ECOLOGIES OF SUBVERSION AND INSPIRATION ON TWITTER: THE HIJACKING OF #MYNYPD

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Abstract

Recent new media image scandals on Twitter such as the #myNYPD hashtag debacle in 2014 or the #McDStories hashtag controversy in 2012 have pointed towards emancipatory, anti-corporate communication practices of engaged citizens and customers surrounding the acquisition of social capital online. In view of these events, I argue that communication practices of resistance on new media reinforce and strengthen the complementary and reciprocal relationship between structure and agency. By analyzing cases of hashtag hijacking, we can see new media's transgressive potential for individuals and groups to participate in ad hoc communities of protest and to appropriate, manipulate, and redirect particular hashtag conversations through ecologies of subversion and inspiration. Internet researchers can, thus, not only demarcate various rhetorical roles exercised by individual participants but also trace the impact of hashtags as idiosyncratic, discourse-enabling markers.

Introduction

One of the long-standing debates in the social sciences surrounds the relationship between structure and agency. Some branches such as structuralism, functionalism, or Marxism consider 'structures' the objective, preeminent social configurations that condition and constrain the ways people act. Other branches such as phenomenology or symbolic interactionism assert that 'agents' are, in fact, active drivers and shapers whose agency creates and sustains structures for human conduct. A third, and more recent perspective, to which this paper contributes, has advanced the complementary and reciprocal nature of structure and agency. Proponents of the latter view such as Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu have emphasized that structures inform human actions and vice versa. In particular, Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of the 'habitus' and 'communities of practice' conceptualize a bridge between structure and agency so that "social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution" (Giddens 121). Conceived in such a way, individual and collective expressions "are generated by structural features" and "agents'

dispositions to act are themselves *formed* out of preexisting social contexts" (Couldry 358).

When considering this more recent perspective, one cannot help but think of the micro-blogging platform Twitter and how the structural constraints imposed by the 140 character tweeting limit have prompted user-driven processes, which have given rise to a number of now common communication conventions. Prime examples include the hashtag or the @reply that were incorporated into Twitter's own architecture only after they had been proposed by users as a means to curate and organize larger threads of communication and interaction (Bruns 2012). In other words, the original Twitter architecture provided a basic set of features for interaction, but it was moldable enough for users to invent new modes of practice that allowed conversations to move beyond general use paradigms, thereby reinforcing the complementary nature of structure and agency (Lievrouw 2011).

In this paper, I will be looking at another new trend on Twitter that has gained traction especially in the last years: the counter-hegemonic practice of hijacking or occupying hashtags in the context of anti-corporate protest. As has been shown, one way of studying the interconnections that constitute communication ecologies on Twitter successfully is through patterns of hashtag use (Segerberg and Bennett 2011, Poell and Darmoni 2012, Earl et al. 2013, Croeser and Highfield 2014). I treat these new trends as a new form of Twitter activism, certainly nurtured in the wake of events such as the Occupy movement, which was partially based on the premise that recognition and visibility is achievable by way of occupying distinct semiotic markers. While the Occupy protestors set up tents in the heart of Wall Street, users on Twitter have engaged in virtual occupation practices by establishing a strong presence within a given hashtag conversation through acts of tweeting, retweeting, and cross-linking, ultimately with the aim of turning the hashtag against the original creator. These new forms of activist engagement, to quote Rita Raley's work on tactical media, "are not oriented toward the grand, sweeping revolutionary event; rather, they engage in a micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education" (1). Usually oscillating between expressions of rational criticism, parody, and flat-out mocking, famous examples that have attracted wide-spread attention in traditional news reporting, have included the #McDstories hashtag campaign debacle of 2012, the #Muslimrage controversy surrounding *Newsweek* in 2012, the failed #AskJPM Q&A session in 2013, and the #AskSeaworld hashtag that backfired in early 2015. These Twitter events, which now commonly serve as cautionary tales of social media marketing circles, all involved the creation of a hashtag by a corporate entity, and in each case, an engaged Twitter user base quickly seized the opportunity to appropriate the hashtag and to use it as a vehicle for expressions of critique and ridicule.

For this study, I have chosen the failed #myNYPD Twitter reputation campaign of the New York Police department in 2014. The NYPD case is interesting for two reasons. On the one hand the campaign occurred in the midst of national debates surrounding the issue of police brutality in the United States, so that anti-police sentiments were quite wide-spread. On the other hand, this particular campaign provided an added rhetorical dimension pertaining to the photographic material that Twitter users were asked to post to the hashtag. I organize my analysis along two dimensions: on the micro-level within

the hashtag itself, which I classify as *ecologies of subversion*, and on the meso-level of discourse across hashtags, which I subsume under *ecologies of inspiration*. Ecologies of subversion consist of those types of counter-hegemonic practice that stay thematically within the confines of the original hashtag. They can be visualized by way of identifying the most visible contributions to the hashtag. Ecologies of inspiration, on the other hand, refer to those kinds of activities by which the original hashtag and its contribution(s) (be they supportive or critical) inspire users either to align the original hashtag to other existing semantic hashtags on Twitter or to invent new hashtags for further interaction (both supportive and critical). We can assess those dynamics by way of isolating the original hashtag conversation and identifying not only the various types of hashtags that circulated the most but also how the top hashtags developed over the study period. This paper presents applicable methods.

Although studies on Twitter as a socio-political medium have uncovered a multitude of use contexts, especially in the context of papers presented at the *14ᵗʰ Annual Association of Internet Researchers* conference, research on the Twitter "hive mind" in relation to these particular forms of counter-hegemonic practice remains relatively scarce (Zappavigna 789).

Data and Method

Historical Twitter data for this study were acquired through the online platform *Texifter* (http://sifter.texifter.com). The raw data, which consisted of 58577 units in toal, was uploaded to *Discovertext* (http://discovertext.com) for further cleaning and processing. The resulting six datasets, divided into three categories were exported and loaded into *IBM SPSS* and *Microsoft Excel* for further analysis and visualization purposes.

The first category for analysis includes two datasets that offer general results not only pertaining to the overall shape of the #myNYPD conversation in terms of use and sharing patterns, but also information about the most visible unique users. The first dataset illustrates the activities of particular user groups based on Tedjamulia's (2005) 90/9/1 percentile division, i.e. the top 1% of users (338 users), the most active 9% (3043 users), and the least active or visible 90% (30431 users). The other dataset classifies the top 1% of unique users mentioned on the hashtag (57 in total) according to available profile information. The second category consists of two datasets that capture ecologies of subversion on #myNYPD, illustrating thematically the top 10 unique tweets and photos that received the most attention. The third and final category consists of two datasets that focus on ecologies of inspiration. While one dataset tracks and classifies the top 1% of unique hashtags (272 in total) that users aligned with the general #myNYPD hashtag, the other dataset chronicles the competition between a set of top hashtags on #myNYPD over the course of the study period. The table below summarizes the coding scheme used for each dataset.

	Dataset	Coding Scheme Used
General	Percentile distribution (90/9/1) of tweeting activity per group	1=original tweets; 2=unedited retweets; 3=edited retweets
	Percentile distribution (90/9/1) of linking activity per group	1=link to text; 2=link to image
	Most visible unique users based on available profile information	1=official; 2=media stations; 3=produsers[1] (context-based); 4=produsers (unrelated); 5=unknown
Ecologies of Subversion	Most favorited unique tweets according to type of message	1=response to original NYPD call; 2=general criticism against police practice; 3=criticism against NYPD's use of Twitter
	Most retweeted unique photos according to type of message	1=as is; 2=image from the news; 3=humorous (unedited); 4=humorous (edited)
Ecologies of Inspiration	Most visible unique hashtags	1=created in response to #myNYPD; 2=already existing; 3=related to meta-discussion
	Dissemination of top hashtags over the study period	Hashtags tracked: #myLAPD, #S17, #Fail, #FTP, #Justice4Cecily

General Results

The analysis of the first dataset showed that each group engaged in similar tweeting activities, with retweeting being the most dominant practice (see Fig. 1). However, the graph also shows that the least active 90% group actually generated the most original tweets, whereas the most active 9% and the top 1% engaged more in information brokerage rather than as opinion leaders. This creates a rather homogenous picture of overall Twitter activity with no group necessarily dominating the other. As far as the most mentioned users on #myNYPD are concerned, the analysis revealed that while many users broke the news about the #myNYPD hashtag to official media stations including CNN and international broadcasters like RT America (Russia Today) and Al Jazeera, most tweets were directed to the Twitter accounts of specialized activist groups such as Occupy Wall Street as well as to individual produsers whose profiles either indicate a personal interest in civic and political engagement or not (see Fig. 2)

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[1] The term 'produser' was coined by Axel Bruns to conceptualize and analyze the impact of user-led forms of collaborative content creation. For more information on produsage, see http:// http://produsage.org/produsage.
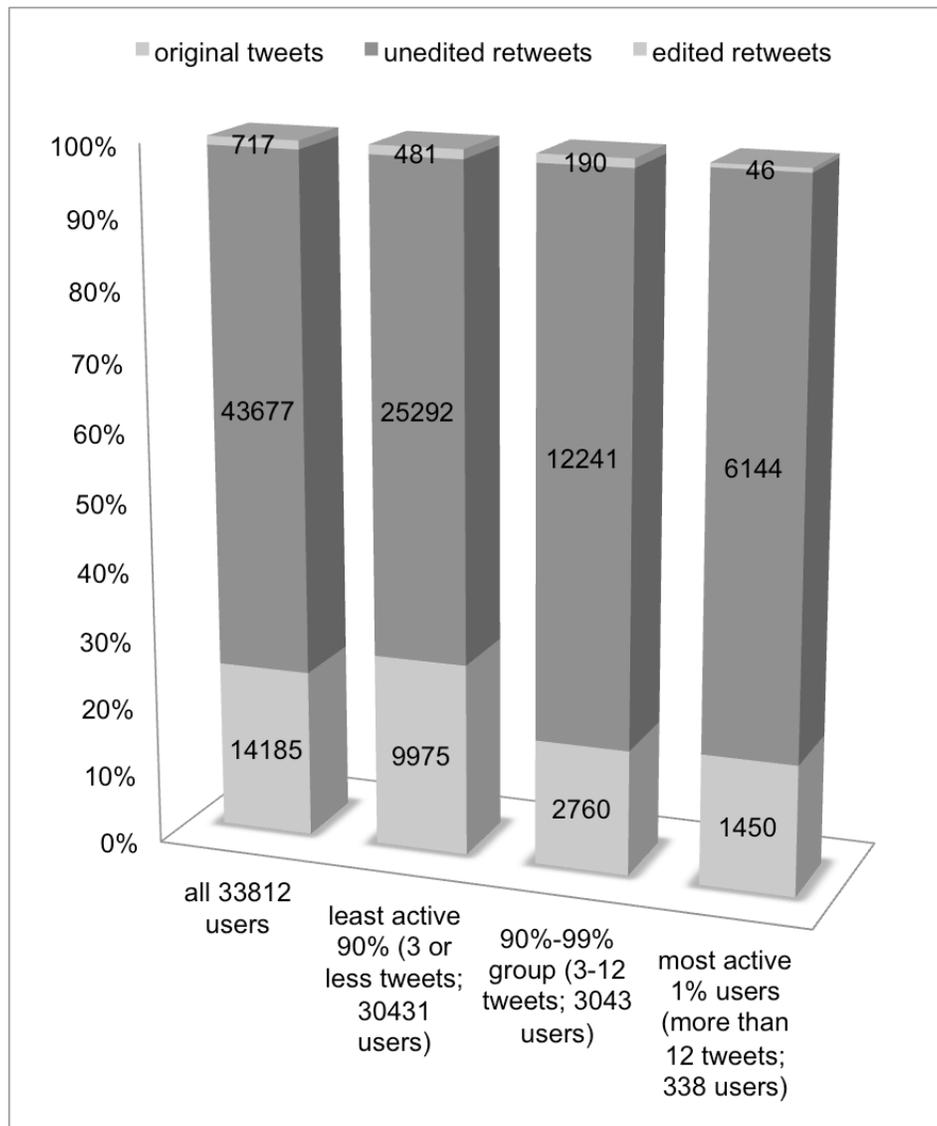
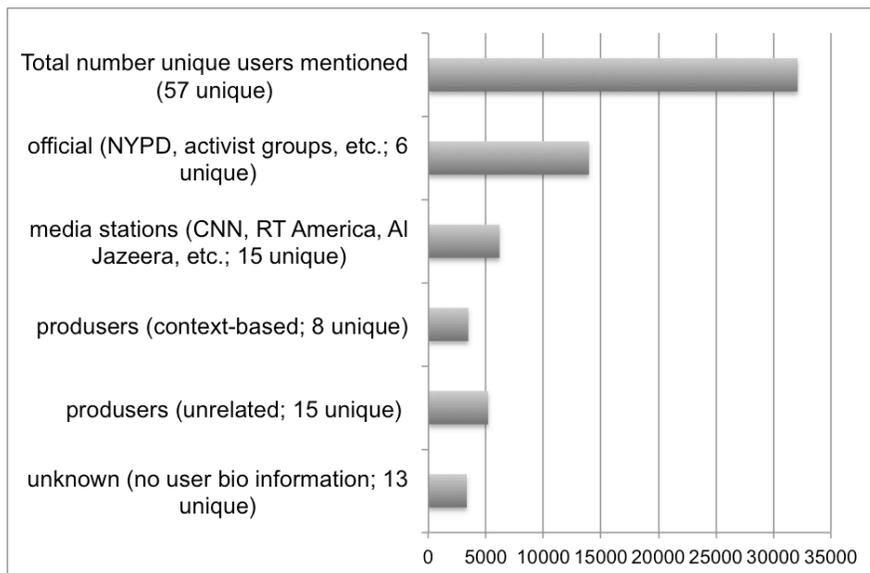Fig. 1. Activity of different user percentiles in #myNYPD, 22-23 April 2014.

Fig. 2. Distribution of unique @mentions of users (classified according to available user profile information, top 1% displayed).

Ecologies of Subversion

The first thing we notice is that supportive tweets of the NYPD campaign did not appear in the top 10% of favorited tweets. The response to the campaign was dominantly negative and critical in nature (see Fig. 3).
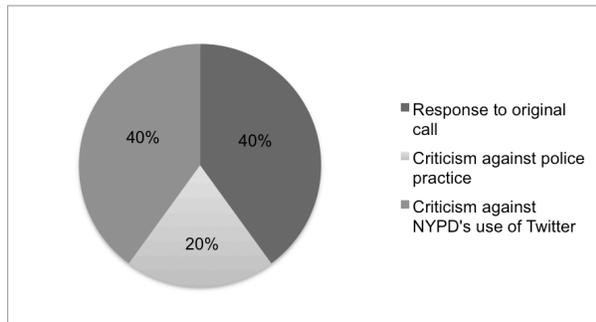

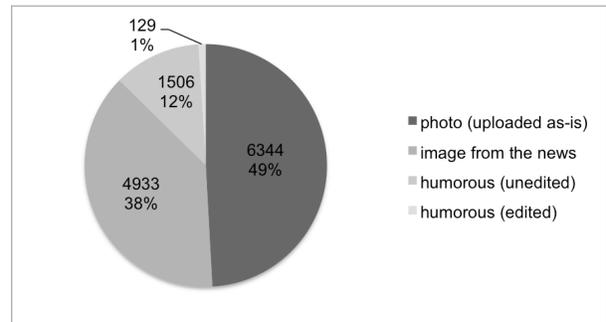Fig. 3. Top 10 most favorited tweets by topic.

Fig. 4. Most visible photos by type (12912 total mentions, top 1% displayed).

A look at the top-10 list shows a clear mix of users favoriting tweets by users who either ridiculed the call through the use of photographic material (40%) or who criticized questionable practices of police officers (40%). The remaining 20% consisted of tweets that reflected in general about NYPD's failed attempt at using Twitter to enhance its image. Figure 4 illustrates that the majority of unique photos that circulated on #myNYPD consisted of photos that showed police officers engaged in acts of violence. Only 12% of the photos poked fun at police officers.

Ecologies of Inspiration

In total, users aligned 2732 unique hashtags to the conversation over the course of the study period. By looking at the top 1% of unique hashtags (270 in total), 14,44% (39) were new hashtag inventions by Twitter users in response to the call, 22,96% (62) were hashtags that marked conversations about police brutality, and 62,59% (169) were either unrelated or they curated meta-discussions about failed attempts (#fail, #epicfail, #socialmediafail, etc.). However, when we look at the relative visibility of these three types of hashtags, we see that newly created hashtags far exceeded the other two types in terms of visibility on #myNYPD (see Fig. 5). In addition, 33 out of the 39 newly created hashtags actually targeted other police departments, not only in the United States (#myLAPD, #myCPD, etc.) but also in other countries (#DankePolizei for Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, #MiPoliciaMexicana for Mexico, or #miaPolicia for Italy, for example).
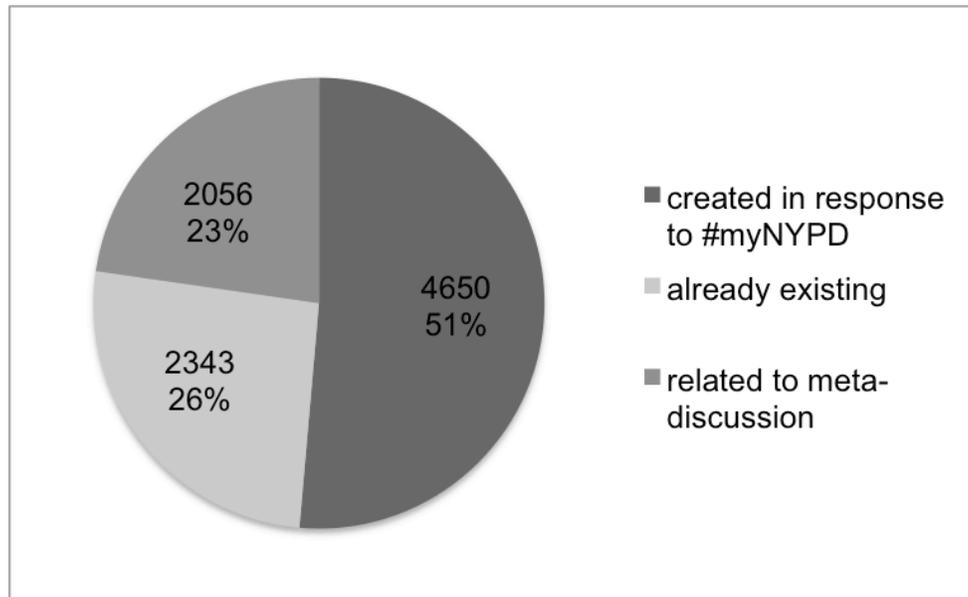
Fig. 5. Distribution of different sentiment types of hashtags posted to #myNYPD over the course of the study period.

The analysis of the second dataset in this category revealed how various top hashtags influenced not only the direction of the conversation on #myNYPD but also the emergence of other new hashtags (see Fig. 6).

Here, the hashtags #S17, which commemorates the day the Occupy movement officially began (September, 17, 2011), #FTP (denoting "fuck the police"), and the #Justice4Cecily hashtag (a solidarity hashtag created in response to the questionable jail sentence of Occupy activist, Cecily McMillan) dominated the #myNYPD hashtag in the early hours of the study period. Studies have found that emotionally-charged content is more likely to be shared by online users (e.g. Berger and Milkman 2012, Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2012), and in the case of #myNYPD we see how conversations surrounding the Occupy movement helped fueling anti-police sentiments. Occupy Wall Street sympathizers were the first to spin the wheel on #myNYPD. They shared the hashtag with their followers and aligned it with other existing Occupy hashtags. A couple of hours later, then, #myNYPD inspired the creation of #myLAPD and it became the most widely distributed hashtag in the context of the NYPD reputation campaign.
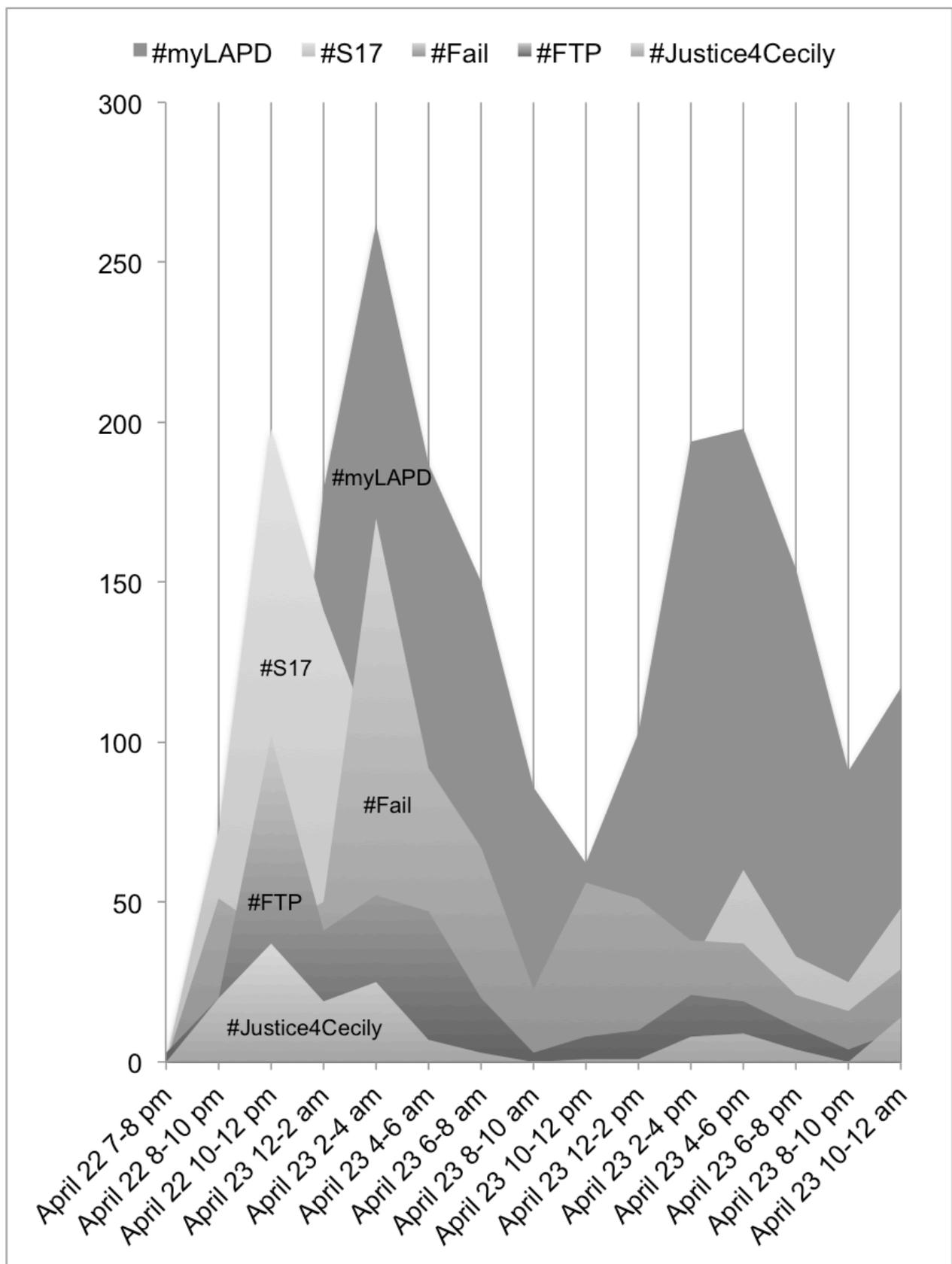
Fig. 6. Circulation patterns of a sample of the top hashtags over the course of the study period.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the current trend of hashtag hijacking on Twitter is more than a past-time mocking activity of corporate communication. Instead, the counter-hegemonic appropriation of corporate hashtags functions as a form of Twitter activism that employs micro- and meso-level communication operations to contest dominant media messages. By examining how ecologies of subversion and inspiration define a framework of contestation, this paper offers scholars a way of studying other cases of hashtag appropriation by Twitter users.

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