information moved or have been moved to the centre of the scene on which the drama of human coexistence is staged and seen to be played.
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> —Zygmunt Bauman (2015)

> Movements in complex societies are disenchanted prophets.
>
> —Melucci (1996, p. 1)

Long before Donald Trump becoming the master of Twitter (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018), it was with the Tea Party Movement (TPM) that many on the right side of the political aisle in the United States began reinventing their political engagement and organization in the image of social media. The seeds of the Tea Party fervor were sown, in the late 2008, amidst the turmoil of a financial crisis in full swing, an outgoing Republican president admitting having "abandoned free-market principles to save the free-market system"[i] and an African-American Democrat president-elect heading to the Oval Office. At such a pivotal juncture in the United States politics, dispersed groups of disgruntled white middle-aged middle-class churchgoer conservatives (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012), arguably fed up with their usual resort, the Grand Old Party (G.O.P.; (The Washington Post, 2010), started to voice their anger—this time though by taking note of Obama's harnessing of "New Media" in organizing and mobilizing.

Social media loomed large in this endeavor. The initial linkage between a core of some tens of would-be activists was shaped through #TCOT, an amateur ranking of conservatives on

Twitter turned into a community holding weekly conference calls. Crashing phone calls caused by the growing number of participants paved the way for the launch of Wikis filled with protest techniques and advice. Ning and Facebook pages filled the void left by the lack of formal mechanisms and were added to the organizing nexus of the emerging grassroots. Eventually, it was a social-networking site called *Tea Party Patriots* that, arguably, put the name Tea Party on the (cyber-)map of twenty-first century United States politics (Blackmon, Levitz, & Etter, 2010).

Alas, this tale of technologically-empowered grassroots is not the only narrative hovering around the genesis of the TPM. Accusations of astroturfing abound. Far from being a spontaneous outburst of public sentiment, Tea Parties are accused of being fake grassroots "manufactured by the usual suspects" (Krugman, 2009)—i.e., the Republican strategists, right-wing billionaires, and Fox News—aiming "to keep the focus on tax cuts for the rich instead of for the great middle class"[ii]. Some have indeed gone to the extreme of calling the TPM "the biggest [a]stroturf operation in history" run by the owners of the avowedly "biggest company you've never heard of" (i.e., Koch Industries; Monbiot, 2010). More balanced accounts, however, recognize both grassroots and astroturf signatures in the movement (Skocpol, 2013; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Despite its grassroots genesis, the untried movement has indeed been convoyed with top-down allies since early on, when big-money professionally-run libertarian think tanks found in the uprisings the grassroots base they were lacking since 1970s—and jumped on the bandwagon to reap the benefits of its fervor.

This coalition created a paradoxical situation which was kept in balance partly thanks to social media. The Tea Partiers are avowedly leaderless and leery of anything that represents Washington D.C.—the G.O.P. included. They distinguish their brand of conservatism from the

Republican establishment—boasting its "free-flowing nature" that runs counter to "structure and formality" (Vogel, 2010)—and have now and again voiced concern about being co-opted, or even hijacked, by Party establishment or special interest groups (Vogel, 2010; Zernike, 2010b). And yet, most argue that the TPM would not have gotten off the ground without seeding, staffing, and strategizing carried out by its infamous big-business allies (Monbiot, 2010).

To capitalize on TPM's 'leaderlessness paradox', its allied elite organizations framed themselves as "grassroots service centers" (« FreedomWorks », 2014) for local Tea Partiers. Social media proved especially instrumental in allowing these organizations to "[connect] local groups to national conversation" (Hiar, 2010)—while enjoying the ability to frame said conversation. Aiming to "transform how people organize on the Right" (Hopkins, 2012) these organizations, among other things, showed local Tea Partiers how to tame and foster the power of social media: "to connect and let the people connect" while letting uninvolved others "to see what everybody is doing" (Glenn Beck quoted in Wlison, 2011). These organizations provided local Tea Parties with social media tools and trainings on how to establish their digital presence and attract audiences, to communicate and collaborate with other groups, and to organize rallies and/or campaigns.

This dynamic, decentralized, and flexible organization deployed the TPM as a "pincer operation" that gave it both political leverage over the G.O.P. agenda and ideological clout to shift the U.S. political discourse further right (Skocpol, 2013). In less than two years, the TPM managed to "push already very conservative Republicans into obstructionist and non-compromising styles of governance", to bring federal government action close to a grinding

halt (Skocpol, s. d.), and to gain the sympathy of nearly 20% of voting-age Americans (Zernike, 2010a; Zernike & Thee-brenan, 2010).

Just as the Republican label was being tarnished, a right-wing activist movement burst into existence that not only helped conservatives rebrand their ideology under an "unsullied standard" (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011, p. 11), but also dashed the high hopes of liberals for Obama's progressive agenda—and this, in only less than two years of their birth. But maybe more importantly, the TPM also took part in rewriting the rules of the game of political engagement and organization in the age of social media. The question becomes: *how to organize a crowd that are leery of leaders?*

INTRODUCTION

Material Enactment of Social Movements With, Through, and By Social Media

An interest in social movements is increasingly gaining traction among scholars in both organizational theory (OT; Djelic, 2013; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008) and information systems (IS; Oh, Eom, & Rao, 2015; Selander & Jarvenpaa, 2016; Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe, & Negoita, 2017) disciplines. This is for the good reason that movements and movement organizing have become a daily reality for increasing numbers of people. Today a considerable amount of movements' organizing work materializes with and through social media. Ideas are disseminated on YouTube, knowledge is stockpiled and contested on Wikipedia, wars are fought on Twitter, and camps are held on Facebook, as it were. Social media—with their reconfiguring of how social interactions materialize—not only provide novel sites for activism and movement organizing, but also take part in shaping their very fabric and outcomes. Social media provide activists with fora for outreach, connection, engagement, belongingness, collaboration, and making their voices heard, but also for bashing and trashing, othering, spreading fake news, and nothing less than creating and sustaining alternative realities.

While the extant literature recognizes the importance of ICTs for social movements (Castells, 2012; Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004; Kelly Garrett, 2006; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Tarrow, 2011), it is, nonetheless, limited and limiting when it comes to making sense of the

transformative implications of social media activism. On the one hand, technological deterministic studies solely focus on the *impact* of technology on movements. On the other hand, cultural deterministic studies only focus on how culture *shapes* media technologies or only on the transmitted content itself. Finally, studies that capture the interactions *between* technology and movements tend to reify both as separate and independent from each other (see for a review of these perspectives in social movements studies: (Heeks & Seo-Zindy, 2013); in organization theory: Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Phillips & Oswick, 2012; in media studies: Langlois, 2014; Slack & Wise, 2006). Working from a separationist assumption, these approaches, while insightful, foreclose possibilities of investigation into the constitution of phenomena that blur, as never before, our habituated divisions between the realm of the social and the realm of the technical (Introna & Hayes, 2011; Schultze, 2014; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Slack & Wise, 2005). The emergent, dynamic, distributed, and indeterminate organization of a movement with and through social media is one such phenomenon where it is increasingly indeterminate where the social factors end and the technical ones begin. For example, one cannot easily distinguish between the roles of human actions and algorithmic calculations in determining "who gets to interact with whom, where and when?"

To overcome this challenge, I join and build upon recent endeavors in IS and OT literatures to account for the constitutive role of materiality in organizing (Barrett, Oborn, & Orlikowski, 2016; Carlile, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2013; Cecez-Kecmanovic, Galliers, Henfridsson, Newell, & Vidgen, 2014; Leonardi, Nardi, & Kallinikos, 2012; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). I submit that if we are to take the increasing digitalization of society seriously, we need to pay close attention to what happens to the social/cultural processes we are interested in when they materialize

with, through, and by social media. Towards this, I adopt a relational and performative perspective (Barad, 2003; Introna, 2013; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014) and shift my focus from preexisting technological and social entities (with determinate boundaries, inherent properties, and pre-ordained roles) to the totality of ongoing practices— or the *apparatus*—that make social media activism work (Barad, 2003). This perspective provides an integrative framework and vocabulary to capture and make sense of the complex phenomena of social media activism without assuming sharp edges between social/discursive and technological/material factors or giving primacy to one over the other.

Empirically, I shift from oft-studied progressive or anti-dictatorial uprisings to the understudied, yet increasingly momentous rise of the Right (Gross, Medvetz, & Russell, 2011; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Specifically, I study the emergence throuhg social media of the Tea Party Movement (TPM); a hardline branch of United States conservatism, which later became an integral part of the Trump phenomenon in the 2016 election and beyond. The TPM presents an interesting and relevant case for studying how social media have participated in materializing a new organizational form in the highly institutionalized field of U.S. politics— with implications reaching far beyond.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. First, I situate the discussion about social media in a broader literature on ICTs in social movements. Then, I move on to present the overall theoretical perspective adopted in this dissertation. Next, I discuss the epistemological implications of adopting a such a performative perspective. Finally, before making some concluding remarks, I present in broad strokes the three essays that make up the main body of this dissertation.

Social Movements, ICTs, and Social Media

ICTs have been recognized as catalysts of contemporary social movements (Tarrow, 2011). The uprisings of Zapatista, Mexico in 1994 and the 'battle of Seattle', U.S. in 1999—interestingly both against neoliberal globalization—are the first well-known cases that attracted the attention of the public and intellectuals alike to the role of ICTs in the diffusion of protest and solidarity. Since then a growing body of interdisciplinary research has investigated the role of ICTs in social movements (Ayres, 1999; Bennett, 2003; Castells, 2001, 2012; Chadwick, 2006; Donk et al., 2004; Juris, 2005; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Taken together, these studies have noted that ICTs facilitate the organization, mobilization, and transnationalization of traditional offline activism but also create new forms of online activism (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Specifically, they have argued that ICTs have influenced all aspects of social movements—i.e. mobilization, accessing and seizing political opportunities, and framing movements' issues— in productive, and only sometimes unproductive, ways (see for a review Kelly Garrett, 2006). This influence is treated in two main ways. The majority of studies frame the impact of ICT use in terms of 'quantitative' changes in social movements' variables, whereas a limited number of studies frame it in terms of 'qualitative' changes in social movements' underlying processes (Earl, Hunt, & Kelly Garrett, 2014). For example, the former group argues that ICTs lower the costs of participation or mobilization and thus make social movement organizations (SMO) more effective, or that ICTs weaken (or strengthen) community engagement and collective identities. Whereas, the latter group argues that ICT usage challenges the dominant assumptions that mobilization of collective action requires formal organizations (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006), or that SMOs

are reinventing themselves vis-à-vis ICTs—giving rise to new organizational forms, tools, membership criteria and so on (Carty, 2011; Karpf, 2012).

Heeks and Seo-Zindy (2013) have categorized studies of social movements and ICTs along two dimensions of technological optimism vs. skepticism and technological determinism vs. social determinism. They argue that the mainstream narrative is both technologically optimistic and deterministic: ICTs empower challengers in contesting incumbents and increase the speed, reach, and effectiveness of their organization and mobilization efforts. Finally, Baron (2014) argues that most of these studies are interdisciplinary and often lack theoretical frameworks conceptualizing ICTs and their relationships with social movements—leading them to producing simplistic and deterministic accounts.

Attention to the role of ICTs in social movements was only amplified vis-à-vis claims about the role of social media in Arab Spring, Iran's 2009 post-election uprisings and '#Occupy' (Farrell, 2012; Juris, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013). The oft-heard arguments are those that techno-optimists and techno–skeptics have pitted against each other (Miranda, Young, & Yetgin, 2016). On the one hand, optimists claim that social media enhance freedom and democracy by increasing the ability to easily and quickly deliberate, promote, cooperate, and organize collective action (Shirky, 2008); they collapse the boundaries between private and public spheres and thus generate novel spaces for political engagement (Papacharissi, 2010), and they bring about 'network publics' (boyd, 2010). Arab Spring or Spain 2004 are frequently cited to support these arguments. On the other hand, skeptics claim that social media enable only half-hearted, feel-good, lazy-friendly activism—or slacktivism (Morozov, 2009)—which cannot bring about systemic political or social change; they lack hierarchy, resource mobilization capacities, and strong ties and therefore only work when

people are not asked a lot (Gladwell, 2010). Iran 2009 or Thailand 2010 are the counter examples that are cited to refute optimists.

I suspend judgment on this debate and refrain from taking sides. In fact, I argue that the premise of such debates is imperfectly technologically deterministic (Fuchs, 2013). They treat social media as a single self-contained entity with definite and stable properties that produce generalizable effects on social movements, unmediated by any other factors such as where (context), how (practice), and by whom (actors) they are used (Farrell, 2012). That said, there is a nascent yet growing body of work, I must quickly concede, in Information Systems, Communication, Human Computer Interactions, and Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) literatures that engage with social media and social movements (or organizing at large) in a more nuanced manner.

Looking at social media from different perspectives and engaging with it through different methodologies, these studies give a mosaic picture of social media (and social media organizing). More specifically, a review of these studies gives a notion of social media that is dialogical (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Kim & Miranda, 2011; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), multimodal (Crivellaro, Comber, Bowers, Wright, & Olivier, 2014; Mehmet, Clarke, & Kautz, 2014), algorithmic (Langlois, 2014; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014), heterogeneously composed (Fuchs, 2013; Heath, Singh, & Ganesh, 2013; Heath, Singh, Ganesh, & Kroll-Smith, 2013; Heeks & Seo-Zindy, 2013), temporally situated (Hallerbach, Barrett, & Faraj, 2013; Kaganer & Vaast, 2010; Maghrabi & Salam, 2013, 2013), embedded in and influential for broader institutional contexts (Hercheui, 2011; Jensen & Kjærgaard, 2010; McGrath, Elbanna, Hercheui, Panagiotopoulos, & Saad, 2012; Wulf, Misaki, Atam, Randall, & Rohde, 2013), infused with third-party interests (Langlois & Elmer, 2013), and finally with

multiple and emergent affordances (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Jensen & Dyrby, 2013; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Zheng & Yu, 2014).

A Posthumanist Performative Perspective

In this dissertation I adopt a posthumanist performative perspective. Emerged in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS; Barad, 2003; Callon, 2007; Callon & Law, 1995; Latour, 2005), this perspective is based on a relational ontology and is committed to steer clear from reifying technology and other social entities and from a priori distinguishing any direction of influence between them. Instead, it attends to action and enactment and focuses on practices through which phenomena are differentially performed—it is based on an ontology of 'doing' and becoming. As put by Introna (2013, p. 335) in such a relational ontology:

> there are not beings that then have relations with other beings, rather, the beings, which our language and thinking already assume, are the accomplishments that emerges, or are produced, through those very relations. The assumed relations are the conditions of possibility for them to be the beings we assume them to be.

This perspective treats action as carried out by heterogeneous webs of material and symbolic relations (Law, 2009). Moreover, it argues that differences between the material and the symbolic (their boundaries, properties, and roles) are generated in those relations—be them in *assemblages* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), actor-networks (Latour, 2005), hybrid *collectifs* (Callon & Law, 1995), mangles of practice (Pickering, 2010), cyborgs (Haraway, 1991), or apparatuses (Barad, 2003). The latter, which is rooted in Karen Barad's philosophy of agential realism, is the touchstone of this study.

Agential realism is a posthumanist performative alternative to representationalism that strives to capture the entanglement of meaning and matter while giving matter its due role as an

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active participant in the becoming of reality (Barad, 2003, 2007). It is based on a reconceptualization of discursive practice, matter (but also agency and causality). The notion of performativity has been essential in the tradition of STS to show how representations can produce material effects—that is, discourse can produce the reality it purports to describe (Callon, 2007; Latham & Sassen, 2009; Latour, 2005; MacKenzie, 2003; MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2007; Pickering, 2010; Suchman, 2007). Performativity is at the center of an ontology of becoming (Introna, 2013). Having come from theoretical quantum physics, Barad (2003, 2007) contributed to the performative scholarship by building on Nils Bohr's philosophical work in revising both Newtonian physics and Cartesian epistemology[iii]. She reworked the conceptions of matter/material, meaning/ discursive, and their relationship, aiming to show while discourse can produce material effects, matter also participates in this production of reality—without resorting to reification or determinism.

As such, joining Butler (1990) and Haraway (1991), Barad drops Newtonian conceptions of matter as solid eternal substance and renders matter as a—fluid but also congealing—temporal and historical process of materialization. Thus, for her, matter is always in the process of becoming. Therefore, matter is not limited to physical properties (e.g., of technology); rather it refers to the materiality, or the materialization, of phenomena. She also reworks the notion of meaning, or rather discursive practice, as a process of boundary making (i.e., differentiation) in the ongoing materialization of the world.

Neither of these processes have primacy over the other. Meaning and matter entail each other. Matter is not to be merely understood as a "support, location, referent, or source of sustainability" (Barad 2003, p. 821) for pre-existing meanings. Without matter, meaning does not register. That is, meaning is always already material in the sense that discursive practices

are ongoing boundary makings in a material world. Similarly, meaning is not to be understood as a mere reflection, representation, signification, or labeling of a pre-existing material reality. Without meaning, matter does not register. That is, matter is always already discursive in the sense that material phenomena are produced through congealing of ongoing boundary makings in the world.

The point, therefore, is not to pay lip service to matter—by merely admitting that discourse, which is the actual generative factor in reality-making, is materially supported or sustained. Nor is it that "there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices" (Barad 2003, p. 823). The becoming of the world is both material and discursive—or more strictly it is material-discursive—and therefore, both discourse and matter play agential roles in (or, contribute to) further materialization of phenomena. Finally, Barad localizes these entanglements of meaning and matter into specific phenomena. Thus the boundaries between the discursive and the material, the properties they assume, and the roles they come to play become distinguished and distinguishable only within each specific phenomenon—and thus vary across different phenomena (Barad calls this "exteriority-within" as opposed to "absolute exteriority" of realism and "absolute interiority" of social constructivism; see also the section on epistemology).

Agential Realist Vocabulary and Its Implications

In short, Barad argues that the (ontological) units of reality are not things but *phenomena*. A phenomenon is performed through an *apparatus*—a set of material-discursive practices. An apparatus carves a phenomenon out (of the flux of ontological and semantic indeterminacy) and gives it stabilized boundaries, components, and meanings by making *agential cuts*[iv]. These

cuts locally determine what is included in and what is excluded from the boundaries, properties, roles, and meanings of the phenomenon and its components. Finally, based on these locally enacted differences, components *intra-act[v]* and exert influence on each other (enacting what Barad calls a local structure of causality). In the process, they constantly renegotiate their differences and thus redraw the agential cuts that separate them—furthering this generative process.

There is no outside to this process of becoming—it feeds and folds on itself. Apparatuses (and phenomena) are like Russian dolls[vi]. Each phenomenon is constituted through an apparatus that is itself a phenomenon produced through another apparatus/phenomenon and so on. Intra-activity is the ebb and flow of this process—it is the engine of Barad's relational ontology. Intra-actions among the locally enacted components of an apparatus are what draw the agential cuts in the first place—separating the components of the produced phenomenon and so on.

Agential realism has profound implications for the study of social media and social movements. From this perspective discursive and material are intertwined and thus any attempt to determine the individual effect of one on the other is of limited validity. Instead, this perspective invites us to go beyond attempts to capture the essence of artifacts, technologies, or materiality; in the same way that it invites us to go beyond endeavors to capture the essence of organizations, movements, and social processes. Instead we are invited to focus on material-discursive practices that *make phenomena work* (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014, p. 889)—that is to focus on how *characteristics* and *consequences* are produced in the phenomenon under the study.

Barad's performative perspective provides scholars with needed vocabularies that can be appropriated to study phenomena in various contexts. As such, it has been adopted, in various degrees, to study customer service (Nyberg, 2009), digital encoding and plagiarism (Introna, 2011; Introna & Hayes, 2011), online reviewing (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014), virtual worlds (Schultze, 2014), as well as to explore its implications for multimodal discourse analysis (Iedema, 2007) and morality (Introna, 2014). Her agential realist perspective is especially well suited for the purposes of the current study. This is for the good reason that the fast-changing social media phenomena blur our habituated divisions between the realm of social/discursive and the realm of technological/material (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). Social media make extremely simplistic any attempt to see them as self-contained technological entities. Much like contemporary social movements, social media easily reveal to have porous boundaries and malleable properties. Social media are not mere technologies. They are apparatuses of meaning-making "composed of users, audiences and producers, institutions, policies, rules, routines, professional hierarchies and ethics, aesthetics, and technologies all in the service of enabling the production, storage, and distribution of meanings" (Langlois, 2014, p. 7). They bring about new materialities for meaningful social interaction that seep, in nontrivial ways, into any social movement process that they mediate. Indeed, social media are better seen as apparatuses of human and non-human activities together amounting to dynamic, emergent, distributed, inseparable, and indeterminate implications for social movements. Barad's work provides an integrative framework to investigate such complex phenomena without assuming sharp edges between social/discursive and technological/material factors or giving primacy to one over the other.

Epistemological and Methodological Reflections

The Knower and the Known

The performative perspective adopted in this study has strong ontological and epistemological implications. It argues for the primacy of action and relations in practice over substance and entities. This is not to say, I argue, that discreet entities and their differences are not *real*. Rather, the point is that they are performed into reality, they are made real—or are *realized*, as it were. However, as Barad put it (2011), to start the analysis by taking them as granted is to start the analysis too late. Moreover, the point is not to argue that since the boundaries are blurred we should simply abandon them and retreat to a boundary-less caricature of reality. Rather, it is to draw attention to the practices through which those differences (boundaries, properties and roles) are made and to make them transparent, accountable, and responsible. This is especially the case, I argue, if there is reason to believe that the stability or change of those differences is morally and ethically relevant or if there are grounds to suspect that they are going under consequential transformation without being noticed.

Based on Barad's agential realism, the relations of exteriority are only locally determinate within a phenomenon (Barad, 2003). This means that the demarcated boundaries, properties, and roles between the enacted symbolic and material entities—e.g. movement and technology—are not definitive beyond the phenomenon under scrutiny. Therefore, the point of research in this perspective, I argue, is not to find and report, in the said phenomenon, the underlying technical and social factors, or the rules of their interactions, *as such and per se.* Instead, it is to provide illustrations of *how* within a phenomenon those technical and social factors co-emerge and co-evolve only in relation to each other. Also, more importantly, the

point is to show the performative implications of such enactments for the phenomenon of interest. A corollary of the above is that since the boundaries are not definitive beyond the chosen phenomenon, any phenomenon would entail a different distribution of boundaries, properties, and roles. Therefore, to warrant analysis the chosen phenomenon for the study needs to be ethically, morally, politically—or even practically—relevant and consequential.

Moreover, according to agential realism the knower, too, does not stand in a relation of absolute exteriority to the known. That is, the 'observed' phenomenon is not independent of the 'agencies of observation' (Barad, 2003). This does not mean that observation is biased since that would presuppose a single True state of the things, but that observations—that is, any kind of knowledge production—do not so much *represent* phenomena as they contribute in *performing* them.

Such a material-discursive performativity also governs the research practices I engaged with as well as their outcomes. On the one hand, the knowledge that I produce can participate in bringing about or maintaining the phenomenon it purports to describe. On the other hand, social media (as the sources and tools of data collection) can shape and condition my knowledge of the said phenomenon—making specific kinds of knowledge possible and not others.

First, the knowledge that I produced is performative. I am neither an outside objective observer of the phenomenon of social media activism, nor am I merely a situated subjective onlooker. Instead, I am part of this phenomenon (Barad, 2003). I am productive and constitutive of it. I am taking part in performing it. In other words, I as a researcher, my research questions, my objects of study, and the research context did not preexist each other (Tamboukou, 2014). They have only been brought into existence in relation to each other

through the research practices that I adhered to and engaged with. As such, I partly enact the object that I purport to study and the context in which it is embedded, as well as the distinctions between the two: mainly by including and excluding elements in my description of the object and its context (e.g., in deciding between what goes into the 'context' and what goes into the 'findings') while adhering to the specific norms and genres of reporting qualitative research that are legitimate among my audience community. Meanwhile the enacted object and its context refuse to be enrolled in my work merely according to my wishes. They too take part in the negotiation. In short, by problematizing, describing, and presenting it in specific genres, I become part of an apparatus that promotes 'social media activism' as a category—a thing that exists in the world—but also promotes the Tea Party as a social movement (and not for example a mere astroturfing operation).

Second, social media shaped and conditioned my knowledge production. I have argued that social media not only mediate but also contribute to meaning-making and knowledge production. For me as the researcher, social media constitute sources of and tools for data collection. However, that data is itself partly produced and, as it were, brought to me by social media (e.g., it is algorithmically-laden)—making particular kinds of knowledge production possible while excluding others. Therefore, while social media give the impression to make extant social behaviors visible—and are mostly studied as such—they are in fact in the process of performing specific sociomaterial realities and also shaping the knowledge that can be produced about those realities (Langlois & Elmer, 2013). For instance, a Twitter stream does not give me a neutral or transparent representation of the meaning-making processes going on among the participants. It will allow me to see certain aspects, in certain ways, and not others. I can see the threads and the retweets but not any private messages, for example. More

interestingly, the order in which I see tweets is not necessarily the same as for others—it will depend on an algorithm that considers, *inter alia*, my past interactions and aims at showing me tweets that I am more likely to engage with.

Note that again the point is not to argue that since the boundaries between researcher, phenomenon, context, and knowledge are blurred we should simply abandon them and retreat to a boundary-less caricature of research. Rather, it is to be mindful of the research practices that contribute to enacting of those distinctions and to make those practices modest, transparent, accountable, and responsible.

Methodological Aims

Methodologically, the performative perspective adopted here takes practice as primary. Such a focus on practices as analytical units gives us an entry point for studying how things work and how these performances might be constitutive of wider sociomaterial configurations and processes (Pink et al 2015). However, to more faithfully enact a performative perspective, we need to resist the familiar temptation to simply focus on the practices of the research subjects, as it were, and to represent them as given—existing out there. That is, we should not fall back to the research practices of a representational paradigm and forget our own involvement in the (re)enactment of what we study.

I shall discuss and reflect on these concerns in more detail in essay 3. However, a quick overview of some of the main methodological assumptions is in order. To study the role of social media in performing social movements a few ground rules should be set. First, social media should not be treated as reified and self-contained material/technological entities in the same way that a movement and its main theoretical parts (e.g. collective identity) should not be treated as reified and self-contained social/symbolic entities. Second, the direction of

influence 'between' social media and social movements should not be assumed beforehand. Instead, multiple (initially) ambiguous relationships should be allowed to emerge in various situations in the phenomenon under the study.

Third, the analytical gaze needs to be shifted from entities to actions that are performing social movements through and by social media. Specifically, the aim will be to capture how activists enroll social media in their practices and how social media in turn respond to such attempts; how after enrollment social media takes part in performing movements through forming and stabilizing a nexus of relations—locally determining what is included in and what is excluded from movements when they materialize through and by social media; how, in those practices, various components within social movements (e.g. community, activist, technology) are locally enacted in relation to each other, assume different properties, come to play various roles and exert influence on each other; what are the consequences of such enactment of social movements, especially for what we know as collective identity and action, individual activists, and technology? In short, focus should be on how social media become part of the apparatus that performs a social movement—selecting, ordering, and aggregating situated practices into collective phenomena (e.g., collective action), but also redistributing collective phenomena among local settings and actors (as it were, bringing the movement to its constituents).

As such, my aim in this dissertation is to flesh out mid-range conceptual frameworks regarding the topic of each essay, while using the broader performative lens to make sense of the collected data and to guide the analysis. These conceptual frameworks will not be concerned with proposing abstract representations of the role of social media in social movements. As put by Czarniawska, "why should one attempt to formalize a world undergoing construction?" (2008, p. 779). Rather the frameworks will be concerned with

putting forth "a way of seeing and thinking" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 37) about social media activism and its consequences.

Presentation of the Case and the Essays

Empirically, I shift from oft-studied progressive or anti-dictatorial uprisings to the understudied, yet increasingly momentous rise of the Right (Gross et al., 2011; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Specifically, I study the emergence through social media of the TPM; a hardline branch of United States conservatism, characterized by its avowedly ideological purity regarding its mixture of libertarianism and conservatism. Only after two years of its existence, the TPM was enjoying the sympathy of around 20% of voting-age Americans (Zernike, 2010a; Zernike & Thee-brenan, 2010), and repeatedly managed to send hardliner Senators and Representatives to the U.S. congress, before becoming an integral part of the Trump phenomenon in the 2016 election and beyond. The TPM is embedded in a broader rise of the Right in the United States described by Gross et al. (2011) as:

> a historically situated process of group-making and mobilization comprising the emergence of the [the United States'] national conservative movement (…); the growth of more or less stable and interlinked political organizations and institutions aligned with it; the increasing number of Americans who identified as conservative over the course of the twentieth century; the heightened salience of ideological themes identified as conservative in contemporary political discourse; the newfound power of conservative Republicans to win political office at the local, state, or national levels; and the degree to which that power has been used to shape public policy (p. 336)

The TPM presents an interesting and relevant case for studying how social media have participated in materializing a new organizational form in the highly institutionalized field of U.S. politics—with implications reaching far beyond. Touted as being mobilized around a stern agenda of "less government, lower taxes, and more economic freedom"

(« FreedomWorks », 2014), "Tea Partyism" thrives on dynamically connecting a structural backbone of elite-supported interlinked organizations (and conservative mass media outlets) to an avowedly leaderless grassroots base of local networks. Social media have proved instrumental in this endeavor, I argue. Not only they play a role as organization and participation tools, but also are used by activists for fostering, through time, an alignment of normative orientations leading to more articulated and sustained forms of collective action.

In studying the emergence of the TPM through social media, and in line with my theoretical commitments described above, I refrained from starting the analysis with attributing to the TPM reified categories of traits, ideas, beliefs, or practices that possess a fixed or stable essence (e.g., psychological resistance to change, economic interest in free markets, or an overarching moral worldview; see Gross et al. (2011) for a review of these perspectives on American conservatism). This does not mean that I reject the notion that there might in fact be a recurrence of these signatures among Tea Partiers. Rather, the point is that they should not be unproblematically assumed in explaining how the movement came to be and why the Tea Partiers do what they do.

In the same way, I refrained from attributing to social media any determinate property or preordained roles in the articulation of this movement. Instead, I attended to the processes through which particular practices became constitutive of the TPM through and by social media. Therefore, instead of starting with reified and separated conceptions of the TPM and social media to then study their interactions, I focused on the totality of practices—that is, the apparatus—that stabilized both in relation to each other.

Throughout the journey of my investigation, I came to distribute the focus of my three essays on the processes of collective identity formation, becoming social media activists, and social

mediation (i.e. a processual alternative for thinking about social media). In each essay, I treated the subject matter—community, activist/user, and technology—as processual accomplishments and relational effects rather than substantial entities. Evidently, my foremost aim in each essay was to engage with and account for the constitutive role of social media practices in accomplishing the focal relational effect. Below I present a broad review of each essay.

First Essay—Collective

In the first essay, titled "**'Build That Wall!' Social Media and the Materialization of Collective Identity**", I study the enactment of collective identity in social media practices. While scholars recognize the process of collective identity—i.e. the ongoing articulation of a collective actor; a "we"—as a central organizing process, they mainly treat it as cognitive ("sense of we-ness") or linguistic ("talk of we-ness"). Instead, I investigate how the "we" materializes in practice. I conducted an genealogical investigation of #TCOT, an amateur ranking of conservative Twitter users, turned activist community, turned organizer of the first Tea Party rallies 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. I identify four boundary processes of inclusion, unification, fragmentation, and exclusion that unfolded in these practices. I show how these boundary processes constituted the material and discursive collective identity of TCOT and how different temporal configurations of them characterize different phases in the becoming of the TCOT community—and more generally in the process

of collective identity. The study contributes to organizational literatures on collective identity, (socio)materiality and social media.

Second Essay—Individual

In the second essay, titled "**The rise of Conservatweeps: On becoming cyborgs-in-practice through social media**", I focus on how the prevalence and prominence of social media use offer us new possibilities of mattering; new modes and means of experience and action extending beyond our bodies' immediate space-time. I argue that understanding the constitution of these possibilities through our complex and multifaceted relations with technology requires us to go beyond discreet conceptions of human (activist) and technology (social media) and to sharpen our understanding of how different human-technology entanglements produce different modes of actorhood in an increasingly technological life-world—a world where nothing happens simply 'here and now'.

Towards this goal, this paper proposes the concept of cyborg-in-practice and uses it to conduct a genealogy of "conservatweeps" (portmanteau of conservative Twitter people). More specifically, I report on an in-depth historical investigation of the emergence and adoption of specific social media practices among a group of conservative Twitter users in the late 2008 in the United States. The findings show how through de-centered and distributed social media practices these conservatweeps came to inhabit emergent possibilities of mattering. I show how those cyborgs-in-practice accomplished different levels of presence, visibility, reach, and influence beyond their local space-time, how some emerged as (early) leaders of the TPM, and finally, how in turn different *spacetimemattering* (Barad 2007) regimes enacted in those social media practices had performative consequences for conservatweeps' becomings. The paper

proposes the concept of cyborg-in-practice as an alternative to the traditional yet integral concept of the User in IS research.

Third Essay—Technology

Finally, in the third essay, which is admittedly less developed than the other essays and titled "**The process of social media(tion): Beyond features and content**", I engage in a reflective exercise aimed at developing a sensitizing framework and several methodological implications with which to understand social media's complex social consequences. Specifically, after problematizing approaches that start with attributing clear-cut boundaries and properties to social media technologies and those that focus merely on the content of social media communications, the essay argues for treating social media as bundles of social mediation practices.

Through a reflective exercise I account for some implicit influences in my dissertation research practices of the performative perspective as well as the functional programming paradigm with which I became fascinated during my dissertation research. The result is two groups of methodological recommendations for the study of social mediation; those concerning observation and accounting practices and those concerning theorization and generalization practices. While these recommendations do not amount to an exhaustive guide on how to perform a performative study of social media, they do constitute a solid springboard for launching such a study.

Concluding Remarks

In line with recent interest in social movements in OT and IS literatures and vis-à-vis the increasing digitalization of societies, in this dissertation I study the material enactment of social movements with, through, and by social media. In so doing, instead of separating social media and social movements to study their interactions—a maneuver that forecloses investigation into the situated constitution of both—I adopt a posthumanist performative perspective and shift my analytical gaze on the everyday actions and practices entailed in social media activism.

Each essay in this dissertation foregrounds one angle of a Collective-Individual-Technology triangle which taken together denote a three-sided co-constitutive relation; each essay shows how the other two corners of the triangle are constitutive of the focal one:

- **Collective ← (Individual & Technology)**: Essay 1 shows how through a multiplicity of interrelated social media practices, individuals become part of a collective.

- **Individual ← (Collective & Technology)**: Essay 2 shows how different bundles of social media practices perform different modes of actorhood within collectively enacted spatial and temporal regimes of mattering.

- **Technology ← (Collective & Individual)**: Essay 3 works towards developing a sensitizing framework and methodological practices for a social study of social media that account for the co-constitution of actors and collectives.

This dissertation contributes to both OT and IS literatures. Specifically, in each essay I develop a practice-based material-discursive understanding of the subject matter that is useful in

engaging, investigating, and making sense of phenomena entailed in social media organizing and their consequences. The novelty and relevance for the OT literature comes from attending to the constitutive role of materiality in organizing processes, while, an additional novelty and relevance for the IS literature comes from attending to issues of contestation, politics, and collective agency vis-à-vis social media. Finally, I make a distinctive contribution by attending to the understudied context of right-wing movements.

I conclude this manuscript by noting that the performative perspective adopted in this study has a decidedly non-neutral view on the entanglement of technology and culture. For Barad, any enactment is based on *constitutive exclusion* and thus is open to contestation. That which is left out opens up opportunities for agency (and change) and "foreclose[s] any possibility of determinism, providing the condition of an open future" (Barad, 2003, p. 26). As such, in dealing with apparatuses in general and those entailing social media in particular, the point is neither to make a case for abolishing them nor is it to put forward recommendation for the correct way of interacting with them. Rather, the point is to make the apparatuses subject to what Agamben calls "profanation" (2009), that is, to bring them down from any sacred, removed, and untouchable position that they might have assumed and make them accountable, responsible, and contestable. While people might not have the heroic agency they were promised by the Enlightenment and Modernity, informed individuals can still evaluate options as they come up and strive to negotiate better choices in a "technological culture" (Slack & Wise, 2005). Recognizing that culture and technology are entangled does not imply moral or ethical equality between the two. We could always stop and ask ourselves, as put by Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. (2014):

> Do we want to live a world that is produced by an ever-more elaborate set of algorithms that proscribe the outcomes of our search, the decisions made about who

should get mortgage, how much insurance should be paid, what advertisements we view, what health procedures are undertaken and so on? (p. 826).

Notes

[i] George W. Bush defended his bill to bail out big Wall Street banks on CNN on December 14, 2008.

[ii] Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), then Speaker of the House, on KTVU on April 15, 2009

[iii] Faced with new empirical findings about the nature of atom and struggling to find a theoretical framework to make sense of them, Bohr eventually dropped atom as the underlying entity and with it he dropped the notion that there is an underlying entity. He came to reject the notion that things have "inherently determinate boundaries and properties" but also that concepts and words have "inherently determinate meanings" (Barad 2003: 813). He problematized the inherent distinction between the knower and the known and argued that neither measurement, nor language, are transparent mediators of a preexisting reality.

[iv] As opposed to the Cartesian cut (mind vs. matter) which is inherent, determinate, and universal. Thus, intra-actions enact agential separability and not inherent separability.

[v] Barad coined intra-action to distinguish it from interaction. An interaction, she argues, presupposes discreet entities ("relata") that exist before the relation. An intra-action, on the other hand, refers to a relation between two "relata" that do not pre-exist the relation. Put differently, an intra-action happens among endogenously enacted and fluid components of a phenomenon.

[vi] This imagery, though, risks foreclosing the possibility of cross cutting between phenomena and apparatuses.

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ESSAY I

"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 essay 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.

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 essay 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; Kavada, 2016; Priante, Ehrenhard, van den Broek, & Need, 2018). 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

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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 essay 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 essay 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.
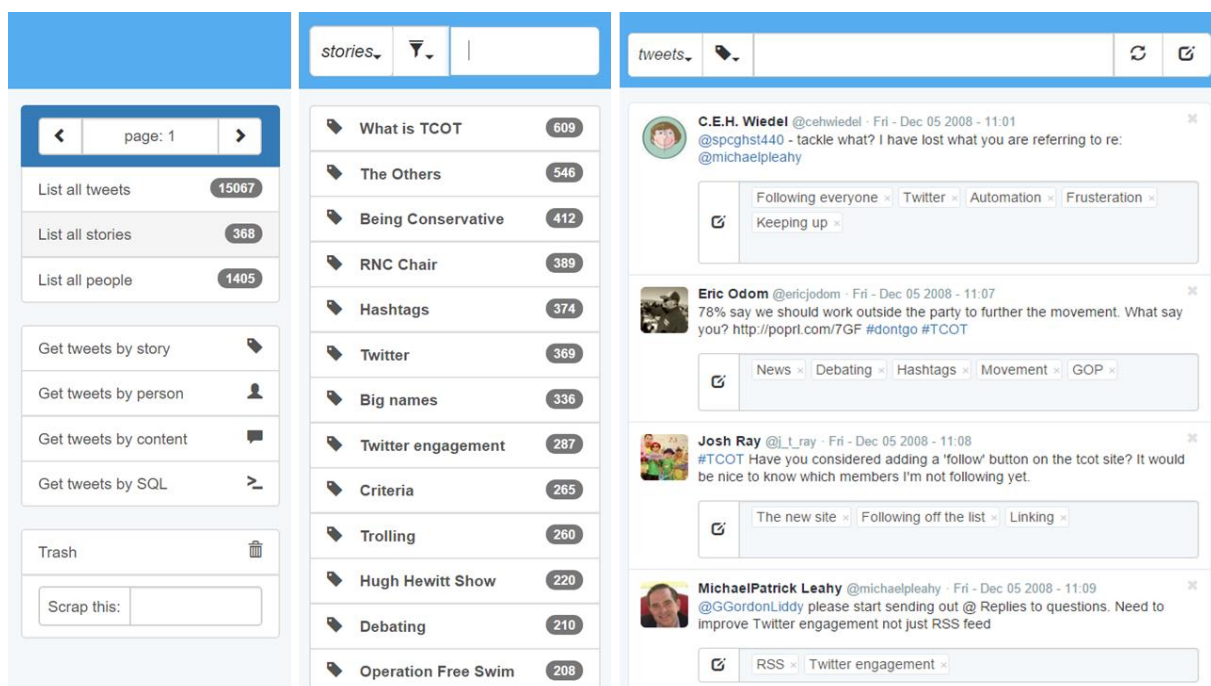
Figure 1: Software developed and used for categorizing tweets

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.

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

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.

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)).
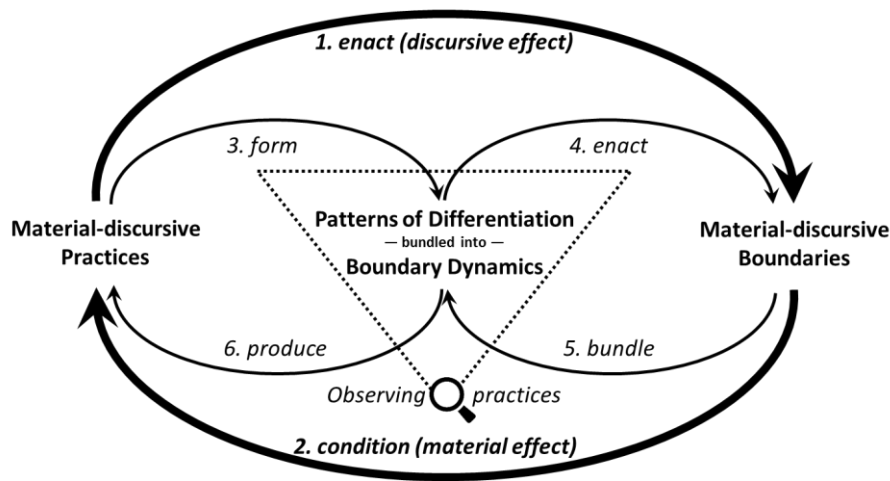

Figure 2: The fundamental practice-boundary intra-action

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.
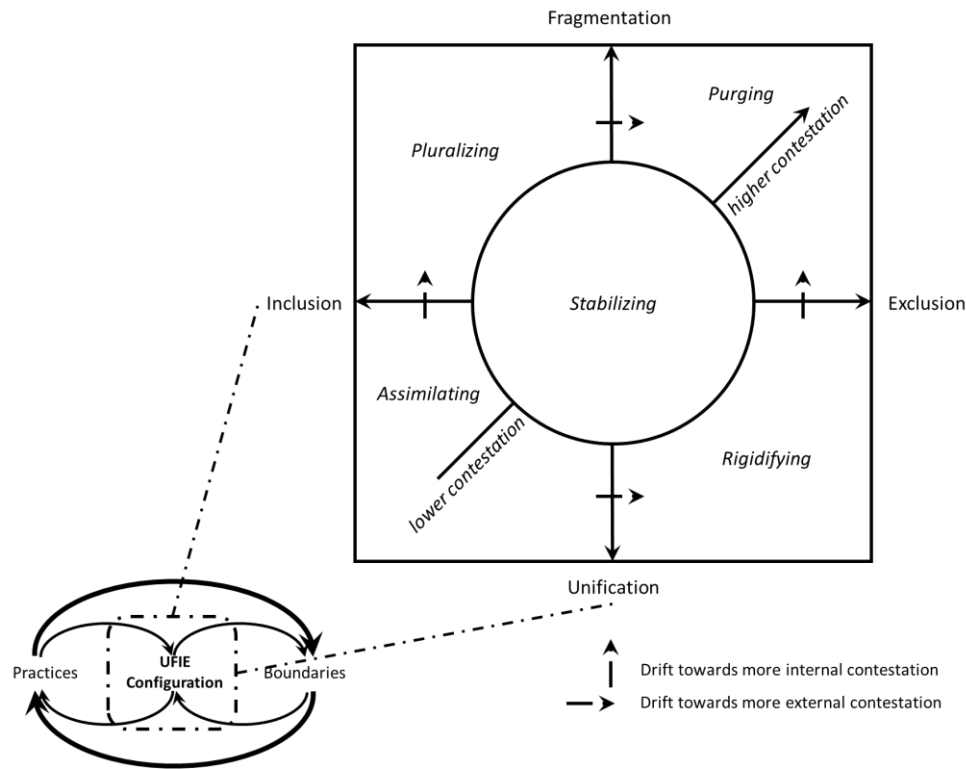
Figure 3: Ideal typical UFIE configurations

Table 2 details these five ideal-typical UFIE configurations and their effects. *Assimilating* refers to **UFIE** 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 **UFIE** 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 **UFIE** 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 **UFIE** configurations with dominating exclusion and unification dynamics. The enacted boundaries are outwardly

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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: 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

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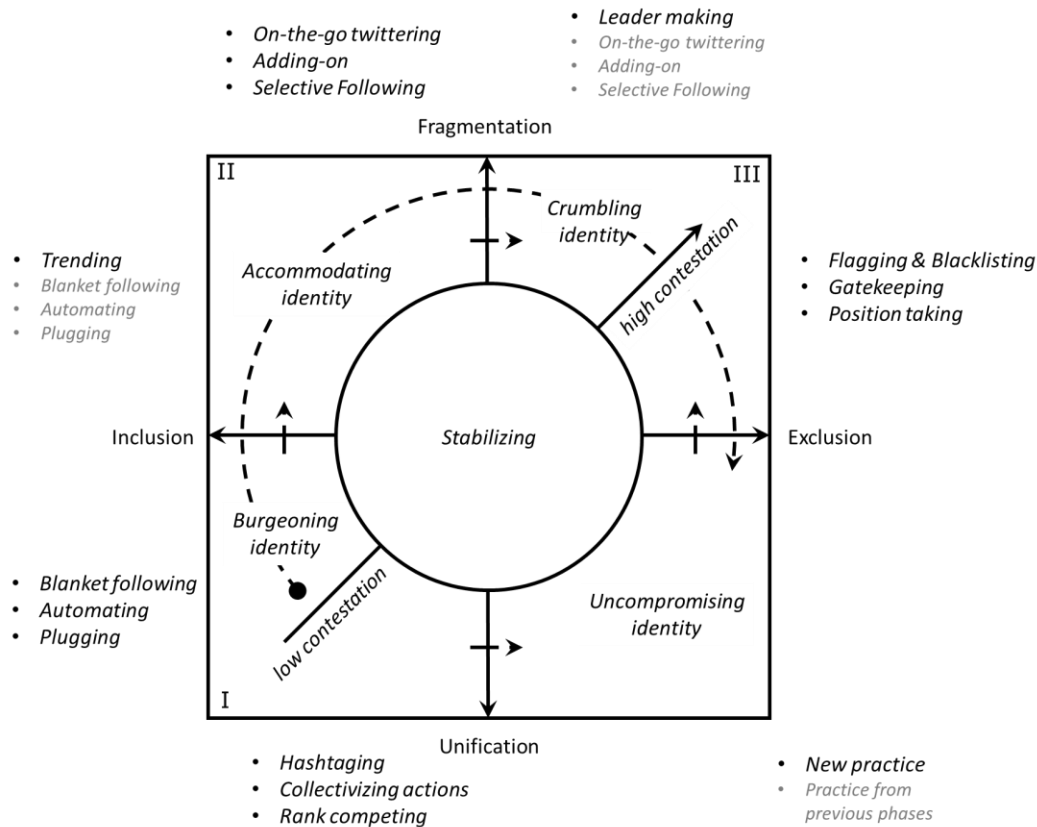
Figure 4: TCOT's materialization of collective identity in practice

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 (Miranda, Young, & Yetgin, 2016). 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.

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ESSAY II

The Rise of Conservatweeps:
On Becoming Cyborgs-in-practice Through Social Media

ABSTRACT

As our everyday lives become increasingly entangled with social media, the time is ripe again to rethink human-technology relationship. The prevalence and prominence of social media use offer us new possibilities of action (e.g. collaborating, organizing) beyond our immediate space and time. Understanding the constitution of these possibilities through our complex and multifaceted relations with technology requires us to go beyond discreet conceptions of human and technology and to sharpen our understanding of how different human-technology entanglements produce different modes of actorhood in an increasingly technological life-world—a world where nothing happens simply 'here and now'. Towards this goal, this essay proposes the concept of cyborg-in-practice as an alternative to the traditional yet integral concept of user in IS research. The concept is developed through an in-depth investigation of the emergence and adoption of specific social media practices among a group of conservative Twitter users. I show how through different social media practices these actors accomplished different levels of presence, reach, and influence beyond their local space-times, and how in the process some emerged as early leaders and organizers of the Tea Party Movement. I find that different sets of social media practices organize and regulate the meaningful materialization of cyborgs-in-practice in different ways.

Keywords: *Cyborg-in-practice, ICT user, social media, human-technology relationship, agential realism, materiality*

> The body must become a cyborg to retain its presence in the world, resituated in technological space and reconfigured in technological terms. Whether this represents a continuation, a sacrifice, a transcendence, or a surrender of "the subject" is not certain.
>
> —Scott Bukatman (1993, p. 247)

Introduction

From traditional corporate technicians sitting behind hefty terminals, to modern office workers typing on desktops, to nomadic knowledge professionals working on their laptops in an airplane, to commuters catching subways using their phones, to fitness enthusiasts wearing tracking gadgets, to social media personas uploading daily vlogs or broadcasting live videos from their phones—the users of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have evolved. Accordingly, information systems (IS) researchers have begun reexamining their conception of the user, a concept that has profound implications for the theory and practice of design, use, and evaluation of information systems.

Lamb and Kling (2003) problematize the dominant notion of the user in IS research for being overly individualistic and "contextually underdeveloped" (p. 198). Instead, they reconceptualize users as social actors who are enmeshed in networks of organizational affiliations and interactions and who routinely use ICTs to perform tasks and to create/maintain identities. Yoo (2010) argues that the concept of the user needs to go beyond focusing on task performance and information processing in organizational contexts. Instead it needs to attend to the digital mediation of time, space, actors, and artifacts that form the lived experience of everyday activities. Finally, Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. (2014) urge IS researchers to engage with the concept of cyborg and develop necessary "infra-language"

(Latour, 2005) for investigating the inseparability of the social and material in performing everyday activities.

Building upon recent work in IS research on sociomateriality, this essay proposes an unambiguously posthumanist alternative to the notion of the user, namely, cyborg-in-practice. Cyborgs—cybernetic organisms (Clynes & Kline, 1960)—have been for decades a recurring theme in science fact and fiction. They have recently garnered renewed interest thanks in part to the ongoing development of a myriad of human enhancement technologies such as neural implants, nanochips, 3D bioprinting, etc. (Oudshoorn, 2015). However, one does not need to look only at the fusion of human body with technology to find instances of cyborg experience (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014; Schultze & Mason, 2012). Indeed, looking for cyborgs only in and around the conventional body conceals the myriad ways in which human embodied experience is being reconfigured through and by digital technologies (Yoo, 2010). Cyborg is not only about the fleshed body made hybrid. More radically, it is about rethinking the human ontology (Haraway, 1991); about overcoming Cartesian subject/object dichotomies; and about revisiting taken-for-granted us/them relation that has for long framed our thinking about our relationship to technology (Pickering, 2013; Yoo, 2010).

From a practice-based performative perspective, this essay shifts from viewing cyborgs as hybrid entities to cyborgs as sociomaterial enactments in practice. We become cyborgs not necessarily by having implants in, or prostheses attached to, our bodies but by increasingly performing our everyday activities with, through, and by digital and social technologies. In fact, we do not so much interact with these technologies anymore as we intra-act with them (Barad, 2007). They use us as we use them, or better, they constitute us as we constitute them (Orlikowski & Scott, 2015). In the process, we come to inhabit emergent possibilities of

mattering; new modes and means of experience and action extending beyond our bodies' immediate space-time. As we inhabit these cyborgian embodiments in all their diverse sociomaterialities, what we can do and thus what/who we can become will be at stake.

Such a view of cyborg-in-practice helps IS research go beyond its traditional notion of the user as an atomic—or even socially constrained—carrier of well-articulated properties (e.g. preferences, interests, values, information needs); one who has narrowly defined interactions with technology to carry out well-defined tasks (Lamb and Kling, 2003; Yoo, 2010). Instead it focuses on how specific users are produced through specific sociomaterial practices. It allows us to more accurately portray our complex and multifaceted relations with technology and sharpens our understanding of how different human-technology entanglements produce and perform different modes of becoming/mattering in an increasingly technological life-world.

The concept of cyborg-in-practice and its defining dimensions are further developed and honed through a genealogy of "conservatweeps" (portmanteau of conservative Twitter people). More specifically, I report on an in-depth historical investigation of the emergence and adoption of specific social media practices among a group of conservative Twitter users in the late 2008 in the United States. The findings explain how through de-centered and distributed social media practices these conservatweeps came to inhabit emergent possibilities of mattering. They show how those cyborgs-in-practice accomplished different levels of presence, visibility, reach, and influence within specific spatial and temporal regimes as well as how those *spacetimemattering* (Barad 2007) regimes in turn had performative consequences in conservatweeps' becomings.

Theoretical Framework

User in IS Research

The dominant conception of the user in IS research—the human side of the human-technology relationship—has already come under criticism for not capturing the complex realities of information systems use. Most explicitly, Lamb and Kling (2003) problematize the traditional notion of the user as being an "atomic individual with well-articulated preferences and the ability to exercise discretion in ICT choice and use, within certain cognitive limits" (p.198). Such a view, which is based on cybernetics models and cognitive social psychology, diminishes the importance of contextual and environmental factors in favor of decontextualized and well-defined representations of individual preferences, tasks and their information needs, and interactions with technology (c.f. Burton-Jones & Straub, 2006). Instead, from an institutional perspective, they reconceptualize users as social actors who routinely use ICTs as parts of navigating conflicting and ambiguous requirements of their work activities and the socially legitimate ways of carrying them out while creating/maintaining their professional identities. Yoo (2010) goes beyond the paradigm of task performance and information processing in organizational contexts. Instead, from a phenomenological perspective, he argues for expanding the notion of the user by attending to the ways in which digital technologies transform our lived experience of time, space, other actors, and artifacts. Such conception of the user underscores that "[h]umans… no longer experience computing as something that is out there, but rather they… live in it." (p. 220)

Another line of criticism comes from a posthumanist perspective and argues that the all-encompassing and self-contained categories of (human) user and (non-human) technology

elide the lived realities of contemporary human-technology relationships (Introna, 2011; Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010). A posthumanist perspective argues for the inherent indeterminacy of the human and non-human categories and the arbitrariness of any a priori and abstract (i.e. before and outside practice) attribution of properties, effects, and agency between them (Barad, 2007; Pickering, 2013). Instead of such ready-made and discrete categories, it focuses on practice and the ongoing enactment of differences, including those between humans- and technologies-in-the-making in practice. While this perspective has profound implications for IS research, empirical work has yet been sparse and to my knowledge an explicit alternative to the notion of the user is yet to be advanced. Indeed, Cecez-Kecmanovic et al (2014) urge IS researchers to engage with the concept of cyborg to develop necessary "infra-language" (Latour, 2005) for capturing the indeterminacy of the human and non-human divide in everyday human-technology relationships.

Cyborg-in-practice

In this essay, I build upon this stream of work towards developing an unambiguously posthumanist alternative to the notion of the user, namely, cyborg-in-practice. The concept of cyborg has recently garnered renewed interest thanks in part to the ongoing development of a myriad of human enhancement technologies such as neural implants, nanochips, 3D bioprinting, etc. (Oudshoorn, 2015). However, one does not need to look only at the physical fusion of the human body with technology to find instances of cyborg experience (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014; Schultze & Mason, 2012). Indeed, looking for cyborgs only in and around the conventional body conceals the myriad ways in which human embodied experience is being reconfigured across space and time through and by digital technologies

(Yoo, 2010). Cyborg-in-practice underscore a shift from viewing cyborgs as hybrid entities to cyborgs as sociomaterial enactments in practice. As such, in this conception no one or thing *is* a cyborg, but they might become *enacted* as such through performing their everyday activities through digital technologies.

Cyborg-in-practice is especially suited for investigating human-technology relationship in contemporary digital phenomena—such as social media—that increasingly challenge our habituated divisions between the realms of the social and the technological (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014; Slack & Wise, 2005). With de-centered and distributed algorithmic and artificial intelligence practices increasingly participating in the production of various social phenomena, more than ever before digital technologies are becoming a non-other. This trend profoundly challenges the traditional notion of ICT user, which is based on a dualist conception of the self, as a stable and local centre of agency and action, interacting at arm's length with others, including technology (Pickering, 2013).

To start envisaging a posthumanist alternative to the notion of ICT user, I draw from Barad's framework of agential realism. By reconciling social constructivism with (a version of) realism this framework offers a unifying vocabulary for explaining how material and discursive factors contribute to the production of sociomaterial phenomenon. Based on a processual and relational ontology agential realism inverses the conventional priority given to entities before processes and relations. Accordingly, cyborg-in-practice is not concerned with any abstract, given, or universal notion of the user as a discrete entity with well-defined properties (e.g. preferences, intentions, interests, values). Instead, it focuses on how different users are produced in digital phenomena. Cyborg-in-practice captures users in their perpetual becoming as they meaningfully materialize in myriad bodies across different spaces and

times. It captures how through de-centered and distributed digital technology practices, users come to inhabit emergent possibilities of *mattering*—new modes and means of experience, action, and becoming that extend beyond their bodies' immediate space-time.

Spacetimemattering—or how do users come to matter in space and time?

Barad uses the concept of *mattering* to refer the materialization of possibilities of meaningful action, or as she put it, the realization of agential possibilities. Mattering is simultaneously about materiality and discursivity. For Barad materiality does not refer solid eternal substance but to a process of materialization, while discursivity refers to a process of boundary making in the ongoing materialization of a phenomenon. Thus, mattering is about *making a material-discursive difference.* It refers to the *material enactment of a meaningful difference in the ongoing materialization of a phenomenon.*

Mattering is contingent and practice-dependent. The set of inter-related practices that enact a phenomenon also enact its rules of mattering—i.e. "material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering" (p.148). They enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering in that phenomenon. For example, how a specific type of cyborg-in-practice comes to matter in a digital phenomenon is a function of how specific "digital bodies" (boyd 2006) materialize in practice and make a difference, but also a function of what it means to be present, to act and interact, or to make a difference in that phenomenon etc.

Moreover, mattering is not limited to here and now. For Barad, a phenomenon is not located in any given point in space and time, but extends across multiple spaces and times. A phenomenon delineates its own *spacetime* by enacting endemic rules of connectivity, rhythm, etc. In fact, to underscore the entanglement of spatiality, temporality, and mattering, Barad

uses the term *spacetimemattering*—a process that configures the spatial and temporal logics of mattering within a phenomenon. For example, an important implication of this argument is that it moves us beyond proclamations about the abolition of the boundaries of space and time through digital technologies to the investigations of the ways in which specific space-time-mattering regimes are relationally produced in specific digital phenomena.

Finally, (spacetime)mattering is performative. When a difference is made it conditions further materialization of the phenomenon (Barad, 2007). Therefore, the possibilities of action are indeed possibilities of becoming (and not simply discrete affordances that leave no mark on the people/entities involved).

In the remainder of this essay I further develop and hone the concept of cyborg-in-practice and its defining dimensions through a genealogy of a specific breed of cyborgs-in-practice self-dubbed as "conservatweeps" (portmanteau of conservative Twitter people). More specifically, I report on an in-depth historical investigation of the emergence and adoption of specific social media practices among a group of conservative Twitter users in the late 2008 in the United States. Using Barad's concept of spacetimemattering, I show how through de-centered and distributed social media practices these conservatweeps came to inhabit emergent possibilities of mattering. I show how they accomplished different levels of presence, visibility, reach, and influence within specific spatial and temporal regimes and how those spacetimemattering regimes in turn made a performative difference in conservatweeps' becomings.

Methodology

Research site

This essay reports an in-depth genealogical investigation (Bastalich, 2009; Foucault, 1978) of practices of social media use by conservative Twitter activists who became essential in organizing the Tea Party Movement (TPM) in the early 2009 in the United States. The setting presents an interesting and revealing case for studying the how and the why of social media use and its entanglements with and consequences for the spatial, temporal, and material regimes of mattering and actorhood. While the rise of conservatweeps took place before the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street—uprisings that have attracted their fair share of attention to social media organizing and mobilizing—its story has largely gone untold, even though it ushered a new era in the relations of Conservatives vis-à-vis the Internet, the Liberals, the Media, and ultimately the G.O.P. Establishment.

A confluence of factors made this case of social media use particularly revealing. Since, at the time, catching up to the Left regarding technology had become a matter of concern (Latour, 2005) for many on Right, conservatweeps were quite vocal about what they were thinking or doing with or in relation to social media and its potentials for them. As such, the case reveals considerable amounts of in situ struggles, hopes, concerns, experimentation, sensemaking, etc. vis-à-vis social media -- factors that most likely become subject to hindsight bias and difficult to grasp once a technology is black-boxed and ready-to-hand (Heidegger, 1962; Introna, 2013; Latour, 2005)

Moreover, since for the most part of this story, social media was the main medium whereby conservatweeps accomplished co-presence (see below, though), social media can be used both

"as the subject and the tool of the research" (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 125) to go back and forth in time and directly observe what these conservatweeps did and said in the natural setting of their actions. This allows to go beyond a semiotic analysis of social media content and to instead observe the practical activities that were accomplished through and in relation to social media (Couldry 2012; Pink and Mackley 2013) and gain contextual and contingent understanding of different actions, talks, and events (Couldry 2012; Pink and Mackley 2013).

The research site was delineated through the following decisions and factors. Upon reading accounts of the emergence of the Tea Party Movement (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012; Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011), I came across passing mentions of online conservative networks that had been instrumental in organizing the first Tea Party rallies, namely Top Conservatives On Twitter (TCOT), Smart Girl Politics (SGP) and DontGo. After some initial research about these collectives, their activities, origins, and the actors involved, I chose to primarily focus on the rise of conservatweeps by tracing the evolution of TCOT for the following reasons.

DontGo, a hashtag-based campaign led by Eric Odom that "urged members of Congress to stay in session to lift the moratorium on offshore drilling", was a topical campaign and not very active after August 2008 (though Eric Odom and his operations became involved in the early Tea Parties). As for SGP, a network of conservative women created around a blog run by Stacy Mott, I had to rely on sporadic snapshots that the Way Back Machine (WBM) had cached from their blog (due to low traffic). TCOT, however, emerged as the most popular conservative social media operation at the time, and many of the people involved in DontGo and SGP were also participating in it. As its name suggests, TCOT was explicitly about conservatives' relation to social media and an early exploration promised an interesting story

about technology. Moreover, for the most part TCOT unfolded on Twitter, which meant I could use Twitter to directly observe most of TCOT-related activities in their natural context. (Though the official Twitter API does not serve tweets more than one-month old, one can still manually use a browser to search and scroll through old tweets, and 'scrape' them). The popularity of TCOT meant that its own website and blogs that linked to it were also more often picked up by WBM. Overall, TCOT provided an unmatched in situ record of actions, events, and expressed thoughts and emotions by conservatweeps in their becoming.

Data collection

The process of data collection went as follows. I collected data about and around TCOT from a variety of sources, including tweets, field notes, websites and blogposts, (online) radio shows and podcasts, as well as videos of an online TV show. The eclectic and diverse nature of data sources reflect the de-centrality of the phenomenon itself (Langley, 1999; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013).

I started out by focusing on the "founder of TCOT" and using Twitter's search engine to go back in time to his very first tweets. I then read forward all tweets from or to him, effectively shadowing his Twitter presence, as he was learning and tinkering with different twittering practices. I took detailed notes regarding my observations and interpretations about his activities, experimentations, expressed sensemakings and aspirations. Further, his novice fascination with Twitter and his obsession with his political allies not getting it, became a good source of contextual insight into the state of conservatives on Twitter at the time.

As I moved forward in time, I added #TCOT to my search criteria, and began scrolling through the ensuing stream of tweets, this time observing and taking notes on how TCOT was

emerging and evolving and how in the process conservatweeps were learning and perfecting their twittering skills. Whenever, I realized that a conversation had originally started somewhere else (i.e. without using #TCOT) or that the interlocutors did not use #TCOT on all their tweets, I conducted ad-hoc searches to get the full conversation. Finally, whenever a person proved interesting or significant to a sequence of events, I followed them back in time mainly to observe their twittering practices and get a sense of their Twitter character.

Early on, I faced changing Twitter API policies regarding access to historical tweets and the discontinuation of a third-party web service for deep Twitter searches (Topsy.com acquired and discontinued by Apple). This led me to develop an application, screenshot in Figure 1, that allowed me to scrape and store tweets on demand. Especially important to me was to simulate Twitter's interface; to see tweets as tweets with profile pictures, clickable links, etc. and not, for example, as records in an Excel file so as to retain most of the materiality of the experience. I used my application during data collection steps to store the tweets that I deemed noteworthy for later coding. This led to a corpus of around 15000 tweets from around 1400 people out of many more read concerning the period between November 2008 and February 2009. This data is heavily tailed, with 20 people accounting for around 5300 of the saved tweets, showing in-depth focus on a group of core participants.
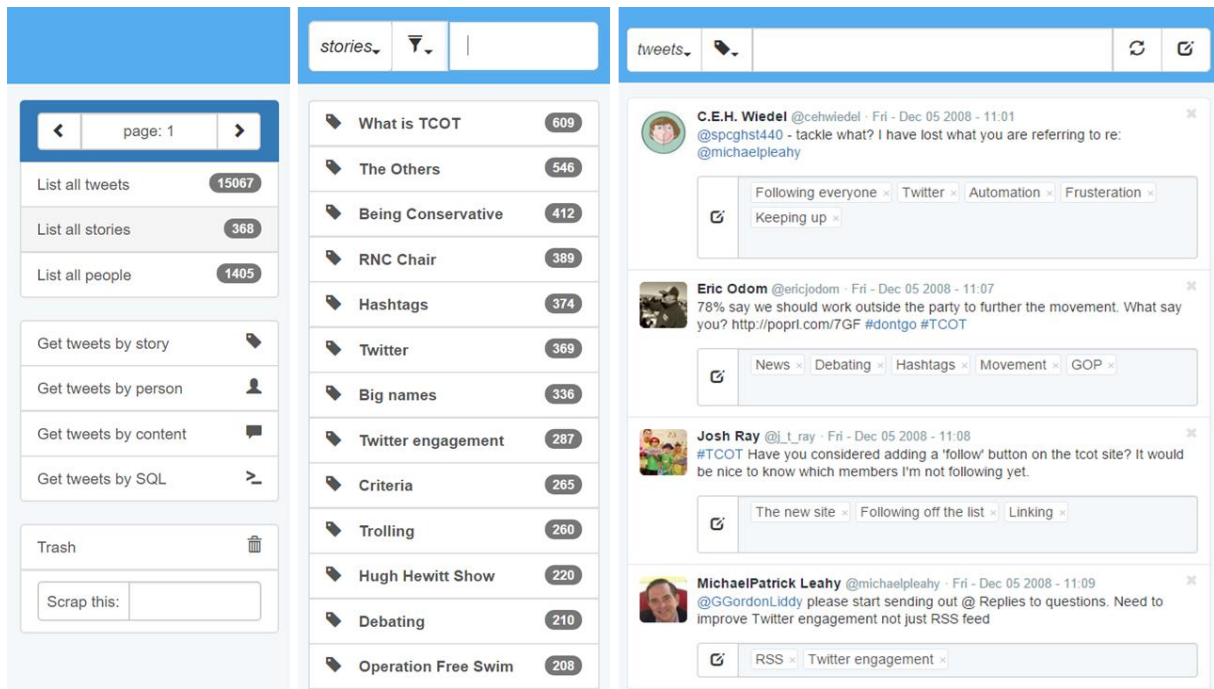
Figure 5: Software developed and used for categorizing tweets

In addition to tweets, I also collected documents and other information on the TCOT website, read and stored accessible blogposts from participants, listened to and transcribed several hours of radio shows and podcasts about TCOT. Towards the end of the period covered in this study and as Twitter was becoming popular among conservatives, the sheer number of tweets per day was becoming overwhelming. Fortunately, by this time certain twittering practices had gained hold among conservatweeps, and no particularly new insight was drawn from reading all of the daily tweets. Moreover, this coincided with the bursting into existence of the Tea Party, and having had a good understanding of conservatives' mundane twittering practices I decided to zoom out (Nicolini, 2009) and focus on more extraordinary events in the evolving phenomenon. As the phenomenon evolved from an emergent stage to an organizational one, the rather consequential activities and events tended to take place outside of tweets. Leaving Twitter proper to follow the flow of actions meant that I stopped having the same type of access to actions themselves and had to rely on records of the actions; for

example, through an online TV show that became heavily involved in organizing and covering Tea Party rallies or through participants' reports of events and their own organizing activities on their blogs and podcasts. This is consistent with the recommendations to de-center media practices (Couldry, 2012). I, nonetheless, kept my connection to Twitter and went searching for tweets before and after certain important and well-documented dates recorded in the literature and the press (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012; Williamson et al., 2011; Zernike, 2010).

Data analysis

Consistent with a genealogical mode of inquiry (Bastalich, 2009; Foucault, 1978; Introna, 2013), I treated conservatweeps not as given social media users but as emergent accomplishments at the intersection of heterogeneous flows of becoming—i.e. as cyborgs-in-practice. Focusing on the how and the why of social media use, I investigated the different practices that enacted the material-discursive conditions of possibility for the emergence and evolution of conservative social media activists. True to genealogical sensitivities, I specifically focused on the contingent, the accidental, and the arbitrary, which in one way or another came to make a difference in this "nexus of accomplishments" (Introna, 2013).

A narrative structure (with temporal decomposition) seemed most promising to account for the emergence and ongoing evolution of these accomplishments, as it allows to tackle with the messiness of practice and to incorporate a host of eclectic data. The choice of a narrative structure also corresponds with the theoretical perspective of this study in which actions and evolving relations precede entities.

This narrative was produced through the following process. After I read the tweets pertaining to each day and stored the noteworthy ones, I went back to my application to qualitatively code the tweets based on recurring sequences of actions and expressed experiences, twittering practices, but also evolving storylines, contingent events, and other emerging ideas. Almost always, each tweet received more than one tag as it was an instance of a multiplicity of existing and emerging codes. Moreover, in many cases the tags were effectively used to code streams of tweets rather than individual ones as the focal tweets were not standalone acts but part of a stream of tweets that constituted an evolving multi-party storyline. I repeated this process of sifting and sorting tweets for each day in the period of the study, which resulted in around 370 cross-cutting codes.

In addition to the tweets, whenever the flow of actions and events left Twitter, (e.g. when the founders of TCOT were interviewed on radio or on podcasts, or when some news broke in #TCOT, or even when links to websites and blogposts were provided), I would also leave Twitter and go on excursions (Pink, 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012), as it were, to get a better sense of the evolving information environment. These excursions yielded further documents, records or account of events, and debates and interpretations about TCOT or conservatives and technology in general. The participants' blogposts and the podcasts, specifically, provided opportunities to triangulate my interpretations of contexts, events, and actions, with multiple well-articulated ones from the participants.

During this process, I regularly used my application to "slice and dice" tweets in numerous ways based on different qualitative codes, but also their content, author, time, or any combination of those. This served to get a better understanding of cross-cutting storylines and to analytically delineate different constitutive practices, events, and emerging hybrid agents.

As this iteration progressed, I converged towards a number of provisional themes and wrote narrative accounts for each one. A narrative structure allowed me to retain as much as possible the specificities of each stream of tweets while also incorporating the insights drawn from other eclectic data (Langley, 1999). During the writing of each narrative account, I also purposefully sampled more data (e.g. tweets, blogposts) on the basis of supporting or challenging the narrative's plot. Examples of these narrative accounts are: scrolling, experimenting, hashtagging, algorithms, connecting, follower raising, following norms, etiquette, competition, ranking, automation, website, engagement, radio, keeping up, trending, traffic, action projects, event creation and listing, etc.

Next, focusing on the constitutive role of practices, I began delineating recurring themes across different narrative accounts in order to move from "what is happening here" to "what is this a case of" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). A sensemaking device at this stage was to focus on different materialities and meanings of the participants' central concern for "reach and influence" through social media. After becoming re-conversant with process philosophy (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014; Langley et al., 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), and Barad's agential realism, I found the process of spacetimemattering to resonate with my grounded insights and to offer a good candidate as the underlying process unfolding in the overall phenomenon. At the same time, I felt my empirical work lent itself well to fleshing out this abstract concept in the context of social media. I began seeing many of the participants' actions and expressed aspirations and experiences as sociomaterial struggles for mattering (i.e. making a difference through presence and action) in a social "mediatizing" (Couldry, 2012) society. Thus, I began focusing on how different twittering practices were opening different

possibilities for mattering, with specific spatial and temporal orderings and hybrid material bodies as well as their consequences.

Next, I mobilized these theoretical sensitivities to reconstruct a synthetic analytical narrative of the rise of conservatweeps that combines in-depth accounts of practices with a more structured "articulation and replication of more abstract theoretical ideas" (Langley, 1999, p. 703). Specifically, I used relatively distinct enactments-in-practice of the process of spacetimemattering to structure this narrative into three "acts". This temporal decomposition (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013) creates "comparable units of analysis" for a more structured "articulation and replication" of the process of spacetimemattering enacted through social media use. The acts also characterize the stages through which disconnected and disgruntled conservatives became connected and engaged community members and eventually became co-organizers of the Tea Party.

Case Study—The Rise of Conservatweeps

Prologue: A Brave New World

The story of the rise of conservatweeps at the end of the 2008 unfolded at the intersection of several historical processes. First, at the time, the social media culture as we know it today was gaining exponential momentum. Facebook had just surpassed MySpace and Friendster in popularity. Twitter had taken online the popularity of text messaging and was also propagating the practices of unilateral following and hashtagging. Both services were at the forefront reshaping social media applications by rolling out public interfaces (APIs) for third-party developers to access their content and build a myriad of diverse apps. Finally, the

iPhone and Android ecosystems which had already begun in earnest and were set to oust BlackBerry, freed social media from desktops and made it mobile.

Second, while the name of Howard Dean 2004 had already gone down history for showing the power of the internet to raise money, it was Obama' 2008 campaign that incorporated interactive social media technologies to actually create a political brand for a young senator with a light résumé and little traditional clout. This social media apparatus was not only instrumental in advertising to voters, organizing grassroots, fighting smear campaigns, and getting out the vote operations, but also in creating a sense of connection and engagement with his supporters. Obama was hailed as ushering in a "networked presidency" that was going to push his agenda with the clout of an online army (PBS, 2008; though ironically it took another 8 years for this title to materialize in Trump!). Relatedly, his campaign elevated social media from its MySpace teen aura towards a real political game changer.

Third, while in 2004 the Republican Party basked in the glory of Karl Rove's "metric" campaign technology—a micro-targeting get-out-the-vote apparatus that used phone banks and direct mail—in 2008 the Right was in a technological crisis. Many tech-savvy conservatives argued that the G.O.P. had remained the "talk-radio Party" with traditional discipline of central and top-down communication and "staying on the message". They were convinced that the Democrats had "discover[ed]…a better grassroots model" to raise money and "get boots on the ground" in electoral races, and thus feared that the extent to which they mattered in elections and hence the future of the country was dwindling.

Finally, narratives of the widening technology gap had already motivated different actors to rise to the occasion of "Rebuild[ing] the Party". Notably, the Americans for Prosperity Foundation (the Koch brothers' "grassroots training operation") started organizing

RightOnline, a conference about New Media strategies and online activism on the Right for the summer of 2008. Other seasoned online political operatives (such as Erick Erickson and Patrick Ruffini) had also begun to portray themselves as potential saviors of the Party—with their plans for integrated systems and web-based communication networks—but also admittedly to influence its "approved vendor list".

In 2008, social media was en route to becoming a political force to be reckoned with—a force that however was not favorable for conservatives. They were few, disconnected, and unorganized when it came to a proper "digital ground game". At the same time, the low entry barrier and openness of social media meant that sooner or later they could also catch up. After a demoralizing loss of the White House and both chambers of the Congress that had left the Republican Party without a clear leader (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012) and as Obama was tweeting "we just made history tonight" the time was ripe for politically motivated conservatives to begin their foray into the realm of social media. But how?

Act I: Tweeter

Michael Patrick Leahy (MPL) signed up on Twitter on September 2008 but it wasn't until after Obama won that November's Presidential election that he began twittering more often. The 53-years-old card-carrying Republican in Nashville was discouraged to see once more that "liberals own the internet". An aspiring self-published writer and firm believer in the Technology Gap discourse, MPL was writing a book blaming McCain's loss on the *brain dead Luddites who run [the G.O.P.]* for their faulty assumption that *the technology is not as important as the message*, whereas *[t]oday, the technology of delivery can be the message*. MPL was no stranger to technology; he had practiced IT project management for years, blogged since the mid-2000s,

and had already tried, without success, to launch a Facebook app. But this campaign season had made him increasingly fascinated with Twitter.

New possibilities of mattering requiring work

Then-one-year-old debutant on the social media scene, Twitter was promising tweeple (short for twitter people) new possibilities of mattering beyond their network of friends. By diverging from the practice of friendship requests and opting for unilateral following, Twitter had disentangled itself from the notion of real-life friendship. This promise of "unbounded reach" and "influence" across space and time was promoted by tech gurus who, with arguments ranging from "practical implications" to "sheer vanity", were preaching the advantages of having large numbers of followers. It was also buoyed by algorithmic services (e.g. TwitterCounter or Twinfluence) that, using Twitter's public API, were quantifying and ranking tweeple based on their "reach" and "influence".

Those possibilities of mattering, however, were not given but required work—work that is not simply about mastering different features of a technology but rather about participating and navigating a sociomaterial stream of distributed activities. At the very minimum, to matter more tweeple need to learn and practice the dos and don'ts of attracting and maintaining followers. As a newbie tweeple with limited followers, MPL sought *a personal network of like minded people -- conservative activists, evangelical Christians, writers, social media types…people with whom unexpected synergies can develop*. He began sitting at his desktop and *lurking in the weeds* of that *liberals' paradise*—observing, imitating, tinkering, theorizing, and experimenting with different ways of twittering. He would tweet about what he was doing, his political opinions, things that were happening in his personal life, and so on, trying to

figure out what worked in attracting followers and what didn't. He often compared Obama's number of followers (the then-most-followed tweeple with around 140,000 followers) with McCain's—only to become more steadfast in his conviction that the G.O.P. was *not getting it*— and aspired to become *the #1 conservative on Twitter* arguing *[s]ince there are so few trying, how hard [could] it be?* After reading some practical tips on how to "pick up" followers on Twitter, he even came up with different ratios (e.g. *following-follower ratio of 1.1 to 1*) and strategies (e.g. *Build and Weed*) to build his "reach" and "influence" on Twitter. He thus began following tweeple in batches, banking on the percentage that might follow back (he would *weed out* those that would not reciprocate after a certain period and would *build again*).

Contingent mattering of disconnected nomads

However, as MPL was soon to learn, to matter—to make a difference—tweeple needed to be noticed and engaged with by others. That is, besides having many followers, tweeple's mattering rested on their followers' patterns of connectivity and engagement and the ways in which Twitter's algorithms continually order, organize, and translate these spatiotemporally distributed activities into marks on screens across space and time. As tweeple like, retweet, or @reply, or as they simply scroll to *discover*, they join this stream of sociomaterial activities and thus participate in reproducing what they look at and engage with—making a difference in its further materializations on screens and thus possibilities of mattering. That is, different patterns of engagement make for different patterns of materialization of tweeple's Home Feeds.

Take the practice of scrolling for example. Having followed a couple of hundred tweeple, MPL had found himself *scroll[ing] through about 5 pages of tweets twice a day* and was dreading having to scroll his Home Feed thoroughly if he was to continue his *Build and Weed* practice. He thus

opted for K's (a tech guru and his *Twitter hero*) advice that Twitter power users need *not worry about the scroll*… and only need to *add followers but always respond to @s and DMs*. However, he soon entered a serendipitous and consequential episode that reconfigured his possibilities of mattering thanks to his followers' different scrolling and engagement practices. On November 27th, as he approached to following 2000 tweeple, MPL realized he could not follow more. Asking around, he was told that the so-called 2000 follow limit was Twitter's way of countering follower farming and that to surpass it he first needed to gain around 2000 followers himself (he had gathered around 1300). During his inquiry, he conversed with K about his 16th-most-followed-tweeple ranking and mentioned his own goal of becoming *the #1 conservative on Twitter*. Since he had @replied K, his tweets could only materialize in the Home Feed of those who followed both, provided they scrolled enough. Two such tweeple, a *women's fitness coach* and a *conservative home schooling mom*, who were scrolling in California and Texas respectively, noticed the exchange even though the interlocutors had stopped conversing and engaged with MPL. The former, rather jokingly told him: *set up your own grading system and you can get your #1 ranking. :)*. At first, MPL did not take the idea seriously, replying: *Yes, but so tranparently self-promoting! LOL*. A few hours later though, and with the help of the Texan woman, he compiled a list of around 10 conservative tweeple, ranked based on their number of followers, put it on a clumsy-looking blog, used a hashtag for his first time and tweeted:

MichaelPatrick Leahy @michaelpleahy · 28 Nov 2008
#conservativesontwitter Here's the ranking
!http://topconservativesontwitter.blogspot.com If you're not on the list, tweet me
!

In a series of tweets, he then started congratulating those on the list for becoming ranked number such-and-such among the most followed conservatives on Twitter. The reactions were enthusiastic—with conservative tweeple expressing how much they *love lists and scores*; asking about the criteria of the ranking; about who is behind it; and about how to *qualify*; as well as recommending other tweeple to be added to the list. MPL thus continued expanding the list and with it came more chatter and more exposure for him and his ranking. Nine hours later, with the list at around 50 members, MPL checked his grade on *twinfluence.com* and called it a night with the knowledge that without adding many new followers he had reached *1,351,738* tweeple and was ranked *#338 most influential* on Twitter. Had Twitter's algorithms not featured MPL in the two women's Home Feeds and had the latter not scrolled enough, MPL would not have materialized on their screens in California and Texas on that fateful day and would not have been reacted to—he would not have mattered to them and as a result would not have embarked on a process that in time changed his own "reach" and "influence".

In summary, this act shows how twittering was offering new possibilities of mattering—i.e. materializing on different screens, exerting influence, and being interacted with—and how these possibilities required constant work. This work was not simply emanating from a focal human actor or any local (here and now) human-technology interactions. Rather, it was de-centered and distributed across many spaces and times and was constantly interweaved in myriad ways by bots and algorithms with different degrees of transparency. Mattering in such context is a function of participating in and navigating this stream of sociomaterial activities. Moreover, it shows how in the absence of established networks of followership with shared practices of connectivity and engagement, the spatiality and temporality of those possibilities

of mattering are extremely contingent and serendipitous. Without engaged followers, conservatweeps hardly materialized on any screens and thus mattered little.

Act II: TCOTer

In December 2008, Top Conservatives On Twitter (TCOT) ranking became a "Twitter phenomenon". The list was growing: "All of a sudden people not [only] wanted to be on the list" but were also admitting to being "proud" and "honored" about it. For MPL, this became evidence of an "unmet need for community among conservatives" and made TCOT an opportunity to experiment with the Open Source Model that he believed the *Democrats [had] used so well* for online organizing. He thus began, with early success, to mobilize the enlisted to volunteer for different *TCOT Action Projects*, starting with getting all 168 members of the Republican National Convention to join Twitter. He also became "50-50 business partners" with Rob Neppell, a well-known conservative blogger and IT consultant, to automate the ranking and keep it afloat. Neppell, a regular "tech wizard" on Hugh Hewitt's nationally syndicated conservative talk radio show, brokered a half-an-hour promotional plug for TCOT, which put the latter on the offline conservative map and blessed it with a virtuous cycle of legitimacy and exposure. TCOT thus began morphing from a *popularity contest* where conservatweeps competed for a better ranking to a *community of conservatives on Twitter that self-organize in action projects*. As its founder, MPL was constantly green-lighting projects, delegating responsibilities, demanding progress reports, and organizing leadership conference calls. Conservative radio shows and podcasts interested in covering TCOT solidified him as the go-to person for any questions about the goals, strategies, and tactics of TCOT. By the end of the year, the TCOT portfolio had around 30 action projects, the list was around 3000 members long, and TCOTers were rapidly gaining followers. TCOT's top 19

reached Twitter's top 1000 most followed tweeple with at least two among the Top 100. Hailed as a manifestation of *focused energy*, *momentum*, and *organization*, TCOT was heartening for conservatweeps fed up with their side's technological incompetence: *and they thought we couldn't do it.* It was offering them new possibilities of mattering with new special and temporal orderings.

Spatial Reconfiguration: Dis-local Connectivity

Collective participation in TCOTing practices was reconfiguring the spatiality of conservatweep's mattering beyond the locality of their offline and online lives. Take for example, the practice of hashtagging with #TCOT, which besides the ranking itself, had become one of the defining practices of TCOT. Hashtagging, an innovation by Twitter, involves adding a # sign in front of a word knowing that upon clicking Twitter will render that tweet among other tweets with the same hashtag. Having been *lonely as a conservative on Twitter*, the enlisted conservatweeps began happily using the TCOT list and its hashtag to find and follow other conservatweeps whom they *never would have met any other way: In non computer life most of my girlfriends are liberal or non political. Nice to find [TCOT]... where have you guys been all my twitter life? Felt oddly alone with both Obamamericans and libertatrians all around me!* As a result, not only were they boosting their Twitter numbers but they also were happy to see their *Twitter li[ve*s] improved: *Am in the warm embrace of my conservative compatriots. And in Chicago no less!* Soon, hashtagging with #TCOT became a *highly addictive* way for conservatweeps to reach beyond their own followers and to socialize, share news and informal updates, ask practical questions, and chat about politics with other like-minded tweeple—leading to #TCOT trending prominently on Twitter throughout December: *even higher than santa.* Hashtagging was partitioning and ordering conservatweeps' till-then-

nomadic mattering, channeling them into the #TCOT stream, and thus increasing their chances of materializing on other conservatweeps' screens where they would matter more. This made #TCOT stream *the place to be* if one was *conservative and on Twitter*, where they could find affinity and empathy: *I just LOVE having a place I can go to read what like minded conservatives are thinking, and why.*

However, a geometrical metaphor of space—as a given and passive container in which tweeple exist and actions unfold—is not well-suited to describe the spatiality enacted by hashtagging. The latter is better described with a topological metaphor of space—as a continual and differential process of enacting material-discursive connections among screens distributed across space. The spatial reconfiguration of tweeple through hashtagging concerns the process through which tweeple materialize on different screens situated in different places and elicit engagement. This spatial process is a function of multiple sociomaterial factors— such as the content of tweets and their hashtags and their popularity within one's network, tweeple's histories of interactions, records of following and blocking, patterns of scrolling, tweeting and retweeting, etc.—that feed the algorithms that continually relate/connect tweeple together by producing different marks on their screens presumably to maximize some measure of likelihood of engagement.

To matter more prominently in such a space-making process, conservatweeps needed to get a sense of how these algorithms connect, or bring, one to different audiences (*I keep forgetting to put the #TCOT [and so don't reach the community] - I will have to put a sticky on my computer to remind me*); to learn how to cultivate favorable connections by enacting in-group out-group boundaries (*I try to be clearly conservative in my tweets & profile to avoid those [liberal] nut cases*); and to learn how to better engage their target audiences (*in politics being on sidelines means not*

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mattering, McCain tried that, #TCOT is new and unruly, but GOP needs to listen). For conservatweeps, the fact that their mattering rested heavily on engagement from the TCOT community meant that they needed to strive to be *#TCOT worthy* and to *make following [them] worth…while* by *primarily tweeting about conservative issues* so as *not to disappoint* or *to tick off [their] newly found friends*—especially as following was a scarce resource due to the 2000 follow limit: *Every once in awhile I might let the F-bomb slip - I sure hope I don't get in trouble for that.*

Temporal Reconfiguration: Instantaneous Tempo (Live tweeting)

TCOT's space-making was also entangled with a specific temporal reconfiguration of conservatweeps' possibilities of mattering. At the time, Twitter was in general organizing tweets in a sequential and reverse chronological order, which together with the limited number of tweets per screen and the growing influx of new tweets (only if one was in the flow), enacted a temporal rhythm that favored the most recent. Accordingly, as its hashtag became more popular, TCOT's temporal rhythm became increasingly instantaneous: *there is no "get back to it when I have time." Then it is already lost.* It increasingly required more work to materialize on the first page of #TCOT stream and to help one's chances of getting noticed and engaged with. This was only toughened by the competition among TCOTers "to get the most followers and move up the list" and TCOT's emerging norms of prompt reciprocation and engagement. Conservatweeps who wanted to keep mattering in the community needed to invest more of their local spacetimes, for example not to miss out on #TCOT's *morning [and/or evening] traffic*. As such, those who could, began twittering more frequently and on-the-go—e.g. taking their laptops to the kitchen, getting a smartphone, even blogging more frequently to stay relevant to daily trends. The more tech-savvy conservatweeps also began using add-ons to create groups and filters to improve their presence and responsiveness across multiple

conversations, @Replies, DMs, and hashtags at the same time—increasing their chances of mattering among conservatweeps.

However, these spatiotemporal reconfigurations were not given, uniform, or universal, but continually enacted in the nexus of TCOTing practices and as such were situated, contingent, and differential. As such, different sets of twittering practices would enact different space-time-mattering processes for conservatweeps. For example, the introduction of the practices of organizing and executing action projects partly disentangled the spacetime requirements of TCOTing from the increasingly demanding rhythm of frequent and on-the-go twittering. Involving activities such as making phone calls, writing and sending emails to officials, creating manuals, designing graphics, and so on, the action projects opened possibilities for volunteering conservatweeps to matter more prominently in the community, as *Project Servant-Leaders* (*PS-L*) or *Team Members*, without having to keep up with the *overwhelming* rhythm of #TCOT's *tweetstorm*. These possibilities materialized through TCOT's website and *leadership conference calls.* The former, which was home to the ranking and action projects' documentations, had become a frequent passage point (*Go to the website. Read the tips. Choose an action project. Contact its PS-L to volunteer*) whereas the latter, which was organized weekly by MPL to get progress reports, gave PS-Ls the distinguished position of having access to TCOT's decision-making process.

In summary, this act illustrates how conservatweeps came to collaboratively and competitively inhabit differential possibilities of mattering—getting disentangled from the local spacetimes and re-entangled with a dis-local and instantaneous spatiotemporal order enacted in TCOTing practices. The establishment of sympathetic networks, the enactment of in-group out-group boundaries, and the emergence of shared and normative patterns of

constant connectivity and engagement were not only structuring conservatweeps' till-then-nomadic and contingent materializations, but were also redefining the significance of those materializations—together improving conservatweeps' mattering. In the process, TCOTing was elevated from just twittering to collective construction of conservative reach and influence: *Stay connected and have a hand in taking back the GOP!... It's your chance to make that difference.* TCOT had become "a potential precursor to a movement to rally ALL conservatives into a PLACE for web 2.0 collaboration, mutual promotion, sharing ideas and best practices, and more." It was replacing post-election loneliness and despair with the joy and empowerment: *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!* The flip side of these newfound possibilities of mattering was the enactment of specific power relations whereby MPL was becoming the de facto leader and spokesman of TCOT; the man who opened the door of *New Media* and online organizing to conservatives.

Act III: Tea Partier

The perfect opportunity presented itself on February 19, 2009, when from the floor of Chicago Mercantile Exchange, CNBC commentator Rick Santelli frantically chastised Obama's mortgage relief plan as "promoting bad behavior": "This is America. How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage, that has an extra bathroom, and can't pay their bills?" With traders cheering around him, he infamously ended by inviting "all capitalists" to "a Chicago Tea Party in July". This was repeatedly broadcasted and was soon posted on YouTube. It spurred a buzz on Twitter with #teaparty becoming trending—convincing many conservatweeps that *this tea party thing seems 2 be taking off*. In response and on the behest of a couple of messages, MPL organized an urgent TCOT leadership conference

call to discuss how to keep the momentum of "the Rant" alive. With around 50 people dialing in from across the country, he "press[ed] for an actual tea party protest" to be held soon, arguing that "if [they] could pull off a simultaneous nationwide event, the likelihood that it would catch fire was very high". Subsequently, ChicagoTeaParty.com (later renamed to the Nationwide Tea Party Coalition), announced its existence to coordinate for "Tea Party events" on February 27, 2009. A relative success in gathering crowds of a few hundred people in dozens of cities across the country (Williamson et al 2012: 8), motivated the Coalition to organize another round of simultaneous Tea Party events on April 15, 2009 Tax Day through *TaxDayTeaParty.com*.

Four sets of practices became constitutive of what was to become the Tea Party Movement and in the process reconfigured the spacetimemattering of conservatweeps. These were practices of *organizing local events*, *participating in events*, *covering events*, and *listing events*.

Organizing Local Events

At first, TCOT's action projects and conference calls became the template for organizing Tea Party events. If not volunteering themselves, conservatweeps would refer other potential (would-be) local organizers to participate in TCOT's daily coordination conference calls and/or to ultimately become a "Tea Party PS-L" for one of fifty State-specific Tea Party action projects on Facebook and Ning. These efforts to organize simultaneous dispersed gatherings, constituted opportunities for mattering outside the spacetimemattering regime of twittering. On the one hand, they re-entangled volunteered conservatweeps back to their local geographies, not as lone conservatives anymore but as the embodiment of national/local, online/offline, and tweeple/people mediators. These local organizers to-be leveraged their position as an emissary of a national conservative cause to mobilize their local online and

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offline networks for participation in local events. On the other hand, the organizing practices entangled a limited number of conservatweeps with a national space for mattering where they would ensure better participation from the local events to the national cause. This was achieved through showcasing local mobilization efforts and headcount estimates in the conference calls to boost morale but also by creating agreement among local organizers to synchronize their events in time, and "branding", to collect email addresses, and to post pictures and videos of their events using #teaparty.

Participating in Events

Tea Party events created opportunities for conservatweeps to go beyond their digital bodies and matter through forming physical embodied crowds in cities across the country at the same time. This also allowed to enlist less tech-savvy and older people who did not have digital bodies yet to participate in the formation of Tea Party crowds. The collective embodied performance of a Tea Party event was constituted through … several materialities which served not only to unify the geographically dispersed events in "branding" but also to enrich the emotional undertone of the participants' experiences. In addition to synchronizing their events in time, the local organizers would also agree to unify their crowds in waving often inflammatory signs, chanting, and dressing up as American Revolutionary patriots, and using other paraphrenia (e.g. stuffed pork, Tea bags) or for example in gathering in strategical locations such as "outside of post offices" (in the Tax Day Tea Parties), hoping that people would be "angry because they have to pay their taxes". Embodied participation in such Tea Party crowds were cathartic experiences for conservatives—the self-proclaimed "silent majority"—to feel that they were quite literally making their voices heard. The crowds also attracted sympathetic bystanders for whom witnessing "an economic conservative protest"

was "just unheard of" as conservatives had generally not been good at "putting bodies on the street… one of the things the Left considers as their turf". Overall, these practices created opportunities for conservatweeps' physical bodies to matter in their collective materialization of the conservative anger "on the ground".

Covering Events

Such small and scattered events were not likely to attract the attention of the traditional mainstream media. With their new media fascination, the Coalition's plan to get the message out was instead "to go viral". The local organizers were thus advised to share pictures and videos of their events on social media using #teaparty. Translating locally bound "bodies on the street" into digital bodies, these practices reconfigured the spacetimemattering of Tea Party crowds' embodied performances—making them visible and engageable (e.g. sharable, comment-able) and ultimately able to make a difference beyond their local spacetime. Further, the simultaneity (repeating temporal flow in a short period of time) of the "incoming" pictures and videos in the #teaparty stream as well as their similar and peculiar themes and performances constituted a broader "twitterland" Tea Party event and created the sense that a broader "movement" is underway. This convinced many sympathetic bystanders that to join the efforts. As a bystander turned local organizer put it:

> "It's becoming a movement…that's where I started seeing…I see this stuff…and I thought you know somebody's gotta do something and I'm not gonna sit around, I'm usually somebody that overthinks things, but I thought, you know, I'm not overthinking this. I'm just gonna start doing it. And I didn't know what to do, I just started doing it…"

The unified and seemingly well-organized aura of this multi-city spectacle, especially when "the Press didn't even show up", was a curse and a blessing. It became at the same time an evidence for its non-sympathizers that the Tea Party was an "AstroTurf" charade, but also a

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major attention grabber which provided the Coalition and MPL with notable clout among the conservative activists and organizations. In the lead-up to the second round of the protests, the covering even became before the fact. MPL, who had secured a paid contract with PJTV.com (a conservative online TV, which had been running segments on the Tea Parties since Rick Santelli's rant), began covering the upcoming events in his Tea Party Coalition Show. Besides promoting TCOT, teaching how to cover local events using #teaparty, the daily show featured local organizers and broadcasted the Coalition's leadership conference calls. Fox News also started to provide heavy before-the-fact coverage of the Tax Day Tea Party events, interviewing the Coalition and local organizers, and encouraging its viewers to attend one. On the day of the protests, Fox News and CNN provided considerable coverage of the events—bringing the Tea Parties to a national audience through their reports as well as tweeted content in #teaparty.

Listing Events

Finally, as the Tea Party phenomenon was gaining momentum, the conference calls, which could not support all the newcomers, were progressively replaced with event listing practices as a mechanism of enforcing some level of unified performance among the local events. The Coalition had announced that "only events conducted on April 15 were to be listed on the national site" and if some local organizers did not like it "all [the] good wishes to them, but another person in their city may be found to conduct one on the 15th". Almost all organizers had to agree to this as they "felt the need to have their event listed on a national site" to be "together in a show of force" even though some preferred a Saturday. The list was soon translated into a Google Maps, which with its colorful markers scattered across the country became for a while the representation of the Tea Party Movement (and an attention grabber

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for the media). Tea Party's national list and map also served to boost morale by showing the sheer numbers and the distribution of the events, to make it easier for local organizers to consolidate events, and to channel newcomers to their local Tea Party Facebook event pages. However, public listing the events also made it possible for other actors to copy the list to their own websites and in some cases "[send] out emails with a 'PayPal Donate' button in them, claiming to be the organizers of the entire movement." By this time, other major national players were interested in jumping on the bandwagon…. Thus, entered Koch-related anti-regulation advocacy groups FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity and Newt Gingrich's (former House Speaker) American Solutions. These resource-deploying organizations used the national list to approach local Tea Parties and extend logistical, legal, and public relations support.

In summary, this act shows how four sets of practices (*organizing local events*, *participating in events*, *covering events*, and *listing events*) allowed a dis-local community of conservatweeps to bootstrap simultaneous local events and to aggregate them into a national performance. These practices constituted a three-tiered organizing structure (national, mediator, local) for what was to become the Tea Party Movement. In the process they created opportunities for mattering outside the spacetimemattering regime of twittering (characteristic of Act 2). In this new regime, a limited number of conservatweeps were entangled with a national space for mattering where they would ensure better participation from the local events to the national cause. A volunteered group of conservatweeps became national/local mediators and leveraged this position to mobilize their local online and offline networks for participation in local events. Many more conservatives (conservatweep or not) became entangled with local spaces for mattering where they could go beyond their digital bodies and matter through

forming physical embodied crowds in cities across the country at the same time. Finally, through translating locally bound "bodies on the street" into digital bodies, these practices made Tea Party crowds' local embodied performances visible, engageable (e.g. sharable, comment-able), and ultimately able to make a difference beyond their local spacetime and at a national level.

Epilogue: The Theater of Leaderlessness

On April 15, 2009, hundreds of rallies were held nationwide with a total headcount estimate of 300,000 people (Willamson et al, 2012). Two weeks later though, MPL faced his downfall. On April 30, 2009 Neppell shut down the TCOT ranking stating "I do not feel comfortable continuing to operate… with a partner who deliberately refuses to communicate with me on fundamental issues". At the same time, MPL was excluded from the board of the newly established Tea Party Patriots citing "his inability to work in a cooperative group setting, and his position that the grass roots needed to be 'led' instead of being honored with the leadership they themselves have earned". This outrage at MPL's "grandstanding for personal gain" came after he had announced that on behalf of the leadership of the Tea Party Coalition he had accepted what he saw as President Obama's "invitation" to meet with Tea Partiers.

Though MPL was gone, the Tea Party Movement continued to gain momentum, thanks in part to the space provided by social media for stabilizing a contentious national/local link. Local Tea Partiers were avowedly leaderless and leery of anything that represents Washington Establishment. Wishing to embody their own "core principle of decentralized power", many local Tea Parties did not appreciate what they saw as "interfering" with, "co-opting", or down-right "hijacking" of their events by "national organizations whose goals and purposes [were] not clear". To navigate this "eschewing of leadership", the national

organizations reframed their role as "grassroots service centers". Instead of directly controlling the local Tea Parties, they would provide them with "best practices", "action memos", town hall talking points, but also proprietary social media tools, content, and training on how to establish their digital presence and attract audiences, to communicate and collaborate with other groups, and to organize rallies and/or campaigns (in workshops such as "Twittisvism" and "patriotism 2.0").

Discussion— Towards an alternative to ICT user

This study sought to further hone and showcase the analytical power of a post-humanist performative notion of technology user through a genealogy of conservatweeps. It reports an in-depth historical investigation into the emergence of specific conservative twittering practices and their consequences for the material-discursive production of conservative cyborg activists, who became essential in organizing the Tea Party Movement. Specifically, I focused on the relational production of the spatiality, temporality and mattering (i.e. meaningful materialization) of those cyborg activists in different bundles of social media practices.

The findings explain how through de-centered and distributed social media practices these conservatweeps came to inhabit emergent possibilities of presence, visibility, reach, and influence within specific spatial and temporal regimes of mattering. I used relatively distinct enactments-in-practice of these spacetimemattering (Barad 2007) regimes to structure my narrative into three Acts. Table 1 shows an overview of these different regimes where lone and newbie "Tweeters" became connected and empowered "TCOTers" and eventually becoming angry and vocal "Tea Partiers".

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Table 3: overview of spacetimemattering regimes in three acts

Spacetime-mattering regime	Act I Tweeter	Act II TCOTer	Act III Tea Partier
Spatial ordering	– Local space – Disconnected	– Dis-local space – Connected online	– Co-local – Local/mediator/national – Connected online/offline – Multi-city
Temporal ordering	– Individual spare times – No collective rhythm	– Conversation flow – Fast tempo – Peak times	– Events – Repetitive – Simultaneous – Scheduling
Material bodies	– Bodies at home – Limited online presence	– Twitter bodies – Collective #TCOT stream	– Bodies on the street – Physical crowds – Shared signs and paraphernalia
Possibilities of mattering	– Disconnected nomads – Extremely contingent and serendipitous	– Online community members	– Collective action co-organizers
Consequences	– Lonely – Defeated – Disgruntled	– Sympathetic networks – In-group out-group boundaries – Normative patterns of constant connectivity and engagement – Sense of belonging and agency	– Three-tiered organizing structure – Local groups with unified national appearance – Working around traditional media – Changing the fabric of social movements – Leadership paradox

Act 1 starts with conservative Tweeters "lurking in the weeds" of the "liberals' paradise" that was Twitter—disheartened nomads, disconnected in time and space, immaterial in the new world of social media with waning visibility, reach and influence, finding themselves on the wrong side of a technology gap. It narrates how through a serendipitous and contingent turn of events, constantly interweaved by bots and algorithms, a wannabe cyborg activist ended up at the center of a specific bundle of twittering practices opening up new possibilities of mattering—i.e. materializing on different screens, exerting influence, and being interacted with—for conservative tweeters.

Act 2 shows how TCOTing practices were amounting to a collective construction of conservative reach and influence on social media. It shows how TCOTers got disentangled from their local spacetimes and re-entangled with the dis-local and instantaneous spatiotemporal order of the #TCOT stream. The establishment of sympathetic networks, the enactment of in-group out-group boundaries, and the emergence of shared and normative patterns of constant connectivity and engagement lifted conservatweeps from their nomadic and contingent materializations to a structured and meaningful mattering as part of a community with its sense of belonging and agency.

Finally, Act 3 shows how a specific bundle of practices allowed this dis-local community of conservatweeps to bootstrap numerous simultaneous local events and to aggregate them into a national performance. In the process they created opportunities for mattering outside the spacetimemattering regime of twittering (characteristic of Act 2). Through translating locally bound bodies on the street into digital bodies, these practices made Tea Partiers local embodied performances visible, engageable (e.g. sharable, comment-able), and ultimately able to make a difference beyond their local spacetime and at a national level.

Implications for IS research

The dominant conception of the user in IS research has already come under criticism for not capturing the complex realities of human-computer interaction (Lamb & Kling, 2003; Riemer & Johnston, 2017; Yoo, 2010). Accordingly, scholars have shifted from an atomistic view of user towards a social view and recently a sociomaterial co-constitutive view. However, to the best of my knowledge in the latter approach we are yet to explicitly formulate an alternative to the ICT user.

This study proposes the concept of cyborg-in-practice as a posthumanist performative alternative to the concept of ICT user in the IS literature. This alternative notion is premised on a few shifts in understanding. First, cyborg-in-practice invites us to shift from viewing cyborgs as hybrid entities—formed when human body is fused with technology—to viewing them as sociomaterial enactments in practice. We become cyborgs not necessarily by having implants in, or prostheses attached to, our bodies but by increasingly performing our everyday activities with, through, and by digital technologies (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014; Schultze & Mason, 2012). In the process, we come to inhabit emergent possibilities of mattering; new modes and means of experience and action extending beyond our bodies' immediate space-time. Second, cyborg-in-practice invites us to shift from viewing users as taken-for-granted carriers of well-articulated characteristics (e.g. preferences, interests, values, information needs) and instead focus on how through specific sociomaterial practices different types of users come to matter, when, where, and for whom.

Finally, cyborg-in-practice urges us to abandon a narrowly defined understanding of human-technology interaction envisioned within a task performance or information processing paradigm for the good reason that today we do not so much engage with technology to carry out tasks (Lamb & Kling, 2003; Yoo, 2010) as we do to live and to matter in an increasingly technological life-world. Instead cyborg-in-practice deals with human-technology intra-actions (Barad, 2007).

After making these shifts, we can now envision cyborg-in-practice as a *performative tool* for navigating the de-centered and distributed terrain of human-technology intra-action without being locked in conventional categories too soon. Without trying to essentialize the new concept, it is nonetheless useful to reiterate some characteristics of cyborg-in-practice.

(a) A cyborg-in-practice is *fluid*; it does not have given boundaries, essential characteristics or pre-determined roles.

(b) It is *contingent*; the enactment of a cyborg-in-practice is not automatic. Nor is the extensions to its spatial and temporal boundaries linear or infinite. Far from being a forgone conclusion, a cyborg-in-practice is open for re-interpretation and thus contestation and change.

(c) It is *de-centered*; instead of being about a focal subject and its relations to surrounding objects, a cyborg-in-practice emanates from the ongoing performance of diverse, distributed, and entangled agencies. A cyborg-in-practice is not centered on, or totally in control of one subject (Introna, 2018).

(d) It is a *material-discursive entanglement*; a cyborg-in-practice is not an imaginary creature residing in somebody's mind. Rather it is *of this world* and thus materially constituted. It is also discursive since it hinges on the recognition that a certain body *is* oneself or someone/thing and that one/thing is *present* somewhere. This recognition is never a private affair and is implicated in interactions and social/cultural discourses. Finally, it is an entanglement and thus its material and discursive components cannot be separated from each other in any abstract way—they are only separable in practice and don't exist as individual elements (Barad 2007).

(e) A cyborg-in-practice materializes in *multiple* bodies; bodies that may or may not resemble conventional human or technology's bodies; such as human body, texts, office buildings, pictures, mobile devices, videos, social media profiles, avatars, tweets, etc.

(f) It is *performed in practice*; none of the above is automatic or universal. They are practical accomplishments and thus variations in composition and meaning are inevitable. Practices are the site that connect the social to the bodies, space, and time and thus make cyborgs-in-practice social creatures.

(g) A cyborg-in-practice is *doubly distributed*; not only are the practices that enact a cyborg-in-practice distributed across time and space, but also are the multiple bodies that make up a cyborg-in-practice. That is, neither the participating agencies, nor the outcome of their participation reside in a given point in space-time. Instead, bodies as well as their spatiality and temporality are relationally produced in practice (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012).

A cyborg-in-practice is not a new ontological entity. It does not denote a permanent identity or closure. It is not a 'thing' which is created when *what we know* as human body is physically infused with *what we know* as machine. Reification is not the aim of this concept. Instead, cyborg-in-practice denotes an ontological dynamism, indeterminacy, and inseparability. The study of cyborgs-in-practice is thus not the study of things—be they material or social—but a study of actions/doings/performances/practices. Rather than to list the abstract characteristics of a new ontological category, cyborg-in-practice is meant to provide focus and orientation towards what Bastian (2006) refers to as "unsure, heterogeneous, desiring, non-innocent, leaky, situated actors" (1029) in an always already technological world.

Implications for practice

As IS researchers, our conception of the ICT user has direct implications for practice ranging from design, evaluation, and governance of human-technology interactions. An atomic view

of the ICT user leads to design, evaluation, and governance of human-technology interactions based on abstract representations of task requirements and cognitive models. It overemphasizes users' well-articulated preferences and their discretion in technology choice while underemphasizing the role of contextual of environmental factors (see for a critique Lamb & Kling, 2003). Alternatively, a social actor view of the user is context sensitive and accounts for affiliations, environments, interactions, and identities of social actors who use ICTs (Lamb & Kling, 2003). Such a view is associated with participatory design practices (Mumford, 2006), and an appreciation of improvisation, design-in-use (Ciborra, 2001), tacit knowledge, and adaptive capabilities on the part of social actors in making the system work and evaluating its success.

Similarly, a co-constitutive view of the ICT user has direct implications for the design and governance of human-technology intra-actions. In our becoming cyborgs-in-practice thanks to what we can/cannot do with, through, and by ICTs, what is at stake is no less than who we can/cannot become and when, where, and how we matter. As such, this view of human-technology intra-actions foregrounds issues such as ethics of research (Schultze & Mason, 2012), ownership (e.g. who own data and digital traces produced through technology use?), decision making (e.g. how are new features, practices, policies are decided upon?), human rights (e.g. who gets to ban someone from a platform?), distribution of responsibility (e.g. who is responsible in creating echo chambers?), distribution of benefits (e.g. should content creators be paid or not?), etc. Here, Foucault's framework of governmentality (1991) seems to be promising path forward to engage us with the question of how technology platforms produce their own subjects to fulfill their interest and policies.

There is a point after which the human-technology interaction stops being an arms-length transaction and people start becoming locked in and too entangled with a technology. When one's personal, social, professional, or political life becomes so entangled with a technology (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) the free-market-flavored arguments that anyone who does not like this or that feature or policy can simply switch to another technology, and that the market forces will eventually push bad players out, quickly pale against reality. Critical mass and network effect, the sweethearts of digital strategy courses and the holy grails of tech start-up, might need to also become the point where we should start taking a technology up to the task of being a responsible participant in our increasingly technological life-world.

Conclusion

"The medium is the message," reads Marshal McLuhan's famous pithy, by which he meant that the technology of communication is far more consequential than the content. While McLuhan becomes technologically deterministic in where he went from there, his maxim constantly reminds us that the mediums through which we communicate are not neutral channels. This makes one wonder what consequences might accrue when social media are becoming the ever more dominant medium of communication of our time.

I argued that our era is one in which we are all *becoming* cyborgs by through intra-acting with technology. This is not a utopian or necessarily a dystopian view—but it is a critical one. There is a built-in political motivation in a performative perspective. And that is to open up the black boxes of things; to open up for debate everything that popular as well as academic practices are implicitly or explicitly thingifying (Barad, 2003); to show how they are not essential and are therefore open for reinterpretation, reformulation, and change, if need be.

Scott Bukatman's quote at the outset of this essay states that cyborgian becoming entails uncertain implications for "the subject". If that's the case, and if our accounts can play a performative role in this becoming, I refuse to submit my account of cyborgs to a de-humanizing project. This is not a statement of surrender. The point, rather, is to be more vigilant of the ongoing transformations and to make diverse agencies responsible for their roles in said transformations. To de-center the human subject does not mean to deny its existence, but to understand it differently. As Pickering (2013) remind us:

> Posthumanism is not just about materiality; it is about understanding people differently too: not as carriers of fixed properties (interests, values, symbols systems, expertise or whatever) but as malleable, manage-able, always liable to become something new in interaction with each other as well as with things. (p.37)

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ESSAY III

The Process of Social Media(tion):
Beyond Features and Content

ABSTRACT

This essay aims to offer a sensitizing framework and its methodological implications with which to understand social media's complex social consequences. It problematizes approaches that start with attributing clear-cut boundaries and properties to social media technologies and those that focus merely on the content of social media communications. Instead it argues for shifting from treating social media as reified propertied technological entities to treating them as bundles of social mediation practices. Through a reflective exercise some implicit influences in my dissertation research practices of the performative perspective as well as the functional programming paradigm (with which I was fascinated during my dissertation research) are made explicit. The result is two groups of methodological recommendations for the study of social mediation; those concerning observation and recording practices and those concerning theorization and generalization practices. The previous essays in this dissertation are used as empirical illustrations of these recommendations.

Introduction

Where do social media's complex social consequences come from? Are they inevitable results of social media's technological features? Or are they but manifestations of pre-existing social and cultural forces? If not, do they emerge out of interactions between technological features and human intentions? Or do social media phenomena have social consequences that cannot be readily accounted for through these approaches? In addressing these questions, the goal of this essay is to offer suitable sensitizing concepts and methodological approaches with which to understand social media's complex social consequences.

The essay problematizes approaches that start with attributing clear-cut boundaries and properties to social media technologies and those that focus merely on the content of social media communications. The former does injustice to the fluidity of social media phenomena, while the latter misses other consequential factors that go into making social media phenomena work. Instead, by building on the theoretical notions of a practice-based performative perspective (Barad, 2003, 2007; Latour, 2005; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), and an ex post reflection on how those ideas have informed and oriented my own dissertation research practices, the essay develops a framework for theoretical rethinking and empirical capturing of social media phenomena. Specifically, the essay develops two groups of methodological recommendations for the study of social media; those concerning observation and recording practices as well as theorization and generalization practices. While these recommendations do not amount to an exhaustive guide on how to perform a performative study of social media, they do constitute a solid springboard for launching such a study.

Unlike an affordance perspective (Faraj & Azad, 2012; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe, & Negoita, 2017), this approach does not limit the investigation to the interface between human and technology and opens it up to contain a myriad of concerns and factors that come to play differential roles in different practices. Central to this framework is a shift from focusing on social media as reified propertied technological entities to viewing them from within media practices and processes of mediation (Couldry, 2008, 2012). Such a focus on all practices related to social media—and not merely social media use—allows us to account for heterogeneous forces and factors flowing in different directions (Introna, 2013) in explaining social media phenomena. It allows to embed social media practices in broader historical, social, and cultural processes while also accounting for the role of technological factors.

The remainder of this essay is organized as follows. First, I review in broad strokes the main approaches towards the relationship between technology and the organization of social life. Next, I develop the notion of social mediation as a practice-based performative alternative to social media. I then develop several methodological recommendations on how to study social mediation, and finally before concluding I offer an empirical illustration of those methodological recommendations.

Technology and (re)organization of social life

The study of the relationship between technology and organizing has been for the most part entangled with a broader and more fundamental debate about the relationship between material and social worlds. The basic idea that the social reality is bound to its material counterpart has been around for centuries. Many foundational theories of social sciences have

been, arguably, about the nature and direction of this relationship. Marx (1992/1867) gave primacy to material conditions. For him, the means and relations of production were the main driving force of history. Other superstructures such as culture, politics, religion, and law are derivatives of these material conditions. Weber (2013/1905) pushed back and made a case for the role of culture and ideas. For him, cultural, religious, political, and legal factors were at least as important as the economic order in explaining the human condition. Arguably, most of the history of the study of technology and organizing has been a constant re-living and re-clarification of these foundational debates. Below I present a summary of the main approaches to the study of technology and organizing categorized based on their ontological and epistemological commitments into two groups of essentialist and performative approaches.

Essentialist Approaches

At first, *technological determinists* (dominant in organizational studies in the 1970s) argued that technology advances on its own logic and molds organizations and society to fit its needs (Blau, Falbe, McKinley, & Tracy, 1976; Perrow, 1967; Woodward, 1958). While this perspective became obsolete in organizational studies of technology, it continues to be prevalent in interdisciplinary studies of social movements and ICTs—where ICTs are argued, for example, to increase the speed, scope, and scale of social movement efforts and eventually lead to democratic outcomes (see for a review Heeks & Seo-Zindy, 2013).

Later on, trying to counter the causal arguments of technological determinism in favor of more voluntaristic accounts (Leonardi & Barley, 2010), *social constructivists* (increasingly dominant in organizational studies since the 1980s) rejected the notion that "a technology's effects are foregone conclusions" (Barley, 1988, p. 34). They started to show how a host of cultural beliefs, values, norms, interests, and social relations shape any technology and mediate its impact on

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organizations. What matters, they argued, is not so much the technologies themselves as the socially constructed ways in which they are designed (Bijker, 1992; Pinch & Bijker, 1984) and constantly reinvented in situated use (Boudreau & Robey, 2005; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Kling, 1980; Kling & Scacchi, 1982; Markus, 1983; Orlikowski, 1992; Robey, 1979; Walsham, 2002). In these studies technologies trigger—or mediate, in the case of ICTs—social construction processes and "have little discernable influence on the social dynamics that emerge" (Kallinikos, Leonardi, & Nardi, 2012; Leonardi & Barley, 2010, p. 32). While the social constructivist project was aimed to push back on technological determinism, it made the pendulum go too far to the other side (Leonardi & Barley, 2010) resulting in a deterministic legacy that accords culture the ultimate driving force. Although this perspective is dominant in organizational studies of technology, it is less prevalent in interdisciplinary studies of social movements and ICTs. However when present, social constructivism is manifested in two ways: Either, the context and existing social and political structures are argued to be more important than ICTs in explaining the outcomes of the so-called ICT-enabled movements (e.g., Salter, 2003). Or, the contents of ICT-mediated communications are the main focus of the study and the ICTs are merely paid a lip service for having enabled those discursive social constructions (e.g., Rohlinger & Klein, 2014).

A third approach to the study of technology and social organization consists of attempts to bring materiality back in—but this time by pushing back, at once, on both extremes of technological and social determinism. These studies focus on the interactions between technology and people (or organizations). The proponents of *socio-technical systems* (Emery, 1959; Trist & Bamforth, 1951) made a case for this mutual relationship as early as the 1950s, however, their normative theory, was pushed aside by the mainstream paradigms of 1970s

and 1980s. Interestingly, it maintained a lively existence through that period as far as the design of the emerging ICTs were concerned (Mumford, 1983). A more recent stream—though, not normatively oriented—is the studies of *technological affordances* (Leonardi, 2011; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007). Affordances are defined as action possibilities that arise when human intentions meet technological capabilities. In other words, technological affordances are specific ways that actors perceive the capabilities of a technology for a particular action. The idea is that neither material nor human agencies, but the affordances that arise from their interactions shape the course of action and influence organizations. While this perspective is gaining traction in organizational studies and IS, its translation to the studies of social movements and ICTs has been limited and problematic. Instead of focusing on how affordances emerge in context (Leonardi, 2011) these studies have attempted to draw relationships between given and universal ICT affordances and certain outcomes—in a manner that closely resemble technological determinism. For example, the ICT affordances of *persistence*, *replicability*, *scalability*, and *searchability* "that emerge out of the properties of [ICTs]" are argued to "introduce new dynamics with which participants must contend" (boyd, 2010, p. 46).

These three perspectives (somehow with the exception of social construction of technology (Bijker, 1992; Pinch & Bijker, 1984)) could be classified together by virtue of their commitments to essentialism and (Cartesian) representationalism[vii]. They are based on an essentialist ontology, an ontology of 'being', and claim to produce knowledge by representing those pre-existing beings. Although they put different emphasis on the direction of influence, all these perspectives conceptualize the technological and the social as *distinct entities* with *inherent properties* and focus on the *interactions between* the two—be them one-sided or two. Specifically,

these perspectives have, either, done away with one direction of influence (technological determinism), collapsed one completely into the other (social constructivism), or reify both to study their interactions (affordance perspective). First, by doing away with any social influence on technologies, technological determinists miss out on the point that technologies are subject to differential interpretations and do not automatically produce outcomes. As such, they fail, for example, to explain instances where the introduction of the same technology induces various outcomes in various cultural contexts. Second, by "collapsing materiality into discursivity" (Putnam & Cooren, 2004), social constructivist studies miss out on the point that any interpretation—and social construction for that matter—is done through material practices that are neither passive nor neutral (Orlikowski, 2007; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & Savigny, 2001). As such, they fail, for example, to explain various unintended consequences of technologies (Czarniawska, 2008; Slack & Wise 2005). Finally, by reifying materiality (e.g. technological properties) and discursivity (e.g. human goals) as separate, proponents of the affordance perspective grapple with a self-constructed problematic—namely accounting for the mechanisms through which material objects interact with discursive entities that are by construction stripped away of any materiality. Moreover, because of according agency to material entities—in order to level the playing field, they face the issue of whether to position these agencies on an equal or unequal footing. Currently by invariably giving primacy to human intentionality over material agency they are, arguably, not very distinct from the social constructivist stream (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

While these perspectives have been significant, though in different periods, in shaping our understanding of technology, they have, nonetheless, enframed us in thinking that the technical/technological and the social inhibit distinct realms that are already out there and

that our task as researchers is to figure out how one *impacts*, *shapes*, or *interacts with* the other. As such they foreclose possibilities of investigation into the in-situ constitution of both.

A Performative Approach—or Posthumanist Practice Perspective

Finally, a fourth approach in the study of technology and social change has emerged in the field of Science and Technology Studies (Barad, 2003; Callon, 2007; Latour, 2005). This approach is based on a relational ontology and is committed to steer clear from reifying technology and culture and from a priori distinguishing any direction of influence. Instead, it attends to action and enactment and focuses on practices through which phenomena are differentially performed—it is based on an ontology of 'doing'. As put by Introna (2013, p. 335) in such a relational ontology:

> there are not beings that then have relations with other beings, rather, the beings, which our language and thinking already assume, are the accomplishments that emerges, or are produced, through those very relations. The assumed relations are the conditions of possibility for them to be the beings we assume them to be.

This perspective describes action as carried out by heterogeneous webs of material 'and' symbolic relations (Law, 2009). Moreover, it argues that differences between the material and the symbolic (their boundaries, properties, and roles) are generated in those relations—be them in *assemblages* (originally *agencements* in French; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), in actor-networks (Latour, 2005), in hybrid *collectifs* (Callon & Law, 1995), in mangles of practice (Pickering, 2010), in cyborgs (Haraway, 1991), or in apparatuses (Barad, 2003). The latter, which is rooted in Karen Barad's philosophy of agential realism, is the touchstone of this study.

Agential realism is a posthumanist performative alternative to representationalism that strives to capture the entanglement of meaning and matter while giving matter its due role as

an active participant in the becoming of reality. It is based on a reconceptualization of discursive practice, matter (but also agency and causality). The notion of performativity has been essential, in the tradition of material-semiotic, in showing how representations can produce material effects—that is, discourse can produce the reality it purports to describe (Callon, 2007; Latham & Sassen, 2009; Latour, 2005; MacKenzie, 2003; MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2007; Pickering, 2010; Suchman, 2007). Performativity is at the center of an ontology of becoming (Introna, 2013). Having come from theoretical quantum physics, Barad (2003, 2007) contributed to the performative scholarship by building on Nils Bohr's philosophical work in revising both Newtonian physics and Cartesian epistemology[viii]. She reworked the conceptions of matter/material, meaning/ discursive, and their relationship, aiming to show while discourse can produce material effects, matter also participates in this production of reality—without resorting to reification or determinism.

As such, joining Butler (1990) and Haraway (1991), Barad drops Newtonian conceptions of matter as solid eternal substance and renders matter as a—fluid but also congealing—temporal and historical process of materialization. Thus, for her, matter is always in the process of becoming. Therefore, matter is not limited to physical properties (e.g., of technology); rather it refers to the materiality, or the materialization, of phenomena. She also reworks the notion of meaning, or rather discursive practice, as a process of boundary making (i.e., differentiation) in the ongoing materialization of the world.

Neither of these processes have primacy over the other. Meaning and matter entail each other. Matter is not to be merely understood as a "support, location, referent, or source of sustainability" (Barad 2003, p. 821) for pre-existing meanings. Without matter, meaning does not register. That is, meaning is always already material in the sense that discursive practices

are ongoing boundary makings in a material world. Similarly, meaning is not to be understood as a mere reflection, representation, signification, or labeling of a pre-existing material reality. Without meaning, matter does not register. That is, matter is always already discursive in the sense that material phenomena are produced through congealing of ongoing boundary makings in the world.

The point, therefore, is not to pay lip service to matter—by merely admitting that discourse, which is the actual generative factor in reality-making, is materially supported or sustained. Nor is it that "there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices" (Barad 2003, p. 823). The becoming of the world is both material and discursive—or more strictly it is material-discursive—and therefore, both discourse and matter play agential roles in (or, contribute to) further materialization of phenomena. Finally, Barad localizes these entanglements of meaning and matter into specific phenomena. Thus, the boundaries between the discursive and the material, the properties they assume, and the roles they come to play become distinguished and distinguishable only within each specific phenomenon—and thus vary across different phenomena (Barad calls this "exteriority-within" as opposed to "absolute exteriority" of realism and "absolute interiority" of social constructivism; see also the section on epistemology).

Agential realism has profound implications for the study of technology and culture. From this perspective discursive and material are intertwined and thus any attempt to determine the individual effect of one on the other is of limited validity. Instead, this perspective invites us to go beyond attempts to capture the essence of artifacts, technologies, or materiality; in the same way that it invites us to go beyond endeavors to capture the essence of organizations,

movements, and social processes. Instead we are invited to focus on material-discursive practices that *make phenomena work* (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014, p. 889)—that is to focus on how *characteristics* and *consequences* are produced in the phenomenon under the study.

To sum, a performative paradigm entails a shift from an ontology of 'being' to an ontology of 'doing/becoming'—a shift from dealing with entities to dealing with actions. While Barad is adamant in pointing out that her performative arguments are ontological and not merely epistemological, this does not mean that entities do not exist or are any less empirically 'real'. It rather means that entities, their boundaries, properties, roles, and meanings, are not prior to action but are the outcomes of actions and processes. But if they are secondary, themselves enacted in practice, entities cannot be good candidates on which to ground our analyses. Doing so conceals the forces/factors/concerns that go into the ongoing accomplishment of those entities. Therefore, and to capture those dynamism a performative paradigm builds its arguments based on actions themselves rather than entities. Actions through which entities become materially constituted and meaningfully registered.

Entities vs Action — An Analogy of Programming Languages

Here an analogy with programming paradigms might be helpful, especially for an IS scholar. The difference between the essentialist and performative ontologies is like the difference between Object-Oriented Programming (OOP) and Functional Programming (FP) paradigms. Building on previous developments, OOP was conceived by software engineers at Xerox PARCS in the 1970s and has since become the dominant paradigm for programming. FP started before, in the 1950s, but remained for a long time more of an academic pursuit until recent years where it is rising in popularity and entering the industry. As programming paradigms aiming to model real- or semi-real-world phenomena, both OOP and FP deal with

data and transformations of that data. However, they differ with respect to (a) their ontological unit or building block of programming (b) their treatment (encoding) of entities and actions, (c) their mechanism of abstraction, and (d) their treatment of change. Table 1 summarizes these differences.

a) In OOP, the building blocks of a program are objects. An OOP developer decomposes phenomena into underlying entities and models the latter as (classes of) objects. Objects are defined based on what they are and the program is thus organized around nouns. In FP, the building blocks of a program are functions. An FP developer decomposes phenomena into underlying transformations/actions and implements the latter as functions. Functions are defined based on what they do and the code is thus organized around verbs.

b) In OOP, objects own tightly coupled attributes (data) and behaviors. An OOP developer deals with stateful objects and encodes actions as behaviors of those objects—i.e. actions belong to pre-defined entities (actors). As such, she often needs to come up with abstract objects whose only purpose is to be the actor of actions that do not fit squarely in any of the existing objects. In FP, functions are independent of data and make simple transformations to their input to produce their output—i.e. actions exist on their own right and don't belong to any entity. As such, an FP developer deals directly with transformations and even encodes entities as outcomes of chains of transformations/actions (based on what they do and not what they are).

c) In OOP, the dominant mechanism of abstraction is inheritance. Faced with similarities between objects, an OOP developer extracts the similar code into a parent object from which the child objects inherit properties and behaviors. Inheritance allows developers

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to reduce repetitive code and model complex families of objects by managing their state and behavior at the nearest common ancestor. In FP, the only mechanism of abstraction is composition. When faced with repetitive code, a FP developer extract recurring actions into stand-alone functions that can be composed together as needed to create more complex transformations.

d) In OOP, objects interact with each other by dispatching own and each other's behaviors. Change is thus manifested as mutation of the internal state (values of attributes) of objects because of these interactions. In FP, data is constantly funneled through chains of functions. Change is thus manifested as continual transformation of data (representing entities-in-the-making).

Table 4: Comparing Object-Oriented Programming with Functional Programming

Difference	OOP	FP
Building blocks	Objects (entities) What they are	Functions (transformations) What they do
Entities	Cast in advance	Outcome of functions
Actions	Belong to entities	Independent of loosely coupled with entities
Mechanism of dynamism	Interaction	Continual transformations
Change	Mutation of objects' internal states	Morphing inputs object into new output objects
Coupling (relationship)	Tight coupling Through Inheritance	Loose coupling Through Composition

In summary, OOP encourages noun-oriented thought and modeling processes. An OOP developer organizes and reasons about her code around what things are and how they interact. She encodes well-defined structures that are (often tightly) coupled together. FP encourages verb-oriented thought and modeling processes. An FP developer organizes and

reasons about her code around actions/transformations. She encodes complex processes by composing small independent transformations together as needed.

While soon after its creation OOP became the industry standard, FP remained for a long time an academic pursuit, as it was considered unintuitive, too mathematical, and not corresponding to the real world common sense. The situation, however, is changing in recent years as OOP is increasingly considered too rigid and unsuitable for modeling changing environments—and this, in addition to a host of more technical reasons (e.g. rise of distributed and parallel computing that do not work well with OOP). Alternatively, FP is considered more flexible and suited for handling future requirements. Among other reasons, this is because in FP one models actions directly and independently, and composes them in different ways as needed, without ever needing to attribute those actions to entities, which often risks breaking and having to repair the tight couplings within and across families of entities (IBM). Indeed, while here I used the paradigmatic principles of OOP and FP as ideal types for the sake of comparison, in practice developers increasingly make do by combining OOP and FP, especially as many OOP programming languages are becoming multi-paradigmatic by incorporating FP ideas.

While by no means alluding to a perfect correspondence with social ontologies, the analogy between OOP and FP paradigms, on the one hand, and essentialist and performative ontologies, on the other hand, does serve to make the following points. First, it shows how an entitative ontology, intuitive as it may feel, is not the only plausible framework in which to consistently and comprehensibly think about complex phenomena. An alternative action-based ontology is increasingly used daily in one of the strictest yet practical domains of human activity to characterize and (re)construct complex socio-technical phenomena. Second, while

not a source of theoretical insight, an investigation of how practitioners of action-based ontologies work in other domains can potentially provide a source of inspiration for our own existing concerns with performative thought and research practices. It can also point us towards concerns that we might need to develop. I shall get back to this later when discussing the practical implications of adopting a performative perspective to study technology.

Social mediation—Towards a performative view of social media

A performative perspective is especially well suited for studying digital technology. Digital artifacts break from conventional notions of object as static and self-contained entities. They are "intentionally incomplete and perpetually in the making" (Kallinikos, Aaltonen, & Marton, 2013, p. 357). Allison et al (2005) argue that digital artifacts have a "dubious ontology" since "they do not easily lend themselves to the kinds of criteria that we normally apply to perceive and identify physical objects" (p.364). Ekbia (2009) uses the post-structuralist notion of "quasi-object" to describe a digital artifact as "an active, immanent, unstable, and loosely bounded entity that meaningfully constitutes, and is constituted by, its environment" (p.2555). Yoo et al (2010) point out that digital technologies and products have fluid boundaries and meanings. Yoo et al (2012) argue that digital technologies "have become inherently dynamic and malleable" (p.1399). Finally, Kallinokos et al (2013) adds that not only digital artifacts "lack the plenitude and stability afforded by traditional objects" they are also "embedded into [shifting] webs of technical and organizational relations that further reinforce their instability and ambivalent ontology" (p.366). The prevalence and increasing importance of digital artifacts described as such has led these scholars to usher a "new organizing logic" (Yoo et al., 2010) and "a paradigm shift". One "in which relations and change trajectories

(rather than single or locally embedded families of artifacts and recurrent or robust functionalities) emerge as major issues of IS management" (Kallinikos 2013, p.366-7).

These insights resonate with the implications of a performative perspective about fluid entities and as such show the evermore relevance of this perspective for the study of digital technologies in general and social media in particular. However, a performative perspective offers a different way forward. Instead of digging deeper to find a more fundamental essence of digital artifacts on which to ground the analysis (a deeper level that might inevitably become more technical), a performative perspective shifts the focus towards the diverse and contingent performances that enact and are enacted by digital artifacts. As such the question shifts from 'what are digital artifacts?' to 'how are digital artifacts enacted in situ and what are the consequences of such enactment for the enacting processes and beyond?' The becoming of technologies is never independent of (the becoming of) people. Therefore, attempts to derive the inherent essence of digital technologies without reference to the human/social/organizational relations that permeate them, run at the risk of leaving things inexplicable.

The necessity of not treating digital artifacts as having an inherent essence (or materiality) independent of people becomes ever more salient in the case of social media. This is for the good reason that the phenomena entailed in social media blur our habituated divisions between the realm of cultural/discursive and the realm of technological/material factors (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). Social media make any attempt to see them as self-contained technological entities extremely simplistic. They easily reveal to have porous boundaries and malleable properties.

Let's take the example of Twitter. As a digital technology, Twitter is doubly distributed. Not only is it constituted through the performance of distributed agencies, but also what is performed is distributed and does not reside in a specific point in space-time. That where and when Twitter would materialize on a specific screen is unknown in advance. It depends on where (e.g. at home, work, or on the go), when (e.g. in the morning, afternoon, or late at night), and how often (e.g. once a day or every five minutes) one would engage in practices of siting at a desk (or holding one's smartphone), opening a web browser or desktop client, signing up, logging in, and so on—practices that are entangled with back-end practices of coding, compiling, 'running', debugging, 'hosting', maintaining and so on.

Not only where and when but also what would materialize as Twitter on a specific screen in a specific point in space-time in not known in advance and is accomplished through distributed actions and practices. As a social technology (2.0), what Twitter does—and thus what it is as a tool—at any specific point in space-time are not given in quite the same way that those of a non-social technology—say, a MS Excel—are. That which is brought to one as Twitter is accomplished through a whole set of distributed actions and practices of a whole group of other people—practices such as tweeting, reading tweets, following, checking the scroll, responding to @s and DMs, and so on. A change in those practices could amount to a change in what Twitter is for the people involved. For example, if the practice of scrolling one's feed is interrupted for any reason—be it a server run-time error, a client machine failure, or prevalence of a practice of only responding to @s and DMs and not scrolling—Twitter would become a different tool for those involved. It will become a tool to interact with designated targets (like emails) and not a general audience anymore. Therefore, the affordances of Twitter for a specific person can change even when there is no change in the

"inherent features" of the technology nor in the person's intentions or practices. The affordances of Twitter can shift for that person based on how other users who populate the same Twitter field are intra-acting with Twitter.

Moreover, to where does Twitter take each of one's tweets fundamentally depends on how other related people are acting on Twitter, subject to how algorithms aggregate these different actions. Therefore, on Twitter the actions of each user can increase another's exposure by relaying her tweets and their reaction to it to their own followers who are in turn scrolling their Feeds at that time and so on. As such the boundaries of tweets—and users at that—are not prior to but are determined in these intra-actions.

Therefore, a social media platform is not so much a given medium as it is nexus of mediation. All the agencies involved (human and nonhuman) are constantly contributing to a process of social mediation—i.e. a fluid, contingent, de-centered and distributed material-discursive process, that is enacted and made meaningful in a host of social media-related practices leading to dynamic, emergent, distributed, and indeterminate consequences for social processes.[1] Barad's work provides an integrative framework to investigate such complex phenomena without assuming distinct discursive and material entities or giving primacy to one over the other.

Researching Social mediation in Practice

The process of social mediation is accomplished in practice and as such practice is where our focus needs to be to describe and analyse different instances of this process. A focus on

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[1] Social mediation is thus concerned with the process through which social media practices are involved in the production and circulation of cyborgs-in-practice, as defined in essay 2

practices as analytical units gives us an entry point for studying how things work and how these performances might be constitutive of wider sociomaterial configurations and processes (Pink et al 2015). However, to more faithfully enact a performative perspective, we need to resist the familiar temptation to simply focus on the practices of the research subjects, as it were, and to represent them as given—existing out there. That is, we should not fall back to the research practices of a representational paradigm and forget our own involvement in the (re)enactment of what we study.

In a representational paradigm the aim is to capture and represent an independently existing phenomenon and therefore two main measures of the quality of a study in this paradigm are the accuracy of the account in representing that phenomenon and its generalizability to explain similar phenomena. A performative perspective, however, invites us to take into account the consequences of observation and (reporting) research practices on the enactment of what is being observed. In the same way that a formula about how certain contracts are valued in financial market soon became *the* way to value those contracts and as such performed the reality it purported to represent (MacKenzie, 2003), different practices of representing social mediation can—and often do—end up performing what they purport to represent. For example, researching, analyzing, and reporting social media(tion) with a sole focus on numbers contributes to the production of a reality in which social media numbers matter enormously. Similarly, a sole focus on technology and its features as given can either absolve technology as neutral or credit/blame it solely as the champion/culprit in a context.

Therefore, while in a performative paradigm we are still bound to produce a representation, what is more important than the representation itself, is the process through which the representation is produced, its specific activities and practices of observations, analysis,

theorization, and reporting, the myriad factors and concerns that come to play a role those practices, and the consequences of such production of a representation on the enactment of the phenomenon under the study itself. As such, the measures of the quality of a study in a performative paradigm need also to include an evaluation of the usefulness of the analytical tools and practices that the study provides in orienting our engagement with that phenomenon and their reusability in orienting our engagement with similar phenomena.

The goal of the framework of social mediation is not simply to offer yet another theory of social media. Instead, its real value comes from the extent to which it can re-orient and re-anchors both our daily and scholarly engagement with social media phenomena. As such, to increase the performativity of our accounts, we need to go beyond merely discussing the theoretical differences and instead identify and elaborate the consequences of this framework for our own daily and research practices. If practices are prior and everything is ultimately enacted in practice, a performative account will matter only to the extent that it can change our practices.

As mentioned above a performative account of social media should go beyond merely informing us about social media. It also needs to orient our practical engagement with it. It is based on this idea that in what follows some recommendations are offered to orient our research practices vis-à-vis social media(tion). These recommendations are produced through an ex post reflection on how the performative perspective has oriented my research practices. As such, while they do not amount to an exhaustive guide on how to perform a performative study of social mediation, they do constitute a solid springboard for launching such a study. These recommendations are divided into two groups based on the different mode assumed

by the researcher in the research process: those that concern observation and recording practices and those that concern theorization and generalization practices.

Recommendations about Observing and Recording Practices

The first group of recommendations concerns how to conduct observations and record actions and events while researching an instance of social mediation. These ideas were produced through an ex post reflection on my dissertation research practices. The goal in this exercise was to go beyond the classical qualitative methodological rules (concerning coding, writing memos, synthesizing narratives, etc. that I consciously followed), and instead to try to make explicit the implicit determinations that I had made in practice as to the meaning and implications of some of the fundamental commitments of the performative perspective for empirical research on social media(tion). Four such determinations are elaborated below in the form of recommendations for observing and recording social mediation phenomena.

Follow the flow of action (even if it leaves social media)

This recommendation is akin to ANT's famous "follow the actors" dictum (Callon & Law, 1995; Latour, 2005), with a subtle but powerful difference in how it anchors our research practices. By taking actions as preceding actors, this recommendation does not put undue emphasis on actors as sources of agency and thus does not get into ANT's thorny issue of correcting human-centrism by attributing agency to non-human actors. Instead, it invites us to follow the flow of action in its own right, and to refrain from the tendency to cut up this flow and attribute chunks of it as belonging to or emanating from this or that pre-conceived human or non-human actor. No single (f)actor owns the flow of action, but they contribute to it in varying degrees. (Of course, not all actors have equal import to a flow of action. Some

might accomplish relational power positions that allow them to exert more control over specific flows of action, and/or to restrict others' ability to do so (Couldry, 2012).

Focusing on social mediation instead of social media de-emphasizes the latter as a given and bounded entity and encourages us to follow different flows of actions even if they take us away from what is ostensibly known as social media. Upholding pre-defined boundaries of what constitutes a social media technology obfuscates the ways in which that technology itself is contingently enacted in practice and works only in a web of relations with other entities (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). However, the process of social mediation is rarely carried out with or through one single technology. As they go about participating in social mediation, people become entangled with diverse technologies forming relational and performative wholes (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). This requires keeping the notion of social media-related practice broad, open, malleable, and de-centered. Specifically, it requires not limiting the study of social mediation to a linguistic analysis of social media content or to an analysis of patterns of technology feature use (Vaast et al., 2017). Social mediation is not limited to what is happening on social media, but also includes all activities oriented towards social media. While we might not be able to follow the flow of action in every possible direction, by remaining open to the possibility that the flow of action might move away from what we take as social media (or that it might have started somewhere else) we might uncover and account for otherwise unaccounted-for factors that make important differences in the social media-related phenomenon that we are studying.

Attend to trajectories of becoming

A performative perspective rejects the givenness of entities in favor of entities as always relationally becoming (Barad, 2007; Barrett, Oborn, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2011; Beane &

Orlikowski, 2015). It invites us to refrain from attributing *given* properties, boundaries, meaning, behaviors, and effects, to entities and instead investigate how such characteristics are temporally enacted, more or less stabilized, and made meaningful in practice amid different trajectories of becoming (Ingold, 2016; Introna, 2013). As a mental image, we should always strive to think in terms of lines (or vectors) instead of points in our spacetime systems.

A focus on the process of social mediation and how it is practiced emphasizes temporality and becoming in social media phenomena. It underscores that social media is not enacted the same way everywhere and at all times, that not all features always matter the same way everywhere (Riemer & Johnston, 2017), that not all social media users are the same atomic individual (Lamb & Kling, 2003), that not all social media collectives matter the same way, or have the same import for participants, etc. Everything and anything involved in a social media phenomenon is in a trajectory of becoming—one that is variously entangled with other trajectories of becoming—and we need to pay attention to these trajectories. Empirically, this means to resist the analytical temptation to strip actors/entities from their temporal and relational becoming, to render them as given, fixed, and self-contained, and only then to put them into arm-length interactions with each other. Instead, we need to focus on how different participants' trajectories of becoming are enacted in social mediation practices, how different trajectories intersect with each other with different consequences, and how various concerns come to play a role in these entangled becomings.

Focus on enacted properties not inherent ones

As mentioned before, a performative perspective rejects inherent properties in favor of enacted ones. The operative word here is inherent. The idea is not that things do not have properties rather it is that those properties are not inherent but enacted/performed and always

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in becoming and thus open-ended. At first, the difference might seem pedantic, but it is indeed very consequential in delimiting our knowledge of and engagement with phenomena. It mainly concerns the fact that inherent properties rarely motivate a need for explanation; if something is an essential property of being human or being a digital technology then there is no point anymore in asking how and why questions about that property. It is what it is. As such, the invocation of inherent properties, by definition, runs the risk of stymying the investigation as it hides the concerns and factors that go into performing that property.

A focus on how the process of social mediation is performed in practice requires us to refrain from explaining phenomena, events, and outcomes as inevitable results of this-or-that inherent properties of the involved entities. For example, while we can meaningfully state that humans have always wanted to share information and so now they retweet; or that people have always wanted to avoid others so now they block them; such statements nonetheless obfuscate the consequential nature of these new practices and absolve them from scrutiny. Instead, the framework of social mediation invites us to explain how and why a certain outcome is accomplished in a certain context by referring to the entities' trajectories of becoming and their embeddedness in specific webs of relations. This disposition allows us in our explanations to account for a host of factors as diverse as those invoked in practice to contribute to the flow of action. As such, when studying social mediation, we should investigate, analyze, and report our findings not around pre-defined social media technologies, their features or affordances—since whether they matter in the phenomenon is not guaranteed—but around social mediation practices. Consequently, we should refrain from blanket explanations such as "social media played x or y role because of its z or w feature

or affordance", and instead trace the multiple, emergent and contested implications of social mediation practices in specific contexts.

Keep the division of labor endogenous

The performative perspective argues for the inseparability of social and material (f)actors. In the IS research stream on sociomateriality this has come to mean that technology is not separable from social structures and/or processes that we investigate (Beane & Orlikowski, 2015; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). However, scholars interested in sociomateriality have often struggled what to make of the notion of inseparability in empirical research. Often it seems when trying to fight the dichotomy we end up inadvertently upholding it, when for example we make the objection that "isn't a practice like hashtagging human-centric since it's the human who initiates the work?".

To deal with this issue the framework of social mediation uses an arguably underappreciated part of Barad's work, namely the difference between the notions of inherent inseparability and agential separability-in-practice. Again, the operative word here is inherent; there's no *inherent*, universal, and eternal distinction between the material and the social, the nonhuman and the human, the technology and the user. However, in practice there's always performed, local, and temporal resolution of boundaries, properties, and more importantly of roles between them. This means that we need not get into the business of determining what is human and what is non-human, nor into looking for literal cyborgs to do the work. Instead, when doing empirical work, we need to approach each practice with an open mind and look for how different factors contribute in contextual and varying degrees to each other's performances but also the performance of the broader sociomaterial process we are interested in. That is the division of (constitutive) labor among the factors is endogenous to the

phenomenon and unknown in advance. It is only after investigating each practice that we can locally observe it to be in a certain way, while also recognizing that in another practice the factors might intra-act differently. Finally, we need to be open to the idea that after such intra-actions the definition of some factors might change. Therefore, while the framework of social mediation does not typecast different (f)actors into different roles—e.g., technology as always being the enabling or constraining context and user as the intentional source of action, as the affordance perspective holds—neither this framework shies away from a practice just because the human happens to be the initiator of work in it. It is not human centrism if in one practice the role of humans is more pronounced than the role of non-humans.

Recommendations about Theorizing and Generalizing Practices

The other group of recommendations concerns how to theorize and produce reusable analytical tools when studying a social mediation phenomenon that are aligned with the commitments of the performative perspective. These recommendations are produced through an ex-post reflective exercise where I aimed to identify and elaborate some of the main ways in which my fascination with the contemporary debate between programming paradigms (namely, OOP and FP) has inspired and oriented how I engaged in theorizing my dissertation empirical research. Specifically, during my dissertation research—and partially due to programming an application that enabled my qualitative data collection and analysis of social media content—I was intrigued by the resemblance of the difference between OOP/FP paradigms and essentialist and performative ontologies. I became interested in how OOP encourages *entitative thought and modeling processes* where developers organize and reason about their code around well-defined rules of what things are (or around names), while FP

encourages *action-oriented thought and modeling processes* where developers organize and reason about their code around actions/transformations (or around verbs).

As mentioned before, the point is not to allud to a perfect correspondence with social ontologies or to draw theoretical insights from programming paradigms. In fact, there are major limitations to this analogy. For example, one major limitation of this analogy is that in FP a function has a well-defined transformation signature while social actions/practices are always themselves in constant flux. Nonetheless, it has been my learned experience that looking at how other practitioners of action-based ontologies deal with some concerns that are similar to ours can be a source of inspiration for performative and action-based accounts of social phenomena.

Before elaborating these recommendations, a quick reminder of the main paradigmatic difference between the two programming paradigms is in order. While both aiming at modeling real world phenomena, OOP and FP differ with respect to

a) their ontological unit (objects vs functions/transformations),

b) their treatment of entities and actions (actions belonging to pre-defined entities vs. entities produced as outcomes of actions),

c) their mechanism of abstraction (organizing entities in hierarchies based on what they are vs. composing complex transformation from simpler ones), and

d) their treatment of change (mutation of objects internal states vs. continual transformation of inputs into outputs).

Below I shall elaborate three such influences in the form of recommendations for theorizing and generalizing social mediation phenomena.

Characterize complex processes by composing simpler ones

Composition in FP is about how simple functions (transformations) can be put together to create more complex ones. Instead of creating various inter-related molds to cast objects, an FP developer creates what can be thought of as single-purposed light filters that can be put together in different ways to variously transform the passing light and create different effects. The core ideas of composition are that each transformation should be composable with other transformations, that the composed transformation is just like any other transformation, and that the transformations need to be reusable in other contexts. As such, composition allows to encode many more complex transformations by composing a smaller number of simpler and reusable transformations in various ways.

Put this way, composition seemed to me like an apt addition to the analytical toolkit of action-based studies as an operationalization of relational constitution. This is since it directly denotes inter-relationship among actions instead of the conventional notion of relationship that is among entities. As such, this notion of composition makes for more conceptual integrity in our accounts. Thinking in terms of composition allows us to move beyond simply producing laundry lists of actions/practices in our studies. It also allows us to focus on how small and common actions/practices can compose together and how their different compositions can lead to different more complex actions/practices with different consequences.

Composition might be even more potent metaphor than interactions or intra-actions as it has an abstraction mechanism built into it. As mentioned above, the composed action/practice is simply another practice that can be treated like its constitutive parts. As such, composition allows us to reconstruct increasingly complex practices/processes by keep adding actions to a

composed practice/process without needing to always re-describe all the previous steps involved—i.e. without creating immense flat networks but also without reifying processes into structures. Moreover, composition might even make for reusability of pieces of our accounts. It allows to characterize complex and specific practices as compositions of simpler more common place practices, with the latter retaining a level of generality as to be reusable in accounts of similar phenomena.

Progressively replace entities with underlying processes

To support the claim that composition is a sufficient mechanism to characterize (m)any complex phenomena, FP draws heavily from Category Theory (CT), a branch of mathematics that privileges context over content (Marquis, 2015; Milewski, 2017). For CT, a category is a collection of objects and transformations between them that are composable. Transformations are primary in CT as their specific configuration is the only information needed to define a category. Objects are secondary and are defined solely in terms of the transformations they're involved with and not in terms of any intrinsic properties. In other words, objects always exist in and depend upon an ambient context and not by virtue of their content. This notion of context, however, is far from a passive, static, backdrop to, or a container of, entities and actions. Instead, CT provides an active, dynamic, foregrounded conception of context as the configuration of related (i.e. composable) transformations. If we want to single out a particular object in a category, we can only do so by describing the patterns of transformations it is involved with, since in CT object are always what they can become along different transformational paths and not what they are. This is similar to our own concern that if we want to focus on an entity, we need to focus on how it is enacted in practice in relation to other entities. The issue for both us and the FP developers is how to describe and (re)construct

empirical phenomena solely in terms of transformations, when our thought and language are more attuned with entities. As such, again looking at how an FP developer deals with this issue might provide some inspiration for our own similar concerns.

Subscribing to CT, FP developers acknowledge that, at least in the beginning, it is difficult to think about transformations without their endpoints (what is being transformed to what). As such, when dealing with a problem, FP developers initially delve into entities (content) to add sense to the problem and to identify different transformational paths between entities. Once sufficient transformations are isolated, entities (especially the intermediate ones) are folded/abstracted out in favor of reformulating the problem solely in terms of transformations. The developer then enters a cycle of identifying patterns among different transformations and then composing smaller ones along the patterns to create bigger ones until the problem is sufficiently re-constructed.

This practice of progressively abstracting entities out in favor of foregrounding transformations can be translated to our own concern of how to deal with entities in action-based studies. This way, we can both keep entities around to make description possible and to help identify practices, but also remove them from the analysis and theorization, which will solely be in terms of patterns among practices/processes. Our accounts will thus neither be too foreign to our thought processes by not talking about any*thing*, nor will our analyses make essentialist claims by featuring reified and self-contained entities that have inherent attributes and agency, play roles, or determine outcomes.

Identify different orders of change

Another concern in action-based studies is how to go beyond simply stating that change is not an occasional event but an always present reality in any state of affairs, and to start saying more about it for example by characterizing different kinds of change (and the relationships between them). FP developers deal with a similar concern. Having only functions at their disposal to model phenomena they also want to be able to characterize different kinds of transformations and relationships among them.

For this, FP developers again draw from CT to characterize relationships among transformations. As mentioned before, in CT a category is defined as a specific configuration of transformations (relationships between objects). Going further in abstraction, CT also provides language and toolkit to deal with transformations between categories, called functors, and even further, transformations between functors, called natural transformations. Considering category as context (a set of transformations), a functor concerns a transformation from one context to another, (or a re-contextualization), and a natural transformation concerns a transformation from one functor to another. This means to gain reusability FP developers always identify and isolate higher-order functions—functions that work not on objects but on other functions. These higher-order transformations allow FP developers to easily re-contextualize functions that work in one context to work in another context without needing to worry about the implementation details of each function.
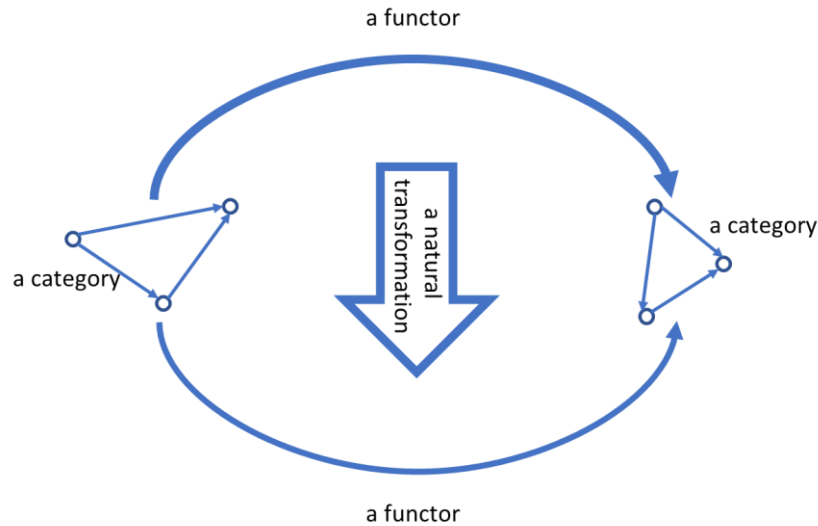
Figure 6: Different orders of change in Category Theory

The idea of higher-order transformations—transformation that change processes not entities—can serve, as it did for me, as a source of inspiration for our performative accounts and analyses of social phenomena. It inspires us to go beyond only identifying first-order actions—i.e. those characterized in terms of how they transform and constitute entities—and to identify higher-order actions/processes—i.e. those that when unfolded into a context, transform that context's underlying configuration of processes. We can thus identify three types of actions/processes: 1) context makers, the configuration of which constitutes a state of affairs with specific trajectories of becoming, 2) context changers or re-contextualizers that transforms this state of affairs into another one with different trajectories of becoming, and finally 3) re-contextualizer changers which transform one context changer into another one.

Empirical Illustration

In this section, I use my study of the emergence of the Tea Party Movement (essays 1 and 2 of this dissertation) with and through Twitter as an example to illustrate these recommendations

and how they oriented my research practices and led to uncovering of different concerns and factors.

Follow the flow of action

To observe how the process of social mediation is performed in practice, this recommendation invites us to follow different flows of actions even if they take us away from what we might ostensibly take as social media. It allows us to appreciate how social media itself is contingently enacted in practice and works only in a web of relations with other entities.

For example, in my study of #TCOT I refrained from limiting my focus only to the use of different Twitter features, or only to the use of language in tweets, etc. Instead, I aimed to account for any activity or practice that meaningfully had a bearing on TCOT becoming what it was becoming. Therefore, as I would get a sense of what was going on each day by going through tweets, I would follow what happened next, even if it left Twitter—but this of course within the limitations of a historical research, though luckily the people involved were more than happy to tweet about their actions and thus leave traces for me to follow. As such, I followed the flow of action from an inferiority complex about technology developed over a few election cycles, to one man's fascination with Twitter, to his ranking algorithms, with their unintended consequences of creating a real-time who's who of conservatives on Twitter; to other websites and blogs, where TCOT was being defined and (re)presented; to radio and podcasts, where TCOT was plugged and discussed; to third-party add-ons, which created different regimes of attention and engagement among TCOTers; to conference calls, where decision about TCOT and later about the Tea Party were made; to online TV shows, where diverse organizing efforts were showcased; and finally on the ground where the first Tea Party rallies were held. By not trying to arrest the flow of action within the confines of what I

might have taken as Twitter proper, and by not solely focusing on the interface between users and technology, and by instead going on those excursions, as it were, I came to appreciate how TCOT only worked through being part of this web of relations. 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.

Attend to trajectories of becoming

This recommendation invites us to always see entities in their becoming; to focus on how different trajectories of becoming are enacted in social mediation practices, how those trajectories intersect with different consequences, and how various entangled social and technical factors come to play a role in these entangled becomings. That is, it invites us to attend to the character arc of entities.

For example, in my genealogy of "conservatweeps" (short for conservative Twitter people), I refrained from treating the latter as given social media users or activists. Instead, I set out to investigate their emergence and evolution as sociomaterial accomplishments in a process of spacetimemattering. I set out to capture how through TCOTing practices these conservatives came to inhabit different possibilities of mattering (new modes and means of experience, action, and becoming) that extended beyond their bodies immediate space-time. As such and in focusing on conservatweeps' trajectories of becoming, I investigated their collective and individual backstories, where their motivations, dispositions, and skills had been formed; their current situations, where different possibilities of mattering across space and time were opened up to them thanks to their differential participations in TOCTing practices; and their different courses of action, whereby they exercised the agencies bestowed on them through

these practices to move their stories forward. As such, I was better able to address the why and the how questions about social media use among conservatives. I was able to show how different possibilities of meaningful action and actorhood were produced in social media(tion) practices, and how through such practices conservatweep accomplished different levels of presence, reach, and influence beyond their local space-times, and how some emerged as (early) leaders of the TPM thanks to their technological prowess.

Focus on enacted properties not inherent ones

This recommendation invites us to explain social mediation phenomena by accounting for any factor that comes to make a difference in practice, and not simply by invoking this-or-that inherent properties of social media technology or users.

In my study of conservatives and Twitter, I started with the aim to investigate the implications of social media on the emergence of the Tea Party Movement. However, based on the sensitivities of the performative perspective, I refrained from merely focusing on different features of Twitter or different values and interests of the conservative users. This does not mean that I did not pay attention to these issues, rather that I did not take them to be inherent but enacted in practice. Such a focus on practice as the entry point and unit of analysis freed me for example from having to first decide what constitutes Twitter and create a laundry list of its features, and instead allowed me to approach Twitter, or rather twittering, the way the participants themselves experienced it, from within the phenomenon, and as different enacted features came to make a difference in the phenomenon. As such, features like the 2000 follow limit or the difference between @Reply and @Mention—which rarely make it into the feature-based studies of social media—came to make consequential differences in practice in the phenomenon I was studying, while a famous feature like Retweet did not, since retweeting

was not very prevalent among TCOTers. To be sure, these consequences were accomplished as diverse social mediation practices materialized in situ and thus cannot be attributed to any inherent properties of social media.

Keep the division of labor endogenous

This recommendation invites us to approach practices with an open mind and look for how different factors contribute in contextual and varying degrees to the carrying out of each practice. That is, it invites us to suspend judgment about the division of labor among the factors before studying the phenomenon. As such, instead of knowing once and for all the role of social media in a social process, we can have a more nuanced and dynamic appreciation of how in different practice it comes to play different roles.

In my study of TCOT and of conservatweeps, I did not typecast Twitter as a channel, a context, or a tool for communication. Nor did I treat the users as the source of agency and initiators of all actions. Instead, taking practice as primary, I focused on what was happening in practice and found the division of labor among technology and users to be so messy and practice-dependent as to render problematic any clear-cut declarations about the role or roles of Twitter and users. However, as I had taken practices themselves as units of analysis I could keep this indeterminacy in the account instead of forcing a resolution that transcends practice. This allowed me to identify multiple, emergent and even contested roles played by social media, as enacted in different practices, for the phenomena I was studying. For example, in studying the enactment of TCOT's boundaries I found that specific twittering practices were implicated in performing different boundary dynamics both in the same and in different phases of TCOT's collective identity—showing that it is not that social media led to unification

or to fragmentation, while at the same time these dynamics would not have happened without those specific social media practices.

Characterize complex processes as the composition of simpler ones

To theorize how a specific process of social mediation is performed in practice, this recommendation proposes the notion of composition as a way to directly deal with relations among actions or practices instead of those among entities. It invites us to think about how different combinations of simple practices can be used to characterize the enactment of different more complex processes. Its abstraction mechanism also allows to keep composing composed processes to characterize even more complex ones.

Reflecting on my study of TCOT, I could trace the influence of these ideas in my data analysis and theorization. For example, I delineated practices at the most basic level where they could be meaningfully differentiated from each other—i.e., I did not unnecessarily abstract out details in an attempt to make practices more generalizable. However, I moved on to characterize mid-range processes, or what I called boundary dynamics in that study, by relating together groups of those small practices—i.e., I argued how this or that set of practice collectively enacted one of the four boundary dynamics. Next, I was able to differentiate more complex boundary processes by composing the four basic boundary dynamics in different ways; though for simplicity I only considered certain combinations that were more meaningful and for each I had supporting data. Finally, this last level of composed processes served to characterize different phases of TCOT's process of collective identity.

This approach to theorizing from practices allowed for various cross-overs between lower-level branches to characterize complex higher-order concepts. It also allowed me to easily

move up and down the abstraction tree and focus my attention on different levels of detail as needed. For example, when trying to characterize different phases of the overall process of collective identity, I could forget about the details of each underlying practice and only focus on their collective effect as part of a specific nexus of practice. At the same time, whenever needed I could characterize a different higher-level dynamic by adding or removing practices to or from an already composed dynamic, without having to re-describe everything.

Progressively abstract entities out in favor of processes

This recommendation concerns the idea of characterizing context or phenomenon as the effects of ongoing processes. Specifically, during theorization it invites us to progressively abstract entities out in favor of foregrounding the underlying transformations and processes. This way, we can invoke entities to describe practices, but also remove them from the analytical account, which will solely be in terms of patterns among practices/processes, in an attempt not to reify them as self-contained with inherent attributes.

In my study of TCOT and conservatweeps, whenever a seeming entity was the direct subject of the study, e.g., TCOT as a collective entity or conservatweeps as cyborg actors, I completely treated them as enactments in a collection of practices and aimed to capture and explain those enactments. However, in each study I treated the more underlying entities, which were not the subject of the study in the following way. I used these entities to identify and describe different practices, but also progressively removed them from the analysis during theorization, where I was solely focused on patterns among practices and higher-order dynamics, composed from those practice as mentioned before. As such, human actors, technical features, as well as a host of other factors, exist in the account but only in the description of practices, and do not rise as reified and self-contained entities with inherent

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attributes to the transcendental level of theory. This maneuver parallels the performative perspective's claim that entities are only enacted in practice, and that practices are more primary than entities.

Identify different orders of change/transformation

Finally, this recommendation invites us to go beyond only identifying first-order dynamics—i.e. those characterized in terms of how they transform and constitute entities—and to identify higher-order dynamics/processes—i.e. those that when unfolded into a context, transform that context's underlying configuration of processes; the context changers, or re-contextualizers.

In my study of TCOT once I characterized different phases of the TCOT's process of collective identity, as transitions between different composed boundary dynamics, as explained above, I needed to identify the conditions under which these transitions had taken place. Why did TCOT move from assimilating dynamics to pluralizing and so on? What were the factors that lead to these transitions? To answer such questions, I went back to my data and identified internal and external contestations as two inter-related higher-order processes that once unfolded in a phase of TCOT's process of collective identity, transformed the underlying boundary dynamics and thus pushed the process in a different direction. For example, I showed how internal contestation and fragmentation dynamics positively reinforce each other as do external contestation and exclusion. By treating contestation as a higher-order process that interacts in different ways with different composed boundary dynamics, I was able to translate its effects down to the level of practices and show sow the dynamics that were enacted in a specific set of practices could in time lead to change to that very set of practices.

Conclusion

This essay argues for shifting from treating social media as reified propertied technological entities to treating them as bundles of social mediation practices. Unlike an affordance perspective (Faraj & Azad, 2012; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Vaast et al., 2017), this approach goes beyond the interface of people and technology and allows us to account for heterogeneous agencies flowing in different directions (Introna, 2013, 2018) and coming to play differential roles in a fluid, contingent, de-centered and distributed process of social mediation. It also allows to embed social media practices in broader historical, social, and cultural processes while also accounting for the role of technological factors.

The goal of the framework of social mediation is not simply to offer yet another theory of social media. In a performative paradigm, what is more important than such a theory/representation itself, is the process through which that representation is produced as well as the extent to which it can re-orient and re-anchor our daily and scholarly engagement with social media phenomena. If practices are prior and everything is ultimately enacted in practice, a performative account will matter only to the extent that it can change our practices.

As such, in this essay I engaged in a reflective exercise to make explicit two sets of implicit influences in my dissertation research practices. First, I aimed to account for some of my implicit determinations as to the implications of the performative perspective for my empirical research on social media. I elaborated these determinations as four recommendations for observing and recording social mediation phenomena. Second, I aimed to identify some main ways in which my fascination with the similarity of concerns between functional programming and the performative perspective has inspired and oriented my

theorization of my dissertation's empirical work. Here again, I elaborated three recommendations for theorizing and producing reusable analytical tools when studying a social mediation phenomenon. While these recommendations do not amount to an exhaustive guide on how to perform a performative study of social mediation, it is my contention that they do constitute a solid springboard for launching such a study.

Notes

vii Substantialism is the philosophical doctrine that holds that reality is made of distinct entities with inherent properties. Representationalism is the philosophical doctrine that holds representations (words, knowledge) and those which are supposedly represented (things) as two distinct and independent types of entities. At its basis, representationalism holds that we have a direct access to (immaterial) representations that we lack towards (material) things.

viii Faced with new empirical findings about the nature of atom and struggling to find a theoretical framework to make sense of them, Bohr eventually dropped atom as the underlying entity and with it he dropped the notion that there is an underlying entity. He came to reject the notion that things have "inherently determinate boundaries and properties" but also that concepts and words have "inherently determinate meanings" (Barad 2003: 813). He problematized the inherent distinction between the knower and the known and argued that neither measurement, nor language, are transparent mediators of a preexisting reality.

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