

**Representations of self in the digital public sphere:  
the field of social impact analyzed through relational and discursive moves**

**Achim Oberg, Walter W. Powell, and Tino Schöllhorn**

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## **Introduction**

In everyday life, people often make a distinction between organizations “in reality” and organizations “in the digital sphere,” or between click and mortar (Powell et al., 2016). Even though with some organizations it is hard to gain in-person access to them (think of Amazon or the airlines), life goes on inside those organizations, often obscured from public view. Organizational life consists of many aspects and processes that are not digital, but in this paper, we focus solely on organizations’ appearances in the digital realm. We explore what can be learned about the dynamics of a field from organizational behavior in the digital sphere. To answer this question within one chapter, we confine our perspective on organizations’ appearances even further: First, we focus on the digital information an organization provides to the public, ignoring other forms of digital information, such as email (see Goldberg et al., 2016; Srivastava & Goldberg, 2017), Twitter (Bail et al., 2018), Facebook (Bail et al., 2017), or employee postings of opinions about employers, such as Glassdoor (Corritore et al., 2020). Second, we limit our analysis to information provided in the public digital sphere and ignore digital communication channeled to specific partners or audiences.

By analyzing organizational self-representations in the public digital sphere, including texts, images, and videos, we reveal how organizations position themselves with regards to others, both in terms of language and affiliations. We gain insight into the relational culture they produce (Z. Mohr et al., 2020). When producing digital data, organizations create – intentionally or unintentionally – connections to their environments in at least two ways: On a rhetorical level, they use elements of ongoing discourses, such as specific terms or keywords, that communicate their position within a debate; on a relational level, they reference other organizations with whom they interact or that provide legitimacy. The digital self-representations of organizations, interacting in the same field over time, permits analysis of both discursive and relational dynamics.

As our topic of empirical study, we select the field of organizations involved in a global debate about the social impact created by nonprofit organizations (Seelos & Mair, 2017; Ebrahim, 2019; Logue, 2019). Scholars refer to such topics as an issue field, connected by public participation in ongoing discussions (Hoffman & Wooten, 2017; Powell et al., 2017; Zietsma et al., 2017). Other such fields could include debates over climate change and sustainability, diversity and social

justice, or equitable supply chains. A distinctive feature of issue-based fields is they bring together organizations across sectors and industries to engage in an evolving discussion.

Our goal is to capture the direction of the social impact discourse over the better part of a decade. Based on yearly snapshots of the digital self-representations of hundreds of organizations over eight years, we provide three interlinked analyses. We begin with the discursive movements of individual organizations, where we observe extensive changes. These portraits show how influential organizations alter their public faces. We then analyze discourse at the field level, which is surprisingly stable even though individual organizations change their discursive and relational positions frequently. Finally, we turn to groups of organizations with similar positions and highlight their ability to integrate vocabularies of other groups. Here we observe that the connectivity of keywords, a *lingua franca* if you will, increases integration at the field level and affords distinction with individual organizations' positioning. Although our approach is conceptually focused on only a few core aspects of organizations in the digital sphere, the possibilities to study the interaction between organizational discursive positioning and field development become obvious. We conclude with a discussion of complementary research avenues that overcome the somewhat restrictive view we present in this contribution.

### **Theory: Digital Positioning in Fields**

To lay a conceptual foundation for our empirical analysis, we begin with the relevance of the digital sphere for organizations. From this starting point, we develop a condensed conception of individual organizations' self-representation in the public sphere. Then we move to multiple organizations and discuss briefly how fields are reflected in the digital world and how organizations are positioned in this field. Because it is technically easy for organizations to change their digital self-representations, we end with the question of how such organizational repositioning might change a field.

#### ***Digital self-representations of organizations***

Goffman (1959) defined the self-presentation of an individual as the information given by an individual in a social situation. Although "information given" was often interpreted as a conscious or even strategic act of impression management (Elsbach, 2003), Goffman made clear that when providing information about oneself, additional information is "given off" that is not consciously

controlled. We use the concept of self-representation as a descriptive term to highlight the source of information: The self-representation is the digital information offered by an organization. This excludes all information about an organization produced by others. For instance, media reports about an organization or ratings and rankings produced by experts or customer comments are not part of the self-representations we study. To be sure, some organizations readily emphasize evaluations and rankings, even sharing critical ones on their webpages as a sign of transparency (Brandtner, Horvath, and Powell, 2021).

An organization's self-representation takes place in various spheres with different artifacts. In the physical realm, buildings, signposts, statues, promotion souvenirs, etc. are used to represent the organization. In the print world, press reports, annual reports, advertising material, etc. are part of the self-representation. In the digital sphere, websites, logos, social media channels, etc. are means for organizational self-representation. Because we are interested in digitalization, in the following, we focus solely on digital self-representation and ignore physical and print spheres, although they obviously have multiple connections - e.g., the logo of an organization appears in the digital sphere, in print, on buildings, and on flag (Drori et al., 2016).

Because we are interested in a field perspective on self-representations, we limit our analysis to information provided in a public sphere and ignore communication channeled to specific partners or audiences. We exclude annual reports for investors (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010) unless they are posted on their webpages. Within this restrictive perspective, we exclude studies of internal communication (Oberg & Walgenbach, 2008; Goldberg et al., 2016) or interorganizational communication (Corritore et al., 2020), although the relationship between internal and public communication is very interesting but beyond the current scope.

Self-representations in a public digital sphere—especially on the Internet—contain quite different means of communication and interaction. They include organizations' homepages with logos (Delmestri et al., 2015) and news, "about us" sections with mission statements (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Brandtner, 2021), downloadable annual reports for investors (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010), product and service descriptions, shopping areas, and information for potential employees. Today, online self-presentations combine various formats and genres that emerged decades before the Internet (Yates, 1993).

### *Relevance of self-representations*

Organizations use their Internet self-representations to interact with a variety of stakeholders via the same channel. Among the main audiences are members and beneficiaries as well as customers and clients. For potential customers, a webpage is nowadays in many cases the first point of contact (Powell et al., 2016). Visitors often become aware of a product, company, restaurant, sports club, association, etc. via their websites before any physical interaction takes place. In addition, the interaction may end with a product or service rating made on the web. Another important group is potential investors or experts who try to evaluate the performance of an organization. For many organizations, interaction with customers is channeled through their websites, and therefore outside evaluators are now better able to compare company reports with actual organizational service than they were in previous decades when organizational communication was divided into various channels for different stakeholders. Even when interactions are not visible from the outside, extensive self-representation can be assessed regarding its consistency. Many organizations provide information about employment or participation options and conditions that aim to attract new employees or members. Simultaneously, this information can be read by existing employees. For employees, the website is therefore a means to compare the promises an organization gives towards its environment with the actual reality within the organization. Even when employees tolerate a certain amount of slippage between externally oriented promises and internal reality, if these discrepancies exceed their tolerance, then silent or even vocal protests might be a consequence (Hirschman, 1970). Recognizing the potential consequences of feedback loops with employees could force organizations to keep discrepancies between promises on their self-representation and internal activities within an acceptable limit.

These brief examples of interactions between public digital self-representation and various stakeholders shows that digital self-representations in the public sphere are influenced by feedback loops with different audiences, which can lead to minor or major updates when expectations or organizational activities change. Consequently, digital self-representations are much less static than other forms of self-representations, such as buildings or printed materials. Digital self-representations are routinely assessed, evaluated, criticized, and updated. Although channeling messages to specific stakeholders via other media is possible, organizations' online self-representations are accessible to diverse stakeholders simultaneously. This visibility limits the

possibility to distribute divergent messages and increases the pressure to demonstrate accountability and consistency.

### *Simplified conception of digital self-representation*

Digital self-representations of organizations combine previously established genres, such as press releases, executive CVs, mission statements, product catalogs, message boards, and annual reports, that have multiple modes of communication (e.g., text, pictures, graphics, animations, videos, and sound). Accordingly, various strategies can be used to conceptualize and analyze self-representations. For example, one can focus on certain genres (e.g., mission statements; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015), communication modes (e.g., logos; Delmestri et al., 2015), or constellations of nouns and verbs (e.g., typification of actors).

We are interested in the interaction between self-representations and organizational fields; hence we highlight two aspects of digital representations: (a) How are self-representations positioned in the larger discourse of the field? (b) How are self-representations connected among each other? To answer these questions, a spartan conception of digital self-representation is sufficient. We limit our analysis to text, the primary means of discursive participation, and hyperlinks, the main tool to reference other organizations.

### ***Organizational Fields in Public Digital Media***

Organizational fields are everywhere in the language and analytic toolkit of organization studies, tracing a lineage back to Bourdieu (1984) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and running through Fligstein and McAdam (2012) and Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012). Although there are differences among the many proponents of this concept, the spatial metaphor of an arena around which relations of production, circulation, and appropriation of economic, cultural, and political goods occur is shared. Yet despite all the discussion of fields (see Martin (2003) and Swartz (2013) for very good reviews), there is scant attention to actual measurement of who constitutes the members of one. Bourdieu himself was fond of correspondence analysis as a tool (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 230). Our aim is to demonstrate how the digital world provides real opportunities for studying membership within a field as well as wider field dynamics. The entry ticket is collecting web-based data. Our conception of organizational self-representations as

bundles of texts and symbolic relations allows us to capture membership in organizational fields on both a discursive and relational level.

### *Discursive level*

From a field perspective, self-representation can be interpreted as an interface between an organization and its environment. From this view, the language used by an organization in its self-representation can be seen in relation to the languages other organizations use in the same field (Oberg et al., 2017). An organization's overlap with a shared set of symbols and with the dominant discourses and vocabulary of a field can be interpreted as its degree of membership in a field. The communicative contributions of all members of a field define a discursive realm of current discourse and its actual vocabulary. The discursive position of an organization is then the specific mix of discourses it offers in its self-representation. For instance, an organization can position itself in the current debate about Sustainable Development Goals by talking primarily about climate change and CO2 reduction, whereas another organization might focus on environmental justice and diversity topics. Together, they might share a vocabulary relating to sustainability. In this example, the specific mix of discourses marks the discursive positions of individual organizations.

### *Relational level*

Besides discursive contributions to current discussions, most organizational self-representations contain references to other organizations' websites. Such a reference can be interpreted as an endorsement of another organization or, at a minimum, as the acceptance that visitors might leave the current website to visit another organization's website. This willingness to share audience attention varies with organizational forms. For example, companies are less inclined to lose the attention of potential customers, thus banks do not link to other banks, whereas universities might highlight their multiple connections with other research institutions (Oberg, Schöllhorn, et al., 2006). Because references have a direction from one organization to another, the incoming references from peers can be interpreted as signs of acceptance within an organizational field: The more incoming references an organizational self-representation receives from other organizations of the same field, the higher its acceptance as a member of the field (Powell et al., 2017). If two organizations reference each other, this bidirectional willingness to share attention can be interpreted as mutual awareness, which is a key characteristic of organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The collection of all symbolic references among organizations of a field can be

analyzed as a relational structure in which each organization has a certain network position (Powell & Oberg, 2017).

Although we narrowed our conception of self-representation to text and hyperlinks, the simultaneous accessibility of all digital self-representations of organizations of the same field makes it possible to focus not only on the information given by an organization but to include additional information about organizations' discursive and relational positions in relation to other members of the field.

### *Change of Positions and Field Change*

Organizational self-representations are important means to communicate with various stakeholders who are not just a reading public, but also react and might even demand changes. In general, the digital nature of online representations makes it easy to change central aspects such as texts and references according to changes in environmental expectations or internal changes. Based on our simplified model of self-representations, two changes are of importance:

**Discursive change:** Organizations might integrate key terms or full vocabularies of discourses that they did not use previously to highlight their willingness to interact with other organizations that are already engaged in these debates. Inversely, organizations can drop and delete key terms to leave certain public debates.

**Relational change:** Organizations might add references to others to increase their embeddedness, even though this may reduce their chances of maintaining stakeholders' attention. Inversely, organizations cut references to those with whom they no longer want to be associated.

Both types of change are obviously not mere changes of digital symbols or stylistic changes, but social actions that can be interpreted according to their effect on other organizations and on the organizational field. Although changes by single organizations might not change the discourse and relational structure of a field, multiple changes of several organizations might affect the field's relational structure or discourses.

On the relational level, we can distinguish at least two directions of change of an organizational field. If an increasing number of organizations of the same field connect with each other, then relational integration takes place (Oberg et al., 2017). This would be the relational equivalence to



the idea of increased interaction among field members that DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described as a typical structuration process. The opposing organizational activity whereby organizations reduce references to peers could lead to a disintegration that would finally result in fragmentation and dissolution of a field. If the increase or decrease of relationships is limited to certain areas of the field, a relational structure with interconnected clusters of organizations with higher connectivity emerges (Oberg et al., 2017).

On the discursive level, we can assume—in a simplified manner—at least two directions: If organizations adopt a similar vocabulary over time, then the similarity of discursive positions increases. Such a use of a shared language is another core aspect of the structuration of fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Inversely, if organizations change their self-representation by reducing the relevance of a shared vocabulary in favor of specialized discourses, distinct discursive sub-communities appear within a field.

On a conceptual level, relational integration and similarity are often expected to appear in tandem. For instance, structuration is often perceived as a combination of relational integration and rhetorical similarity. Nevertheless, diffusion studies across fields show the similarity of some aspects of an organization is possible without assuming a relational integration. Furthermore, symbolic interactions are possible even when the overlap of vocabularies among partners is low.

## **Methods**

We use recent discussions of accountability and performance metrics in the US nonprofit sector to analyze online debates and to demonstrate how digital data can be harnessed to study both organizational positions within a field and changes within the field through time. By studying both the discursive orientations of and relations among organizations involved in conversations about appropriate metrics of performance, we offer an analytical x-ray of a potentially fateful moment of transformation. To capture a picture of the social impact issue field, we proceed in four steps: First, we identify the organizations that have participated in the metrics and evaluation discourse. Second, we develop markers that enable us to characterize the discourse in text presented on the webpages of these organizations. Third, we apply these markers to the online materials created by the identified participants, and then generate indicators for all entities discursive position and their degree of membership in different linguistic communities. Fourth, we develop visual images to

represent both change in individual discursive positions and field-level change in discourse over time.

### *Metrics and impact discourse*

The increasing attention to performance metrics in civic and philanthropic activity is an outgrowth of a broader trend of professionalization in the nonprofit sector (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Barman & MacIndoe, 2012; Maier et al., 2016). Calls for greater accountability and efficiency, expressed by both public and private financiers, have ushered in market-based ideas and practices—conventional means of competition and marketing as well as ballyhooed concepts like strategic philanthropy and social entrepreneurship—into a realm long known for charitable intentions and volunteer engagement (Frumkin, 2009).

Although the contemporary clamor for efficiency, accountability, and scaling has recast the debate over nonprofit performance (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2010; Schoening & Hartigan, 2013), attention to evaluation and outcomes is by no means new. In the U.S. the beginnings of this movement go back to the Progressive era of the early 20th century. The social sector, along with other elements of American society, experienced a marked turn toward professional training and more “scientific” charity, led by the creation of the field of social work and subsequently augmented by policy analysis (Lubove, 1965; L. A. Mohr et al., 1994; Abbott, 1995). This scientific approach was later joined by managerial influences from both business and government in the latter part of the 20th century (Worth, 2011).

The present focus on performance metrics and evaluation is the result of the intensification of these earlier influences and their confluence with contemporary debates over how best to do good work. Encouraged to be more “business-like”, some nonprofit managers turn to the commercial world as a source of inspiration (Dart, 2004). In response, critical voices bemoan this apparent renunciation of activism and civic involvement in favor of managerialism (Skocpol, 2003; R. D. Putnam, 2007). These divergent pulls, despite threatening to corrode the sector’s character and functions, have stimulated considerable effort to develop new approaches to manage and measure nonprofit activity (Salamon, 2003; Brest & Born, 2013). No one approach, however, has yet succeeded in drowning out the voices of other contenders.

Although the importance of evaluation of performance has become widely accepted, no coherent set of metrics or general framework currently dominates. Instead, a cacophony of multiple voices, reflecting the contrasting orientations of civic ideals (“beneficiary voice”), scientific expertise (“control groups”), and managerial efficiency (“social return on investment”), contend for attention (Hall, 2014). Our goal is to capture these divergent voices and analyze the evolution of the conversation around how to gauge social impact.

### *Identification of the members of the interface*

To identify organizations involved in these debates, we used webcrawler technology that tracks all hyperlinks embedded within an individual website to identify possible participants in conversations with the initial website. The tool was developed by Oberg and Schöllhorn (see Oberg, Schöllhorn, et al., 2006; Oberg, Huppertz, et al., 2006) and has been used in studying social movements and their affiliations. The webcrawler allows for the self-identification of a community in which participants are identified by others on the basis of weblink connectivity. An important advantage of a webcrawler is that it facilitates snowball sampling and generation of preliminary boundaries, independent of researcher bias or a priori definitions of a sample. This self-referencing process is especially useful in analyzing fields composed of multiple types of members, referred to as “multimodal networks” (Shumate & Contractor, 2013, p. 450).

The process of tracing weblinks and scrutinizing possible field members, detailed in appendix 1, produced a sample of 369 entities involved in discussions of evaluation, who relate to at least one other participant with a bidirectional reference. To be sure, interconnectivity among entities on the World Wide Web is high (Huberman and Adamic, 2004; Barabási, 2009). Research illustrates that individuals on Facebook are not linked by six degrees of separation, but a tighter 4.74 (Backstrom et al., 2012). The sample we developed is even more densely connected. The 369 entities in our study have an average of 32 unidirectional connections to others. This dense pattern reduces the average distance to 2.2 degrees of separation between any two, indicating that the sample represents a relatively cohesive interface engaged in discussions of nonprofit performance metrics.

We coded key characteristics of each entity, including demographic attributes, activities, sources of revenue, and audiences reached or served. Information was taken directly from the websites as well as secondary sources, including Internal Revenue Service 990 forms and the online service

Guidestar (now Candid). We treated organizational form as a mutually exclusive category and report the legal status, except for non-organizational forms—such as projects, blogs, or conferences, which we coded using information from their websites. Fifty-six percent of the sample are nonprofits, 14% transnational organizations, 13% for-profits, and 3% branches of government. The remaining 14% are non-organizational forms.<sup>1</sup> We identified the activities in which each entity is engaged, for example, evaluation, funding, consulting, networking, media, advocacy, research, and social services. There is some clustering between form and function: nonprofits tend to be involved in social services and advocacy; for-profits in consulting and funding; government agencies in funding and research; and non-organizational forms in media, advocacy, and networking. Certain activities—evaluation, consulting, and networking—attract multiple organizational forms. The entities range in age (based on founding year) from 2 years old to more than 200. They vary considerably in staff size (full-time staff and volunteers) from small blog operations to 250,000-employee global organizations, and in scope of programs and services from local and national to international. Altogether, the resulting sample has members from different sectors (public, private, and civic), represented by an array of organizational and non-organizational forms, that participate in evaluation via multiple activities aimed at diverse constituencies.

### *Identification of the markers of the discourses*

Research on organizational discourse has burgeoned, providing insight into how concepts are created and become accepted or rejected by relevant constituents (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010; Phillips & Oswick, 2012; Phillips & Malhotra, 2017). An older line of work examined annual reports to garner information about the behavior of corporations (Westphal & Zajac, 1998; Staw & Epstein, 2000; Fiss & Zajac, 2006). In our case, looking only at annual reports would restrict us to professional organizations that create documents for a limited audience. It would leave out such non-organizations as blogs and social movements, and for every organization would exclude documents detailing their work on evaluation. Websites provide a richer source of information,

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<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of blogs, advocacy groups, communication sites and the like may seem unorthodox to those used to brick and mortar organizations. Digital media have played a crucial role in recent large-scale efforts at social change, with mixed results to be sure; but their presence, for good and ill, is now undeniable. Similarly, in discussions of social impact, a logic of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), in which digital media and conferences are paramount, ties together a loose community of commentators and practitioners.

including reports, PDFs, and current programs, for analyzing how entities represent themselves to a broad range of publics. Moreover, not only are websites a primary point of access and communication for many organizations, hyperlinks also form a representational relation that sends a message to the public about the association between two parties. In this respect, hyperlinks are similar to bibliometric networks as well as friendship networks on social media.

We analyzed website content by assessing the use of *keywords*. To identify these “significant, indicative words” (Williams, 1976, p. 14), we examined websites to discern terms used to describe evaluation efforts to discern social impact. We then consulted five sources that provide glossaries for the sector: 3ie Impact (the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation), REDF (Roberts Enterprise Development Fund), Charities Evaluation Service (“the UK’s leading provider of service and advice on evaluation for the voluntary sector”), Innovation Network (a nonprofit evaluation consulting firm), and TRASI (Tools and Resources for Assessing Social Impact, an initiative of the Foundation Center). These vocabulary and concept guides were culled and matched with our examination of the websites to expand the number of keywords. The resulting list, presented in appendix 2, was then shown to practitioners in the field. This method produced a list of 105 keywords.<sup>2</sup> These keywords, we assert, are loaded with cultural and political meanings. We follow Castells (2000, p. 379) who argued that cultural battles have become the power battles of the information age.

Each keyword was then linked to a domain-specific vocabulary. *Associational* terms reflect an orientation that stresses membership, civic participation, and social justice. *Scientific* language captures the methods, tactics, and theories of implementing and measuring the effectiveness of social services. *Managerial* discourse is focused on performance and outcomes. A co-occurrence analysis indicated that the conceptually derived keyword clusters were closely connected with respect to how frequently they appear together on the websites.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Keywords occasionally entail different formulations referring to the same concept. “Operational monitoring”, “monitoring system”, or “M&E”, for example, all refer to “monitoring and evaluation”. To comprehensively capture references to a concept, we included for all keywords possible synonyms and closely related expressions to be considered in the analysis of website text. This produced a total of 214 search terms.

<sup>3</sup> Following (Carley, 1988), we tested whether the terms that we categorized into the same language are closely connected with each other.

### *The linguistic topography of nonprofit performance evaluation*

We collect data on keywords by analyzing the full written content of websites.<sup>4</sup> Using a program written by Oberg and Schöllhorn, we culled the contents of every website (which sometimes include tens of thousands of pages) and stored them in a special search index that allows direct access to and calculation of the appearance of the keywords. As one example, this process reveals that the term “impact evaluation” appeared 171 times on GiveWell.net in 2011. These data allow us to examine how the members of the sample use expressions affiliated with associational, scientific, and managerial discourse. From this analysis, we created an indicator of cultural position as follows:

*Discursive position:* For each organization, we counted the number of occurrences of keywords on its website. As each term is assigned to a specific discourse, we obtain the size of a discourse by summarizing the occurrences of keywords. An organization’s cultural position is calculated by computing the percentages of each discourse.<sup>5</sup> The position is a point in a three-dimensional space spanned by the three axes of associational, managerial, and scientific languages.

*Visualization of positions:* As the percentages for each organization add up to 100%, the discursive position rests on a plane in three-dimensional space. This plane can be rotated into a two-dimensional space without any transformation in the distances between nodes.<sup>6</sup> The resulting visualization is a triangle, where the corners mark a discursive position with 100% of the occurrences of terms belonging to only one discourse. The center of the triangle is a position with equal percentages of all three (see Figure 1). By marking each organization’s cultural position on the triangular plane based on its use of the three discourses, we create an image depicting the linguistic topography of nonprofit performance evaluation. (Further discussion of the visualization steps is found in (Korff et al., 2015). We use the triangle imagery as it is apt for this linguistic

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<sup>4</sup> A research assistant initially wrote a program that used Google Search to identify the presence of keywords on the websites. We are grateful to Google and its now defunct University Research Program for assistance in the first iteration of the data collection process.

<sup>5</sup> By measuring the cultural position in percentages of all occurrences on a website, the size of a website is rendered irrelevant for its discursive position.

<sup>6</sup> This is different from the multi-dimensional scaling algorithms used in correspondence analysis, where distances in an N-dimensional space have to be transformed to create a two-dimensional visualization. The advantage of our approach is that no information is lost.

topography of this field; we have seen other examples of this approach with as many as twelve sub-communities.)

- Figure 1 about here -

In 2011, the organizations in the sample spoke in a language that used 42% associational, 26% scientific, and 32% managerial terms. Words from all three discourses appeared on webpages, but associational terms were the most prevalent. Scientific and management terminology have become important components in the discussions of performance metrics, but the original associational language of civil society has not been displaced. All three are represented in debates over social impact, indicating a confluence of concepts and ideas from the different domains.

### *Change of positions and field structure*

To assess discursive and relational changes over time, we collected annual snapshots of the websites, including all texts and references, for the sample of participants. Note that in the analyses presented here, we do not include new entrants to the conversation, which would be important for a full picture. Think of these analyses as like a digital movie, capturing the yearly representations of the 369 entities from 2011 to 2018. From these data, we studied change from three perspectives:

**Change by individual organizations:** To make the changes in discursive position from year to year accessible for a descriptive analysis, we developed a visualization that resembles an airplane's contrail above the discursive field. We drew the movement from one discursive position to another position during a recent year thicker than movement during an earlier year. Additionally, we marked more recent positions with larger nodes than in previous positions. The resulting visualizations provide a first impression of an organization's trajectory within the discursive space of discussions around social impact.

**Discursive positions at the field level over time:** To assess change and evolution in the discursive space over time, we generated a triangle visualization that includes discursive positions and symbolic relationships for each year. If the discursive positions visualized as nodes move closer to each other, this would indicate discursive integration, or the development of a proto-or-common language. If the density of references increases, this is a sign of relational integration.

**Co-occurrence of key terms of communities:** Each community of organizations applies relatively similar mixes of vocabulary. How keywords are combined is assessed with a co-occurrence analysis, and then visualized with semantic networks for the beginning and end of the observation period.

## **Findings**

We present our findings in four steps. We start with a description of organizations' positions in the discursive sphere in the initial point of observation (2011). Then we show different trajectories of change by individual organizations. We next analyze the organization's coverage of the discursive field. Finally, we analyze co-occurrences of key terms as organizations use them in similar positions.

## ***Communities***

Hypothetically, the organizations might array themselves randomly across the three-sided space. The deviations from such a hypothetical average value are obvious when we depict revealed positions in figure 2, where we map the linguistic positions in 2011. Each dot represents an organization's discursive position. The sample does not cover all the spaces of the triangle. The number of organizations that draw heavily on scientific or managerial terms is smaller, whereas the number is higher in the associational realm. Moreover, there are no apparent clusters with higher density or otherwise clearly demarcated areas, aside from the clustering towards the middle. Aside from a few outliers located near the far corners of the triangle, we observe a relatively even spread of positions.

- Figure 2 about here -

*Discursive communities:* Using organizations' locations on the triangle, we turn to identifying the presence of distinctive discursive communities. Assuming that shared meanings are indicated by patterns of word usage, we consider all organizations with similar orientations to be a discursive community. From an outsider's perspective, they are comparable in their use of keywords, whether they are aware of one another or not. Community membership is not asserted by an organization but is determined by its discourse. Organizations in the *civil society community* (red) emphasize "social change," "participation," and human rights (the term "justice" is used frequently).



Examples of organizations in the associational community include the Global Fund for Women, Bread for the World, The Open Society Foundation, and Kiva. In the *science community* (blue), organizations make extensive use of terms like “data,” “survey,” and “framework.” Members of this community include the Gates Foundation, The Rand Corporation, The World Bank, and Medecins Sans Frontieres. The *management community* (yellow) is populated by organizations that frequently mention “performance,” “efficiency,” and “outcomes”. Representative participants include Accenture, the Bridgespan Group, and Fair Trade USA.

*Interstitial community*: Some organizations were in interstitial positions, poised between these three communities. We suspect such entities are more likely to have both the interest and capacity to engage in activities that may serve to further interaction, disseminate information, and promote exploration within the wider field. Such skills may be derived from the familiar advantages of brokers, who by playing an import-export game transfer good ideas from one setting into an unfamiliar one (Burt, 2004). Or the ideas may be generated by amphibious entrepreneurs who carry practices back and forth across multiple domains and disrupt all the communities they inhabit (Powell & Sandholtz, 2012).

An interstice is a space between things or parts. Scholars have long recognized the fertility and power of such locations, even when they are only small or narrow zones. Mann (1986, 2012) has argued that interstices were the spaces at the margins of previously dominant ideologies where transformational power leaps happened, remaking civilizations, and catapulting social upheavals that overthrew established regimes. Physical and biological scientists view interstices as fertile ground as well, as headwaters at the confluence of multiple streams, rich in organic content and critical components of ecosystems. In the worlds of culture, an interstice is a space where genres are crossed, and new visions formed. Interstitial actors fill gaps between contexts; they inhabit gradated environments that are partly one thing and partly another.

To identify the interstitial space, we computed a median position by identifying the median for each axis (associational, managerial, scientific) independently. This stylized cultural position is surrounded by 50% of the organizations that use more managerial (or associational or scientific) terms and 50% of the organizations that use fewer managerial (or associational or scientific) terms. We then draw a circle around this median position with a radius  $r = 15$  to mark the interstitial area. Appendix 3 provides details on establishing the radius. All organizations with a cultural distance

lower than or equal to  $r$  from the median position are designated as part of the *interstitial community*. Among the members are Acumen, a nonprofit venture capital fund that supports entrepreneurs in the world's poorest communities, and Glass Pockets, an organization that promotes philanthropic transparency.

*Focused communities*: We identified three communities that reflect focused cultural positions: The *civil society* community contains organizations that do not belong to the interstitial community but use associational terms to a larger extent than managerial or scientific words. For the *managerial* and *scientific communities*, we followed the same algorithm. The analytical exercise results in four communities: three respectively focused on civil society, science, and management and one located in the interstice.

### ***Dynamics of discursive positions***

To understand changes over time, we present examples of organizations that changed their discursive positions during the observation period of eight years. We start with a simple example and proceed with more complex trajectories. Figure 3 depicts the consulting firm McKinsey as an example of the visualization of movement and position.

- Figure 3 about here -

McKinsey began with a combination of predominantly managerial-scientific language with a lower proportion of associational terms. This position did not change much during the first few years, but then the relevance of managerial terms increased gradually. During the last years, McKinsey was again quite stable, with a predominantly managerial language in combination with a mix of associational and scientific terms. The observation that one of the world's largest consulting companies uses a managerial language is certainly not surprising; we present this simple case to demonstrate how the visualization of position and movement can be interpreted.

After this example with a steady and modest movement in the managerial direction, we depict in Figure 4 three other cases that reflect larger changes in the language that organizations speak digitally.

- Figure 4 about here -

The first case is the Clinton Foundation, located at the top right of the triangle. In the first year of the observation, the organization used language combining managerial and associational language, with a small proportion of scientific terms. In the following years, it increased the relevance of associational terms, and its position moved toward the associational corner, showing the reduced importance of managerial terms. This movement was then revised in the subsequent three years with a gradual increase in managerial terms. In 2018, the relevance of scientific terms increases. After these revisions, the Clinton Foundation occupied a position that seems to balance associational, managerial, and scientific languages. Surprisingly, the Clinton Foundation ended nearly where it started.

The second example, the Grameen Foundation, which starts at a position that balances managerial and scientific terms but used a rather small proportion of associational terms. Like the Clinton Foundation, Grameen moved during the first years in the direction of associational language by reducing the relevance of scientific terms before returning to language that combined all three discourses. Subsequently, the relevance of managerial terms increases, to an extent that the organization ends up favoring managerial terms and balancing associational and scientific terms.

The Gates Foundation, our last example, started with language that combined associational and scientific topics with a small proportion of managerial terms. Like the two other organizations, it moves in the first years in the direction of more associational language. Then it returns to balance between associational and scientific language but adds more managerial terms. In the middle of the observation period, the Gates Foundation combined all three languages but later decreases managerial terms and increases the relevance of scientific terms.

All three examples show some similarities, such as the movement toward more associational language at the beginning of the observation. Overall, we see marked differences among the three organizations. None started at the same position, nor do they end up in the same area of combined discourse.

The linguistic changes in direction at different points in time are surprising. The abruptness and speed of change may remind one of Brownian motion, which is a result of atoms bumping into each other. This suggestion raises the question of whether the observed organizations revised their positions because they “bumped” into other organizations’ positions, or by the arrival of new

entrants. We cannot answer this question with this visual analysis; it remains an important task in studying the dynamics of fields.

All three organizations – the Clinton Foundation, Gates Foundation, and Grameen Foundation – are similar in form and operate in the same field. As we limited our perspective to their language on publicly visible websites, these organizations were obviously able to observe each other. In some years, we see movement that could have resulted from mimetic processes – for instance, when they add associational terms. Nevertheless, in most years, their movements are not similar. Indeed, the sharp movements might have even been influenced by the need to differentiate their positions within the field. Overall, the observed organizations started and ended in different sections of the discursive triangle. Although we observe change and can assume mutual awareness, we do not see an increase in similarity in position with these selected cases.

### *Density of discourse*

After looking individually at four organizations, we turn now to the full sample of organizations and examine their connectivity. In figure 5, we visualize the distribution of positions of all organizations from 2011 to 2018, using the same triangle image. Now the lines between nodes represent hyperlinks to one another's webpages. We interpret these linkages as public endorsements among the participants.

- Figure 5 about here -

For 2011, we colored four groups of organizations, one in each corner of the triangle, marked red (associational), yellow (managerial), and blue (scientific); a fourth group is in the center (purple) around the average of the three discourses. Because the organizations within one area of the triangle occupy relatively similar positions and are to some extent connected, we call them communities. The linkage structure reveals that many organizations in the central community are not only connected with each other but with organizations in the other three more specialized communities.

With the images for subsequent years, we remove the color coding to visualize the area that is occupied by discursive positions of organizations. We observe that this covered area changes slightly from year to year as the organizations recast their individual positions. For instance, in 2012, the covered area expands in the direction of scientific and managerial language but without

vacating the associational domain. In 2017, the covered area expands slightly into the scientific area and leaves space empty in the associational area. Although we see slight movements over the years, there are no dramatic signs of aggregation or expansion. Instead, the covered areas remain comparable. The discursive differences among organizations in the sample remained constant, even as individual organizations change their positions, as we have seen.

What might explain why we do not observe increasing similarity of discursive positions? The size differences among organizations might be important. Perhaps our largest organizations do not connect with small fry, or vice versa. But it seems there is a good amount of cross-referencing between different sized organizations. Another explanation for lack of growing similarity could be that organizations in the sample might have lost interest in each other. But the visualized references among the organizations make clear that this is not the case either. Although the organizations present different positions with their discourse, and alter their language, they still reference one another. This result leads to the unexpected preliminary conclusion that mutually interested organizations move around individually, while still holding distinctive discursive positions.

### *Connectedness of discourse*

Even though the larger field-level discourse remains heterogeneous, does the “language” of keywords, and its meanings, change over time? To analyze co-occurrences and associations of keywords, we use semantic network visualizations. In the following representations, the nodes represent terms of discourse, and the thickness of lines between keywords represent the strength of connections between respective keywords. We generated these networks for each of the four linguistic sub-communities of at the outset and end of the eight-year observation period.

- Figure 6 around here -

In the associational community in 2011, the term *impact* was strongly connected to *mission* and to *justice*. *Mission* was strongly tied to *trust*. Furthermore, *impact* was associated with other nonprofit terms like *charity*, *advocacy*, *participation*, and *accountability*. At the end of the observation period, *impact* and *mission* were still connected, but *data* and *management* were now much more salient. Associational terms such as *advocacy* and *vision* were still part of the dominant vocabulary; nevertheless, terms like *data* and *management*, which originated in the scientific and managerial spheres, were integrated. This is a striking transition; indeed, some might suggest a colonization.

- Figure 7 about here -

When we look at the managerial community's vocabulary, the keywords were rather diffuse in 2011 as terms were not often used in tandem. *Performance* was the most central at the outset. *Performance* linked *impact*, *mission*, and *data*. At the end, *performance* was still important, but *data* and *management* greatly increased in importance. Surprisingly, the term *mission*, which is strongly connected to the associational sphere and once connected with terms like *justice* and *trust*, appears in the managerial sphere, along with *data* and *management*.

- Figure 8 about here -

In the scientific community, *impact*, *survey*, and *data* were the main nodes at the beginning. These are cornerstones of a scientific approach. But by 2018, the terms *management*, *effective*, and *mission* were added to the repertoire. These are not terms typically associated with the language of science. Participation also appears in the science domain, but it is a polysemeous term. When used in the associational realm, it refers to voice and engagement, whereas in the scientific realm it refers to rates of participation in randomized clinical trials.

- Figure 9 about here -

Turning to the interstitial community, we observe at the outset that a quartet of terms -- *impact*, *data*, *mission*, and *performance*, are paramount. This quartet integrated keywords from scientific, managerial, and associational discourses. At the end of the observation period, the terms *data* and *impact* were still prevalent. The term *management*, in connection with *effective*, greatly increased in importance. Nevertheless, the interstitial domain still integrates vocabularies from all three domains. The interstitial language connects associational terms such as *advocacy* and *justice* with its core terms and incorporates scientific terms such as *analysis* and *transparency*.

Across all four communities, the language of management became louder, but without dominating all vocabularies. Instead, management becomes integrated into all communities' vocabularies. Is this co-optation, a Trojan horse, or a new hybrid language?

Although organizations in the non-managerial communities added the term *management* to their core concepts, the relative influence of the managerial vocabulary does not increase. This suggests that organizations in the field are balancing two expectations. Binder (2007) referred to this

straddling as ‘for love or money,’ Smith and Besharov (2019) as ‘bowing before dual gods.’ We see it more as a common language that affords the ability to interact with those who are different via shared rhetorical combinations, while maintaining unique discursive positions that permit them to have distinctive voices.

## **Discussion**

We have argued that the digital self-representations of organizations, consisting of texts and hyperlinks displayed in the public sphere, offer a novel approach to studying discursive and relational positions in an organizational field. In addition, by incorporating yearly changes we can analyze how organizations and the larger field change over time. Such efforts are rare in the study of organizations. As a demonstration, we collected the self-representations of organizations involved in discourse about nonprofit metrics over a period of eight years. To make this data accessible for a visual interpretation, we developed a visualization that combines linguistic positions and symbolic relationships in the same diagram. This diagram helps us analyze the initial setting of four relatively distinct sub-communities of organizations with similar discursive positions. Additionally, the change trajectories of individual organizations’ discursive positions can be highlighted with this triangular diagram. We observe striking change patterns showing that organizations have individual developments with sometimes abrupt changes in direction. Surprisingly, these individual changes do not add up to a broader systemic change in the larger distribution of discursive positions, or an increase or decrease in relationships among the organizations involved in the impact debate. But when we compare the co-occurrences of dominant keywords for communities of organizations with similar discursive positions, we find that the ability to communicate with each other is increased by adopting crucial keywords from other discourses. Instead of adapting a full vocabulary, organizations in the sub-communities maintain their dominant vocabularies, while adding some concepts and terms to become more multi-lingual. This expansion of vocabularies knits the field together, tying such value-laden terms as mission and vision together with management and data.

All our visual analyses rely on digital data and on generated indicators for discursive and relational positions and the co-occurrence of terms. We demonstrate that digital data have revelatory potential for the study of organizational change and field-wide evolution. The next step in our research is to

apply statistical analyses to these indicators to identify changes on the individual and field level that cannot be observed by the visual analyses.

Although we limit the scope of our analysis to public data and the analyses to descriptions, we hope it becomes clear that systematic analyses of self-representations from a field perspective are highly promising for analyzing both discursive and organizational change. For empirical analyses of field structures, organizational self-representations on the Internet have two major benefits: First, various types of organizations have the same opportunities to represent themselves on the world wide web, which allows us to collect self-representations of diverse forms of organizations engaged in the same field. This distinguishes the web from other data sources, such as databases that are typically focussed on specific organizational forms (for instance, databases about stock markets containing just companies, or databases about nongovernmental organizations) or on organizations with specific positions in the field (for instance, media collections highlight only organizations that have appeared in the media). In contrast, the Internet is non-selective, so diverse forms and periphery organizations can be studied in relation to those organizations that appear in databases. Second, automatized data collection on the Internet produces nearly no missing data because all accessible websites can be collected automatically and without explicit individual consent. In some cases, organizations restrict web crawlers' access, but this seldom happens and is mostly restricted to a website's product repository or highly interactive sections, which automatic data collections should not affect. Furthermore, organizations that forbid web crawling for all content can easily be identified. When one compares data collections via surveys or interviews with Internet data, the technical "not-collectable rate" of web collections is rather low, especially when compared with typical "non-response rates." This nearly perfect availability of data is especially important for network analyses because network structures can be quite sensitive to single relationships. For instance, if fragmented fields are studied, even a low percentage of missing data would make the analysis problematic, as bridges between fragments could exist but might be missing in the data collection.

With the benefits of the Internet for studies on field structures comes one major practical limitation. If researchers want to sample organizations on the Internet, the ability to "go back in time" is limited, as websites are constantly changing and provide no systematic histories of their previous states. Therefore, for individual researchers, it is nearly impossible to collect the data of previous states when they sample organizations themselves. Some projects create "histories of the Internet"



by collecting websites at different points in time (for instance, the “Wayback Machine – Internet Archive,” <https://archive.org>), but it is not guaranteed that the information of all organizations that are currently part of a field has been collected for previous points in time through such a project. This is one reason why many researchers favor social media platforms, such as Twitter, for time analyses over the Internet, as centrally managed platforms often store previous states of communications. Even if some platforms ask for payments, this is more feasible for many researchers when compared with collecting field data over several years on the Internet to study field dynamics. Nevertheless, such data collection is then bound to the genres and borders of the respective social media platforms.

Our approach is most amenable to issues in formation, and to researchers who have patience. Our senior author has been involved with collecting regular webpage data and WeChat data during the time of Covid, from random samples of organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area and Shenzhen China. We began this effort in early 2020 to see how civic organizations were responding to the pandemic.

To conclude, the necessary public data is available for many fields, thus our approach could be used to compare fields, field developments, and interactions among fields systematically. Furthermore, by expanding the scope, complementary research avenues that overcome the limited view we applied here, come into sight. We briefly discuss four future directions below.

**Discourse versus culture:** In this chapter, we focused on text as a discursive mode of public organizational communication to show the positions that organizations take in debates. This approach to demonstrating the possibilities of web analyses to study field dynamics could be expanded by integrating other modes of digital communication, such as pictures, logos, diagrams, and videos, into the analysis (Höllerer et al., 2017). Furthermore, genres and layouts (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994), which combine various modes into more complex pages, and the internal references of pages on a website (Park & Thelwall, 2003), which create an internal system of the relevance of pages, could be taken into consideration. Such an integrated analysis of the various modes, genres, and information structures of organizations’ websites would help to capture the complexity of a website as an artefact representing an organization’s cultural position (Oberg et al., 2017).

**Self-representation versus perception by others:** The perception and assessment of others is often documented in digital data too—for instance, in the media or in discussion forums (Dahlander & Piezunka, 2014; Hsu, 2006). By collecting this additional information, a comparison of organizations’ discursive and relational positions with the reactions and assessment of audiences would be possible. This could be a link between field analyses and studies of audiences and classification (Zuckerman, 1999).

**Public position versus a stakeholder-specific position:** We limited our analysis on digital data to that provided publicly by organizations for a variety of stakeholders. Because much of the stakeholder-specific communication—for instance, communication with investors—takes place digitally, the differences between internal and stakeholder-specific communication could be studied systematically. This would help us to understand if and how organizations adapt their positions according to specific stakeholder groups (Cornelissen et al., 2007).

**Public position versus internal communication:** Much internal communication within organizations takes place through digital media as well. Systematic comparative studies between internal discourses and external positions in public discourse would help us to understand the extent to which self-representations are façades shielding internal debates (Bromley & Powell, 2012). As channeled communication is typically not available for all members of a field, such research would be limited to case studies (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). Nevertheless, these case studies could benefit from the knowledge of the discursive and relational positions of organizations.

### **Summary and Implications**

We had three interrelated goals with this paper. One, we wanted to demonstrate that digital representations offer novel and exciting opportunities to study both the cultural and relational aspects of organizations. Two, we wanted to explore how the important discussion of social impact has evolved, and with what consequences. Three, we wanted to show how the evolution of an issue field can be studied longitudinally with digital data. We briefly summarize what we have learned in these concluding remarks.

The Web alters and enhances the flow of ideas and concepts between disparate types of organizations and their constituencies, allowing broad access to multiple sources of information. The digital age makes substantial investments of human or financial resources in the acquisition of information obsolete, thereby rendering an organization's influence over its peers less a matter of its size and resources, and more shaped by its ability to use social media and digital technologies. Digitally adept small organizations can gain substantial prominence. Blogs and Instagram accounts, for example, need only modest resources, but can reach a wide audience. The ability to formulate messages in a compelling way and use varied media, from blog posts and videos to feature stories, can result in wide influence. Our website-crawler tool overcomes many problems in capturing the range of participants in the new digital era. This method enables us to identify a comprehensive sample of differing kinds of organizations that are deeply involved, both relationally and discursively, in discussions of social impact. We road tested, so to speak, our sample with some of them most central practitioners involved in these discussions; they were quick to ask did you include x, is y in there. Time after time, our answer was yes. But we also surprised our insiders too, with the inclusion of upstarts and more distant entrants whose voices were becoming louder. The web crawler is especially adept at building a sample of organizations engaged in public debates around notable topics.

The discussions of social impact involve many traditional 'insiders', such as the World Bank, the Gates Foundation, and the world's leading global charities. But alongside these heavyweights are newcomers, both large and small. Some are heretics, determined to upset the established order. Global consultancies see a new domain to mine; global banks want to get in on impact investing; whereas crowdsourcing entities, like Kiva, want to break the hegemony of established financiers. This combination of old-timers, heretics, agitators, and newcomers is remaking the language and standards of assessing the activities of NGOs and their purported impact. A focus on measurable outcomes and offering regular quantitative metrics of performance as a basis for sustained support has become standard practice in this domain. Indeed, no organization today could say it is not concerned with its impact. But rather than seeing this as a form of colonization by the management community, or a type of convergence or isomorphism, our linguistic analysis shows instead a type of creole language has developed. Defining impact has become a trading zone, in which different organizations bring their services and distinctive missions to the table, and engage in cross talk, each attempting to explain their 'unique' strategy of demonstrating impact. The debate has surely

changed practice, monitoring and evaluation are increasingly taken for granted; yet assessment has not become standardized but rather tethered to organizational goals. Put differently, a type of creole language has developed with shared verbs across groups but different nouns within communities.

Organizational fields, too, have changed since the concept was first advanced some four decades ago. Fields are more dynamic, boundaries are more porous, different organizations have come to populate them, and the power differentials have been altered, in part because of the advent of the World Wide Web. Consequently, different relational possibilities are altering the configurations of fields. The image of a *champ*, literally a soccer pitch, offered by Pierre Bourdieu (1969, 1984) in his magisterial studies of intellectual and cultural worlds is still relevant, as is the interorganizational approach of DiMaggio and Powell (1983). But neither these originators nor their many followers have developed many systematic methods to study how fields evolve through time (John Mohr's remarkable body of work is an important exception; see Mohr et al 2020 for a lovely exegesis.) If fields are becoming more porous, and different voices are being heard, we need fresh ways to understand how they are changing. We have suggested one path that utilizes the burgeoning content of our digital age, which is applicable to a wide range of settings.

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Figure 1: Visualizing (a) cultural positions and (b) linguistic communities

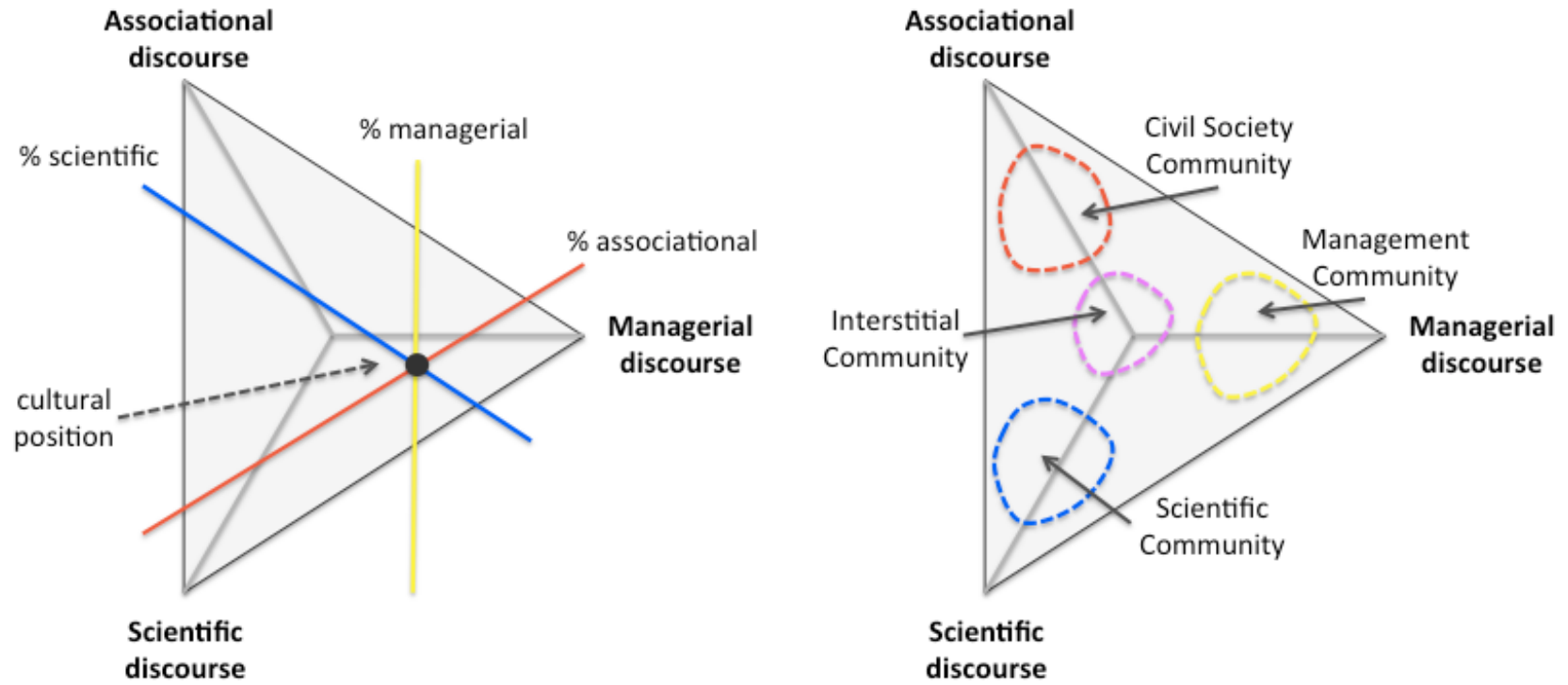


Figure 2: Clustering of linguistic orientation

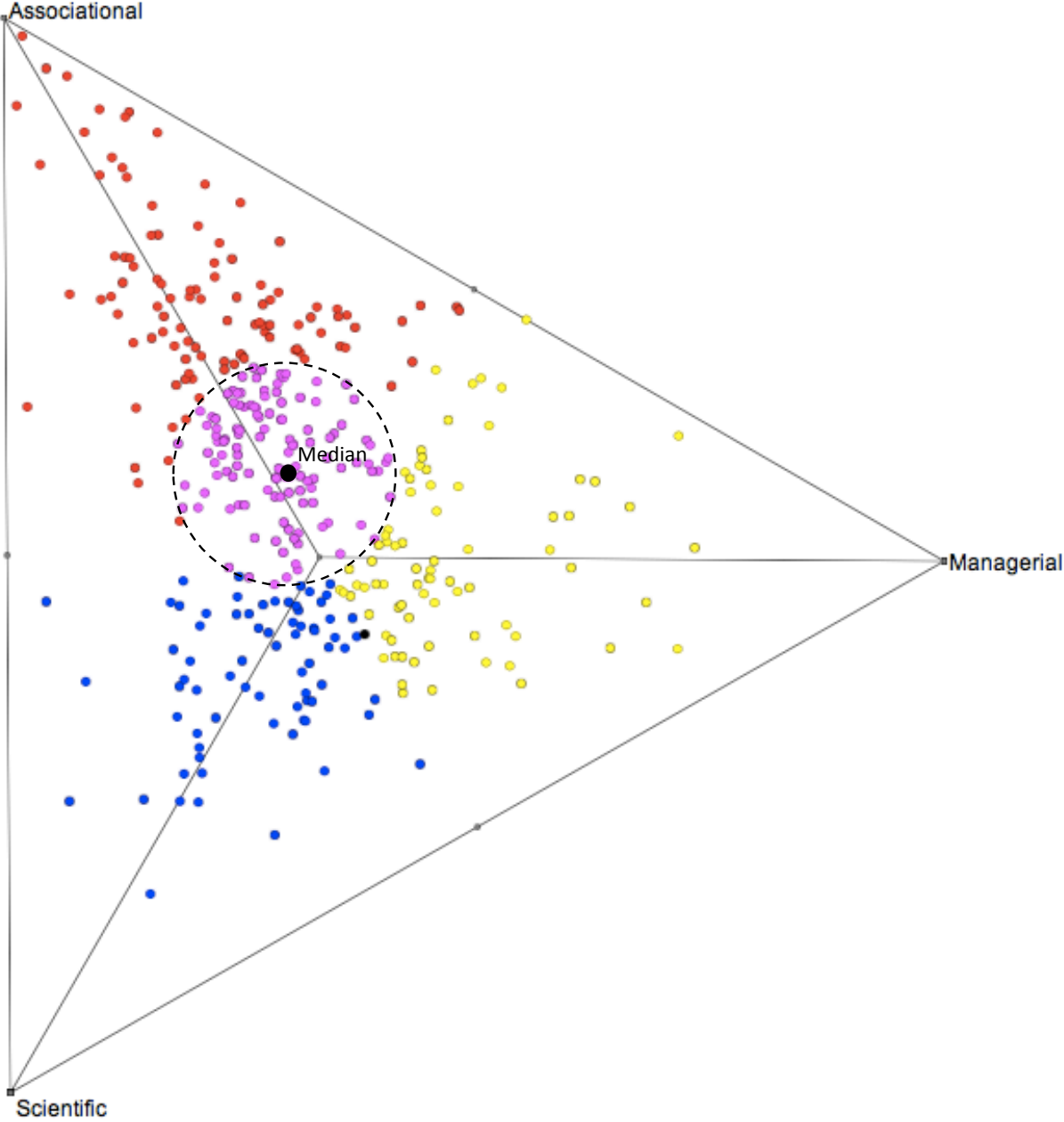


Figure 3: Movement of discursive positions of McKinsey & Company

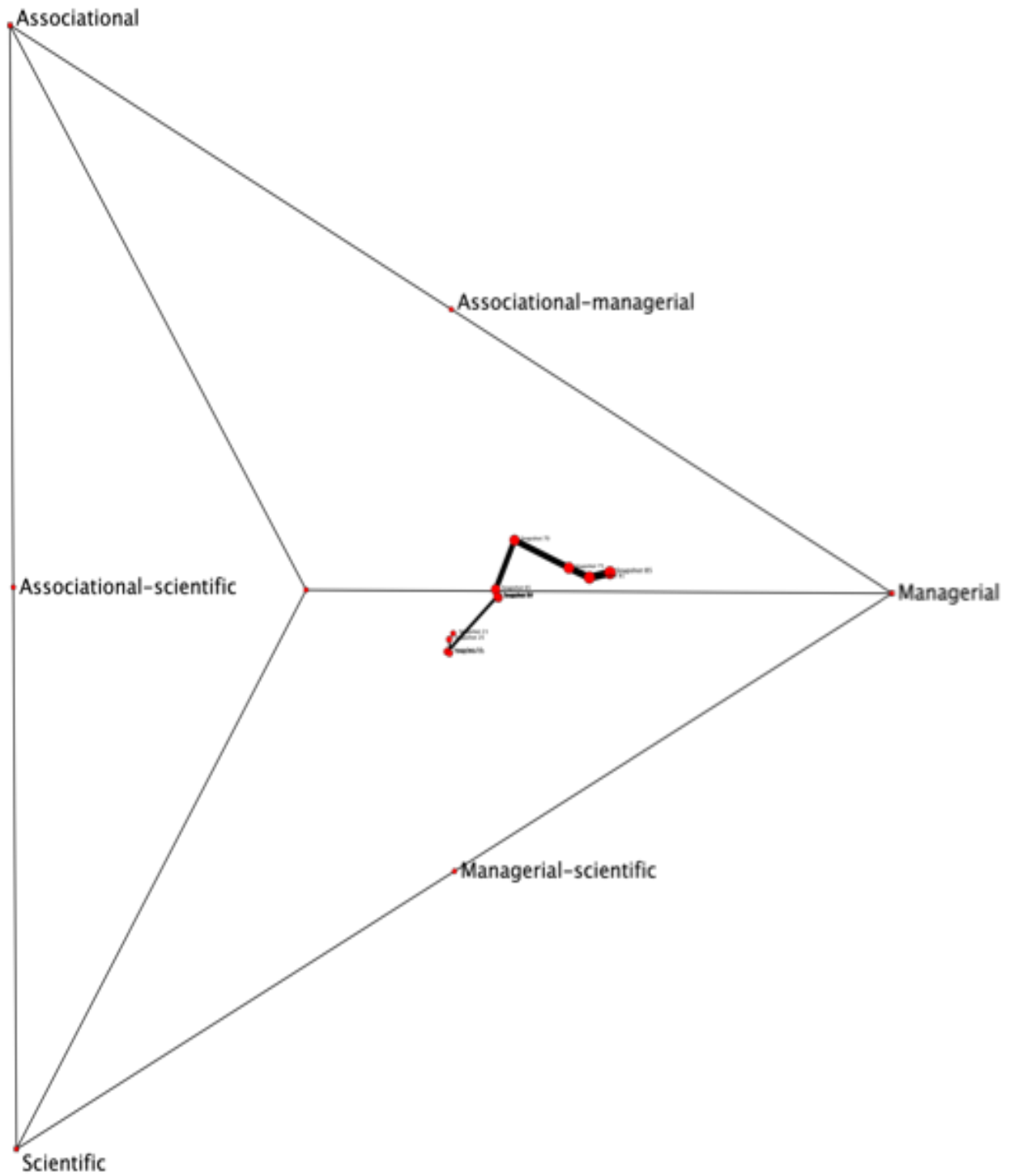


Figure 4: Movement of discursive positions over time

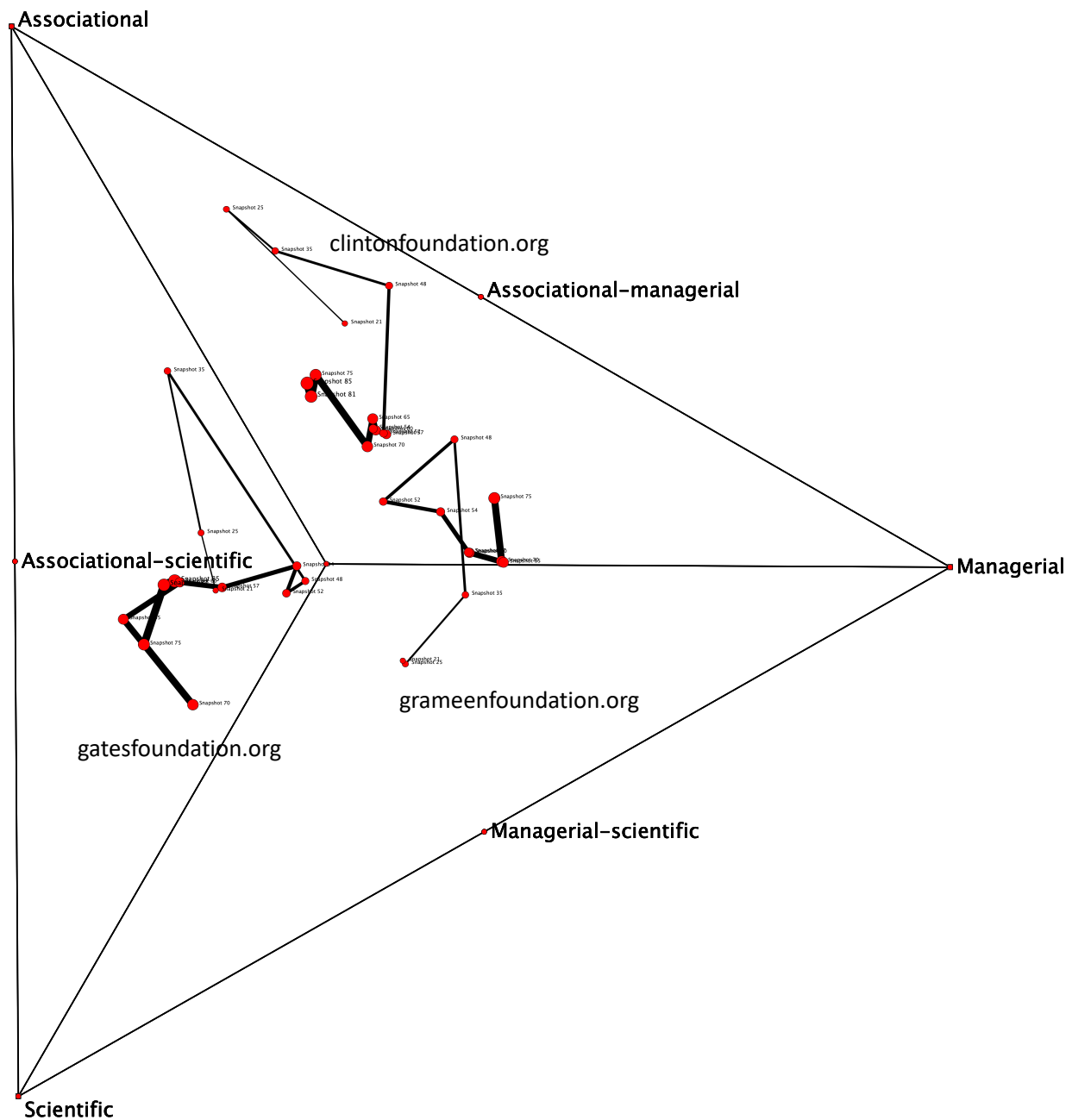




Figure 5: Coverage of discursive space over time

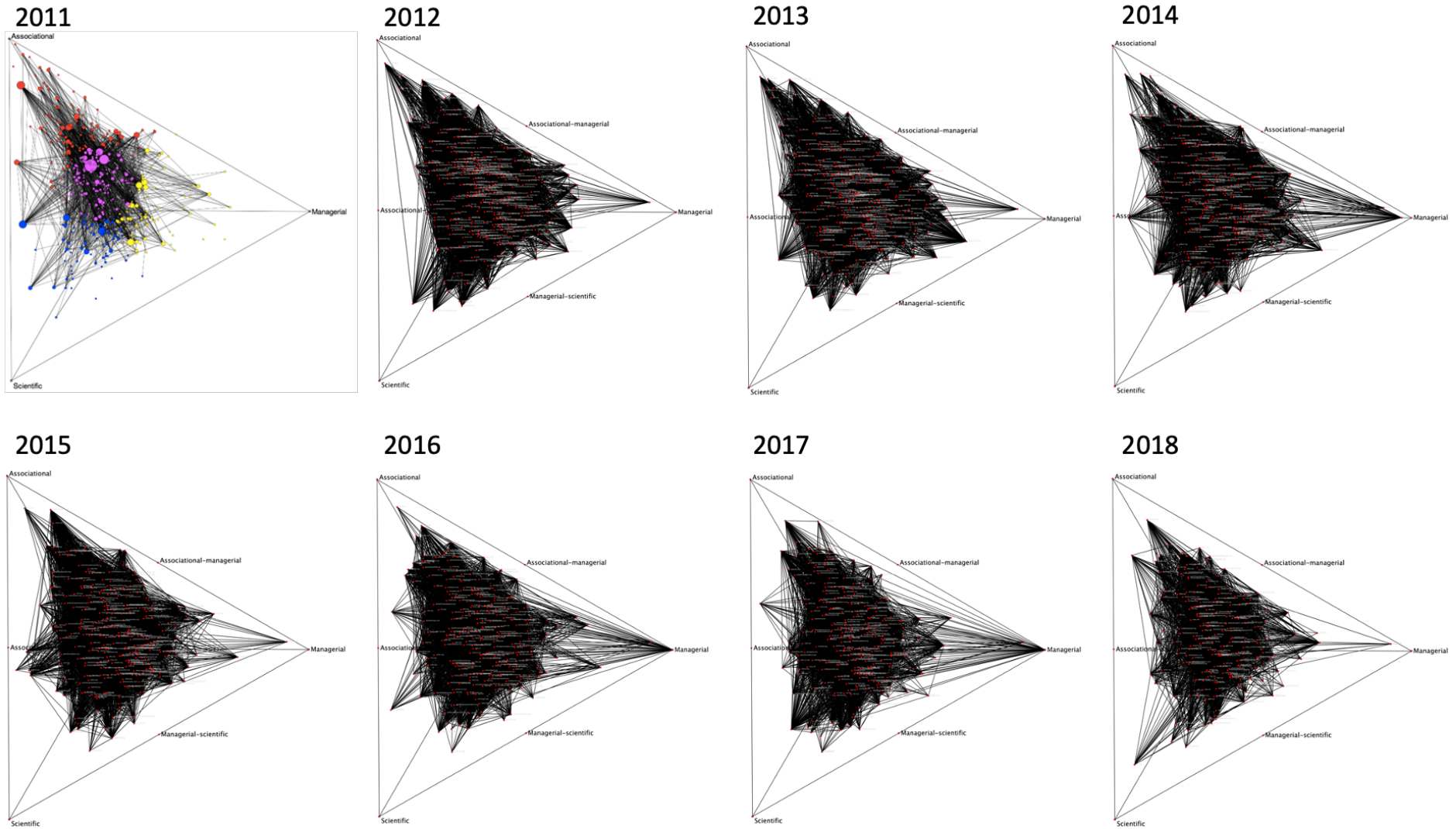


Figure 6: Associational community

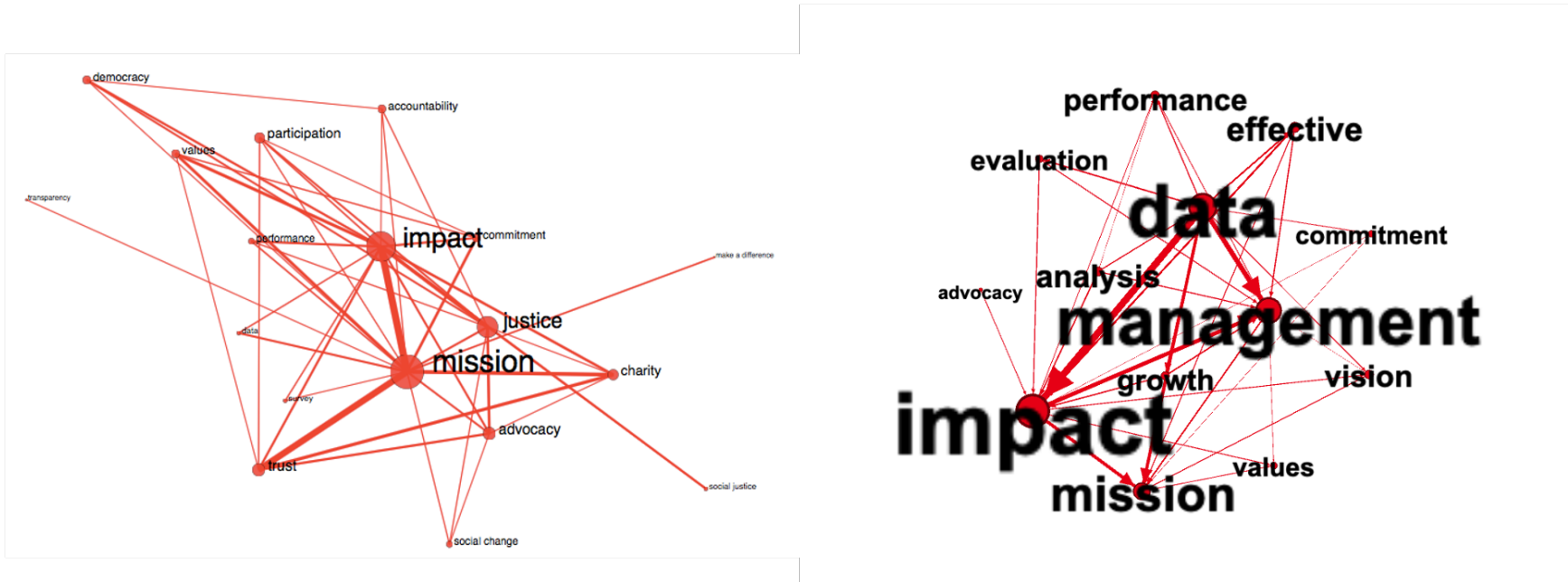


Figure 7: Managerial community

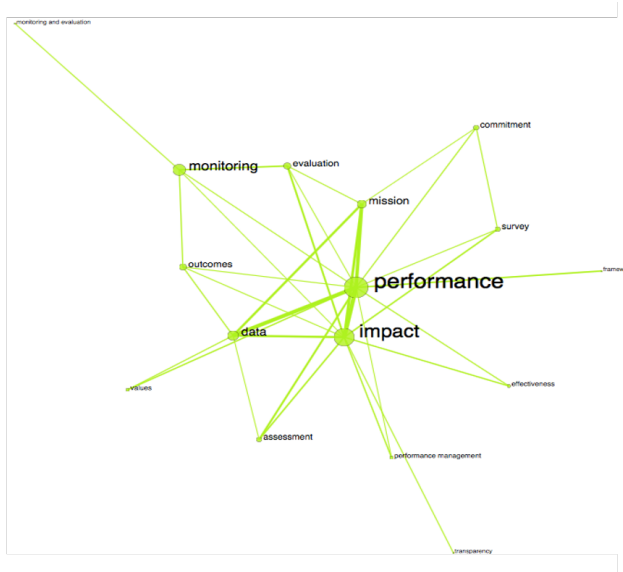


Figure 8: Scientific community

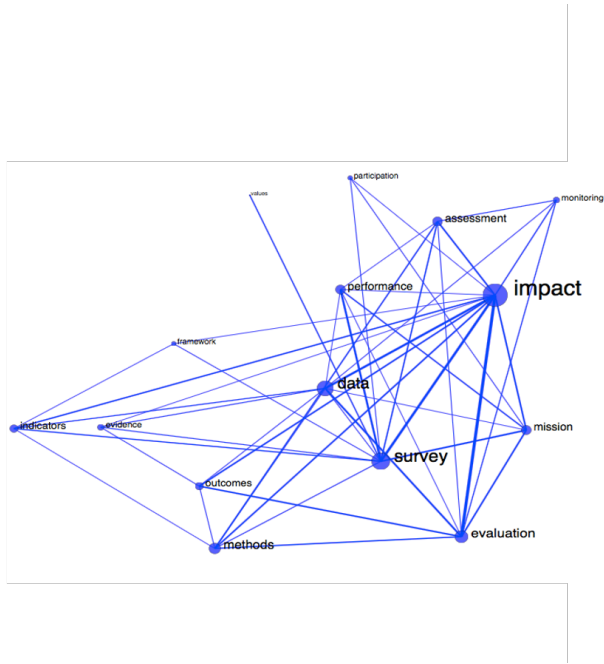


Figure 9: Interstitial community

