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## **Online Conversations in Changing Neighborhoods**

**Abstract:** Fifty years of literature on gentrification provides significant insights into a complex process structuring the global urban landscape, which has only recently begun to incorporate analyses of race and racism, amid an explosion of ethnographies of gentrifying neighborhoods. Yet, few have analyzed how social media and online communication structure the forms of material and social exchange and social organization of communities in the midst of the attendant social transformations of gentrification. In this paper, we discuss our approach on exploring online communication about gentrification in the Chicago neighborhood, Humboldt Park, and begin to identify patterns in online conversations as they are related to this neighborhood.

### **Introduction**

The research done at DePaul University for the DREU 2014 summer program was focused on gentrification, or more specifically, finding how the types of conversations occurring online differed from those occurring in person when it related to the housing market in Humboldt Park. The objective of this study was to explore online communication about gentrification in one localized neighborhood and begin to identify patterns in online conversations as they are related to the change occurring in the communities. Using data mining tools, we sought to figure out how the conversation online was about the topic. We build scrapers for sites such as Yelp, NextDoor, Everyblock, City-data, Reddit, and many others, using Python and Scrapy to do so. We ended up collecting over 10,000 comments in the span of a few weeks, which we then began to thematically code using Atlas TI.

We hypothesized that the intimate segregation of public spaces in a gentrifying neighborhood carried over into and was reinforced in social media and virtual worlds. Because of the tendency of people to pick craft their online spaces in regards to their own viewpoints, we saw these spaces as enabling forms

of faceless inactions and anonymity that encouraged practices of boundary-making essential to racism, as well the cultivation of specialized niche online communities that reflected and structured those dividing the neighborhood.

### **Literature Review: Gentrification in Chicago**

Gentrification in Chicago is marked by the fact that Chicago is a 'planned city' and that areas of the city have long been set out for one particular group through not only processes such as redlining, but also cultural significance and ties to the community. (Kirkland, 2008) Specifically our case of Humboldt Park is one of a Puerto Rican community, whose situation can be contrasted to that of a European immigrant. In a critical analysis of gentrification's effects of racial minorities through more than 40 interviews, it was found that gentrification leads to a more privileged upper class moving in and displacing a lower class, using community organizations and even the government to do so. Their ability to form block clubs and dominate meetings with the police allowed the gentrifiers to leverage their power to move residents, calling police on those they deemed troublemakers and complaining to landlords on those they deemed problems. While European immigrants had left largely voluntarily once new comers arrived in the neighborhood, a process labeled 'white flight', the Latino residents in Chicago were displaced and their community decentralized due to gentrification, and in the end it isolated them from needed support from the government. (Betancur, 2011)

Specifically dealing with the neighborhood Humboldt Park, residents face another emerging threat from realtors eager to profit from the incoming gentrifiers. Realtors use a variety of tactics to promote gentrification, mainly because their worst fear is that active citizens would be able to portray Humboldt Park gentrification as a greedy takeover of a stable community rather than an 'improvement'. They do this through racially coded language and rhetorical that promotes a 'sanitizing' theme. In a neoliberal tactic, they attack ethnic youth through coded language that makes them civically damaging and thus hard to mobilize public opinion towards. The government also supports these tactics in many ways, in fact, gentrification described to be celebrated as the efficient, private-sector-driven alternative to bureaucratic government programs. The discourse surrounding gentrification is changing from exploratory ('urban pioneers') to missionary ('fixing the ghetto'). The problem with reversing this trend is that the battle is waged largely online, making it a hard front to fight when the majority of residents are technology illiterate. (Grammenos, 2005)

## **Literature Review: Community Technology**

In order to study the online communities that form the foundation of gentrification in Humboldt Park, we had to first look at how online communities were structured. In one paper, the Twitter corpus was used in order to find the most relevant and informative Twitter user within a TV program. They filtered the users and computed the POS (parts of speech) and style features, tying into that the number of retweets and number of followers. The official Twitter of the TV program was found to be the most informative. The division between relevant and non-relevant users was not too clear, opposite of what was intended. However, the simple author identification algorithm they used on documents relevant to a TV program in order to find the most active author could be applied to online forums in order to find influential speakers. With that in mind, we used their methodology of taking content into consideration, looking at previous studies in order to find indicators, expanded messages, and style. (Inches, Crestani, 2011)

Another study listed not only ways to study available online communities, but the techniques and tools that are used to strengthen and increase participation in them as well. Using a sample of users from an exploratory film review site, researchers asked whether personalized invitations, contention choice, and suggestion factor into increased participation on a forum. The results were largely inconclusive due to the limited time frame, but the implications their hypotheses have do influence our own study, mainly because such techniques are largely used with the social networks build around online communities. (Harper, Frankowski, Drenner, 2001).

Once we can effectively study the online communities, a larger obstacle appears with regards on 'who'. Who are the users in these communities most effectively leveraging social capital? A study of Wikipedia discussion threads and livejournal weblogs helps us learn more (Biran, Rosenthal, Andreas, McKeown, Rambow, 2012) While much study has been done in live conversations on the detection of influencers, there is not a lot of research on online conversations. This study sought to explore the characteristics of community that make someone an opinion leader and develop a machine learning based approach for the automatic identification of influencers. Their hypothesis was that an influencer is likely to engage in persuasions, agreement/disagreement, and dialog patterns (initiating, contributing, and engendering longer threads). They viewed the actual application of their method as a black box. Upon testing their data, they found that 'attempt to persuade' was the best indicator for an influencer on LiveJournal, and not so significant for Wikipedia. 'Disagreement' is not a strong indicator for either corpus, proving

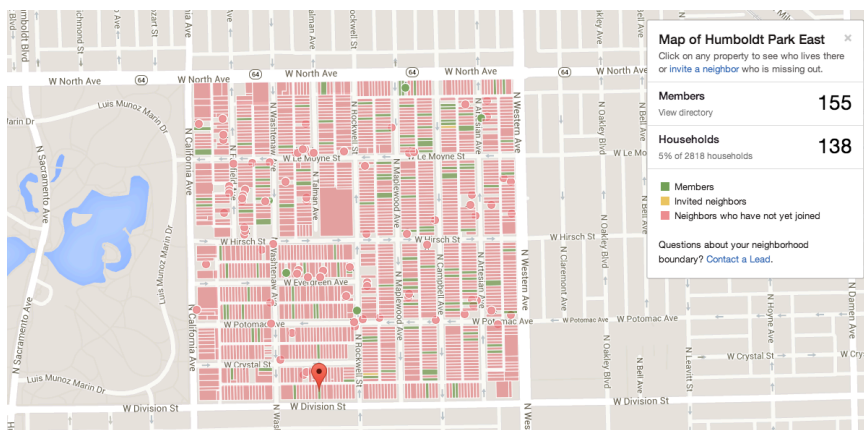
somewhat that influencers are disagreed with just as often as anyone else. ‘Agreement’ is a stronger predictor of influencers on Wikipedia than on LiveJournal. The different ways of interacting and talking on the sites seem to influence what aspects better indicate an influencer. We found this useful to our project in regards to the next steps we could take after analyzing the data; finding influencers, interviews and observations can be done to see how they fit into the community and why people defer to them, leading to more community-focused view of the situation. (Biran, Rosenthal, Andreas, McKeown, Rambow, 2012)

## Methods: Collection

In order to begin analyzing the online communities in Humboldt park, we first had to find them. We generated a database of coded social media and online interactions from sites such as Everyblock, Citydata forums, Nextdoor, Trulia, StreetAdvisor, Reddit, Yelp, and various other smaller threads.

To find these sites we used the following search terms; affordable housing, crime, improvement, graffiti, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, Puerto Rican Festival, gang, gentrification, housing, and realtor reviews. All were used in conjunction with ‘Humboldt Park’ so that we only analyzed data concerning that neighborhood.

WBZ Threads	Expected	Achieved	Comments	Date	Run By	Verified By	Fixed
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/story/delgado-luis-molina/parole-hearing-goes-poorly-puerto-rican-nationalist">http://www.wbez.org/story/delgado-luis-molina/parole-hearing-goes-poorly-puerto-rican-nationalist</a>	2	2		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/news/local/puerto-ricans-welcome-freed-%E2%82%A2%E2%82%AC%CB%9">http://www.wbez.org/news/local/puerto-ricans-welcome-freed-%E2%82%A2%E2%82%AC%CB%9</a>	1	1		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/news/puerto-ricans-aiderman-%E2%80%99hands-our-parade%E2%80%99-106">http://www.wbez.org/news/puerto-ricans-aiderman-%E2%80%99hands-our-parade%E2%80%99-106</a>	24	24		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/news/cultural/long-dueling-puerto-rican-parades-image-106436">http://www.wbez.org/news/cultural/long-dueling-puerto-rican-parades-image-106436</a>	9	9		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/news/life-sock-gang-video-how-well-to-board-136520">http://www.wbez.org/news/life-sock-gang-video-how-well-to-board-136520</a>	2	2		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/news/cops-caught-gang-video-defend-chemist-saves-105368">http://www.wbez.org/news/cops-caught-gang-video-defend-chemist-saves-105368</a>	14	14		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/news/puerto-ricans-honor-hardware-store-owner-who-bridged-racial-divide-10188">http://www.wbez.org/news/puerto-ricans-honor-hardware-store-owner-who-bridged-racial-divide-10188</a>	7	7		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/story/bakery-owner-apologizes-%E2%80%99humboldt-crack%E2%80%99-966">http://www.wbez.org/story/bakery-owner-apologizes-%E2%80%99humboldt-crack%E2%80%99-966</a>	17	17		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/story/travel-emotion-chaerters-puerto-ricans-5249">http://www.wbez.org/story/travel-emotion-chaerters-puerto-ricans-5249</a>	7	7		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-06-17/musicians-puerto-rico-congress-reunite-live-per">http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-06-17/musicians-puerto-rico-congress-reunite-live-per</a>	2	2		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-06-17/weekly-guide-cultural-activist-carlos-flores-offer">http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-06-17/weekly-guide-cultural-activist-carlos-flores-offer</a>	1	1		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-06-17/reasons-behind-humboldt-parks-changing-demo">http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-06-17/reasons-behind-humboldt-parks-changing-demo</a>	1	1		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/news/police-board-fires-cops-conduct-captured-gang-video-107131">http://www.wbez.org/news/police-board-fires-cops-conduct-captured-gang-video-107131</a>	21	21		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-03-20/charging-face-humboldt-park-84417">http://www.wbez.org/episode-segments/2011-03-20/charging-face-humboldt-park-84417</a>	5	5		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<a href="http://www.wbez.org/blogs/john-r-schmidt/2012-07/rise-and-fall-humboldt-park-100702">http://www.wbez.org/blogs/john-r-schmidt/2012-07/rise-and-fall-humboldt-park-100702</a>	19	19		7/24/2014	Anfal	Anfal	
<b>Total</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>132</b>					

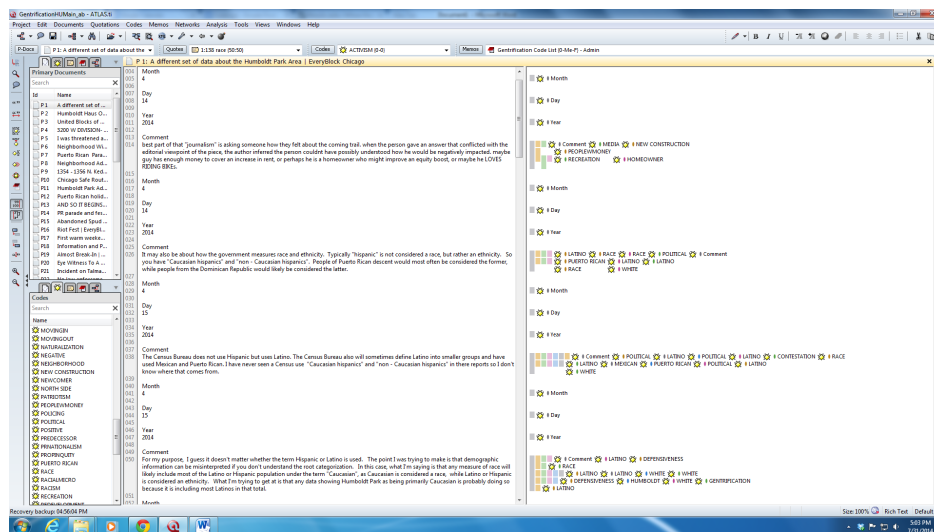


book for key phrases and themes to look for as we started coding the data.

## Conclusions

After gathering the threads we intended to analyze, we build various data scrapers and clean body scripts using Python and the scraping library Scrapy. After this we loaded the comments, which totaled more than 10,000, onto the thematic coding tool Atlas T.I. We also designed a code

While the bulk of the analytic work has yet to be done, there are certainly some conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Specifically in the collection, there were far more online posts in forums about the subject matter of gentrification in Humboldt Park than there were available print or newspaper publications. People expressed more opinions online, and the bulk of these opinions appear to be made by those supporting the further gentrification of the neighborhood. The language they use is coded specifically against any quantitative measure of ‘gentrification’, instead using phrases like ‘improvement’ and ‘cleaning up the neighborhood’. Further research must be done, but the overall profile of an online user speaking about the state of the community appears to fit that we first hypothesized: an incoming or present gentrifier unconsciously using the tools online literacy grants them in order to continue the trend.



The next steps we'll likely take on the project is to finish thematically coding the 10,000 plus comments, a long endeavor. While our goal for the summer, producing a large enough database for the review and collecting all available literature on the subject, had been met, there

are definitely ways to continue the research. Once the data is finished being analyzed, larger themes and assessments must then be found and brought to light. Hopefully in the end this project will lead to some significant new looks into how the online playing field concerning changing is forming and how the divide between the classes is playing out in a modern virtual field.

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