

A Content Analysis of the Social and Mainstream Media Narratives Surrounding the  
2011 Egyptian Revolution

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On January 25, 2011, a historical Egyptian movement, inspired by the recent revolution in Tunisia, was sparked by a wave of protest demonstrations throughout Cairo. These demonstrations eventually converged around Tahrir Square. After days of continued protests, as well as deadly battles with police and militant pro-Mubarak groups, the army stood down and the administration wilted. By February 11, Mubarak was completely ousted and his regime had fallen for good (Nunns & Idle, 2011).

For this article, I conducted a content analysis on a sampling of the social and mainstream media coverage of this remarkable Egyptian uprising. Through this analysis, I wanted to discover the emergent concepts and themes that are prevalent in the media coverage before, during, and after the revolution. I also want to understand how these concepts and themes vary across the different types of social and mainstream media coverage. What ideas emerge? How does the story evolve and get retold as the narrative transitions from real-time, on-the-ground tweets to general newspaper articles and opinion columns?

### **Content Selection and Methodology**

Leveraging the book, *Tweets from Tahrir* (Nunns & Idle, 2011), I have extracted all the tweets the editors collected. These tweets were dated from January 4<sup>th</sup> to February 20<sup>th</sup>. It is important to note that the editors selectively chose the tweets based on a variety of criteria that fit with the story they were trying to tell in their book. First of all, they concentrated only on tweets in Cairo, and consciously chose to not include any tweets from outside of Egypt. They only included English-language tweets. They also purposely did not include tweeters who opposed the revolution or thought that the protesters pushed things too far. Finally, it should be recognized that the tweeters in this sample most likely

came from a more affluent group of Egyptians, since the poorer people don't typically have frequent access to laptops and smart phones. However, the people who were actually on the ground, demonstrating in Tahrir Square, included both affluent folks and urban poor (Nunns & Idle, 2011).

I am also analyzing 68 NY Times articles that my research team discovered and collected. These articles were published between January 25<sup>th</sup> and February 14<sup>th</sup>. The NY Times articles were selected based on three different types of criteria: (a) articles that were written in Cairo, (b) event/day reports, and (c) opinion articles.

First, I organized the collected data into separate files and folders. I consolidated all of the extracted tweets from the book and consolidated them into a single Word document. I organized the three different categories of articles into separate folders. Next, I loaded the tweets document and the three folders of articles into Leximancer. In the initial pass, I mostly chose to keep all of the default settings. However, I did select "Merge word variants" to cut down on concepts being listed separately, even though they have the same stem. Similarly, I merged all concept seeds together that referred to Tahrir Square (e.g. "Tahrir", "square," etc.). I also selected "Apply folder tags" and "Apply file tags" so that I could eventually compare and contrast the emergent concepts within the various document sets. In order to do this comparison via the Leximancer Insight Dashboard, I had to add the relevant folder and file tags as Mapping Concepts. Finally, in the Insight Dashboard settings, I elected to generate an Insight Dashboard with a Quadrant Report, using those same folder and file tags as categories.

### **Leximancer Analysis of Concepts and Themes**

At an aggregate level, the prevalent concepts that emerged are not particularly surprising. Figure 1 shows that ‘Protesters’ is by far the most frequently occurring concept, followed by ‘Tahrir,’ ‘Egypt,’ and ‘people.’ According to Figure 2, ‘Protester’ was also the most relevant and connected overall theme. It is interesting that the ‘protester’ theme is made up of concepts that appear to define the protesters as on-the-ground, citizen journalists, highly connected and intertwined with social media. Concepts such as ‘reported,’ ‘blogger,’ ‘Twitter,’ ‘video,’ ‘journalists,’ and ‘television,’ all reveal a lot about how the protesters saw themselves, and also how they were portrayed by mainstream media reporters. It seems that one key role of the protesters was to communicate their message and report what was happening to both fellow Egyptians and the entire world.

Looking again at Figure 2, ‘Mubarak’ is the second most relevant and connected theme. The concepts folded into this theme are in line with one might expect: ‘government,’ ‘military,’ ‘president,’ and ‘power.’ It is interesting that the top two themes are ‘protesters’ and ‘Mubarak,’ followed by ‘Egypt’ and ‘Tahrir.’ This clearly illustrates the setting, the subject, and the leading characters in this story. The revolution was personal, localized. It centered on a direct conflict between the protesters and Mubarak. The epicenter was Tahrir Square, and this became the central stage of the showdown.

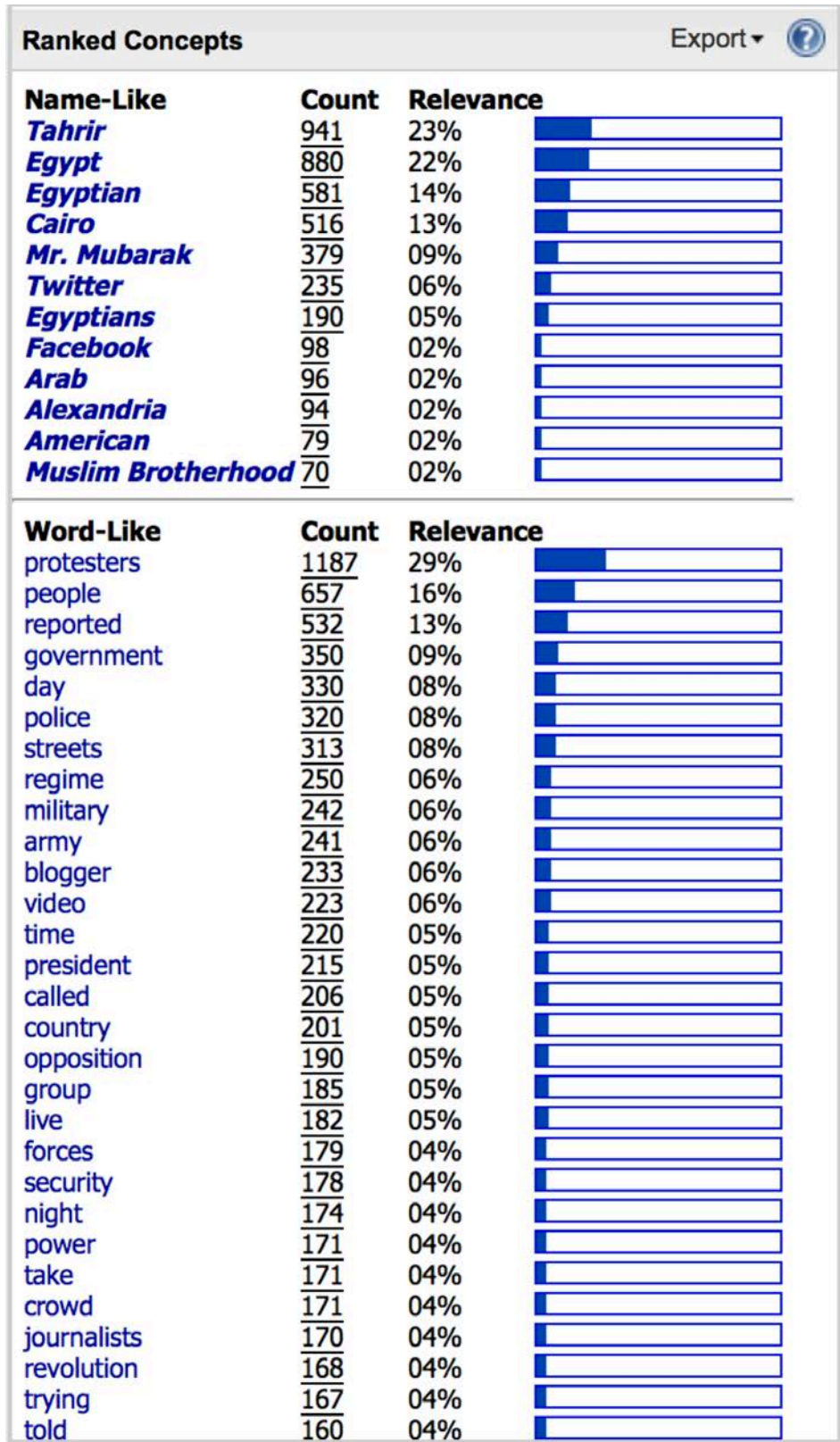


Figure 1. Overall ranked concepts in Leximancer

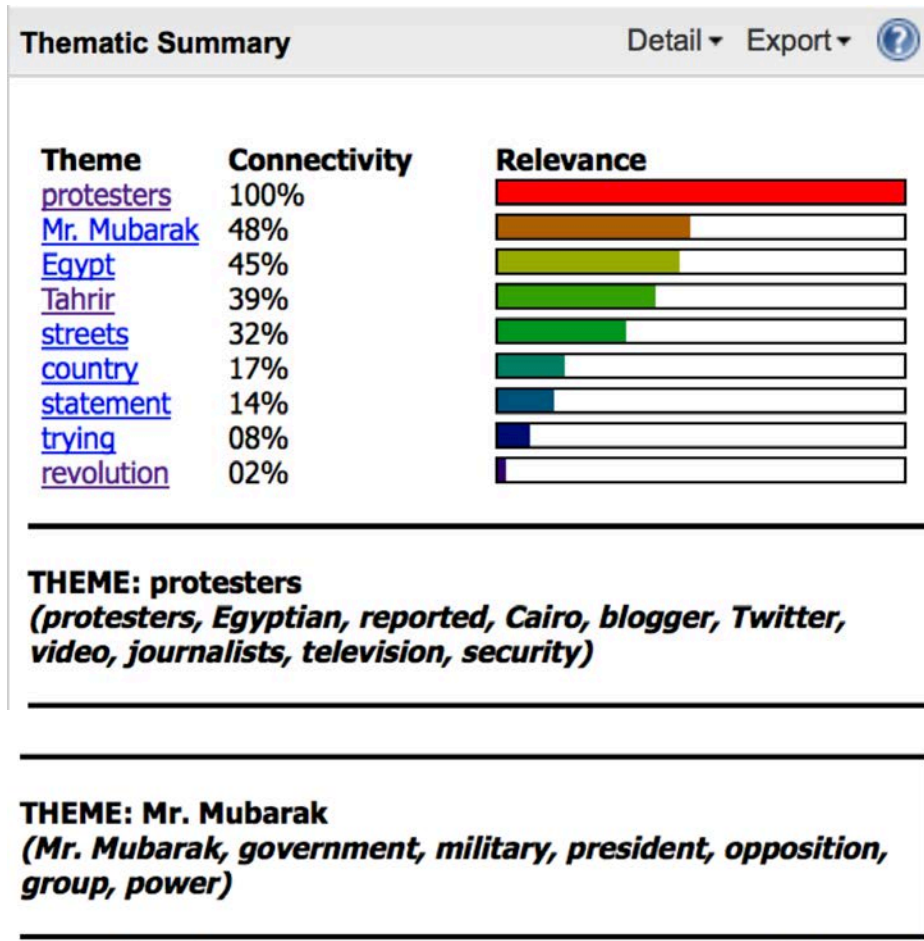


Figure 2. Leximancer's thematic summary of all tweets and articles.

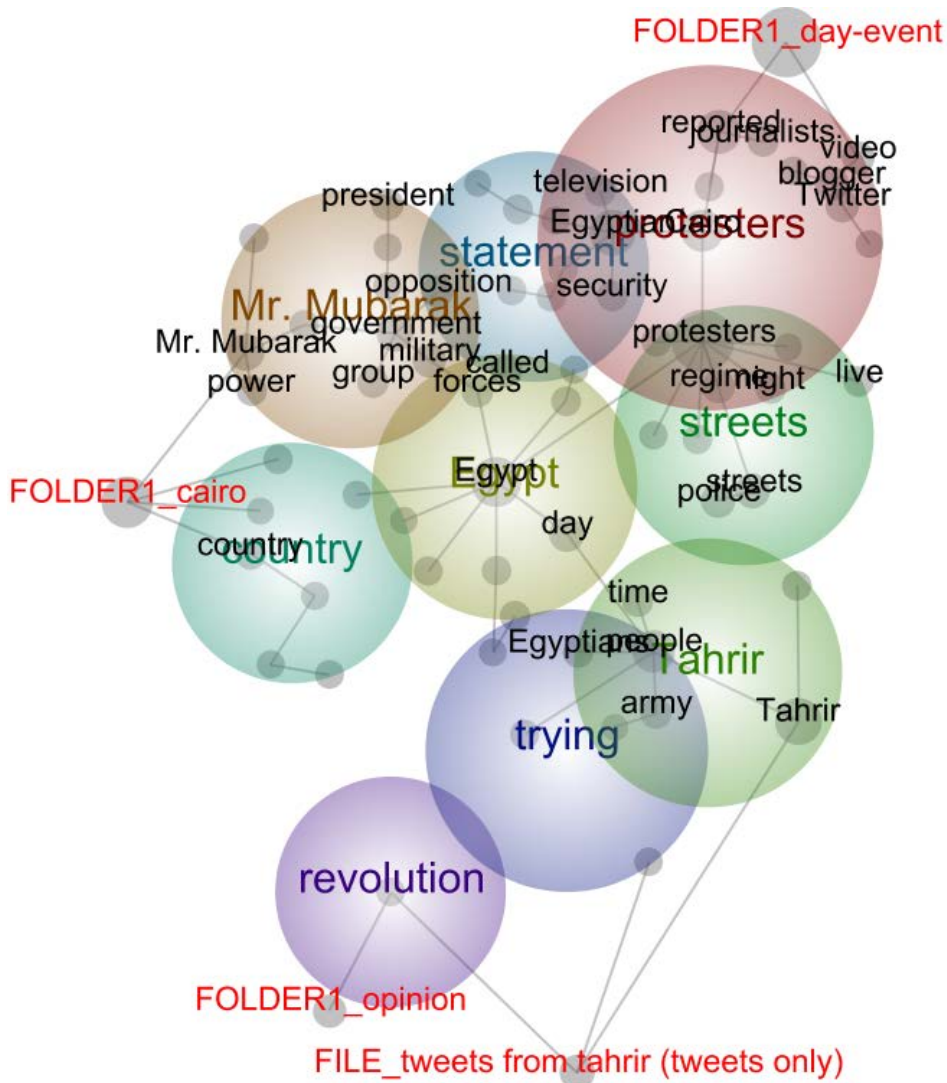


Figure 3. Leximancer's concept map of all tweets and articles.

Isolating the concepts that emerge within each article category, as well as the extracted tweets from the book revealed some distinct patterns when compared to each other. Based on the Quadrant Report (see Figure 4), we could hypothesize that the dialogue and content is more diverse and heterogeneous within the tweets than any of the

NY Times articles. This conclusion is based on the fact that all the highlighted concepts appear in the low strength/low relative frequency quadrant.

At the other extreme are the day/event articles. In these, the highlighted concepts fall within the high strength/high frequency quadrant. This may indicate a more homogenous and templated sort of reporting, which would be expected in a live blog sort of format. Each of these day/event articles includes a day's worth of short, time-stamped entries. Most of these entries reference reports from other bloggers, journalists, websites, and Twitter. Thus, the source of the latest update is always mentioned. This explains why concepts such as 'blogger,' 'video,' 'Twitter,' and 'reported' are relatively unique to the day/event category and are most likely to appear in these articles.

Most of the concepts in the Cairo-based articles and opinion columns trend toward the low strength/high frequency quadrant. This means that the highlighted concepts are more often likely to appear in these types of articles. Based on this Quadrant Report, we might assume that the ideas discussed in the Cairo and opinion articles are more consistent and stable than the tweets. This seems like a reasonable hypothesis, because the tweets are being posted in a more ad hoc, spontaneous manner, as swiftly moving events are occurring in real time. The Cairo and opinion articles are written later, after the author has had time to gather information from many sources, synthesize all of this information, and then reflect more abstractly on the story that is unfolding.



**1. Quadrant Report**

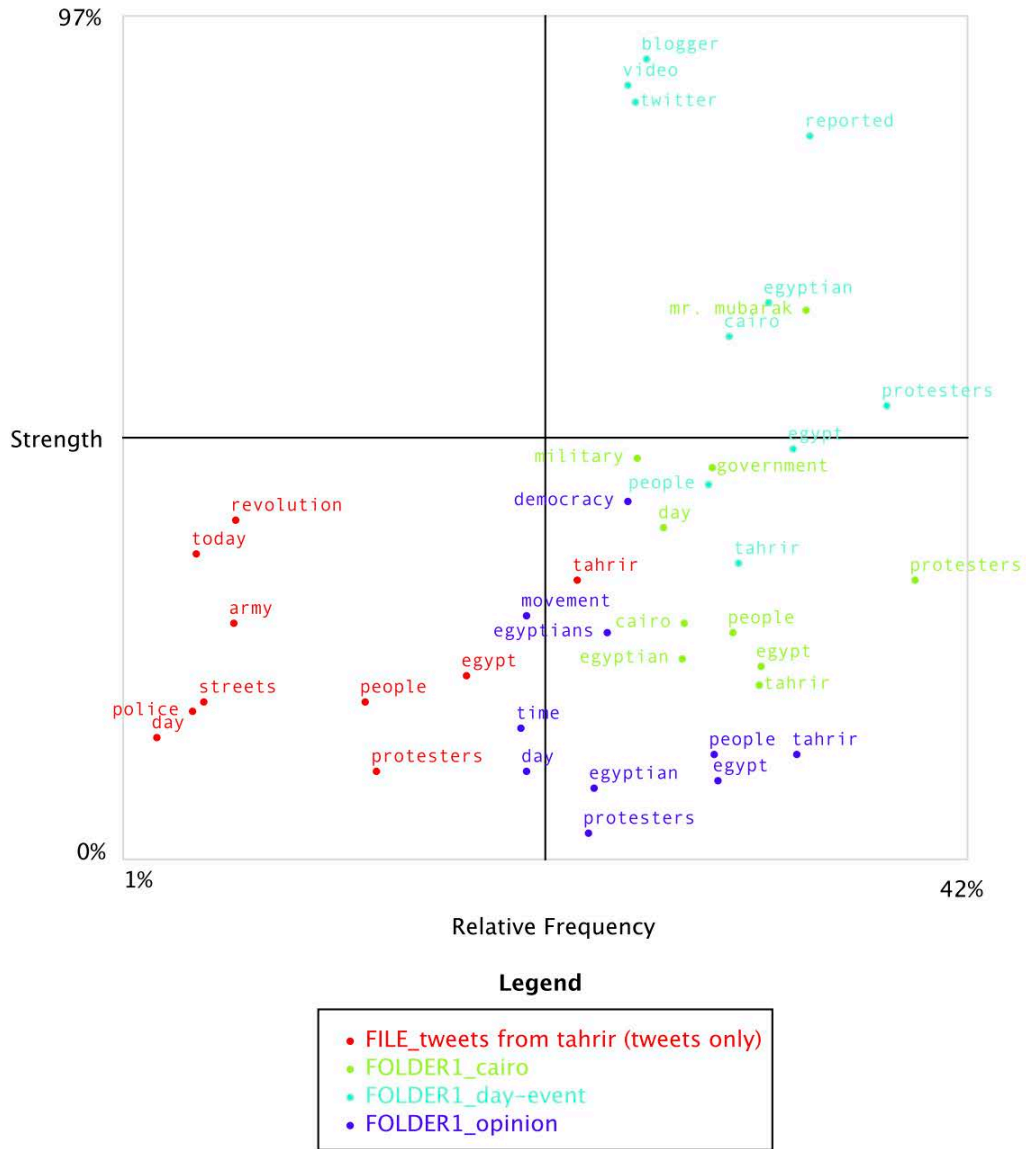


Figure 4. Leximancer’s Quadrant Report of concepts across the various categories of data (i.e. tweets, day/event articles, Cairo-based articles, and opinion columns).

Looking deeper at the Insight Dashboard revealed some noteworthy, comparative differences between the tweets and the three categories of articles. As Figure 5 illustrates, the ranked concepts for the tweet category show that ‘revolution’ and ‘today’ are the most important concept to these tweeters. For these folks who were participating live in the demonstration, the spirit was all about the here and now. Today is the day they revolt and take back their country and their future. Looking down the rest of the list of ranked concepts, one can see a significant focus ‘Tahrir,’ since that is where most of the action was, and where many of them were physically located. Much of the conversation also centered on the ‘army,’ ‘people,’ and the ‘police.’ These, of course, were the actors – the parties that were engaging with each other throughout the course of the revolution.

The day/event category, as discussed earlier, is heavily focused on ‘bloggers,’ ‘video,’ ‘Twitter,’ and the concept ‘reported.’ That is because most logged entries began with a source. The reports focused primarily on the ‘protesters,’ ‘Cairo,’ ‘Tahrir,’ and ‘Egypt’ as a whole. The events appear to cover more of the reporting of the on-the-ground activity, and there is little higher-level analysis about the history of the conflict or the hegemonic forces (e.g. Mubarak’s regime) that the protesters were revolting against.

The articles from Cairo were considerably different than the day/event live blogs. The highest ranked concepts in these articles were in fact ‘Mr. Mubarak,’ the ‘military,’ and the ‘government.’ To a lesser degree, the authors wrote about the ‘protesters’ and ‘people,’ according to this ranked concept list. This juxtaposition is interesting. These articles appear to be more concerned with the power structures in place, inside and outside of Egypt, their reactions to the events on the ground in Tahrir, and the impact that the conflict in Tahrir Square was having on transforming these structures. Just looking at

the headlines of the articles, one can see that these Cairo-based articles tell the story of the revolution from a very different level and perspective:

- Crackdown in Egypt widens but officials offer concessions
- Mubarak orders crackdown, with revolt sweeping Egypt
- Mubarak refuses to step down, stoking revolt's fury and resolve
- Mubarak's allies and foes clash in Egypt
- Mubarak's grip on power is shaken
- As Egypt protest swells, U.S. sends specific demands
- Uncharted ground after end of Egypt's regime
- Egypt's leaders seek to project air of normalcy
- Egypt officials seek to nudge Mubarak out
- Military offers assurances to Egypt and neighbors
- Egypt army sets 6-month blueprint, but future role is unclear
- In crowd's euphoria, no clear leadership emerges
- Diplomatic scramble as ally is pushed to the exit
- Obama urges faster shift of power in Egypt

How will the army and Mubarak's regime respond to the protesters? How will this revolution impact Egypt's future? What are the regional and geopolitical consequences of this transition and the uncertainty it creates? What will the new leadership look like? What role does the United States play, both diplomatically and strategically, in terms of its own interests in the region? How can Egypt restore stability and 'normalcy?' These are the questions being asked in the mainstream, Cairo-based NY Times articles.

Finally, the ranked concepts of the opinion article category may reveal a more idealistic view of the events taking place. ‘Democracy’ is the strongest concept in this category and the revolution is frequently referred to as a ‘movement.’ The focus remains on the ‘Egyptians,’ or the ‘people’ rather than on Mubarak’s government, the military, or other hegemonic themes. It seems that these articles are mostly friendly toward the protesters. The columnists are empathizing, supporting, and sharing in the experience of the Egyptian demonstrators who have gathered and stood up in Tahrir Square. They are attempting to capture the perspective and motivations of those opposing the regime. Once again, here are some of the headlines that support this notion:

- A republic called Tahrir
- Avoiding a new pharaoh
- Exhilarated by the hope in Cairo
- Date with a revolution
- Jubilation in Tahrir Square
- Postcard from a free Egypt
- The view from Tahrir
- They did it
- Watching thugs with razors and clubs at Tahrir Sq.
- We are all Egyptians

These opinion articles remain centered on the plight of the Tahrir protesters, as well as the jubilation, hope, and triumph they all felt as Mubarak was finally deposed.

## 2. Ranked Concepts for Categories

Category: FILE_tweets from tahrir (tweets only)			
Concept	Rel Freq (%)	Strength (%)	Prominence
revolution	2	39	0.8
today	1	35	0.7
tahrir	8	32	0.6
army	2	27	0.5
egypt	5	21	0.4
streets	1	18	0.4
people	3	18	0.4
police	1	17	0.3
day	1	14	0.3
protesters	3	10	0.2

Category: FOLDER1_cairo			
Concept	Rel Freq (%)	Strength (%)	Prominence
mr. mubarak	21	63	4.3
military	10	46	3.2
government	14	45	3.1
day	11	38	2.6
protesters	34	32	2.2
cairo	12	27	1.9
people	15	26	1.8
egyptian	12	23	1.6
egypt	17	22	1.5
tahrir	17	20	1.4

Category: FOLDER1_day-event			
Concept	Rel Freq (%)	Strength (%)	Prominence
blogger	10	92	3.5
video	9	89	3.3
twitter	10	87	3.3
reported	21	83	3.1
egyptian	18	64	2.4
cairo	15	60	2.3
protesters	30	52	2.0
egypt	20	47	1.8
people	13	43	1.6
tahrir	15	34	1.3

Category: FOLDER1_opinion			
Concept	Rel Freq (%)	Strength (%)	Prominence
democracy	9	41	5.7
movement	6	28	3.9
egyptians	9	26	3.6
time	6	15	2.1
tahrir	20	12	1.7
people	14	12	1.7
day	6	10	1.4
egypt	14	9	1.3
egyptian	8	8	1.1
protesters	8	3	0.5

Figure 5. Leximancer's ranked concepts compared across the various categories of data (i.e. tweets, day/event articles, Cairo-based articles, and opinion columns).

### **Conclusion**

Using Leximancer for this initial content analysis provided a great start for understanding the emergent concepts and themes that are grounded within the tweets and articles collected. It has yielded a number of discoveries both about the overall, common ideas told in this Egyptian revolution story, as well as the specific angles of the story that each type of media tended to highlight. A logical next step would be to manually code the tweets, as well as a sampling of the articles, in order to more deeply understand the nuances of how the story evolves and gets retold as it transitions from the ground to the different sections of a mainstream newspaper.

## References

Leximancer. (2014). [www.leximancer.com](http://www.leximancer.com).

Nunns, A., & Idle, N. (Eds.). (2011). *Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's revolution as it unfolded, in the words of the people who made it*. OR Books.