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#ThisIsACoup: the emergence of an anti-austerity hashtag across Europe's twittersphere

Book section

#ThisIsACoup

The emergence of an anti-austerity hashtag across Europe's twittersphere

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Abstract

Social media allow disparate groups to spontaneously coordinate in support of a common cause. At the height of Europe's sovereign debt crisis in 2015, as Greece was negotiating its third bailout and was about to be saddled with new austerity measures, the hashtag #ThisIsACoup emerged and quickly went viral on Twitter. How did it emerge and diffuse across Europe's twittersphere – and with what impact on wider public discourse? This chapter uses data collected through Twitter's streaming API and a qualitative content analysis to examine these questions.

#ThisIsACoup first emerged in Spain. Within hours, people across Europe had coalesced around the hashtag, which succinctly expressed the shared sentiment that Greece was being treated unfairly. Moreover, the impact of #ThisIsACoup on public discourse reached well beyond social media, with more than700 newspaper stories worldwide mentioning the hashtag.

But people did more than adopt a common hashtag. They engaged with other Twitter users across national boundaries, calling into being a transnational, pan-European communication space. Social media provided a potent means of connecting people from across Europe to voice their collective objection to controversial austerity policies. Through the hashtag, Twitter acted as a 'stitching technology', activating disparate, far-flung groups around a shared grievance.

Introduction and context

Since 2010 the fiscal and economic crisis has severely affected the fortunes of many Europeans, most of all in Greece, Spain, Ireland, and Portugal, all of which underwent harsh economic adjustments, often in exchange for bailouts organized by Eurozone countries, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Commission. Public services had to yield to the new orthodoxy of fiscal restraint, while governments propped up banks, outraging many and irking most citizens. The Eurozone's sovereign debt crisis is, of course, ongoing as we write. The prescription of austerity triggered protests around the world. From the Occupy movement, to the Spanish Indignados, Greek Aganaktismenoi, and Portugese Geração, people coalesced around messages of resistance. Many of these anti-austerity protests coincided with the mainstream adoption of social media, which are frequently hailed as a harbinger of empowerment, amplifying the voice of crowds, and extending their ability to organise. And so, Europe's austerity policies grabbed headlines as much as they featured on social feeds, activating citizens to engage in grassroots resistance to the mantra of fiscal restraint.

The high-water mark of pan-European anti-austerity protests came while Greece was negotiating its third bailout in 2015. The country had only recently elected Syriza, a left-wing party, on a platform of rejecting the punishing conditionalities of previous bailouts. Though assessing the parameters of the wider crisis is beyond this chapter's scope, it is important to set out the context of the disagreement in which protests emerged. The contention concerned the bailout's conditions. While the Greek government sought debt relief and a respite from creditor-imposed austerity measures, creditors wanted stricter conditionalities, and would – if at all – discuss debt relief only once further austerity measures had been agreed. Over the first half of 2015 both the Greek government and creditors had dug in their heels on the matter, unwilling to yield from their position. Successive pre-crisis governments had cooked the books, revelations of which triggered the need for the first bailout in 2010. Subsequent governments stood accused of lacking resolve when it came to implementing needed reforms. Trust between the Greek government and its creditors had all but vanished by the time circumstances necessitated a third bailout in five years. Having lost confidence in Greece, creditors used their credit line, on which Greece had become reliant, as leverage to extract what they deemed as necessary reforms. Yet neither bailouts nor economic adjustments have brought about the desired economic convalescence, though it is a matter of disagreement to what extent reforms have actually been implemented.

Greece's Syriza government blamed creditors (Germany and the IMF foremost amongst them) for imposing a bailout programme they claimed to be counterproductive and economically illiterate. The former Greek finance minister, Yannis Varoufakis, prominently espoused this view, colourfully describing the bailout programme as "economic asphyxiation" and "fiscal waterboarding" (Donnelly and Vlcek 2017). Instead, the Greek government demanded debt relief (the IMF and prominent economists have made similar demands) and more lenient terms. Yet creditors were reluctant to grant this wish, not only because they would lose the leverage they consider essential in getting the Greek government to implement reforms, but also because many of them would find it very hard to get their national parliaments to sign-off on debt relief for Greece. Some creditor countries pointed to the fact that they had to implement their own painful reforms, and that others are poorer than Greece or pay their citizens lower pensions. Wealthier countries like Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands would have found it similarly hard to find

a parliamentary majority to approve debt relief. Indeed, in 2015 the Finnish government was close to collapse over its approval for the third Greek bailout.

We do not aim to adjudicate on the matter, but what should be clear is that political views on the Greek bailout diverged sharply, and the 2015 negotiations for a third bailout were amongst the most acrimonious and divisive to date. And so, amidst one of the deepest rift in the European Union's history, as the third bailout threatened to go the way of the previous two, and the Syriza government came under ever-greater pressure to adopt policies that it had been elected to reject, it called a referendum on the terms of the proposed bailout. On 5 July these conditions were rejected by 61% of the vote. Public resistance was mounting. Once again the streets of Athens swelled with protesters, as those of Madrid, Barcelona, and Lisbon had previously. Just days before the negotiations for the third bailout were concluded, on 12 July 2015, the hashtag #ThisIsACoup emerged and quickly went viral on Twitter. It criticised the creditors' demands and expressed support for the Greek government. How did it emerge? How did it diffuse across Europe's twittersphere? What impact did it have on wider public discourse? Was this a unified form of pan-European protest? These are the questions that this chapter will explore. It does so by examining a sample of tweets collected through Twitter's streaming API, and qualitative methods for textual analysis to examine a sample of prominent tweets and a sample of newspaper articles from across Europe.

Twitter, hashtags and connective action

Scholars have long taken an interest in the relationship between protests and media. Broadly speaking, one early strand of scholarship focused on the way protest movements were represented in the news media, noting that these often focused on the spectacle of protests in ways that tended to discredit them – what is sometimes referred to as the "protest paradigm" (Chan and Lee, 1984). A second strand focused on the relationship between protest movements and the media. Notably Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) distinguished between the relationship between the two on a cultural level (who controlled the narrative, the meaning of protest events), and a structural level (how much did they need each other, as news sources, to mobilise, or reach a larger audience). With the mainstreaming of the Internet and the increasing ubiquity of social media platforms attention shifted from the role of mass media, to the role of online platforms in protests (McCurdy, 2012).

From the early 2000s onwards a sustained interest in the democratic, participatory potential of these new communication technologies emerged (Dahlgren, 2001; Dahlberg, 2004). Centring on the fundamental transformation in communicative affordances engendered by the Internet and social media, scholars considered their impact on political participation. Unlike mass media with its vertically integrated production structures and multiple gatekeepers, social media is networked, affording everyone with an Internet-enabled device the ability to publish a message that can potentially reach millions. The threshold for producing and disseminating media messages was radically reduced. But views on the impact of this communicative potential remained divided. While some saw little evidence that social media could catalyse deep political change (Gladwell, 2010), others were more optimistic about the transformative potential that social media could have on protests, political participation, and political change (Howard and Hussain, 2011).

Most research has focused on the role of social media in shaping protest behaviour. In particular, much attention has been focused on the role of social media as an organisational tool

for mobilising and joining protests, and disseminating movement information. A range of studies has found that social media use is positively related to individual protest participation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Others have focused on social media as a means of documenting protests and diffusing news about them (especially when they are not covered by the news media) (Hänska Ahy and Shapour, 2013). Indeed, social media may offer opportunities for protests to become less reliant on news media when seeking to reach wider audiences.

While the predominant focus has been on the role of social media in facilitating offline protests, social media also plays an important role as platforms for opinion expression. Moreover, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or Instagram can become sites of protest themselves. Providing immaterial, virtual sites for protests, they allow users to publicly signal their view on a matter by sharing a story, image, or video, using a hashtag or updating a profile image with an overlay that indicates support for a cause. While some have argued that this kind of slacktivism, clicktivism, or hashtag activism has no real impact on political life and is motivated by a personal desire to feel engaged (Morozov, 2009) others have argued that it has more potential. Though expressing one's view involves a lesser degree of engagement than physically participating in a protest, or even engaging in its long-term organisation, they argue that online opinion expression can catalyse conversations around the issue, and may even act as a gateway for more comprehensive forms of participation (Valenzuela, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, such individualized acts of online engagement can produce collective movements with macro-level coherence, which Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call "connective action".

Bennett and Segerberg's distinction between collective and connective action is elucidating – and helps to explain how collective action problems are sometimes overcome online. Collective action is what many scholars of protest movements consider most desirable. It gets people to participate in sustained movements, with clearly defined goals, but usually requires a deeper organisational structure and a shared identity that coalesces people into the movement. Connective action gets people to contribute to a cause without requiring a shared identity (it allows individualized forms of activism), and without relying on a permanent organisational structure to broker connections. This describes the kind of contentious actions that rapidly emerge through social media. Connective action usually manifests when people share protest artefacts through online social networks such as hashtags (that can be shared easily, irrespective of your location, or embeddedness in a wider movement). Here social media platforms act as "stitching technologies", facilitating the emergence of macro-level organization from disparate individuals, groups, and organisations (Bennett et al., 2014).

On Twitter, a hashtag can be such an artefact through which connective actions emerge. Hashtags are keywords that allow users to label their messages in a way that clarifies a larger theme around which users coalesce. Hashtags allow users to share and tag relevant content, and thus to follow a particular issue, to learn about and engage with it (Gleason, 2013). Any word can become a hashtag (e.g. #Greece), but a hashtag such as #ThisIsACoup succinctly codifies the sentiment that Greece was being treated unfairly, and in that sense became a message in its own right. Hashtags as succinct messages expressing opinion, and indeed voicing protest, have grown in popularity. The hashtag #OccupyWallStreet was used in protests at social and economic inequalities after the 2008 financial crash and the subsequent public bailout of the financial industry (Tremayne, 2014). #BringBackOurGirls was started in the spring of 2014 by Nigerian activists to draw attention to 250 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram. #BlackLivesMatter was

created by activists in 2013 after Trayvon Martin was killed in Florida. More recently Mexico's former President Vicente Fox Quesada popularised #FuckingWall in response to Donald Trump's efforts to build a border wall with Mexico. #ThisIsACoup is another instance of a unique word compound used to distil a message, in this instance expressing protest at the way Greece was treated by its creditors. Importantly, such social media activity can also shape the agenda of the news media (Hänska Ahy, 2016). Hashtag activism, after all, has frequently featured in the news as interesting phenomena in its own right.

In the context of Greece's bailout negotiations the emergence of #ThisIsACoup is also of interest because social media are transnational in scope, and while the bailout negotiations dominated public discourse in Greece, they were also politically salient in European creditor countries, and indeed internationally. As noted, there was mounting opposition to the bailout in Finland and Germany, but also in the Netherlands, Austria, Slovakia, and the Baltic states. The negotiations featured heavily in the news across Europe. Furthermore #ThisIsACoup became an international cause célèbre, as the bailout negotiations attracted much attention beyond Europe's shores. Unlike mass media, social media is not subject to the same kind of spatial constraints, in that communications can flow unhindered across national boundaries (Boyd, 2011). The transnational dimension of #ThisIsACoup is thus not only central to the protest, but also to its role in potentially facilitating a European public sphere. It should be noted that a longstanding area of research has studied the European public sphere, often lamenting its absence, as a pan-European communication space is deemed essential to address the EU's democratic deficit (Hennen, 2016; Koopmans and Statham, 2010). Twitter may thus stitch together diverse groups from across Europe into pan-European connective actions, giving rise to a European online public sphere.

Data and methods

The findings presented in this chapter are based primarily on a set of tweets collected through Twitter's streaming API. Between 11-13 July 2015 we collected all tweets containing at least one of the following words: 'eurogroup', 'eurogruppe', 'eurogrupo', 'eurogruppo', 'eurogroupe', 'eurozone', 'grexit', and 'eurosummit', without limiting ourselves to hashtags. We collected 703,423 tweets relating to the bailout negotiations, serendipitously capturing the emergence and spread of the #ThisIsACoup hashtag. There are several methods for inferring location data from user profiles and tweets. While some users geo-tag their tweets, most do not (Hecht et al., 2011). However, many users specify a location in their profile – and while users can enter any text, most use actual locations. We used a combination Google and Bing's geocoding services to infer quantitative location data from user-specified location fields. Feeding each tweet's user specified location fields into the geocode APIs, these return (possibly approximate) longitude and latitude. Of our sample, 434,590 tweets contained usable location data with 318,190 tweets originating in a EU country. Our enriched data allow us to map the geographic spread of the hashtag. As Twitter also facilitates interactions between users – for instance when one user retweets, quotes, or replies to a tweet – we are also able to map the geographic spread of the hashtag. For instance, if a Twitter user in Belgium tweets #ThisIsACoup, and another user in Greece retweets, replies, or quotes this tweet, we can take the four respective coordinates to trace the spatial and temporal spread of interactions that use the hashtag.

To investigate the content of tweets using the hashtag, we extracted the 50 most retweeted tweets originating in key Eurozone countries, including France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain,

and UK, plus the US, and conducted a thematic analysis of them to identify common and recurring themes. The aim was not so much a rigorous quantification of themes, but rather to gain insight into the ideas users sought to express through their use of the hashtag.

To investigate the impact of the hashtag on the international press, we conducted a search of the entire Factiva database for any article matching the keyword 'thisisacoup' between 12–25 July 2015. Because Greek newspapers are not indexed by Factiva, we also searched the databases of the leading centre-right Kathimerini and the leading centre-left To Vima, using the same parameter. The search yielded 739 hits on the Factiva database and 10 for the two Greek newspapers, for 749 in total. We carried out a thematic analysis of the 10 most relevant articles (relevance as ranked by Factiva) published in key Eurozone countries, including France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, and UK, plus the US. The idea, as with tweets, was not quantification, but to get a sense of how the hashtag was thematised in the press.

Emergence and spread

Unsurprisingly the hashtag was most prominently used in Greece, as revealed in Figure 1, which shows its relative frequency by country. Furthermore, the timeline of its rise and decline shows how the hashtag emerged in Spain before it spread to Greece, as illustrated by Figure 2. The figure also demonstrates that the hashtag peaked on the day of its emergence and ebbed significantly thereafter. This is in line with prevailing accounts of connective action, because sharing a protest artefact through social media is the primary mechanism through which such macro phenomena of collective dissent emerge. Social media allows the network to scale quickly, but also means that engagement can tail off rapidly. Looking at the broader picture of the bailout negotiations, it becomes clear that the trigger for the emergence of the hashtag was a combination of events. A leaked 'Grexit' paper, which had emerged from the German finance ministry, proposed a temporary exit of Greece from the Eurozone. The paper, presumably designed to signal that the German government was not bluffing and would not back down on its demands, was thus interpreted as a quasi-coup d'état against the Greek people, who had only just rejected the bailout's terms in the 5 July referendum. News of this 'Grexit' paper had been making the rounds on Twitter the previous day (11 July).

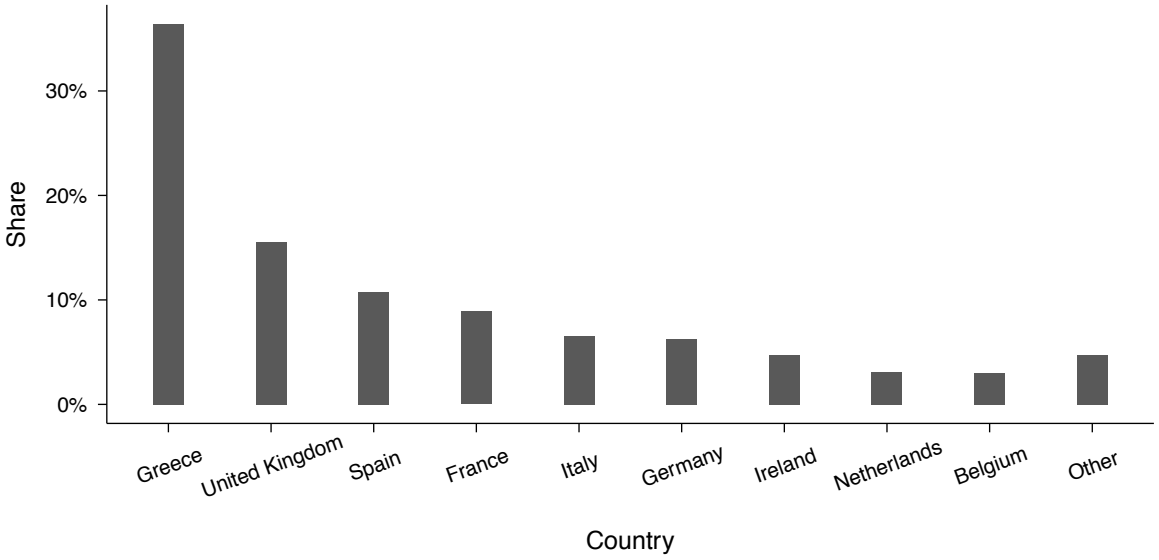

Figure 1: Relative frequency of hashtag by EU country

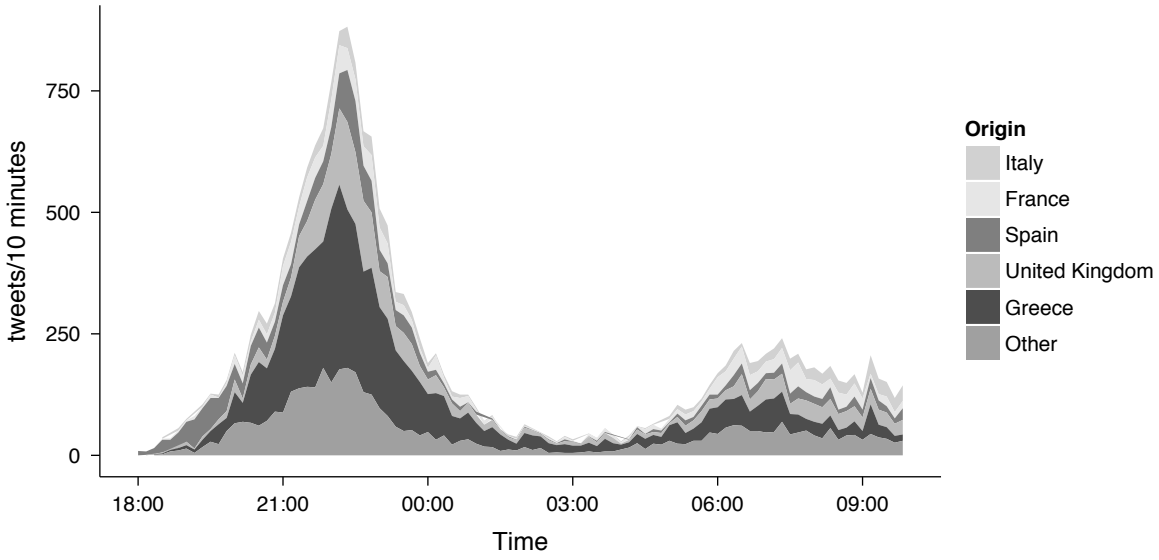

Figure 2: Frequency of hashtag use over time, stacked by country.

The earliest use of the hashtag appears to be by Sandro Maccarrone, a mathematics and physics teacher from Barcelona, who tweeted at 18:01 GMT that "the Eurogroup's proposal is a disguised coup against the Greek people #ThisIsACoup #Grexit". His username (#UErgonya) is a play on the word *vergonya* ('shame' in Catalan) and European Union.

> "La propuesta del eurogrupo es un golpe estado encubierto contra el pueblo griego #ThisIsACoup #Grexit"
>
> *– Sandro #UErgonya @smaccarrone, 6:01PM – 12 July 2015*

Several newspapers reported that Maccarrone, when asked, noted that the hashtag was not his idea alone, but conceived by a group of activists, and that it was pure chance that he was the first to use it (Ulrich and Schulz, 2015). However, the hashtag did not gain much traction at first.

Only once it was used by the Catalan politician and mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau at 19:02, an hour after Maccarrone first tweeted it, did #thisIsACoup take off. Colau's Twitter account acted as a node, brokering connections between otherwise disjointed networks, to amplify and rapidly scale the use of the hashtag across Europe. She tweeted "Greece wants to be in Europe, wants to pay its debt and negotiate. But it also wants respect, democracy and human rights. I'm with Greece #thisIsACoup."

> "Grecia quiere estar en Europa, quiere pagar deuda y negociar. Pero quiere tb respeto, democracia y DDHH. Yo Estoy con Grecia #thisIsACoup"
>
> *– Ada Colau @AdaColau, 7:02PM – 12 July 2015*

That the hashtag originated in Spain was also reported, amongst others, by the Guardian and Süddeutsche Zeitung. While a sizeable proportion of tweets using the hashtag originate in Spain, we have already established that the volume of tweets featuring the hashtag was much larger in Greece and the UK. To illustrate how the use of the hashtag spread across Europe we generated a series of plots at hourly intervals after Sandro Maccarrone first used the hashtag. Figure 3 maps the frequency distribution from Figure 2 onto a map of Europe, to illustrate where the hashtag was first used and how it spread across Europe. Between 18:00 and 20:00 the density of engagement is greatest in Spain, but with some significant engagement towards the end in the UK and Greece. Thereafter engagement with the hashtag is greatest in Greece, and the UK, before quieting down after midnight.

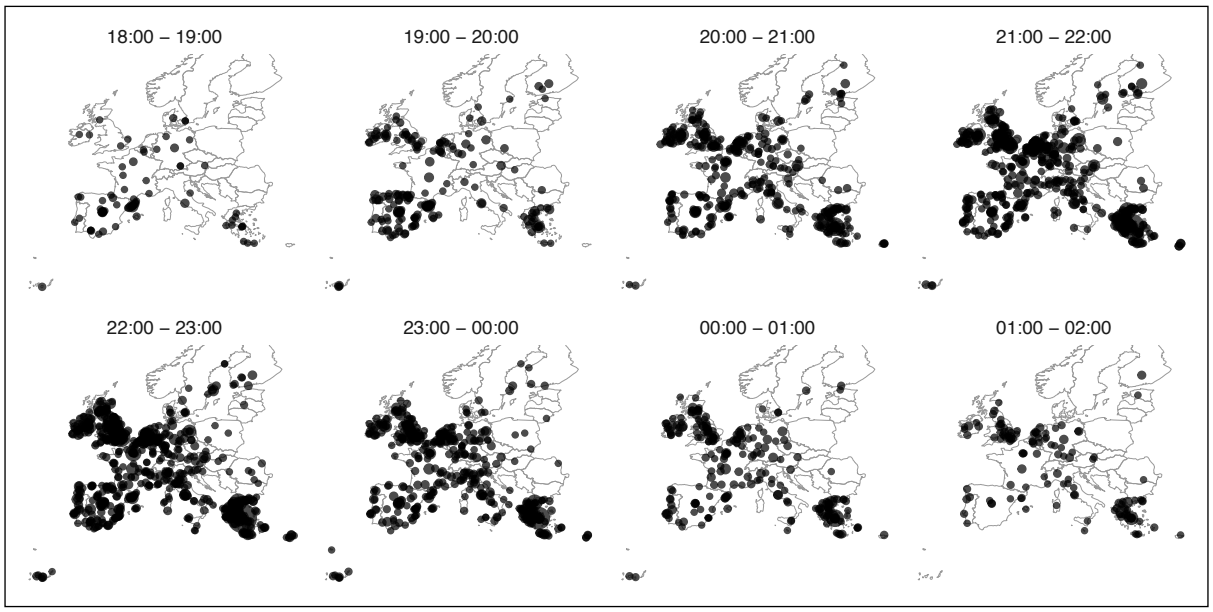

Figure 3: Geography of engagement with the hashtag over time.

To understand how the hashtag spread across Europe, and indeed the world, we need to examine how it was first shared. To do so we mapped the cross-border retweets, replies, or quotes of tweets that used the hashtag. These kinds of cross-border interactions occur when a tweet published by a user in one country (e.g. Ada Colau's tweet using #ThisIsACoup) is retweeted, replied to, or quoted by a user in another country. We do this by aggregating interactions to the country level and visualising country links in a chord diagram where the frequency of interactions between countries (i.e. retweets, replies, or quotes) determine the width of a link (see Figure 4). What is revealed is that the most frequent cross-border interactions occur between Greece and the UK, followed by Greece and Spain, and then Greece and Belgium (included with 'Other' in the diagram). Figure 4 illustrates that direct cross-border interactions were crucial to the geographic spread of the hashtag. Furthermore, it illustrates that connective action did not only involve collective engagement with the hashtag, but also direct engagements between Twitter users in different European countries. Not only did people from across Europe coalesce around the same hashtag, but they also interacted with each other across borders on the issue.

What is noteworthy about social media platforms in general, and #ThisIsACoup in particular, is the ease with which communications can spill across cultural, linguistic, and political borders, especially in the European context where these borders were often considered to be principal obstacles to the emergence of a European public sphere. Yet with #ThisIsACoup, a pan-European, indeed global, public communication space opened up. The hashtag created a virtual site for citizens from across Europe to come together in protest at the measures being imposed on Greece by its creditors. The sentiment the hashtag expressed was clear: seven years after the financial crash, here was another creditor forcing all the burden of adjustment on the narrowest of shoulders, while usurping its democratic right to self-determination. It took only four hours from the moment Maccarrone posted the first tweet that used the hashtag until it was adopted by Twitter users across Europe, ensuring that the hashtag gained widespread popularity while the bailout negotiations were still ongoing. The hashtag's popularity also ensured its wider visibility, as the news media began reporting on this social media phenomenon.

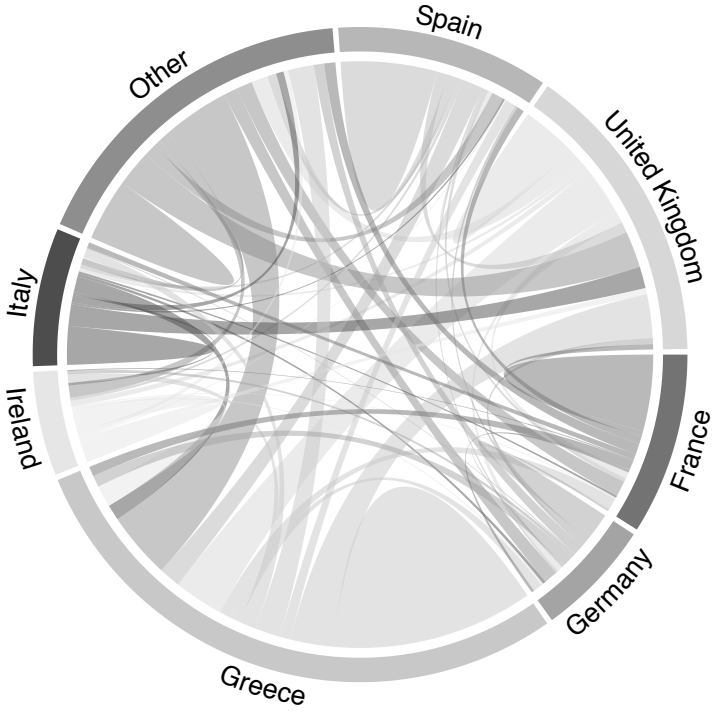

Figure 4: How those engaging with the hashtag interacted with each other across borders

Message and focus of tweets

A thematic analysis of top tweets yields the expected thematic pattern. Tweets using the #ThisIsACoup hashtag expressed solidarity with Greece, and opposition to what is viewed as the undemocratic, humiliating, or downright cruel treatment it received from its creditors. Spanish tweets indicated strong support for Greece and demanded respect for the outcome of the Greek referendum (which had rejected the terms of the bailout). French tweets similarly noted the "cruelty" and "humiliation" that Greece was forced to endure, noting that even the Germans agreed, referring to an article in Der Spiegel entitled "A Catalogue of Cruelties." Greek tweets seize on the "undemocratic" nature of the bailout. Italian tweets most frequently identify the Eurogroup as the culprit and displayed a strong sense of diffuse Euroscepticism. German top tweets are also unanimous in their criticism of the Eurogroup. While most countries have at least some top tweets critical of Germany, or less frequently of German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, in the sample we examined direct criticism of Germany is less prominent than we expected. The notable exception are top tweets originating from the UK, which more than any other point the finger at Germany. Articles and comments by the American Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman, a vociferous critic of the bailout conditions, who called the Eurogroup's demands "madness", were also cited regularly in tweets from all countries. Overall, most of the tweets are clearly directed at creditors, calling on them to respect Greece and meet some of its demands.

Impact on the mass media

A powerful example of cross-media agenda-setting, the hashtag clearly impacted press reporting, with a total of 749 hits in our search that exactly matched 'thisisacoup'. Two Greek newspapers alone had 10 articles matching the search term, Guardian had 11, Financial Times 10, and Süddeutsche Zeitung 6, to name but a few.

International news coverage that mentioned the hashtag was to a very large extent descriptive, noting its use as a grassroots response to what is perceived as the technocratic usurpation of the Greek people's democratic mandate and a violation of Greek sovereignty. Newspapers generally link the hashtag to US economist Paul Krugman. German papers are similarly descriptive, with a Süddeutsche Zeitung article reporting on the group of Barcelona-based activists who hatched the idea for the social media campaign. It discusses how German politicians of the Green and Social Democratic parties have also been opposed to the harsh conditions of the bailout deal. But one of the perhaps most noteworthy aspects of German coverage is its account of how much anger is directed towards Germany, noting also the emergence of a counter campaign #ThisIsNotACoup. More generally, German newspaper coverage reflects concern over the damage done to Germany's reputation, and its international standing, particularly by Nazi comparisons.

The British press covered the hashtag's emergence too, noting the anti-German backlash and anti-German nature of many tweets. It also reports on an offshoot campaign that uses #boycottgermany to call on people to refrain from buying German products. Two prominent articles note that not all tweets echo this anti-German sentiment, and that there is indeed disagreement between Twitter users. Notably an article in the Telegraph argues that "This is not a coup" while an article in the FT Magazine ponders the emergence and significance of hashtags more generally, and how they have affected our communications and our thinking.

Spanish newspapers note that the international phenomenon was mostly very critical of Germany, though stopping short of editorialising, and criticised Nazi comparisons. Quoting tweets directly appears quite prominent in Spanish coverage, as well as discussions of the role and importance of Twitter. One article, for instance, discusses Twitter and notes how politicians participating in the summit use it to communicate the proceedings to the public.

The Greek press was the most forthrightly partisan. The centre-right Kathimerini was broadly critical of the hashtag campaign, calling it counter productive. One article was titled "This is not a coup". Nevertheless, this does not mean that the paper was not critical of the bailout agreement, but that its criticism was different in character to that revealed in Greek tweets. Much of its criticism was directed towards Greece's Syriza government. The centre-left To Vima reported that news coverage across Europe is discussing the destruction of European values at the hands of Germany, and notes that the hashtag is a global response thereto, as well as a rallying cry of support for the Greek government. To Vima's coverage was relatively closely aligned with sentiment expressed in Greek tweets. It also notes how Pablo Iglesias, head of Spain's left-wing Podemos party, used the hashtag in support of the Greek government.

Discussion and Conclusion

The emergence of #ThisIsACoup is probably best described as a form of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). It originated and was spread on Twitter. Through the hashtag, Twitter acted as a stitching technology, activating disparate, far-flung groups around a common grievance (Bennett et al., 2014). The hashtag connected people across the continent by providing them a succinct message around which to coalesce. The threshold to participate was low. People could engage with it on their own terms, without a shared focus, identity, or the kind of organisational bureaucracy that coordinating collective action requires. When people from across Europe started tweeting about #ThisIsACoup they gave rise to a macro-level phenomenon of pan-European dissent.

Like other instances of hashtag activism, it was a powerful way of making visible grassroots resistance to the bailout conditions that the creditors were seeking to impose on Greece. The rapid rise and geographic spread of #ThisIsACoup illustrates that national and linguistic boundaries are extremely porous on social media. Use of the hashtag scaled rapidly, as it spread from Spain to the rest of Europe in a matter of hours, rapidly gathering momentum in the interim. Without platforms such as Twitter, it seems unlikely that grassroots movements could have coordinated so rapidly to communicate their grievances.

But people did more than engage with a common hashtag; they also engaged with other Twitter users across national boundaries. It seems likely that people who participated in the Spanish Indignados, Greek Aganaktismenoi, and Portugese Geração were activated by and engaged with #ThisIsACoup, not least because these movements themselves mobilised through comparable connective actions (Theocharis, 2016). By stitching together people from across Europe, and facilitating engagement across boundaries, Twitter opened a transnational communications space, enabling this Europe-wide public display of resistance. It is hard to imagine how those who had serious misgivings about the bailout negotiations in Greece could have joined forces and signalled collective opposition with people from across Europe, and indeed the rest of the world, in the absence of such a stitching technology. The hashtag allowed people from across Europe with similar grievances to find each other, by coalescing around the

same digital message, encapsulated by #ThisIsACoup, to synchronously express their grievance and dismay.

The effectiveness of connective action in opening up a pan-European public space for protest was amplified when the hashtag came to influence the news agenda. Communications that started out on Twitter quickly spilled over into the press. In the two weeks following the hashtag's emergence, newspaper articles around the world mentioned the hashtag, mostly describing its emergence and the message it was communicating, but clearly acknowledging the grassroots nature of the protest. As such it managed to reach an audience well beyond active Twitter users and enter mainstream public discourse. It would have been hard for an attentive European audience to miss this pan-European expression of opposition to the bailout conditions demanded of Greece. However, #ThisIsACoup does not appear to have crossed the threshold into more sustained forms of collective action, with deeper organisational structures, a shared identity, and clear common goals. Attention to the hashtag, and the coalition that coalesced around it, did lend visibility to pan-European resistance, but engagement itself fizzled as fast as it scaled, absent organisational structures to sustain the coordination of this pan-European network.

As controversial austerity policies continue to be implemented in Europe, social media emerged as a potent means of connecting people from across the continent to voice their objection in concert. Importantly, it opened a transnational communication space that effortlessly traversed national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, and extended the reach of the dissenting message by carrying it into news reports. The fact that people did more than engage with the hashtag, but interacted with others across the continent, illustrates that a genuine pan-European communication space opened up.

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