An Under-the-Hood Look at Social Media-Fueled Protest: Defining Interactions Between News Media Organizations, Activists, and Citizens on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between media elites, activists, and ordinary citizens during the Quebec Maple Spring student strike, also known as Maple Spring. The student-led protest movement began in a fairly conventional manner with students from two large universities voting in favor of a strike against tuition hikes in the province of Quebec, Canada on February 13, 2012. Over the following weeks, this mobilization initiative morphed into a grassroots-intensive protest movement. This article drills down on uses of Twitter by Maple Spring activists and ordinary citizens for information dispersion, advocacy, and mobilization. Specifically, it examines how and to what degree the narrative associated to the student strike was influenced by content produced by news media organizations and individual reporters. In order to do so, a qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis of a sample of 66,282 tweets comprising the hashtag #ggi (including hyperlinks and their content) that appeared on Twitter's public timeline between April 22 and July 31, 2012 was conducted. Contrary to expectations Twitter was seldom used as a way to stir controversy about the strike. In fact, individuals and organizations tweeting about the Maple Spring relied heavily on journalistic organizations and individual journalists to circulate information, share their views on strike-related issues and events, and express themselves on other matters. As traditional media offered an often-sensationalistic coverage of the Maple Spring, the activity on social media was geared more towards analyzing, legitimizing protest, and offering opinions as events unfolded. Individuals and organizations turned to Twitter to express themselves, offer new ways of seeing the strike, and present narratives differing from the mainstream media narrative. Finally, the findings of this study are discussed in light of the "protest paradigm," which helps to characterize news media organizations and reporters' role in shaping the Maple Spring narrative on Twitter. More generally, this article provides a renewed look at politicking in the social mediascape and contributes to the growing body of academic literature on citizen participation, protest, and activists' uses of Web 2.0 for political action and advocacy in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media, Online Politics, Twitter, Quebec, Maple Spring, Protest, Hyperlink.

Overview

The last decade has been marked by a large volume of interdisciplinary academic works exploring uses of social media - which can be defined as "Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others" (Carr and Hayes 2015: 50) - for political and civic engagement. Many of these studies have zeroed in on grassroots-intensive political protest, also known as "movements of the square" (Ensby 2017). Specifically, they have unpacked on how younger members of the public – Including students – have turned to social media to make their voices heard and be active politically outside the realm of conventional media and political elites (e.g. Ensby 2017; Valenzuela, Arriagada et al. 2014; Raynauld, Lalancette et al., 2016). This article builds and expands on this scholarly effort. It takes a deep dive into the ways in which and to what degree the micro-communication service Twitter was used by activists and their allies to engage in protest actions in the context of a protest movement that was the source of significant political, social, and economic disruptions in the province of Quebec (Canada) during the spring and early summer months of 2012: the 2012 unlimited Quebec student strike against university tuition hikes, also known as "Maple Spring." Specifically, as journalistic organizations and individual journalists' strike-related coverage was often referred to in tweets by supporters and critics of the student movement, this article analyzes their impact in shaping the Maple Spring narrative on Twitter. It does so through the consideration of the "protest paradigm," a conceptual model that will be defined in a later section of this article.

Over the last ten years, social media-intensive protest initiatives spearheaded by students have emerged and gained traction in Canada and internationally. Of particular interest is the UK student protests of 2010 and 2011, which was marked by heavy uses of Facebook for political and civic engagement (Ensby 2017). Between 2011 and 2013, Chilean high school and university students turned to Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms to generate awareness and build support for their causes - which included issues related to education - as well as organize and coordinate protest action (Cabalìn-Quijada 2014; Valenzuela, Arriagada et al. 2014). In September 2014, Hong Kong students took to the streets and asked for "candidates for the elections of the Hong Kong Chief Executive to be held in 2017 – the first ever by popular vote – be openly and freely nominated instead of being pre-selected by a government committee directly controlled by the sitting political and business elites, and indirectly by the Chinese central government" (Berlotini 2015: 3; see also Zhang and Lee 2018). Much like in Chile, Web 2.0 tools were instrumental in enabling them to circulate information, launch, promote, and manage mobilization initiatives in decentralized ways, as well as advocate for their cause to audiences in Hong Kong and internationally (Lee, Chen et al. 2017; Monachesi and Turco 2017).

From a strict organizational perspective, the Maple Spring can be viewed as relatively similar to these movements. It can be defined as a student-driven protest phenomenon that began in a largely typical way. On March 17, 2011, the Liberal government of Jean Charest announced that university tuition fees in the province of Quebec (Canada) would be raised by 1,625 dollars CAN, or 65 percent, between 2012 and 2017 (Dufour and Savoie 2014; Sorochan 2012). This decision sparked outrage among a large number of students in CEGEPs (Collèges d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel) and universities across Quebec. Over the following months, student unions and other groups launched top-down mobilization initiatives to pressure the government into rethinking its positions as well as to mobilize and cultivate support ahead of a potential strike. Despite these efforts, the government remained firm and did

not revisit its decision. On February 13, 2012, members of student unions at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) and Université Laval – two Quebec universities with large student populations – voted overwhelmingly in favor of an unlimited general strike. Over the following weeks, they were joined by a large number of CEGEP and university student unions whose members voted in favor of the strike.

As the movement gained momentum, its internal structure evolved. Social media became go-to tools for individuals and organizations either supporting or opposing the Maple Spring to share information, voice opinions, as well as organize, coordinate, and promote political and civic action on their own terms, independently of student unions and other organizational entities (Bégin-Caouette and Jones 2014; Fournier 2014). The movement also diversified, often in ways not necessarily aligned with its initial goals. Informal political groups and ordinary citizens with wide-ranging and often narrow interests and goals, including the anti-capitalism organization CLAC (Convergence des Luttes Anticapitalistes (translation: "Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles")), groups supporting Indigenous rights in Canada, and activist networks, took part in student strike-related initiatives (Barney 2012; Fortin 2014; Sorochan 2012). This article takes interest in the role played by social media in this dynamic.

Contextualizing research on the 2012 Quebec student strike

Over the last six years, scholars from various academic disciplines have taken interest in the Quebec student protest movement due to its magnitude, intensity, and unconventional nature. Ancelovici et al. (2014) examined its effects on democratic processes, power structures within student organizations, protest action repertoires, and institutional reactions to the strike. Dufour and Savoie's (2014) study of the Quebec student strike focused on its impact on different facets of the province of Quebec's political system. They found that it contributed to the emergence of cleavages between formal political players and, by extension, caused the bottom-up redefinition of the political agenda's structure. The 2012 Quebec student strike has also been studied through other theoretical lenses. Among them include the sociology and philosophy lens (e.g. Fournier 2014), political engagement lens (e.g. Fortin 2014), the historical lens (e.g. Lamarre, Nadeau-Dubois et al. 2014), law and order lens (e.g. Dupuis-Déri 2014), and political ideology lens (e.g. Giroux 2013).

Academic attention has also been given to the tone and structure of the journalistic coverage of the 2012 Quebec student strike (e.g. Giroux and Charlton 2014a; 2014b; Lacombe 2013). Sauvageau and Thibault (2013) found that most of the news reports on the Maple Spring were driven by partisan opinion shaped by current events and generally fueled the spectacularization of the student strike and the polarization of the public's views (e.g. demonstrations, violence, personal conflicts). In other words, news media organizations and journalists provided few opportunities for the members of the public to gain an in-depth understanding of long-term policy issues and ideological positions related to the student strike. This article adds to this work and fills gaps in the academic literature. While it does not take examine the journalistic coverage of the Maple Spring, it defines how Maple Spring-strike related coverage informed and shaped the way in which activists articulated their narrative on the strike.

News media organizations and the protest paradigm

This study is informed by recent scholarship on the "protest paradigm." This conceptual model is nested within media framing theory (Harlow 2012; McLeod and Detenber 1999) and, more broadly, the agenda-setting theory (Moy, Tewksbury et al 2016). The protest paradigm stems from the complex, fluid, and often adversarial relationship between news media organizations

and protest movements, especially in the context of the mass mediatization of protest politics as well as the expansion and diversification of the political mediascape (e.g. Harlow and Johnson 2011; Weaver and Scacco 2013). This paradigm can be defined as a dynamics leading to a news media narrative undermining, delegitimizing, and marginalizing the causes, the membership, the actions and, from a broader perspective, the public image of protest movements (Harlow and Johnson 2011; McLeod and Detenber 1999; McLeod and Hertog 1992; 1999).

A closer look at this paradigm reveals three key mechanisms that are at play. First, news media and journalists' protest coverage tends to be unfavorable to protest movements as it emphasizes violence, conflict, and confrontation, even if protest actions are largely peaceful (Harlow and Johnson, 2011). It devotes much less attention to issues and ideological concerns fueling protest. Chitrapu et al. (2007: 134) note that the structure and tone or this narrative "moderate over a longer period of time as journalists develop 'affection for activists through shared contacts and stresses.'" Second, news media organizations and reporters' sourcing for protest-related news stories tends to consist of political elite sources (e.g. government, police). As protesters are seldom quoted, their perspective remains for the most part excluded from the journalistic narrative (Harlow and Johnson 2011; McCurdy 2012; McLeod and Detenber, 1999). Finally, news media organizations and journalists tend to refer to public opinion cues, laws and regulations, or studies casting dynamics of protest as marginal or deviating from or threatening broadly accepted social, political, or economic norms (McLeod and Detenber 1992; 1999).

Rooted in long-established journalistic norms and practices, these news reporting biases are leading protest movements to be portrayed in mostly negative ways in the mainstream press. In other words, they are geared towards protecting and, to some extent, reinforcing existing power dynamics, or the "status quo" (Boyle, McLeod et al. 2012; McLeod and Hertog 1992). Some factors can have mediating effects on mass media organizations' reporting on protest. Among them include protesters' goals and tactics as well as the overall context and structure of protest phenomena (Boyle, McLeod et al. 2012). Despite this dynamic, protesters often rely on news media organizations and individual journalists to get their message out to the public. As indicate previously, they are also turning to digital media platforms - including social media - to be voice their concerns and be active politically outside channels controlled by political and media elites. These communication channels allow them to reframe and, in some cases, combat the negative coverage of protest typically found in the mainstream press (Harlow and Johnson 2011).

Recent academic works have unpacked the effects of the protest paradigm on social media-fueled, grassroots-intensive protest movements. Of particular interest is work by Gottlieb (2015) who examined the role of the protest paradigm in shaping the New York Times' coverage of the transnational Occupy Movement between 2011 and 2014. Also of interest is a study by Weaver and Scacco (2013) who examined this paradigm's manifestation in U.S. news media's reporting on the Tea Party movement. Finally, Harlow and Johnson (2011) showed that the spectacle frame as well as the legitimizing and accountability frames were prevalent in the New York Times' coverage of protest in Egypt.

Journalistic organizations and reporters can play a vital role in informing and, to some extent, mobilizing support or opposition to protest movements. Poell (2014) studied how social media affected activist communication and mobilization during the 2010 G20 summit in Toronto. His analysis of hyperlink patterns offered insights into the organizational ecology of digital communications related to this movement. He found that 36 percent of shared URLs pointed to news sites. Of these "news sites, the mainstream media such as Canadian newspapers

The Star and the Globe and Mail constituted a minority: 15% of all the shared links" (Poell 2014: 721). In fact, social media-based information circulation speeds "far outstretched the reporting capacities of mainstream new outlets" through the protest against the G20 summit (Poell 2014: 727). While the coverage of news media organizations can have repressive effects on protest due to its nature or tone (Veenstra, Iyer et al. 2014), it can provide individuals and other entities involved in protest actions pertinent information shaping their positions and actions. This is in line with Hermida's (2010: 301) concept of "ambient journalism." Based on his work, it can be argued that Twitter can be used as an awareness system to share news and other types of digital content to attain wide-ranging objectives. For example, users can leverage this platform to control part of the information they receive and share it with other users. From a broader perspective, social media facilitate self-representation, which can – or not – be a reflection of mainstream reporting practices (Poell, 2014). Poell and Borra (2011) demonstrate in their study of online protest during the G20 summit that uses of social media by activists essentially mirrored mainstream protest reporting practices as a large portion of their posts focused on spectacle and violence. Contrary to news media reporting where protesters were depicted as deviants or outlaws, the content of the posts they study focused on excessive police force.

Building and expanding on this research, this article unpacks the manifestation of the Maple Spring in the Twitterverse. It does so by defining the ways in which and to what degree news media organizations' coverage of the Quebec student crisis was reused and, in some cases, weaponized in strike-related tweets to generate awareness for the protest initiative against the government, mobilize public support, as well as stimulate protest action. Furthermore, it examines how journalistic organizations and individual reporters' coverage of the Maple Spring shaped the ways in which Twitter users supporting or opposing the Maple Spring shared content about the student strike. A series of research questions are guiding this inductive study: Was the emphasis put on specific issues by traditional media and reporters mirrored in tweets by strike supporters or opponents? Did news media reports contribute to the legitimization and/ or delegitimization of the student movement? What were the key characteristics of the protest narrative structure employed by students on Twitter? Did uses of news media organizations and journalists content by Twitter users allowed them to circumvent the control of message by these media in order to promote different interpretations of news items?

Methodology

This article offers a quantitative and qualitative assessment of hyperlinks pointing to digital material produced by conventional media organizations and individual journalists that were embedded in Maple Spring-related tweets. A corpus of tweets (including their content, such as photos, videos, and hyperlinks) was generated through a three-step sampling process. First, the data mining and archiving platform Tweet Archivist[1] was used to identify, collect, and archive all tweets with at least one #ggi hashtag. The #ggi hashtag was generally included in tweets referring to the unlimited general student strike against the rise of university tuition fees in the province of Quebec (translation: "grève générale illimitée"), that appeared on Twitter's public timeline between April 22 and July 31, 2012. Hashtags have been used by many researchers as a sampling tools for the study of political communication, mobilization, and organizing phenomena on Twitter over the last decade (e.g. Dubois and Gaffney 2014; Raynauld, Richez et al. 2018). The #ggi hashtag quickly emerged as a way for Twitter users taking part or interested

[1]Tweet Archivist has been exploited by many researchers who have taken a look at Twitter-based political or civic engagement phenomena over the last five years (e.g. Croeser and Highfield 2014; Baxter and Marcella 2013).

in the Maple Spring movement to circulate information, express themselves, or interact with each other. The first phase of the sampling process led to the identification and collection of 66,282 #ggi tweets.

In order to narrow down this sample, the work of several authors who wrote about the strike (e.g. Nadeau-Dubois 2014, Simard 2013), was used to isolate key Maple Spring moments based on specific criteria (e.g. major rallies, interactions between student leaders and government officials, clashes between protesters and police forces). This allowed for the identification of 15 key days during which 17,406 tweets with at least one #ggi were shared on Twitter's public timeline.

Finally, the corpus was further refined by selecting the first 100 tweets that appeared on Twitter's public timeline (starting at midnight local time) on the 15 days identified in the second step of the sampling process. This led to the collection of 1,500 tweets (e.g. LeFebvre and Armstrong, 2018; Theocharis, Lowe et al, 2015). While some authors have used more randomized tweet sampling techniques to generate datasets, the selection of the first 100 tweets posted every day allowed for the capture and analysis of potential social interactions between Twitter users. The examination of these dynamics would have been impossible if other sampling techniques, such as systematic sampling or snowball sampling, would have been used. However, it should be noted that this approach has some drawbacks. Among them include being the source of potential selection biases caused by wide-ranging factors at the moment of tweets (e.g. events, journalistic coverage). A thorough review of the #ggi dataset indicated that these biases had limited effects on the study's findings.

An analysis of these 1,500 tweets revealed that they comprised 654 hyperlinks pointing to five main categories of digital resources: news media organizations and individual reporters, social media platforms, governmental digital resources, student union websites, and other sites. Only web links pointing to digital material produced by news media organizations and individual journalists were considered for this article. The analysis of the 654 hyperlinks indicated that more than one third of them (230 hyperlinks or 35.2 percent of all hyperlinks) pointed to content produced by journalistic organizations and individual reporters (other hyperlinks pointed to other digital resources, including Facebook content as well as websites of groups and institutions related to the strike). Further analysis revealed that 20 of those hyperlinks (8.7 percent) were broken at the time of analysis, thus reducing the sample to 210 hyperlinks.

The study of hyperlinks was done through a hybrid quantitative and qualitative coding rubric modeled after work by Giroux and Charlton (2014a; 2014b). Codes unrelated to the work of Giroux and Charlton (2014a; 2014b) were included in order to study dynamics of #ggi activism, which differ greatly from the analysis of news coverage (e.g. profile of #ggi tweeters). The coding grid was tested on a small number of #ggi posts. Coders and researchers met on several occasions throughout the coding process in order to adapt it and develop perfect intercoder-reliability agreement.

Findings

This section of the article focuses on the ways in which news media content was utilized by #ggi tweeters to attain wide-ranging information dispersion and mobilization objectives. It also provides insights into how this shaped dynamics of #ggi tweeting. First, in order to unpack #ggi-related hyperlinking during the time period considered for this study, it was important to consider the personal profile of Twitter users who embedded hyperlinks pointing to content from news media organizations and journalists in their posts. They were grouped in ten

categories based on personally-identifiable information available in their Twitter profile (see Table 1). Some identified themselves based on their political allegiances while others presented themselves as "parents" or offered generic information about their personal or professional background. Twitter users who shared at least one hyperlink in their #ggi posts and who did not provide personally identifiable information on their profile page were categorized as "citizens." The analysis of the dataset also revealed that many public personalities turned to Twitter to share their views on the Quebec student strike. However, many users categorized as "public personalities" were not necessarily known by all members of the Quebec public.

Table 1: Personal profile of #ggi tweeters who shared at least one hyperlink pointing to digital resources of news media organizations or journalists

Category	Number of hyperlinks	Percentage of hyperlinks
Elected official	0	0
News media organizations and reporters	11	5.24
Ordinary citizens (excluding self-declared students)	110	52.38
Self-declared students	4	1.90
Organizations	2	0.95
Experts and professional communicators (e.g. bloggers)	30	14,29
Disconnected account	25	11,90
Public personalities	11	5,24
Militants, activist networks, and unions	13	6,19
Other (e.g. protected tweets)	4	1,90
Total	210	100

The analysis of #ggi tweets shows that they were authored by a large number of unique users, ranging from ordinary citizens to journalists, student-led groups, as well as news and opinion-driven media organizations They had varying interests and goals which impacted greattly their patterns of #ggi tweeting and, by extension, the ways in which they were active politically, whether it is in support or in opposition to the Maple Spring. A closer review of the data shows that these tweets comprised 654 hyperlinks pointing a large number of digital resources. Specifically, 230 of the 654 hyperlinks, or 35.2 percent, redirected Internet users to digital material by news media organizations or journalists. Eighteen #ggi tweeters included a hyperlink pointing to content produced by news media organizations or journalists in more than one tweet. For example, user @JoseeLegault, a political columnist for the French-language newspaper Le Devoir and the online news platform @HuffPostQuebec - two major players in the Quebec mediascape - only contributed one post with a hyperlink to the #ggi tweeting dynamic, but were retweeted on numerous occasions. This boosted their influence in the Twitterverse significantly.

Unpacking patterns of #ggi hyperlinking

The review of the 210 hyperlinks indicates that 64.3 percent of them (135 web links) pointed to digital material produced by four French-language news media organizations based in the province of Quebec. As shown in Table 2, journalistic content of Gesca Limitée, a corporation that owns Montreal-based newspaper La Presse and Quebec-based newspaper Le Soleil, was referenced 48 times compared to 34 times for Montreal-based newspaper Le Devoir, 27 times for digital resources linked to CBC/Radio-Canada, and 26 times for media platforms owned by Quebecor Media, including Montreal-based Journal de Montreal, Quebec City-based Journal de Quebec, and TV network TVA. This shows that these media organizations had strong shaping effects on the structure and tone of many #ggi tweets considered for this study. Comparatively, national news media outlets from the rest of Canada, including daily newspapers The Globe and Mail and National Post or the weekly news magazine Maclean's, were quoted significantly less through hyperlinks (see Table 2). It should be noted that #ggi tweeters only embedded 8 hyperlinks pointing to news content from international journalistic organizations.

Table 2: News media outlets cited with hyperlinks by #ggi tweeters

Category	Number of hyperlinks	Percentage of hyperlinks
Voir	14	6.67
Le Devoir	34	16.19
News media owned by Quebecor Media (Journal de Montréal, Journal de Québec, TVA, Canoë)	26	12.39
News media owned by Gesca Limitée (e.g. La Presse, Le Soleil)	48	22.86
News media owned by CBC/Radio-Canada (ICI SRC, CBC)	27	12.86
The Globe and Mail	6	2.86
Métro	8	3.81
The Gazette	1	0.48
L'Actualité	2	0.95
Huffington Post	10	4.76
La Presse Canadienne	3	1.43
MacLean's	1	0.48
L'Aut' Journal	1	0.48
National Post	1	0.48
Others (La République, Hebdo Bas-St-Laurent, The Star, CNW)	20	9.52
International news media (Le Monde, The Atlantic, The Nation, The New York Times)	8	3.81
Total	210	100.00

Second, the journalistic genre of the digital material quoted via hyperlinks in #ggi tweets was taken into account during the coding process (see Table 3). More than half of hyperlinks (57.14 percent) redirected Internet users to news reports, which typically consist of factual information on issues and events. Additionally, 27.1 percent of hyperlinks embedded in #ggi tweets pointed to editorials, 8.1 percent to opinion letters from the public, 3.8 percent to interviews, 1.4 percent to political commentary, and 1.4 percent to cartoons. Only one hyperlink pointed to the profile of a public personality.

These findings suggest that #ggi tweeters linked mostly to journalistic content providing factual information on different aspects of the student strike as well as opinions or commentary. As discussed by Gallant et al. (2015), this can be seen as part of the digital protest repertoire: informing others, which can potentially lead to higher levels political and civic awareness and ultimately lead to increased levels of public support and mobilization. As the student strike was an important topic of conversation among Quebecers, sharing opinions helped #ggi tweeters shape the discussion in often strategic ways.

Table 3: Journalistic genre of the news media content cited via hyperlinks by #ggi tweeters

Category	Number of hyperlinks	Percentage of hyperlinks
News story	120	57.14
Journalistic portrait	1	0.48
Interview	8	3.81
Analysis	4	1.43
Editorial	57	27.14
Opinion letter	17	8.10
Cartoon	4	1.90
Total	210	100.00

Topical analysis

This article also takes a deep dive into uses of journalistic content by #ggi tweeters through the consideration of themes that were discussed in news media content shared via hyperlinks (see Table 4). The analysis demonstrates that a large portion of the content circulated reinforced the previously defined protest paradigm. For example, 12.3 percent of hyperlinks pointed to digital material focusing on matters relating to the work of local, provincial, and national police forces, notably during demonstrations and other strike-related mobilization events. Approximately one tenth of hyperlinks (10.48 percent) pointed to news reports of negotiations between the Quebec government and student unions as well as negotiation strategies. Also, 10 percent redirected Web users to accounts of demonstrations, 8.1 percent to polls and discussions of public opinion, and 2.3 percent to matters relating to violence, threats, and vandalism.

These findings are in line with those of previous studies. Giroux and Charlton (2014a; 2014b) examined the structure of the coverage of the student strike by the mainstream press in the province of Quebec between February 12, 2012 and June 23, 2012. They found that Quebec-based news media organizations reinforced the protest paradigm as they gave significant attention to matters unfavorable to the student strike. Their analysis of La Presse's reporting on

the student strike showed that 13 percent of news stories focused on demonstrations and other strike-related protest efforts, 13 percent on negotiation strategies, 9 percent on public political and social debates, 9 percent on individual finances, 7 percent on violence and vandalism, and 7 percent on broader dynamics of the student strike. From a broader perspective, #ggi-related hyperlinks observed in this study were somewhat similar to the narrative of Quebec news media organizations and reports on this student strike (Giroux and Charlton 2014a: 21).

Finally, a smaller number of #ggi-related web links pointed to journalistic material not reinforcing the protest paradigm. For example, 9.1 percent of hyperlinks redirected Twitter users to Maple Spring-related social and political debates compared 7.6 percent to the special law debated and adopted by the Quebec government on May 12, 2012, 1.9 percent to various legal aspects of the student strike, and 1.9 percent to institutional political debates (see Table 4).

Table 4: Themes of the journalistic content shared with hyperlinks by #ggi tweeters

Category	Number of hyperlinks	Percentage of hyperlinks
Individual finances	7	3.33
Legal aspects	4	1.90
News media coverage (meta-coverage)	18	8.57
Institutional political debates	4	1.90
Social and political debates (e.g. ideology, public debates)	19	9.05
Provincial public finances	0	0
Management and quality of education	0	0
Impact of strike and demonstrations	1	0.48
Special law (Law 12, Bill 78)	16	7.62
Different manifestations of the strike	21	10.00
Strike movement	0	0
Negotiations and strategies	22	10.48
Positions taken by public personalities	19	9.05
Polls and public opinion	17	8.10
Work of political forces (local, provincial, and national police forces)	26	12.38
Personal life of student leaders or members of the government	3	1.43
Violence, threats, and vandalism	9	4.29
Other current events-related matters	9	4.29
Provincial elections	15	7.14
Total	210	100.00

Tone of journalistic content

The tone of the news media content cited through hyperlinks by #ggi tweeters is also of importance for this study. The tone can indeed impact public perceptions of Maple Spring-related issues and actors. By extension, it can also affect activists' protest efforts deployed on and off-line. News media content cited through hyperlinks was labelled as unfavorable when shedding a negative light on individuals or organizations involved in the student strike (Giroux and Charlton 2014a: 31).

The analysis of the data reveals that 116 hyperlinks, or 55.2 percent of all hyperlinks embedded by #ggi posts linked to news reports providing a unfavorable coverage of Maple Spring-related matters. For example, a retweet by user @Antagonist_net - a professional political Canadian news diffusion account – included a link to an editorial titled "Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois et la CLASSE: Les Soviets de salon" (translation: "Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois and the CLASSE: Living room Soviets") by Dominic Maurais, a Journal de Quebec and CHOI RadioX commentator. Another tweet - "Greve étudiante: Droit de vote http://t.co/aK2ULsp0 #Éditorial #LeDevoir #EdQc #ggi #non1625 #greve2012" (Translation "Student strike: Right to vote. http://t.co/aK2ULsp0 #Editorial#EdQc #ggi #non1625 #greve2012") - linked to an article highlighting some of the democratic processes used by student unions during strike-related meetings. Another tweet included a link pointing to an article on the Prime Minister's opinion about the work of student associations and the violence during the Victoriaville[2] demonstrations: "N'avez rien fait de tout le mois de mars. 31 jours #ggi #plq Charest jette le blâme sur les associations étudiantes http://t.co/CRUVKPyY" (translation: Nothing was done during March. 31 days #ggi #plq Charest puts the blame on student unions http://t.co/CRUVKPyY").

A closer look at #ggi data allowed for the identification of sub-categories of unfavorable coverage (see Table 5). The majority of news content cited featured negative views of the provincial government of Jean Charest, including the Prime Minister and his ministers, as well as the Liberal Party of Quebec (42,2 percent). #ggi tweeters also referred to negative content on other Maple Spring-related matters, including local, regional, and national police forces and their work (13.8 percent of hyperlinks) as well as more general #ggi-related issues, including tuition hikes and negotiation (13.8 percent) and street protest and the student strike in general (7.8 percent of hyperlinks). To some extent, #ggi tweeters' uses of hyperlinks helped roll out a narrative highlighting the strike's problems as well as challenging the tone of news media's coverage.

Some activist included in their tweets hyperlinks pointing to news content offering a counterpoint to the negative media coverage. For example, it featured interviews where protesters described some of the reasons leading them to be involved in the student strike. An opinion letter written by Léo Bureau-Blouin and Pier-André Bouchard St-Amand - respectively president of the "Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec" (translation: Federation of college students of Quebec) and president de la "Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec" (translation: Federation of university students of Quebec), at the time of the strike – and published in the French-language newspaper Le Devoir was also referred to in a tweet through a hyperlink. It helped give a voice to student leaders in the context of a protest that was for the most part leaderless.

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[2]The Liberal Party of Quebec held a meeting in Victoriaville May where protest held a violent manifestation and the police intervention lead them to shoot some plastic bullets. One if these ending up in the eye of one student protester.

Table 5: Characterization of the negative coverage of the Maple Spring quoted with hyperlinks by #ggi tweeters

Category	Number of hyperlinks	Percentage of hyperlinks
Issues directly linked to the student strike (e.g. events, demonstrations, negotiations, make-up classes, injunctions, tuition hikes)	16	13.79
Government (e.g. prime minister Jean Charest, Liberal Party of Quebec, ministers)	49	42.24
Police force and their work	16	13.79
Student representatives and student associations	9	7.76
Street demonstrations and student movement in general	15	12.93
News media	4	3.45
Elected officials in opposition parties	1	0.86
Other (e.g. other issues, individuals and events not linked to the student strike)	6	5.17
Total	116	100.00

Conversely, 21.9 percent of hyperlinks pointed to journalistic content largely favorable to the Maple Spring. It was categorized as favorable when outlining positive outcomes of the strike (e.g. demonstrations, student unions' decision, government's proposals) or when portraying in a positive way individuals or organizations taking part in strike efforts (Giroux and Charlton 2014a: 31). The majority of these web links (80.4 percent) offered journalistic content supportive of street protest and the student movement in general, compared to 10.9 percent of hyperlinks pointing to material favorable to the Quebec government, 6.5 percent to content favorable to police forces and their work, and only 2.2 percent to news reports favorable to representatives of Quebec opposition parties (see Table 6).

For example, a user tweeted a link to an article from the daily newspaper Le Devoir on the support of political and cultural public figures for the strike: "Grève étudiante: Un moratoire tout de suite, réclament des personnalités du monde culturel et politique | Le Devoir http://t.co/pe2kWzDf #ggi" (Translation: Student Strike: A moratorium now, are clamming cultural and political personalities | Le Devoir http://t.co/pe2kWzDf #ggi"). Another tweet included a link to a column in the magazine Voir by political commentator Josée Legault. In her piece, she characterized the provincial government's attitude towards students as unacceptable.

Building on Giroux and Charlton' work (2014b), it can be argued that much of the favorable coverage of the student movement came from Le Devoir. Our study indicates that its content was referenced 34 times by #ggi tweeters. As noted by Giroux and Charlton (2014b), while most Quebec-based news outlets offered largely unfavorable views of the Maple Spring in their coverage, Le Devoir distinguished itself by providing a more favorable coverage of student protesters and their allies. By quoting Le Devoir news stories, editorials, and opinion pieces, #ggi tweeters tried to build a positive Maple Spring narrative.

Table 6: Characterization of the positive coverage of the Maple Spring quoted with hyperlinks by #ggi tweeters

Category	Number of hyperlinks	Percentage of hyperlinks
Issues directly linked to the student strike (e.g. issues, events, demonstrations, negotiations, make-up classes, injunctions, tuition hike)	0	0
Government (Charest, Liberal Party of Quebec, ministers)	5	10.87
Police force and their work	3	6.52
Student representatives and student associations	0	0
Street demonstrations and student movement in general	37	80.43
News media	0	0
Elected officials in opposition parties	1	2.17
Other (e.g. other issues, individuals and events not linked to the student strike)	0	0
Total	46	100.00

Discussion

Many scholars have taken interest in the 2012 Quebec student strike over the last five years. This article builds on and complements existing research on uses of social media by its supporters and opponents for information dispersion and mobilization. It sheds light on the ways in which and to what degree news media content was used by #ggi tweeters to help shape the Twitter-based narrative on the strike against higher university tuition fees. It also offers insights into how journalistic coverage was used to legitimize and delegitimize students' positions and actions as well as those of their allies. This dynamic is of particular interest as recent research on the Maple Spring coverage of Quebec-based news outlets found that it was generally unfavorable to protesters (Giroux and Charlton 2014a; 2014b).

The findings suggest that journalistic organizations and reporters played a central role in setting the agenda and structuring #ggi-related information flows on Twitter. As indicated previously, 35.2 percent of hyperlinks embedded in #ggi tweet considered for this investigation (230 of 654 hyperlinks) redirected social media users to digital material produced by news media organizations and journalists. This definitely shaped how #ggi tweeters discussed the student strike in their posts and, by extension, how they were perceived by other Twitter users clicking on web links. In other words, #ggi tweeters engaged in agenda setting, framing, and priming by linking news content favorable to their cause, thus circumventing the mainstream press' protest paradigm-fueled coverage. #ggi tweeters cherry-picked news content in order to build and promote a largely positive narrative of the strike. This countered mostly negative accounts of #ggi activists' actions and positions as well as those of their allies by Quebec journalistic organizations. This is particularly important as their content was quoted more frequently via hyperlinks by #ggi tweeters than any other type of content (Giroux and Charlton 2014a, 2014b).

This article lays the groundwork for understanding how protest-related uses of Twitter constitute the materialization of new forms of political action in the social mediascape as well as the extension and reshaping of existing modes of digital political action. The concept of political action repertoire can be defined as the ensemble of ways in which citizens can be active politically, whether it is within institutionalized political engagement channels (e.g. voting, attending rallies organized by political parties, being a member of a political party) or outside the realm of political elites (e.g. signing a petition, attending a demonstration) (Stolle, Hooghe et al. 2005). While much academic research has been conducted on Twitter-based political and civic engagement in recent years (e.g. Theocharis, Lowe et al. 2015; Vaccari, Valeriani et al. 2015; Vromen, Xenos et al. 2015), few scholars have taken a specific look at how tweets' content, specifically hyperlinks, has been used to fuel and shape political action. This article offers a much needed quantitative and qualitative assessment of how legacy media content can be instrumentalized on social media for political engagement.

The data suggests that the previously defined hyperlinking dynamic could have mobilized members of the public supporting the Maple Spring. Individual and organizations following the #ggi dynamic could have been inspired by the positive tone of content cited and taken part in different facets of the student movement, whether it is online or offline. This hypothesis could be the object of further research, especially as recent studies conducted in the United States and internationally have shown that younger adults are relying increasingly on Twitter and other social media services for political protest information (e.g. Veenstra, Iyer et al. 2014). This raises important questions about potential differences between journalistic information and content from other sources, including blogs and social networking services. This is part of the dynamic highlighted by Gallant et al. (2015) through interviews with Maple Spring activists. They determined that most Facebook and Twitter users did not generate content, but circulated content found on third-party digital resources. In other words, they argue that Twitter was used as a news wire service by Maple Spring activists. This brings them to suggest that a specific profile of political activist is emerging: interested and informed individuals and organizations circulating content of interest to others, thus acting as political information and mobilization gatekeepers. In other words, content relaying is an important form of political engagement.

Further research is required to further document and analyze the effects of the protest paradigm in Canada and internationally and how it can be appropriated by political and social activists in the social mediascape. Uses of social media for grassroots activism during other mobilization phenomena like the #umbrella revolution (Bertolini 2015), as well as the recent large-scale protest against police brutality against ethnic minorities (e.g. #ferguson, #blacklivesmatter), gun violence (#nevergain), and in support of minimum wage increase (e.g. #fightfor15), could be investigated to document how social media users are exploiting mainstream media content to frame and complement their discourse. For example, the production of memes by younger segments of the public following the Ferguson protests and the emergence of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was studied by Schofield Clark (2016). She considered memes as "artifacts of engagement," which is in line with Bennett and Segerberg (2013) "connective action" theory. In a context of fluid political and social protest, memes allowed young citizens to express themselves in an unfettered way. They often offer accounts of events different from more mainstream sources of information. Furthermore, interviews with social media users could shed light on protesters' motivations when sharing content online and interacting with other users. Despite the large volume of predominantly quantitative work that has been conducted on social media-based protest politics, much work remains to understand dynamics of protest in the social media environment, especially in Canada.

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