RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Transnational Echoes of Spenceanism: A Text-Mining Exploration in English-Language Newspapers (1790–1850)*

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## Abstract

By tracing mentions of the English radical thinker Thomas Spence (1750–1814), his revolutionary "Plan", and his disciples (the "Spencean Philanthropists") in digitized collections of English-language Irish, Caribbean, Indian, Australian, Canadian, and US-American newspapers in the 1790s–1840s, this article explores the dissemination of the ideas and militancy inspired by Spence ("Spenceanism") across the British Empire and the United States. By applying Digital Humanities methods to investigate British radical history from a transnational perspective, the global reception of Spenceanism is reconstructed by examining and comparing a corpus of 275 newspaper articles through text-mining methods such as keyword analysis, co-occurrences, and sentiment analysis. These methods enable the identification of key themes in references to Spenceanism and advance hypotheses concerning both their geographical and chronological distribution: not only when and where Spence and the Spenceans were alluded to and commented upon, but also how a newspaper's geographical location may have impacted its rhetoric in a specific year and historical context. By combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, this article contributes new insights regarding the global circulation of radical ideas across the nineteenth-century English-reading world.

## Introduction: Towards a Digital History of British Radicalism

In 1801, keen for the dissemination of his revolutionary ideas aided by the circulation of pamphlets and periodicals, the English radical thinker Thomas Spence (1750–1814) remarked that, "in these days, by means of printing all nations learn everything of a

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general tendency at the same time".[1] Especially in the years following his death in 1814, Spence, his revolutionary "Plan", and his disciples, known as the "Spencean Philanthropists", were repeatedly mentioned in a wide array of journals across the British Empire and the United States.[2] By tracing these mentions in digitized collections of English-language Irish, Caribbean, Indian, Australian, Canadian, and US-American newspapers in the 1790s–1840s, this article investigates the transnational dissemination and reception of Spence's ideas and the Spenceans' political activities by looking at their media footprint, or public legacy, in the periodical press of the English-reading world.

In the past decade, the increasing digitalization of historical newspapers has provided a treasure trove for empirically oriented social scientists wishing to understand the underlying structural features of modern political discourse by examining how its rhetoric played out in the media.[3] The increasing availability of, and interest in, text data has resulted in the development of various statistical approaches for analysing the digital corpora created from these newspapers.[4] Simultaneously, among the scholars expanding the global history approach, some have turned towards the worldwide dissemination of ideas aided by the printing press,[5] while others have shed light on the transnational scope of radical movements in the Atlantic region and beyond during the modern age.[6] This article contributes to both strands of research: the growing integration of Digital Humanities (DH) methods into the historian's toolkit[7] as well as the new scholarly interest in global cross-cultural exchanges and radical histories; more specifically, it aims to show the crucial and yet still unexplored role that digital approaches can

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[1]Geoff I. Gallop (ed.), *Pigs' Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spence, Radical and Pioneer Land Reformer* (Nottingham, 1982), p. 164.

[2]Ireland is here juxtaposed with the other British imperial dominions even though it technically became part of the United Kingdom after the 1801 Act of Union; however, the "colonial elements" of the British control over Ireland, and the same imposition of the legislative union following the abolition of the Irish Parliament, make the inclusion of Ireland in the "British Empire", though inaccurate, not arbitrary. See David Fitzpatrick, "Ireland and the Empire", in Andrew Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 494–521, 494.

[3]Andrew King, Alexis Easley, and John Morton (eds), *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers* (Abingdon, 2016); *idem* (eds), *Researching the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Case Studies* (Abingdon, 2018).

[4]Tiago Mata and Claire Lemercier, "Speaking in Tongues, A Text Analysis of Economic Opinion at Newsweek, 1975–2007", *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2011); Hannu Salmi *et al.*, "The Reuse of Texts in Finnish Newspapers and Journals, 1771–1920: A Digital Humanities Perspective", *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History*, 54:1 (2021), pp. 14–28.

[5]Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876–1922* (Oxford, 2003); Massimo Rospocher, Jeroen Salman, and Hannu Salmi (eds), *Crossing Borders, Crossing Cultures: Popular Print in Europe (1450–1900)* (Berlin, 2019); Adelaide Vieira Machado *et al.* (eds), *Creating and Opposing Empire: The Role of the Colonial Periodical Press* (Abingdon, 2022).

[6]Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000); Peter Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons & Closure, of Love & Terror, of Race & Class, and of Kate & Ned Despard* (Oakland, CA, 2019).

[7]Stephen Robertson, "Digital Humanities", in Simon Stern, Maksymilian Del Mar, and Bernadette Meyler (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Law and Humanities* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 87–104.

play in the study of the theoretical and practical impact of the political ideas of Thomas Spence ("Spenceanism") from a transnational perspective.

Spence was an ultra-radical thinker, publisher, and bookseller active between Newcastle and London during the so-called Age of Revolution.[8] He is renowned for his "Plan", a proposal for the abolition of private landownership and a return to the common enjoyment of land. The state apparatus would be dismantled and replaced with a decentralized parish administration, which would redistribute the plots of land to individuals and families with everyone paying rent for tilling the soil. This rent would be used by the parishes for several purposes, including the funding of hospitals and schools. Spence also envisaged that part of the total rent would be left over and these remainders would constitute the "dividends", namely, shares of money to be redistributed according to a quarterly schedule among all parishioners.[9] As to the method by which the Plan might be established, since the mid-1790s, inspired by French events, Spence advocated the revolution of the poor underclass contemptuously branded the "swinish multitude" by Edmund Burke; Spence in turn used that expression to refer to his own preferred political actors and interlocutors.[10] His followers came to be organized formally into the "Society of Spencean Philanthropists" after his death in 1814. The Society soon became the leading group within London insurrectionary politics by convening mass meetings, organizing riots, and plotting conspiracies aimed at precipitating a Spencean revolution.[11] Although Spence's Plan was often considered to be impracticable by several of his contemporaries, who viewed Spence as an odd and eccentric fellow, and the Spenceans as a bunch of deranged enthusiasts, the persecution that both mentor and disciples suffered at the hands of the British state authorities provides reliable evidence of the danger that the Spencean doctrine and militancy were assumed to represent for the established social and political order.[12]

Scholars of Spence have investigated how he publicized his Plan through chapbooks, tokens, and songs and translated his political themes into a popular language to make himself understood by the poor and uneducated members of the "swinish multitude".[13] It was his "multi-media" perspective that introduced his ideas into the public discourse and made them a potential object of reference for

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[8]David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c.1760–1840* (Basingstoke, 2009).

[9]Robert Franklin, "The Political Ideas of Thomas Spence", *Journal of Local Studies*, 2:1 (1982), pp. 21–40; John Marangos, "Thomas Paine (1737–1809) and Thomas Spence (1750–1814) on Land Ownership, Land Taxes and the Provision of Citizens' Dividend", *International Journal of Social Economics*, 35:5 (2008), pp. 313–325.

[10]Mark Neocleous, *The Universal Adversary: Security, Capital and the "Enemies of All Mankind"* (London, 2016), pp. 24–36.

[11]Terry Mitchell Parssinen, "The Revolutionary Party in London, 1816–20", *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 45:112 (1972), pp. 266–282.

[12]Matilde Cazzola, *The Political Thought of Thomas Spence: Beyond Poverty and Empire* (Abingdon, 2022), pp. 5, 210–213.

[13]E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York [1963], 1966), p. 162; P.M. Ashraf, *The Life and Times of Thomas Spence* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1983), pp. 58–60; Marcus Wood, "Thomas Spence and Modes of Subversion", *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 10 (1991), pp. 51–77.

journalists and political observers.[14] Concurrently, other studies have recently shown how Spence's Plan, which has traditionally been analysed within a national context, featured a strong critique of enslavement and empire as well as a project of colonial emancipation.[15] By conceiving his Plan for implementation beyond the boundaries of Britain, Spence rendered it suitable for subsequent dissemination in other parts of the British Empire and the Americas. For instance, the select committee of the legislative assembly of Barbados, appointed to enquire into the causes of Bussa's Rebellion, the largest slave revolt that occurred on the island in 1816, blamed the uprising on the anti-slavery principles of the "Spencean and African Philanthropists", which had found their way to Barbados via the journals sold in Bridgetown.[16] This article seeks to appraise the phenomenon of newspaper circulation evoked by the Barbadian committee through both a quantitative and a qualitative approach; in doing so, it builds on previous scholarship studying Spence from a transatlantic perspective by expanding the geographical framework of analysis from the Atlantic region to the global English-reading world.[17]

The feeble beginnings of international media discourse about Spence date back to the mid-1790s, when he had just moved to London from his birth town, Newcastle upon Tyne, and had come to the attention of state authorities by writing and selling seditious pamphlets advocating the common ownership of land.[18] In the early nineteenth century, after over fifteen years of neglect (corresponding to Spence's decreasing publishing activities after his conviction for seditious libel in 1801), echoes of Spenceanism could be heard in many places far away from Britain. More particularly, in 1817, Spencean-related mentions peaked in non-British newspapers as Spence's followers began embodying the most subversive fringe of the capital's radical politics. After that high point, newspaper mentions rapidly dropped as Spenceanism as an organized movement was progressively weakened by persecution and state repression.[19] In Britain, distinctively Spencean themes were recovered in the mid-1840s by the "Land Plan" promoted by some prominent exponents of the

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[14]Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775–1840* (London [1988], 2010), p. xii.

[15]Matilde Cazzola, "'All Shall Be Happy by Land and by Sea': Thomas Spence as an Atlantic Thinker", *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents*, 15:4 (2018), pp. 431–450; Ajmal Waqif, "Cato Street and the Spencean Politics of Transnational Insurrection", in Jason McElligott and Martin Conboy (eds), *The Cato Street Conspiracy: Plotting, Counter-Intelligence and the Revolutionary Tradition in Britain and Ireland* (Manchester, 2020), pp. 101–117.

[16]"The Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly, Appointed to Inquire into the Origin, Causes, and Progress, of the Late Insurrection" (Barbados, 1818), pp. 23, 31–34. See also Hilary McDonald Beckles, "The Wilberforce Song: How Enslaved Caribbean Blacks Heard British Abolitionists", *Parliamentary History*, 26:S1 (2007), pp. 113–126.

[17]Robin Alexander Plant, "The Haitian Revolution in British Anglosphere, 1791–1825" (MRes, University of Liverpool, 2021), pp. 125–129. Available from the present authors on request.

[18]Ashraf, *Life and Times of Thomas Spence*; Alastair Bonnett and Keith Armstrong (eds), *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man's Revolutionary* (London, 2014); Rachel Rogers and Alexandra Sippel (eds), "Thomas Spence and His Legacy: Bicentennial Perspectives", *Miranda. Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone*, 13 (2016).

[19]Terry Mitchell Parssinen, "Thomas Spence and the Spenceans: A Study of Revolutionary Utopianism in the England of George III" (Ph.D., Brandeis University, 1968); Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge, 1988).

Chartist movement and aimed at redistributing smallholdings to labourers.[20] As Chartism declined in the late 1840s, the end of that decade is assumed to be a convenient endpoint for this analysis.

This work is based on a manually created, digital corpus of newspaper articles that can be examined through a wide range of text-analysis packages that are available on the popular open-source platform "R".[21] Specifically, three methods were utilized to investigate the underlying texts: keyword analysis; calculation of co-occurrences; and sentiment analysis.[22] Once applied to the investigation of the newspaper dataset, text mining helps reconstruct the transnational newspaper footprint of Spence and his followers over five decades by identifying its key topics – ranging from the land Plan to the threat of revolution and slavery emancipation – and capturing the semantic subtleties associated with each of them. Moreover, by linking all Spencean-related newspaper mentions with relevant metadata, this corpus allows the mapping of their chronological and geographical distribution in the context of broader processes and internationally resonating events. This enables us to formulate hypotheses regarding why and how a newspaper's geographical location impacted its rhetoric. The transnational interest in Spenceanism was ignited by new British publications, specific occurrences such as trials, riots, and plots, or more general reflections upon poverty and popular protest, all of which had different implications depending on the various contexts. This article does not intend to fully reconstruct the diverse ways in which these events and themes were covered in the press, nor to assess the accuracy of those accounts. Instead, it aims to explore the representations of Spenceanism that they contributed to disseminating among local readerships.

At this stage, it may be helpful to briefly deliberate upon the benefits and drawbacks of the methodology employed in this study to elucidate the reception of Spencean ideas. The application of text-mining techniques, like keyword analysis, facilitates a quantitative analysis and comparison of a substantial corpus of 275 newspaper articles. While the volume of the corpus would have made it feasible to conduct the analysis purely through traditional close reading, more conventional discourse analysis is labour-intensive, time-consuming, and might be subject to personal biases, making it challenging to assess a large number of newspaper articles in a structured, objective, and efficient way. In contrast, text-mining methods enable the automatic extraction of key themes and sentiments, but they may overlook the contextual subtleties and complexities inherent in the historical source material, potentially leading to oversimplification or misinterpretation of the data. Further, these methods are inherently reliant on the quality and representativeness of the digitized articles, a point to which we return below when discussing the manual

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[20]Malcolm Chase, "Chartism and the Land: 'The Mighty People's Question'", in Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman (eds), *The Land Question in Britain, 1750–1950* (London, 2010), pp. 57–73.

[21]Julia Silge and David Robinson, *Text Mining with R: A Tidy Approach* (Boston, MA, 2017); Kasper Welbers, Wouter van Atteveldt, and Kenneth Benoit, "Text Analysis in R", *Communication Methods and Measures*, 11:4 (2017), pp. 245–265.

[22]For a recent overview of these and other text-mining methods, see Justin Grimmer, Margaret E. Roberts, and Brandon M. Stewart, *Text as Data: A New Framework for Machine Learning and the Social Sciences* (Princeton, NJ, 2022).

construction of the corpus. Acknowledging that a purely quantitative approach might not adequately capture the nuances of the rhetoric employed in different geographical locations at various points in time, the article opts for a mixed-methods approach. Overall, while the use of DH methods offers advantages in terms of efficiency and usefully complements the qualitative analysis with "hard data", one must approach the findings with a critical understanding of these methodologies' limitations and biases. As a by-product of this study, one can thus derive some more general methodological insights about the added value of quantitative DH methods for qualitative discourse analysis and the reliability of the evidence created by them, which will be reflected upon in the conclusion.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next two sections describe the newly assembled Spencean newspaper corpus and present descriptive statistics alongside regional analysis. On this basis, keyword analysis is used to detect critical themes in the dataset. Then, all articles are scrutinized by drawing on concurrence analysis and novel methods for detecting sentiment. All sections combine a quantitative and a qualitative approach. The concluding section appraises the nineteenth-century transnational reputation of Spenceanism and assesses the main benefits of a text-mining perspective in investigations of British radical histories.

## Data: Constructing the Spencean Newspaper Corpus

To conduct text-mining operations and capture the media legacy of Spence, his Plan, and his disciples in global press circuits, a corpus consisting of 275 Spencean-related articles in newspapers from Ireland (106 articles), the US (100), the British West Indies (35), British India (29), the Australian colonies (4), and Canada (1) was created. "Article" is employed here broadly, referring to longer, professional pieces as well as all news items or brief mentions that were separately recorded in the underlying newspaper databases. The corpus consists of either the full text of each article or relevant extracts, as well as additional metadata such as source, date, title (if applicable), keyword, and region. We mined all databases that we had access to and that featured at least one article responding to our keyword search (see below). In particular, the following databases have been relied upon:

- *Irish Newspaper Archives* (for Ireland),[23]
- *Caribbean Newspapers: Digital Library of the Caribbean* (for the Caribbean),[24]
- *Caribbean Newspapers 1718–1876* (for the Caribbean),[25]
- *Newspapers & Gazettes – Trove* (for Australia),[26]
- *America's Historical Newspapers* (for the US),[27]
- *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* (for the US),[28]

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[23] https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/; last accessed 3 March 2023.
[24] https://dloc.com/collections/CNDL; last accessed 3 March 2023.
[25] https://www.readex.com/products/caribbean-newspapers-series-1-1718-1876-american-antiquarian-society; last accessed 3 March 2023.
[26] https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/; last accessed 3 March 2023.
[27] https://www.readex.com/products/americas-historical-newspapers; last accessed 3 March 2023.
[28] https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/; last accessed 3 March 2023.

- *Newspapers.com by Ancestry* (for Canada, Ireland, and the US),[29]
- *British Newspaper Archive* (for British India, Ireland, and the Caribbean).[30]

Digitized collections of newspapers published in New Zealand (*Newspapers Home – Papers Past*) and the British colonies in Africa (*African Newspapers: 1800–1925*) were also explored but yielded zero results for the timeframe examined.

These databases were searched using the following keywords: *Thomas Spence* [1750–1814]; *Spence's Plan*; *Spencean/Spenceans*; *Spenceanism*; *swinish multitude*; *people's farm*; and *pigs' meat*. All databases checked for Australia, the Caribbean, India, and Canada have been exhausted, and a substantial number of Irish and US-American articles have also been grabbed. Moreover, 157 articles on Spence and the Spenceans from British newspapers have been downloaded from the *British Newspaper Archive* to be exclusively used for qualitative analysis and comparative purposes. Interestingly, this British selection demonstrates that several metropolitan articles found their way to other parts of the Empire and the US in the form of reprints, most of which were also included in the corpus. We acknowledge that a more extensive number of domestic articles on Spence exists within the British context. However, given the specific aim of this study to explore the transnational resonance of Spence's political ideas, incorporating all available domestic articles would skew the analysis away from this international perspective. Surely, the available databases do not cover all articles ever written about Spenceanism during the period of observation and suffer, as all digital archives, from survivorship bias. However, in the case of the non-British newspaper articles, we could at least avoid any additional manual selection bias by simply downloading and transcribing all available articles that mention one of the keywords. In the case of the domestic articles, this was not possible due to the large number of sources that include one of our search terms. As the British articles could not be carefully curated to constitute a representative sample, we decided to use a random selection of them as a point of comparison for the qualitative analysis, but not as empirical observations for calculating the quantitative results. Overall, the dataset's final structure is designed with the primary objective of tracing the transnational resonance of Spence's ideas outside of Great Britain, as we consider this to be our main contribution to the literature.

Due to the low scan quality of databases, most articles needed to be copied manually. As this analysis is built on a collection of primary sources discovered through keyword search within large-scale newspaper archives, it is important to methodologically consider that its results ultimately depend on the output of Optical Character Recognition (OCR).[31] This means that, besides traditional sample selection and survivorship biases associated with printed sources, the Spencean dataset may suffer from the fact that Spence's name can be misidentified by "dirty" OCR. The high number of manual corrections necessary to clean this dataset for text-mining analytics suggests that there are, indeed, a certain number of articles on

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[29]https://www.newspapers.com/; last accessed 3 March 2023.
[30]https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/; last accessed 3 March 2023.
[31]Ryan Cordell, "'Q i-jtb the Raven': Taking Dirty OCR Seriously", *Book History*, 20 (2017), pp. 188–225.

Spence that remain hidden from this search. Since Spence was probably an unknown figure in most countries outside Britain, it is also possible that his name was misspelt in the original newspaper. For these reasons, the dataset can be assumed to provide a lower threshold of Spence's relevance, leading to an underestimate of the extent to which his ideas were referred to in a transnational context.

The 275 articles of the corpus consist of 167,515 tokens. In a text-mining framework, a "token" is defined as a meaningful unit of text, usually a word. Most articles dealing with Spenceanism were short news snippets and opinion pieces (average length 609 tokens), while longer accounts were commonly reprints of British parliamentary reports and debates (maximum length 4,600 tokens). After collecting and transcribing all relevant articles and loading them into R, the standard pre-processing steps were performed, including removing English stop words, numbers, punctuation, as well as all single characters. Together, these pre-processing steps reduce the corpus size to 67,910 tokens. For some parts of the analysis, lemmatization and part-of-speech (POS) tagging are also conducted, as discussed later. As is common in DH scholarship,[32] the dataset is made publicly available through an online repository to promote transparency, reproducibility, and future research.[33]

The upper panel of Figure 1 plots all collected articles over time, with the greyscale indicating their regional context. In addition to the absolute number of Spencean articles that were discovered in the above-mentioned databases, the lower panel of Figure 1 displays relative numbers, defined as the share of articles per year as a part of the overall corpus, in order to illustrate how the regional proportion of articles per year changes over time.[34] Comparing the number of articles according to their publishing location shows that the US and Ireland are better represented than other geographical areas. The figure also reveals that the temporal distribution of mentions is heavily skewed to the left. The great majority of Spencean-related articles were published between December 1816 and September 1817. In fact, only the Spa Fields riots (three consecutive mass demonstrations organized by the Spenceans in London between November 1816 and February 1817 to precipitate a general insurrection) and the subsequent official enquiry (which materialized in the "Report of the Committee of Secrecy of Lords and Commons") and repressive legislation (The Habeas Corpus Suspension Act and The Seditious Meetings Act of 1817) seem to have been of primary transnational interest.[35]

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[32]Florian Wittmann and Anselm Küsters, "Über die Form nachdenken. Eine Text Mining Analyse von Stadionrezensionen in deutschen Bau- und Architekturzeitschriften (1912–2011)", in Dietmar Hüser, Paul Dietschy, and Philipp Didion (eds), *Sport-Arenen – Sport-Kulturen – Sport-Welten. Deutsch-französisch-europäische Perspektiven im "langen" 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 2022), pp. 475–499, 480.

[33]Anselm Küsters and Matilde Cazzola, "A Transnational Newspaper Dataset Covering Spenceanism", in *Zenodo* (2023). Available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7696185; last accessed 3 March 2023.

[34]We normalize the bar heights to 100 per cent, making it easier to compare the proportions for different regions.

[35]Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and His Times* (London, 1979), pp. 63–90; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 496–497.
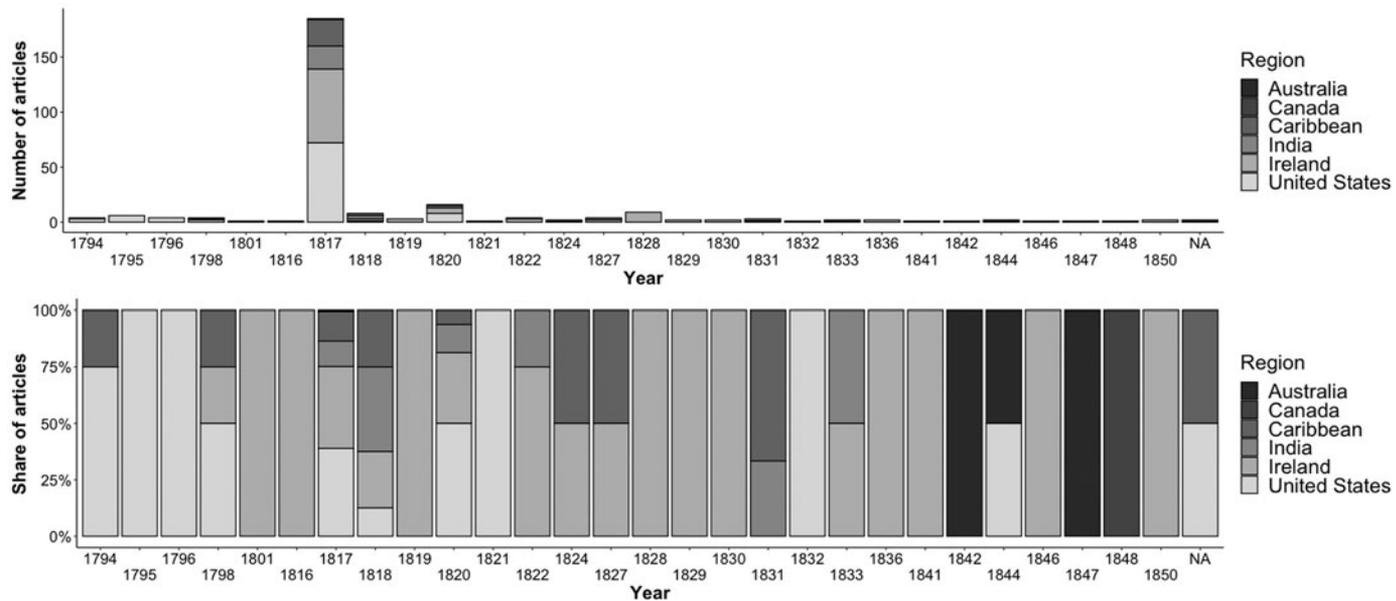
**Figure 1** Temporal and geographical distribution of Spencean articles.

The late 1810s were formative years of imperial restructuring and nation-building across the British Empire and the US. The plantation system of the West Indies was challenged from below by the revolts of the enslaved, which contributed to the strengthening of the British abolitionist movement.[36] Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, British India experienced a set of key administrative reforms starting from the Charter Act of 1813, which opened the purported transition from the "phase of conquest" to the "phase of improvement"; nonetheless, the prevailing British representation of themselves as benevolent rulers was being contradicted by recurring famines and challenged by revolts of the colonized such as the Vellore mutiny of 1806.[37] Ireland had, for its part, been recently incorporated into the United Kingdom by the Act of Union of 1801 following the Rebellion of 1798. Still, conflicts on the island between peasants and landlords, Catholics and Protestants, and nationalists and unionists were far from quelled. Meanwhile, the already colonized parts of the Australian continent featured a white population consisting almost exclusively of – potentially troublesome – convicts, who, in 1804, erupted in the Castle Hill Rebellion in New South Wales.[38] In the US, in turn, the making of the new nation in the early nineteenth century had to repeatedly confront revolts of the distressed, disaffected, colonized, and enslaved, including Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion and the German Coast Uprising of enslaved people in 1800 and 1811, respectively, and the New Orleans Riot in March 1817.[39]

## Regional Analysis: The Wheres and Whens of the Spencean Corpus

Within this agitated transnational context, the scale and aims of disturbances in Britain and the authorities' military, investigatory, and legislative responses must have appeared as relevant precedents to state and empire builders across the British Isles, the British Empire, and the Americas. Notably, some of these newspaper accounts, especially in Ireland and the US, stressed the urgency that the authorities should grant "great allowance" to the poor and disaffected, who had been "misled" by radical doctrines, to restore public tranquillity.[40] The *American Yeoman* recommended that the principles and memberships of newly established associations be disclosed and divulged, lest they become as troublesome as the

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[36]Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2006).

[37]Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 28–65; Jon E. Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835* (London, 2010).

[38]Oliver MacDonagh, *Ireland: The Union and Its Aftermath* (Dublin, 2003); Anne-Maree Whitaker, *Unfinished Revolution: United Irishmen in New South Wales, 1800–1810* (Darlinghurst, 1994).

[39]Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, 1980), p. 169; D. Branson, *Narrative of the Riot On the 15th, 16th, and 17th of March 1817, in the City of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1843). Available at: https://www.louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/state-lwp%3A6802; last accessed 9 February 2023.

[40]*Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 26 February 1817; *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 February 1817; *Evening Post*, 21 April 1817; *Baltimore Patriot*, 23 April 1817; *Albany Gazette*, 25 April 1817; *Daily National Intelligencer*, 26 April 1817. References to newspaper articles that are included in the corpus are abbreviated with the respective journal title and date. For further information, see the online dataset in Küsters and Cazzola, "A Transnational Newspaper Dataset Covering Spenceanism".

Spenceans in London.[41] It is surprising that few results for the utilized keywords were discovered about the Cato Street Conspiracy in February 1820 (when some Spencean Philanthropists plotted to assassinate the British Cabinet), suggesting that this event was not commonly linked to Spenceanism in foreign newspaper accounts.[42] Even in Australian journals, no mention of the Conspiracy could be found, even though some conspirators had been transported to New South Wales as convicts.[43]

Albeit less significant from a quantitative perspective, some Spencean-related articles published after the 1817 peak are relevant in qualitative terms. In the British West Indies, for instance, an 1827 piece in the *Grenada Free Press* and the *St Christopher Gazette* bitterly remarked how paradoxical it was that Britain, the same country that had convicted Spence in 1801 for writing a work advocating the abolition of private landownership, had begun, only a few years later, promoting the "amelioration" of slavery with a view to its abolition. In the journal editors' view, this amounted to metropolitan interference with the private property rights in enslaved people that Caribbean planters presumed to possess legitimately.[44] In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Spenceanism sounded relatable to different types of emancipation – not just from enslavement in the Caribbean, but also from the restrictions imposed on Catholics in Ireland and the exclusion of disenfranchised Britons from voting rights. In 1824, a contributor to the Irish *Waterford Mirror* rejected allegations that campaigners for Catholic emancipation were "revolutionists" akin to "Spenceans"; instead, this anti-Catholic analogy – which went as far as to compare the Irish leader Daniel O'Connell to the Cato Street conspirator Arthur Thistlewood – was calculated to "alarm the people of property […] against the Irish Catholics, [by] mix[ing] up the latter with a party in England, which, at one time, terrified […] most of the men of fortune".[45] It was, in fact, the *Dublin Evening Post* and the *Newry Telegraph* that presented a "Spencean community of goods" as the inevitable outcome of a possible success of the association established by O'Connell to campaign for the repeal of the Union with Great Britain in 1830.[46] Concurrently, both the British Indian *Government Gazette* and the Irish *Cork Constitution* interpreted the extension of the franchise in Britain with the First Reform Act of 1832 as the accomplishment of a process of democratization of political participation within which the Spenceans had been playing a crucial role; just as Ireland was still recovering from the cholera outbreak of 1832, the *Cork Constitution* urged the necessity to "bar out the cholera" of a

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[41]*American Yeoman*, 27 May 1817.

[42]David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790–1820* (Detroit, MI, 1992), pp. 136–144; Malcolm Chase, "Cato Street in International Perspective", in McElligott and Conboy, *The Cato Street Conspiracy*, pp. 64–80; Vic Gatrell, *Conspiracy on Cato Street: A Tale of Liberty and Revolution in Regency London* (Cambridge, 2022).

[43]George Parsons, "The Cato Street Conspirators in New South Wales", *Labour History*, 8 (1965), pp. 3–5.

[44]*Grenada Free Press*, 5 September 1827; *St Christopher Gazette*, 19 October 1827. See also J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750–1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford, 1988).

[45]*Waterford Mirror*, 1 December 1824.

[46]*Dublin Evening Post*, 4 December 1830; *Newry Telegraph*, 7 December 1830. See also Brian Inglis, "O'Connell and the Irish Press, 1800–42", *Irish Historical Studies*, 8:29 (1952), pp. 1–27.

"Spencean equalization of property" as the possible long-term consequence of a reformed Parliament.[47]

Unsurprisingly, Spence's Plan was often alluded to in press discussions concerning land ownership. An article on the agrarian question published in the *Bombay Gazette* in 1822 recommended that readers "attend to the principles of political economy" and forget about the "crack-brained disciple[s] of the Spencean school".[48] These were the years when the Malthusian administrators of British India were reflecting on a new system of land tenure to be implemented in the territories of the East India Company; the so-called *ryotwari* system, giving cultivators the freedom to sell and buy the land, had just been introduced in Madras and would soon be adopted in the Bombay Presidency.[49] Likewise, throughout the 1820s, as Ireland was the subject of heated debates around the implementation of the Poor Laws on the island, several Irish newspapers compared the poor rates subsidized by taxes on landed property with Spence's proposal to partition off the product of the soil to the people through the redistribution of dividends.[50] Some contributors remarked that, if the revenue of Irish landlords had been taxed to fund poor relief, then legislators would have implemented "the Spencean system indeed", with rich and poor "equalized to one common level of distress".[51] In a couple of Irish articles published in 1850, Spenceanism was also juxtaposed with the "vague, mystical, undefined tenant right […] savouring of an agrarian law" advocated by the Tenant Right League, committed to checking the power of landlords over their tenants in the aftermath of the Famine; only a "Spencean cabinet", the critical contributor remarked, could tolerate the League's interference with market dynamics.[52] Two years later, this interference was, notably, advocated by the *Bombay Gazette* in relations between half-starved *ryots* (cultivators) and the dishonest Indian middlemen collecting rents from them. The contributor recommended that a Tenant Right Act be passed by the Anglo-Indian administration and speculated how "curious" it would be "to see the functionaries of our despotic Indian Government becoming so Spencean".[53]

In the 1840s, the active campaigning of the Chartist movement and the promotion of the Chartist Land Plan by the Irish leaders Feargus O'Connor and Bronterre O'Brien seemed once again to bring Spenceanism to the fore of the news.[54] For the

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[47] *Government Gazette*, 28 July 1831; *Cork Constitution*, 28 November 1833.

[48] *Bombay Gazette*, 23 January 1822.

[49] J. Albert Rorabacher, *Property, Land, Revenue, and Policy: The East India Company, c.1757–1825* (Abingdon, 2017).

[50] *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 May 1820; *Saunders's News-Letter*, 19 February 1827 and 5 May 1828. See also Peter Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815–43* (Manchester, 2009).

[51] *Belfast Newsletter*, 6 May 1828; *Mayo Constitution*, 8 May 1828.

[52] *Freeman's Journal*, 22 August 1850; *Leinster Express*, 24 August 1850. See also Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly (eds), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780–1914* (Manchester, 1983).

[53] *Bombay Gazette*, 6 October 1852 (the article was not included in the quantitative analysis as it was outside of the year range considered in the dataset). See also Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c.1760–1850* (New Delhi, 1979).

[54] James Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom: Feargus O'Connor and the Chartist Movement, 1832–1842* (London, 1982); Michael J. Turner, "Chartism, Bronterre O'Brien, and the 'Luminous Political Example of America'", *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*, 97:1 (2012), pp. 43–69.

Irish *Freeman's Journal*, the Chartist gathering at the Crown & Anchor public house, London, in 1841 amounted to a "Spencean body" of activists.[55] A few years later, the American *Working Man's Advocate* recounted how "O'Brien and O'Connor [were] openly and fearlessly promulgat[ing] principles identical with those of Spence".[56] Also of note is the article published in April 1848 in the Canadian *Montreal Gazette* by a concerned observer of the potential effects of the ongoing European revolutions on the public order of the Province. Canada featured a (partly republican) French majority as France had just undergone the February Revolution and was a significant destination for ships crammed with starving and politically radicalized Irish immigrants as famine-ravaged Ireland was becoming the theatre of a new anti-British rebellion.[57] After expressing "alarm" about the condition of both France and Ireland, the Canadian contributor informed readers about a forthcoming Chartist demonstration in London, which, however, would not affect "the solid frame of English society": after all, or so the contributor thought, Chartism was a mere re-edition of older and substantially harmless claims, which had been advanced, among others, by the Spenceans.[58] Therefore, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, not only did the international press report about events in which the Spenceans were directly involved, but observers also often alluded to Spenceanism as a term of comparison and a lens through which to comment on the specific problems affecting their different regional contexts.

In terms of underlying sources, several newspapers featured, throughout the entire period of observation, only a single or very few Spencean-related articles. However, one can also identify a comparatively small group of journals that reported more regularly on the topic and from which roughly half of the analysed articles were extracted (Figure 2). In Ireland these were: the "remarkably neutral" *Saunders's News-Letter* with 22 articles; the increasingly nationalist and critical of imperial Britain *Freeman's Journal* with 20 articles; the moderately oppositional and pro-Catholic emancipation *Dublin Evening Post* with 18 articles; the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* with 10 articles; and the conservative and pro-government *Belfast Newsletter* with 9 articles.[59] In the British West Indies these were: the Jamaican *Royal Gazette* with 16 articles; the *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-town Gazette* with 7 articles; and the *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser* with 6 articles – all of them mouthpieces of the views and interests of the Caribbean slave-owning white elite.[60] And, in British India, these were the *Government Gazette* with 14 articles and the *Bombay Gazette* with 11 articles, published in the Madras and the Bombay Presidencies respectively.[61] The higher diversification of US-American

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[55]*Freeman's Journal*, 25 September 1841.

[56]*Working Man's Advocate*, 8 June 1844.

[57]Miles Taylor, "The 1848 Revolutions and the British Empire", *Past & Present*, 166:1 (2000), pp. 146–180.

[58]*Montreal Gazette*, 28 April 1848.

[59]Information on the orientation of Irish newspapers was found in the Irish Newspaper Archives and the British Newspaper Archive.

[60]Andrew Lewis, "'An Incendiary Press': British West Indian Newspapers during the Struggle for Abolition", *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 16:3 (1995), pp. 346–361.

[61]Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton, NJ, 2012), pp. 110–120.
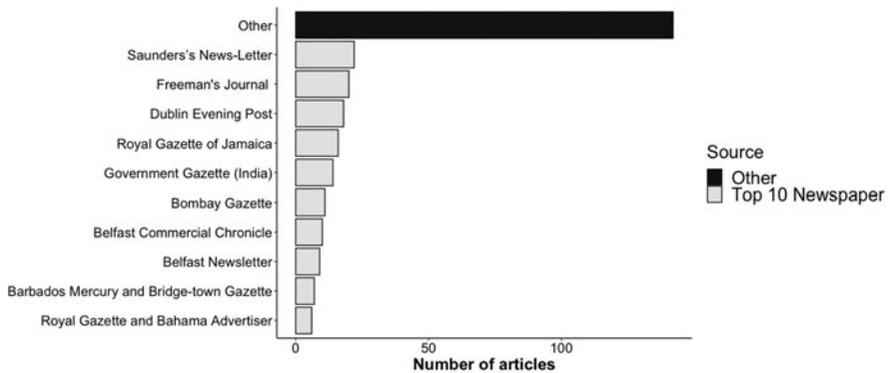
**Figure 2** Newspapers featuring articles on Spence.

sources can probably be explained by the large and increasing number of newspapers published throughout the US in the nineteenth century and the more local nature of US news markets at that time.[62]

A qualitative reading can help one appreciate rarer but nonetheless compelling journal sources that do not stand out using quantitative analysis. In 1796, for instance, the radical republican and anti-federalist US-American *Aurora General Advertiser* printed a set of advertisements publicizing the selling of "an interesting collection of English revolutionary books, pamphlets, and prints" owned by Richard Lee, an English, persecuted radical who had recently fled to the US.[63] The materials that Lee had carried with him included Spence's periodical *Pigs' Meat, or Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*, as well as the Spencean seditious caricature on "cutting the King's Evil – the Royal Ass Guillotin'd by the Swinish Multitude".[64] Equally interesting is the *Watchman, and Jamaica Free Press*, Jamaica's first anti-slavery journal founded by two free men of African descent; in 1831, on the eve of the uprising of enslaved people known as the Baptist War, and amid the acrimonious controversy between West Indian slave-owners and the British Parliament regarding the impending passage of The Slavery Abolition Act, the *Watchman* published two articles juxtaposing Spenceanism with radical views about several issues, including colonial policy and slavery abolition.[65] In 1844, the US *Working Man's Advocate*, the journal of the National Reform Association established to lobby the US

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[62]Edwin Emery and Michael C. Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1978).

[63]Richard N. Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns* (New York, 1997); Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 149–167.

[64]*Aurora General Advertiser*, 2 May 1796, 4 May 1796, 5 May 1796, and 6 May 1796. See also John Halliwell, "Acts of Insincerity? Thomas Spence and Radical Print Culture in the 1790s", in Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan (eds), *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* (London, 2010), pp. 201–218.

[65]*Watchmen, and Jamaica Free Press*, 17 September 1831 and 9 November 1831. See also Candace Ward, "'An Engine of Immense Power': *The Jamaica Watchman* and Crossings in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Print Culture", *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 51:3 (2018), pp. 483–503; Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, MD, 1991).

government to pass land reforms, praised Spence's Plan as an essential intellectual landmark for the Association's campaigns.[66] Therefore, despite being a relatively uncommon media phenomenon, Spencean ideas nevertheless reached not only different parts of the British Empire and the US, but also different readerships within each of those contexts.

## Keyword Analysis: Transnational Themes and Regional Specificities

Within the broad range of topics associated with Spence's Plan, text-mining techniques also enable the detection of a heightened recourse to specific themes. Intuitively, one would hypothesize, in line with previous scholarship on media discourses, that personal drama or concrete events related to Spence and the Spenceans are more likely to be featured in newspaper articles than their more abstract theories.[67] This section empirically checks topic recurrence through the lens of keywords, as identified either by term frequency or the novel weighted log odds metric, which appears to be a superior measure compared to the commonly employed tf-idf metric.[68] Unfortunately, the dataset is not large enough to enable the use of more theoretically demanding methods such as Topic Modelling, which has gained traction in the text-mining analysis of newspapers.[69]

We begin by conducting lemmatization, a sophisticated word normalization technique that transforms each word into its proper base form, called "lemma", i.e. a term to be found in a dictionary.[70] This is important to ensure that keyword detection tasks are not distorted by variations of the same word. In addition, we apply POS tagging, which allows one to algorithmically assign a grammatical tag to each lemma in the corpus, signalling the position of the respective word within a sentence. Consequently, we remove all lemmas that are not classified as nouns, based on the standard assumption that nouns are the most meaningful type of words for summarizing content.[71]

Based on this lemmatized and pre-selected corpus, we calculate the most frequent nouns of the Spencean media footprint according to the geographical regions covered by the corpus (Figure 3). As can be seen, most newspaper contributors frequently relied on administrative words like *committee* (Australia, Ireland, US), *society*

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[66] *Working Man's Advocate*, 8 June 1844. See also Eric Fure-Slocum, "Urban Poverty and 'The Right to Cultivate the Earth': American Land Reformers in the 1840s", *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14:1 (1995), pp. 120–132.

[67] See, for example, Lino Wehrheim, *Im Olymp der Ökonomen. Zur öffentlichen Resonanz wirtschaftspolitischer Experten von 1965 bis 2015 (Die Einheit der Gesellschaftswissenschaften im 21. Jahrhundert)* (Tübingen, 2021).

[68] Kenneth D. Aiello and Michael Simeone, "Triangulation of History Using Textual Data", *Isis*, 110:3 (2019), pp. 522–537.

[69] Paul DiMaggio, Manish Nag, and David Blei, "Exploiting Affinities between Topic Modeling and the Sociological Perspective on Culture: Application to Newspaper Coverage of U.S. Government Arts Funding", *Poetics*, 41:6 (2013), pp. 570–606; Anselm Küsters and Elisa Garrido, "Mining PIGS: A Structural Topic Model Analysis of Southern Europe Based on the German Newspaper *Die Zeit* (1946–2009)", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 28:4 (2020), pp. 477–493.

[70] Grimmer *et al.*, *Text as Data*, pp. 54–55.
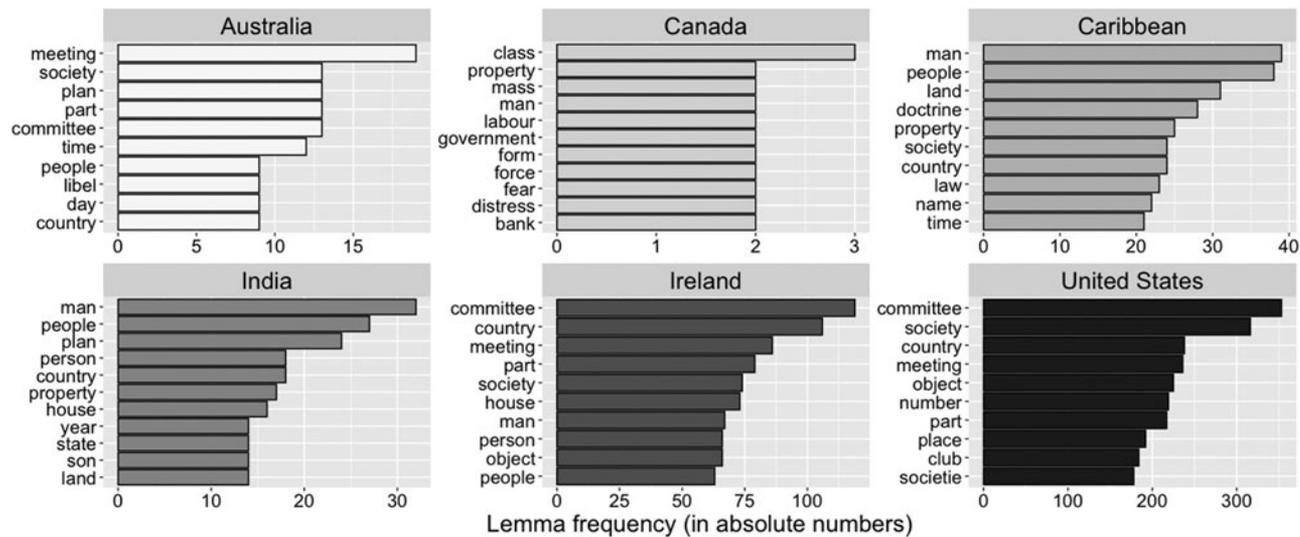
[71] *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

**Figure 3** Most frequent nouns in Spencean newspaper articles, by region.

(Australia, Caribbean, Ireland, US), *people* (Australia, Caribbean, India, Ireland), and *meeting* (Australia, Ireland, US). This is in line with the qualitative analysis of the dataset, which shows that the great majority of articles referred to the parliamentary Secret *Committee*'s "Report". The "Report" repeatedly mentioned the Spencean *Society* as the main reason for the popular disturbances at Spa Fields and the passing of the Seditious *Meetings* Act in 1817, which included a clause banning all associations that referred to the Spencean principles, thereby making Spenceanism the only political ideology to have ever been explicitly outlawed by the British Parliament.[72] The only region lacking in this list is Canada, which can be explained by the relatively low number of observations.

At the same time, the high frequency of rather specific terms, such as *land* (Caribbean, India), *property* (Canada, Caribbean, India), *plan* (Australia, India), and *doctrine* (Caribbean), points to an exciting feature also leaping out at the qualitative reader: contrary to expectations, several articles, including those written in the wake of specific events, featured discussions – sometimes short, sometimes quite lengthy – of the theoretical contents of Spence's Plan, most of them reprints from British periodicals. Therefore, readers of English-language newspapers across the British Empire and the US were not only made acquainted with disturbances in London, the real or supposed ramifications of the Spencean Society, and the measures practically implemented to contain their activities, but they also learnt the more abstract theories underpinning the militancy of the Spenceans. In March 1817, for instance, the *Limerick Gazette* provided its Irish readers with a complete account of Spence's Plan as "so much interest has been excited respecting the doctrine of Spence".[73] A few months later, a couple of US newspapers observed that, as the expression "the Spencean system" was so much in vogue in debates about British disturbances but was still "new to us in the revolutionary vocabulary", an account of that system was hereafter published, being "perhaps not uninteresting to our readers".[74] The Jamaican *Royal Gazette*, the *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, and the New York *Exile* even reprinted complete or abridged versions of the *Address of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists*.[75] In this way, most accounts contributed to a transnational dissemination of the philosophical tenets of Spenceanism, including not only common landownership, but also parochial decentralization, the redistribution of dividends, and Spence's proposals to establish a republican government, universal men's and women's suffrage, and a shortened week of five days to promote leisure.[76]

When reviewing newspaper content, examining frequently occurring nouns proves insufficient, particularly when authors utilize standardized formulations to relay

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[72]Bonnett and Armstrong, *Thomas Spence*, p. 2; Adrian J. Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford, 2006).

[73]*Limerick Gazette*, 14 March 1817.

[74]*Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, 3 May 1817; *Raleigh Minerva*, 16 May 1817.

[75]*Royal Gazette*, 22 March 1817; *Exile*, 10 May 1817; *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, 14 May 1817 and 28 May 1817. Cf. Society of Spencean Philanthropists, *Address of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists to All Mankind, on the Means of Promoting Liberty and Happiness* (London, 1817).

[76]*Limerick Gazette*, 14 March 1817; *Government Gazette*, 26 June 1817; *Royal Gazette*, 13 September 1817.

similar facts. This is relevant when the goal is one of discerning regional differences in reporting about Spenceanism.[77] In such a context, it is preferable to rely on the so-called weighted log odds ratio, a statistical measure used to quantify the degree to which specific words are associated with specific categories within a dataset.[78] To analyse regional variations in newspaper discourse on Spence and his followers, DH researchers can use the weighted log odds ratio to identify and measure the associational strength of particular words or phrases with newspapers from different regions. Without going into technical detail, this technique helps uncover linguistic patterns and preferences unique to each region, providing insights into the variations in framing and topic emphasis within the newspaper discourse captured by our corpus.[79]

As shown in Figure 4, which plots the top-ten lemmas as ranked by weighted log odds, this metric facilitates discerning the subtle, region-specific variations in the transnational reception of Spence. Australian newspapers distinctively mentioned *arm*, *country*, and *flag*, while the Canadian article used a vocabulary reminiscent of mass upheavals (*number*, *men*, *force*), a significant choice in the wake of the European revolutions of 1848. Caribbean articles referred, notably, to *slavery*, *colony*, *leveller*, and *blood*, while political-institutional aspects (*petitioner*, *parliamentary*, *court*, *passport*) recurred in Indian ones. Irish newspapers, in turn, drew on terms such as *warrant*, *tenant*, and, importantly, *misery*, whereas US-American ones talked characteristically about *gunsmith*, *sailor*, *indictment*, and *artizan*. When comparing these word lists with the results stemming from other common metrics for extracting keywords,[80] we note that the terms selected by weighted log odds are relatively more informative and produce meaningful results even for regions with a low number of observations, like Canada.

Qualitative investigation complements these results and throws light on some subtleties that cannot be captured by word lists. For instance, the recurrence of references to *misery* in Irish articles is not surprising, pointing at both the helpless hardships that afflicted most of the Irish labouring population in the early nineteenth century and the Spencean-like degradation that, as some observers envisaged, would have resulted from an application of the Poor Laws to Ireland, which had traditionally lacked an equivalent to the English system of statutory relief.[81] Interestingly, Caribbean terms with a high log odds value include the

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[77]The traditional approach, utilizing the tf–idf (*term frequency–inverse document frequency*) metric, encounters limitations under these circumstances. Tf-idf is conceived to reflect the specificity of a term within a document, in relation to a broader corpus. However, it stumbles when a term is uniformly present across all documents but with varying frequencies in individual sources, inadvertently assigning it a zero value of importance. To mitigate this challenge, we employ the weighted log odds ratio.

[78]It adjusts the traditional log odds ratio by taking into account the overall frequency of words, making it especially useful for comparing word usage across subcorpora. See Grimmer *et al.*, *Text as Data*, p. 115.

[79]For technical details, see Burt L. Monroe, Michael P. Colaresi, and Kevin M. Quinn, "Fightin' Words: Lexical Feature Selection and Evaluation for Identifying the Content of Political Conflict", *Political Analysis*, 16:4 (2008), pp. 372–403. For the implementation in R, see https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=tidylo; last accessed 9 February 2023.

[80]In particular, we also calculated the highest "tf–idf" words (not plotted here; available from the authors upon request). For a discussion of this metric, see footnote 77 above.

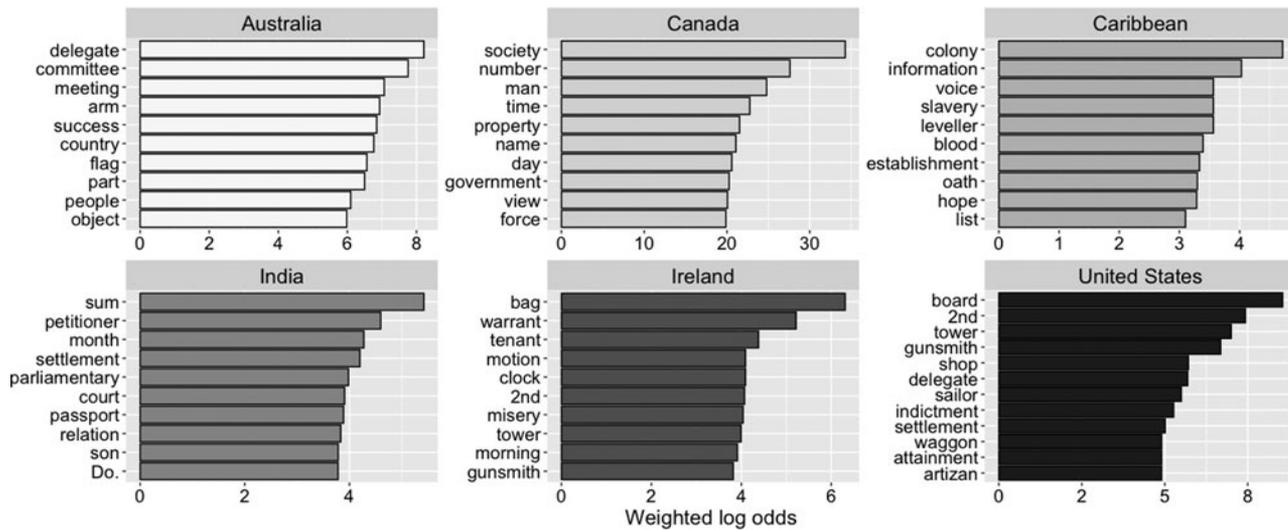[81]*Belfast Newsletter*, 6 May 1828; *Mayo Constitution*, 8 May 1828.

**Figure 4** Top ten lemmas selected by weighted log odds.

emotionally charged words *slavery*, *blood*, and *colony*. From a contextually informed perspective, it is not surprising that *blood* was dreaded by the newspapers voicing the views of the West Indian planter elite, being envisaged as the inevitable consequence of an insurrection of the enslaved – like the major one that occurred in Barbados in 1816, soon to be followed by the Demerara Rebellion of 1823. In 1817, the Jamaican *Royal Gazette* presented Spenceanism as a set of "dangerous and levelling doctrines". A few months later, the same journal published an extract from *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire* by the librarian of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, Thomas Evans, which made it clear why Spencean principles sounded "dangerous" in Caribbean plantation societies:

> Though this librarian has affixed the title *Christian Policy* to his book, he makes no other pretension to the character of Christian […] and informs us, that "this man, Christ, was a Roman slave, crucified as a slave […] for preaching the seditious doctrine that God was the proprietor of the earth, and not the Romans; that all men were equal in his sight, and consequently ought not to be slaves to another.[82]

This same passage was also reprinted in the *Bombay Gazette* but here squeezed into a footnote, while a different extract from Evans's *Christian Policy* waging an attack against the "pretended proprietors of the world" as well as "tyrants, pomp, and monopoly" was given prominence, sounding probably more applicable to the domination of the East India Company in the subcontinent.[83] Likewise, notable accounts of the Spencean system can be found in some US-American newspapers, the only ones significantly recovering Spence's definition of his planned Commonwealth as a "beautiful new Republic".[84] From these cases, Spence's Plan emerges as a reservoir of different social and political themes – including emancipation from enslavement, the censure of colonial conquest, and republicanism – which were alternatively emphasized by newspaper contributors across the English-reading world to engage their respective readerships by sounding more relatable to their specific contexts.

### Sentiment Analysis: How Did It Feel to Read about Spence?

After reconstructing the regional and chronological distribution of Spencean-related articles and identifying their critical themes through keyword analysis, this section utilizes sentiment analysis to grasp the emotional and psychological associations that readers may have been induced to experience when reading a press account about Spence, his Plan, and the activities of his followers. In recent years, text-mining methods have enabled researchers to carry out different types of

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[82]*Royal Gazette*, 13 September 1817. See also Thomas Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire: Being a Clear and Concise Examination into the Causes That Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy* (London, 1816), p. 10.

[83]*Bombay Gazette*, 9 July 1817. Cf. Evans, *Christian Policy*, p. 9.

[84]*New York Daily Advertiser*, 30 April 1817; *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, 3 May 1817; *Albany Gazette*, 5 May 1817; *Trenton Federalist*, 12 May 1817; *Raleigh Minerva*, 16 May 1817.

sentiment analysis to capture emotions in texts,[85] with the most recent frameworks implementing deep learning approaches.[86] Here, we rely on a more standard dictionary-based approach that quantifies the total sentiment of a newspaper article by adding up the individual sentiment scores for each word, as this leads to intuitively accessible and transparent results.

In any historical enquiry, however, such an approach has certain caveats that must be acknowledged. First, dictionary methods typically miss negators and adversative conjunctions, bringing about faulty results. Nor can they generally understand satire and sarcasm, although these rhetorical tools play an essential role in the media commentary on Spence. Most problematically, researchers have noted that these lexicons are derived from contemporary English words and thus potentially ill-suited to earlier periods.[87] More generally, words can carry different sentiments depending on the context in which they are used. For instance, the word *poor* may be negative when describing socio-economic issues, like poverty, but may be neutral or objective when a newspaper took up Spence's writings in a confirmative sense. In the latter case, this article would probably not be classified as negative with a dictionary analysis that simply adds up the number of positive and negative words according to a pre-determined list.[88] We will return to this limitation when discussing the list of most frequent sentiment words detected in articles about Spenceanism, which includes the word "poor".

This section's sentiment analysis thus proceeds in two steps: we start by utilizing the well-known general-purpose lexicon from Bing Liu and others,[89] which classifies 6,786 words in a binary fashion into positive and negative categories. Experimenting with different existing lexicons suggests that this one is best adapted to the language and tone of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals.[90] As a robustness check, we later complement this analysis with a novel, self-constructed sentiment dictionary that builds on previous work identifying a "moral valuation" semantic field in nineteenth-century literature. In the following, we draw on the

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[85]Gavin Abercrombie and Riza Batista-Navarro, "Sentiment and Position-Taking Analysis of Parliamentary Debates: A Systematic Literature Review", *Journal of Computational Social Science*, 3 (2020), pp. 245–270; Ronen Feldman, "Techniques and Applications for Sentiment Analysis", *Communications of the ACM*, 56:4 (2013), pp. 82–89; Bing Liu, *Sentiment Analysis: Mining Opinions, Sentiments, and Emotions* (Cambridge, 2015).

[86]Thomas Schmidt, Katrin Dennerlein, and Christian Wolff, *Using Deep Learning for Emotion Analysis of 18th- and 19th-Century German Plays* (Esch-sur-Alzette, 2021).

[87]Hoyeol Kim, "Sentiment Analysis: Limits and Progress of the Syuzhet Package and Its Lexicons", *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 16:2 (2022).

[88]In contrast, more advanced models, often using deep learning, calculate the sentiment of words in context from large amounts of data (for example, BERT).

[89]Minqing Hu and Bing Liu, "Mining and Summarizing Customer Reviews", *Proceedings of the Tenth ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining* (2004), pp. 168–177.

[90]Philipp Koncar *et al.*, "Text Sentiment in the Age of Enlightenment: An Analysis of Spectator Periodicals", *Applied Network Science*, 5:33 (2020), pp. 1–32. See also Yanqing Chen and Steven Skiena, "Building Sentiment Lexicons for All Major Languages", *Proceedings of the 52nd Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics* (Baltimore, MD, 2014), pp. 383–389. An analysis with the *nrc* lexicon yielded less satisfactory results. The frequently used dictionary by Loughran and McDonald is adapted to analyses of financial reports. Finally, the popular *syuzhet* dictionary relies on terms that were extracted from a small corpus of modern novels.
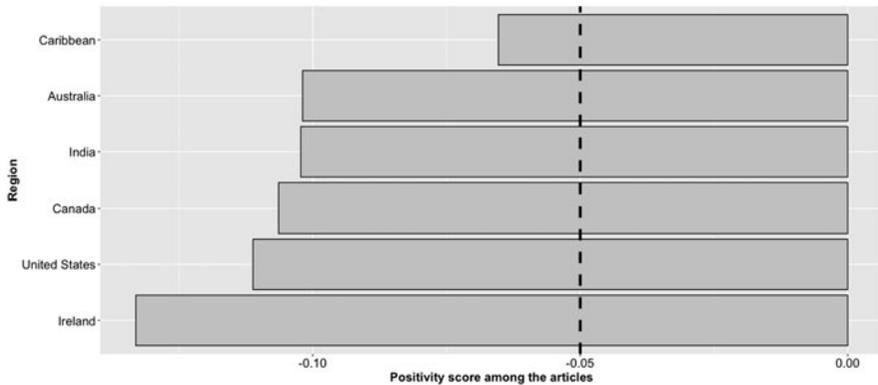
**Figure 5** Positivity score among the articles.

tokenized corpus, thereby leaving aside the lemmas used earlier for keyword analysis, because not all words contained in our sentiment dictionaries are lemmatized. To differentiate according to geographical contexts, we use the Bing lexicon to calculate each region's positivity ratio, namely, the total score of negative words compared to the total score of positive ones, ranging theoretically from -1 to 1 (Figure 5).

In quantitative terms, it immediately stands out that there are, on aggregate, more negative terms than favourable ones in newspaper articles on Spenceanism. To a certain extent, this simply reflects that dictionaries typically have a high ratio of negative to positive words. In text-mining practice, scholars generally tag only texts with a positivity below a score of −0.05 as unfavourable, and anything above 0.05 as positive.[91] Adopting this benchmark (dashed line in Figure 5) confirms that all regions were reached by a media discourse mainly conveying negative representations of Spenceanism, with Irish newspapers containing the most negative vocabulary. The negative sentiments evoked by Irish articles might be explained, on the one hand, by the geographical proximity between Ireland and Britain, which potentially made the socially unsettling importation of the Spencean schemes more plausible in times of distress, and, on the other, by the strong criticisms of the British government to be found in most of those articles, which emphasize the overall derogatory tone. In turn, it is precisely by virtue of the anti-British bias of the Irish press that some mentions from Ireland exhibited a more favourable sentiment towards the Spencean victims of British state repression, as detailed below.

One should also bear in mind that several articles in the corpus consist of many paragraphs that may include both positive and negative sentiments, tending to average out to about zero.[92] To get a more accurate view of Spence's representation, we thus single out all explicit statements addressing Spence, his Plan, and his followers instead of considering entire articles. This can be done with the help of KWIC analysis, which stands for "KeyWord In Context", a form of display in which

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[91]See  https://www.twinword.com/blog/interpreting-the-score-and-ratio-of-sentiment/; last accessed 9 February 2023.

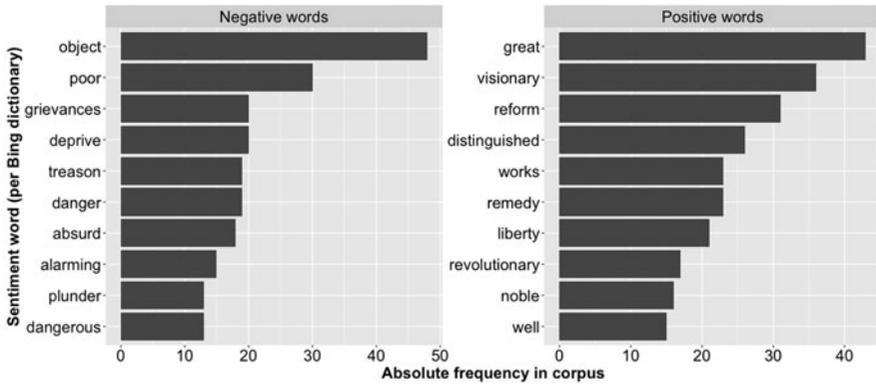[92]Silge and Robinson, *Text Mining with R*, ch. 2.

**Figure 6** Frequency of negative and positive words in Spencean articles.

a particular search term is listed in its respective semantic context. Here, the word *Spence\** has been searched (the asterisk is used to match any unknown characters and include references to variants like *Spencean*) with a reference size of thirty tokens, which means that the algorithm collects the fifteen words immediately before and the fifteen words immediately after a mention of *Spence\**. This procedure results in 518 hits or 11,951 tokens. It then becomes possible to assess the most frequent positive and negative sentiment words featured by these Spencean snippets, based on the Bing dictionary (Figure 6).

While there is a slightly higher number of negative terms, the most frequent one – *object* (48 times) – mainly appears with the meaning of purpose or intention, and therefore does not carry any particularly negative connotation. As alluded to above, the word *poor* (30) is instead relevant, being associated with both the lowest social class to which Spence, most of the Spenceans, and the members of the "multitude" belonged and the general distress that would have resulted – or so political observers thought – from the accomplishment of their schemes. The word was also used, rather rarely, with a more neutral meaning with reference to the contents of Spence's Plan or even with a compassionate connotation more benevolent towards "poor Mr Spence".[93] The terms *deprive* (20), *treason* (19), *danger* (19), and *absurd* (18) also seem meaningful, but they appear to be approximately as frequent as, on the positive side, *reform* (31), *distinguished* (26), or *liberty* (21). Crucially, the word *visionary* appears up to 36 times in the immediate semantic context of Spence. While the term is classified as a positive one by the Bing lexicon, a qualitative reading shows that it was mainly employed with a negative connotation, pointing at either Spence's own supposed insanity or the impracticability and fanatical extremism of his disciples' political activities.[94] As observed by the British Indian *Government Gazette*, for instance, the Spencean "quacks" supposed they could "perform wonders" not only "upon the human constitution", but also "in the very

[93]*Newport Mercury*, 26 April 1817; *Government Gazette*, 1 May 1817; *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 May 1820; *Dublin Weekly Register*, 27 July 1822.
[94]Cazzola, *The Political Thought of Thomas Spence*, pp. 211–213.

nature of man", thinking "human nature to be very different from what it ever was, and probably ever will be – without consideration as to the actual state of the world, and of society".[95] Likewise, *revolutionary* (17) referred derogatorily to the Spenceans' dreaded tenacity and their design to overthrow the social order.

A qualitative reading confirms that the sentiment that transpires from most articles is, indeed, negative. In fact, the great majority of Spencean mentions was included in reprints of the "Report of the Committee of Secrecy" and British parliamentary debates of 1817, and the negative sentiment conveyed by those passages was meant to instil an impending sense of danger not inferior to the one threatening Britain during the war with revolutionary France in 1793–1802.[96] These harsh tones, after all, were instrumental in justifying the re-enactment of the repressive legislation of 1794–1795, namely, the suspension of habeas corpus and a ban on public meetings, during peacetime. Spence's theories were, therefore, branded as "perverted", "pernicious", and "nefarious".[97] The meetings of the Spencean Philanthropists (an ever-growing and multiplying association of "infuriated" and "sanguinary" "mischief-makers") were occasions when "seditious" speeches were delivered, "inflammatory" writings read, "prophane" songs tuned, and "horrid" and "atrocious" oaths taken.[98] Their practical political schemes "deserve[d] to [be] held up to execration", being promoted with a "language of the most unparalleled violence" and moved by hopes of "plunder", "robbery", and "destruction" of property as well as "butchery" of landed proprietors.[99] Alarmed by the British parliamentary debates and state publications, the *American Watchman* stated that the Spencean Society did "threaten with the most serious dangers every part and department of our religious, political, civil, and moral establishments"; its readership may have taken these warnings as close to the truth.[100]

In the corpus, this extremely negative sentiment is displayed alongside several articles promoting a differently nuanced derogatory conception of Spenceanism, namely, its representation as a movement of "deranged" and "desperate" "fools", few in number and much less threatening than British authorities depicted them – and somewhat able to attract followers only when targeted by state repression, which had the effect of making them widely known.[101] In these scornful mentions

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[95]*Government Gazette*, 17 July 1817.

[96]Harry T. Dickinson and Pascal Dupuy, *Le temps des cannibals. La Révolution française vue des îles britanniques* (Paris, 2019).

[97]*Saunders's News-Letter*, 24 February 1817; *Barbados Mercury*, 12 April 1817 and 15 April 1817; *Royal Gazette*, 26 April 1817; *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, 3 May 1817; *Bombay Gazette*, 2 July 1817.

[98]*Freeman's Journal*, 24 February 1817; *Limerick Gazette*, 7 March 1817; *Royal Gazette*, 13 September 1817.

[99]*Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 24 February 1817; *Freeman's Journal*, 24 February 1817; *Belfast Newsletter*, 4 March 1817; *Limerick Gazette*, 7 March 1817; *Charleston Courier*, 22 April 1817 and 23 April 1817; *Commercial Advertiser*, 25 April 1817; *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, 21 May 1817; *Government Gazette*, 3 July 1817; *Bombay Gazette*, 9 July 1817; *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 16 August 1817.

[100]*American Watchman*, 17 May 1817.

[101]*Barbados Mercury*, 11 February 1817; *Belfast Newsletter*, 4 March 1817; *Government Gazette*, 1 May 1817; *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 9 July 1817; *Royal Gazette*, 9 August 1817; *Orleans Gazette*, 27 September 1817.

– sometimes juxtaposed with the first set of harshly negative accounts in the very same articles, most of them reprints of parliamentary debates where different Members of Parliament (MPs) held contrasting views regarding the actual danger represented by the Spenceans – Spence's Plan was described as "absurd", "fantastic", and "ludicrous" "nonsense". Likewise, his followers were ridiculed as "contemptible", "insane", and "ignorant" "enthusiasts", whose writings were "dull balderdash" and whose "visionary" "system of theoretic politics and practical robbery" amounted to an "impracticable" "impossibility", and was thereby too "despicable" to deserve notice.[102] Several were the contributors who, transnationally, appeared to concur with the piece published in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* in May 1818, which blamed Spence for having inspired the new "madmen" of the "science of politics".[103] In colonial Australia, the Spenceans' notoriety in Britain was mocked as providing evidence of the "irresistible attraction" of John Bull (the personification of the British nation) for impostors and charlatans, to such an extent that, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Britain itself was nothing more than a "quack-land".[104] Likewise, the Irish *Dublin Evening Post* and *Freeman's Journal* sarcastically dismissed Britain's self-representation as "the most thinking people in the world", as, "if John Bull be a Spencean, we will take the liberty of writing him down".[105] Others of these unfavourable yet slightly mitigated mentions also featured almost sympathetic accounts of the several arrests and detentions experienced by the persecuted Spenceans, whose "folly" and "misery" made them isolated and ultimately harmless.[106] Their ascribed insignificance even inspired plays on words, scoffing state authorities for focusing their legislative efforts on defeating them: in a widely reprinted excerpt of parliamentary debates, it was ironically remarked that the system by which Britain was oppressed was rather "the Ex-Spencean system".[107]

Another remarkable piece published in the *Dublin Evening Post* in the wake of the Spa Fields riots, after compassionately recounting the "misfortunes" endured by the Spenceans, interpreted their persecution in the light of the repression suffered by Irish radicals: being "innocent" and yet foolishly portrayed as "wonderful conspirators" by the British authorities, the Spa Fields agitators would soon "be put upon trials for their lives; [and] if the counts of indictment would be sustained by two witnesses (*one* would do the business in Ireland) they would be beheaded,

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[102]*Dublin Evening Post*, 8 February 1817, 13 February 1817, and 25 February 1817; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 9 April 1817; *Barbados Mercury*, 12 April 1817 and 23 August 1817; *New York Daily Advertiser*, 30 April 1817; *Government Gazette*, 1 May 1817; *Royal Gazette*, 3 May 1817; *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, 3 May 1817; *American Watchman*, 17 May 1817; *Bombay Gazette*, 2 July 1817; *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 9 July 1817; *Freeman's Journal*, 20 September 1817; *Madras Courier*, 5 May 1818; *Grenada Free Press*, 5 September 1827.

[103]"Truro", *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 2 May 1818, p. 2. See also *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 12 February 1817.

[104]*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 1844.

[105]*Dublin Evening Post*, 25 February 1817; *Freeman's Journal*, 28 February 1817.

[106]See, for example, the accounts of the arrests of the Spenceans Thomas Evans and James Watson: *Barbados Mercury*, 11 February 1817; *Freeman's Journal*, 13 February 1817; *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 9 July 1817.

[107]*Dublin Evening Post*, 1 March 1817; *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, 7 May 1817; *Government Gazette*, 3 July 1817.

hanged, [and] quartered".[108] In 1817, several newspapers even reprinted the insinuation (already advanced by some British journals, including William Cobbett's *Political Register* and the *Edinburgh Review*) that, in their gloomy representations of the rioters, British MPs had not been deceived but had instead deliberately exaggerated the Spencean emergency as a pretext for passing stringent legislation and halt even moderate reforms.[109] The *Madras Courier*, after stressing the more compelling issue of parliamentary reform, ironically remarked that "the Spencean chimera, the very foolishness of folly, until recently invisible to the eye of the political entomologist, [was] then subjected to a microscope which made it appear like a monster".[110] Notably, the suspicion that the authorities had fabricated the Spencean threat ad hoc to justify state repression was mainly reported by Irish newspapers in articles which, despite conveying an unfavourable representation of Spenceanism, addressed their particular censure and reproach of the British state establishment.[111]

Finally, one should pay attention to how the emotional reception of Spencean-related news changed over time by empirically summing up the sentiment scores for each publication date. Even if the size of the Spencean corpus does not correspond to the type of high-frequency text data for which these methods were developed, plotting polarity over time still conveys the impression that negative associations with Spence were mainly restricted to 1817, while other years were overall less extreme in their polarity (Figure 7). Moreover, the percentage of positive sentiment (as part of overall sentiment) significantly increased in the later decades captured by the corpus, when Spence's death was long past and the threat represented by the Spenceans neutralized by means of executions and transportation overseas. The overall polarity trend over time, depicted here with smoothed trend lines, is positive in both sentiment representations.

A qualitative reading validates the basic direction of the different sentiment scores utilized above, confirming that the press representation of Spenceanism improved over time. The observation that the year 1817 featured, in all contexts, the highest amount of negativity reflects the international press reaction to Spa Fields. With the Spencean emergency's fading away, the tone of newspaper accounts became more nuanced. Negative sentiment was still predominant, but the disquieting warnings of 1817 left room more frequently to the above-mentioned expressions of ridicule and scorn, allegations of impracticability and absurdity, and associations of Spenceanism with extreme radicalism without the previous explicit references to an impending danger of "plunder" and "butchery". This development is epitomized by the article in the Canadian *Montreal Gazette* of 1848, which, despite being written in revolutionary

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[108]*Dublin Evening Post*, 13 February 1817.

[109]*Freeman's Journal*, 20 September 1817 (as remarked by the *Freeman's* contributor, this article was a reprint from the *Edinburgh Review*). See also "The Spenceans", *Chester Chronicle*, 28 February 1817, p. 1; "Letter V", *Cobbett's Political Register*, 11 October 1817, pp. 833–864.

[110]*Madras Courier*, 5 May 1818.

[111]*Dublin Evening Post*, 13 February 1817; *Bombay Gazette*, 16 July 1817; *Freeman's Journal*, 22 September 1817 and 25 September 1817; *Carlow Morning Post*, 15 November 1819; *Dublin Weekly Register*, 27 July 1822 and 9 November 1822.
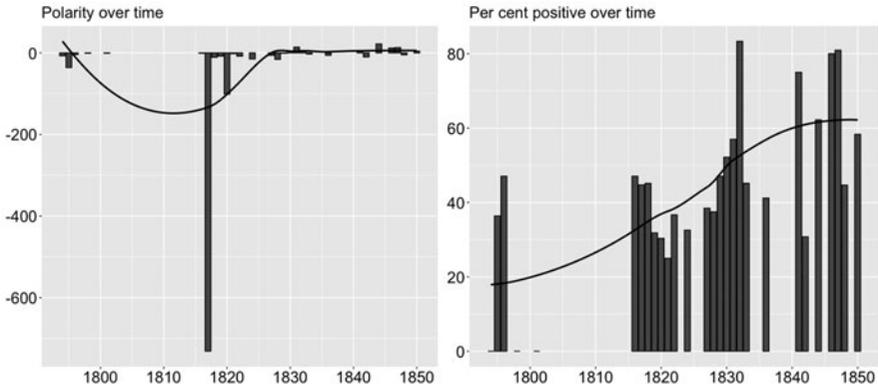
Figure 7 Polarity over time and per cent positive over time.

times, assessed the Spenceans, in retrospect, as "a mob" never really in danger of becoming "a revolution".[112]

Interestingly, some of the vocabulary employed to report about Spenceanism featured a distinctively moral connotation. The previous analysis can therefore be complemented by repurposing the work of the Stanford Literary Lab, which identifies a moral valuation semantic field based on a historical thesaurus and frequency data from close to 3,000 British novels published between 1785 and 1900, thus approaching a comprehensive set of ethically connoted English words in a time span that encapsulates the Spencean newspaper corpus.[113] Overall, this semantic field relates to the ethical assessment of behaviour and consists of 118 "socially normative, evaluative, and highly polarized words",[114] such as *wicked*, *malicious*, *despicable*, *worthy*, *integrity*, and *incorruptible*. We manually split this list into positive and negative words in order to construct two corresponding nineteenth-century sentiment dictionaries in R (in cases of ambivalence or uncertainty, we opt for a third, neutral classification, which we ignore in the following). By calculating the extent to which these terms appear in the newspaper corpus, it is possible to assess whether the actions of Spence and his followers were viewed through an explicitly moral or ethical lens (Figure 8).

The exercise confirms that there was, indeed, a strong moral connotation in news reporting about Spenceanism, as many words from the contemporary ethical discourse were employed. However, the trend towards a more positive valuation of Spence after his death is less visible compared to the sentiment representation based on the Bing lexicon. Moreover, there appears to be a surprisingly high occurrence of positively connoted normative words in the early years of the period covered by the corpus, which does not fit within the general picture shown above, according to which events such as Spa Fields led, in 1817, to a mainly negative sentiment in

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[112]*Montreal Gazette*, 28 April 1848.

[113]Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac, "A Quantitative Literary History of 2,958 Nineteenth-Century British Novels: The Semantic Cohort Method", *Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet*, 4 (2012), pp. 1–66.
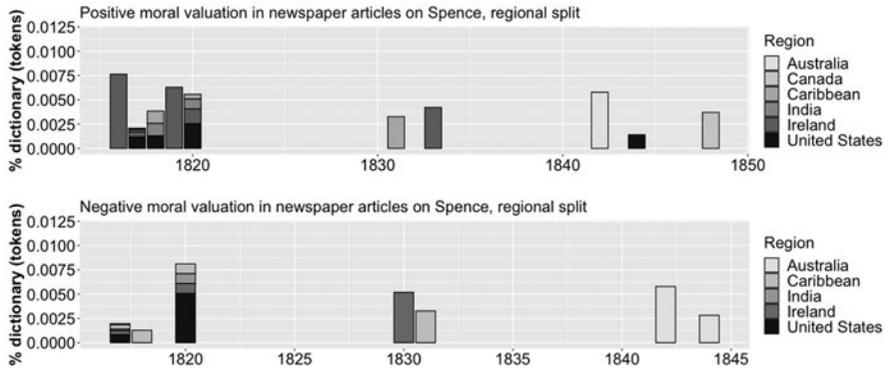
[114]*Ibid.*, p. 19.

**Figure 8** Positive and negative moral valuation in newspaper articles on Spence, regional split.

aggregate terms. However, these results reflect the small list of words collected by the Stanford Literary Lab, which is less capable of producing macroscopic patterns than the Bing-based analysis of a substantially larger vocabulary (6,786 words).

Still, the significance of positive sentiment spotted by the moral valuation analysis can be partly clarified by resorting to qualitative investigation. Notably, in 1817–1818, several newspapers across the English-reading world reprinted or adapted extracts from a long article published in the British *Quarterly Review* in October 1816, whose author harshly censured the Spencean principles and yet acknowledged – with grudging admiration – that Spence was "honest", as he would have "suffered martyrdom for his opinions"; likewise, what made the Spenceans "far more dangerous" than other groups of reformers was, the contributor believed, their being morally "more respectable", as "they know what they aim at, and honestly declare it".[115] Qualitative analysis also helps identify another few, and therefore especially interesting, favourable mentions of Spenceanism. Of course, positive sentiment is less surprising when espoused by progressive and radical newspapers, such as the *Aurora General Advertiser*, which included Spence's periodical *Pigs' Meat* in the list of works contributing to the "cause of liberty".[116] The emotions transpiring from the US *Working Man's Advocate* were also extremely appreciative. Advocating the restoration of men's natural right to the land, the publication openly praised the "bold reformer" Thomas Spence, "a man of genius [and] perseverance", who had dauntlessly asserted that "the land of England belonged to the people […] and not to a chosen few".[117] More positive than negative in tone is the article published in the Irish *Saunders's News-Letter* in September 1829, which remarked that the "good old doctrine", according to which "property should not be too unequally accumulated" – derived from the Scriptures and directly opposed to Malthus's political economy – was no less accurate because the Spenceans had

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[115]*Columbian*, 2 May 1817; *Exile*, 10 May 1817; *Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, 28 May 1817; *Bombay Gazette*, 16 July 1817; *Royal Gazette*, 13 September 1817; *Madras Courier*, 5 May 1818. Cf. Robert Southey, "Parliamentary Reform", *The Quarterly Review*, 16:31 (1816), pp. 225–278, 267, 263.

[116]*Aurora General Advertiser*, 2 May 1796.

[117]*Working Man's Advocate*, 8 June 1844.

argued something similar.[118] Even more remarkable is the piece published in the *Bombay Gazette* in 1852, whose author recommended British interference in relations between Indian rent collectors and tenants in the subcontinent.[119] Here, at a safe temporal distance from Spa Fields, Spenceanism was even adopted – albeit ironically – as a landmark able to inspire the course to be taken by the colonial government.

## Conclusion: Spenceans Against State and Empire

Throughout six decades, between the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, the ideas of Thomas Spence and the political militancy of his followers were alluded to in a diverse array of English-language newspaper articles across the British Isles, the British Empire, and the US. Most of these articles depicted Spenceanism as an ideology and a political movement advocating a complete overhaul of society, with the proposal for the abolition of private landownership; of politics, with the commitment to a profound democratization of political discourse and participation; and of colonial policy, with the stand against colonial domination and enslavement. Due to its revolutionary contents, in several newspaper articles Spence's Plan was compared to other radical schemes of various sorts, including episodes of anti-imperial and Indigenous resistance. For instance, according to the *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent*, the "wildest theories of the Spencean schools" were among the set of influences behind the attempt of the Irish republicans led by Robert Emmett to seize the seat of government in Ireland in 1803.[120] Likewise, in October 1818, the *Barbados Mercury* recounted the seizing of a British ship by a group of Pacific Islanders at Tonga, Polynesia, who, it was argued, had been motivated by notions of property redistribution and the rights of man similar to those promulgated in Britain by the Spencean Philanthropists.[121] Moreover, while the early nineteenth century was witnessing the growing racism of the British working class,[122] the articles published in the Jamaican *Watchman* in 1831 associated Spenceanism with uncompromising views regarding slavery abolition.[123]

In the early nineteenth century, the Spencean ultra-radicalism represented a challenge to the exploitative and racialized order of both state and empire. In this context, the transnational circulation of newspapers became a crucial tool through which its ideas found their way throughout the English-reading world. Even the most negative mentions of Spenceanism somehow contributed to disseminating the contents of the Plan: some West Indian newspapers, despite denouncing the "dangerous" implications of the Spencean doctrines for plantation societies,

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[118]*Saunders's News-Letter*, 5 September 1829.
[119]*Bombay Gazette*, 6 October 1852.
[120]*Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent*, 3 November 1836. See also Liam Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare, 1790–1803* (Dublin, 1998).
[121]*Barbados Mercury*, 6 October 1818.
[122]Ryan Hanley, "Slavery and the Birth of Working-Class Racism in England, 1814–1833", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26 (2016), pp. 103–123.
[123]*Watchman, and Jamaica Free Press*, 17 September 1831 and 9 November 1831.

paradoxically made these doctrines available to different Caribbean readerships – including the most undesirable. While the planter elite of Barbados conjectured that the Spencean Philanthropists may have influenced the outbreak of Bussa's Rebellion in April 1816, no Spencean-related mention has been found in digitized Barbadian newspapers published before that event; after all, the West Indian enslaved did not need British radicals to teach them hatred for or inspire resistance against their bondage. However, in 1817, in Jamaica and the Bahamas, the literate among the enslaved could have read the full version of the *Address of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists* and been informed that Thomas Spence was a well-meaning theorist, who had "promulgated a plan […] [as] the only means to […] promote the permanent happiness of the world" by "declar[ing] that all persons are in order of nature born equal, and […] recommend[ing] […] that lordship on the soil be abolished".[124]

This almost fortuitous intellectual propagation appears to be in line with what was argued by the contributor to the US *Working Man's Advocate* in 1844:

> We often hear of the vegetation of seed accidentally brought to the surface after being buried for years below the influence of solar heat. So it was with the seed sown by Spence. One, at least, of Spence's publications found its way to America, and, in all probability, led to the movement of the Working Men of New York in 1829 […]. And not alone in America have the seeds sown by Spence begun to germinate.[125]

By retracing the transnational dissemination of the "seeds" of Spenceanism, text mining demonstrates the productivity of examining digitized newspaper corpora through a DH perspective to reconstruct the transnational impact of British radical ideas. Still, while these digital methods excel in quantitatively analysing large datasets, relying solely on DH is inadequate as it may overlook subtleties inherent in the dissemination of Spencean ideas. We found that it is imperative to supplement DH approaches with meticulous qualitative close reading to capture the dynamics at play in the varied public reception of Spenceanism. The significance of a combined methodology is underscored by our discovery of qualitative examples that deviate from the prevailing quantitative trends, for instance, unearthing positive sentiments about Spenceanism amidst a predominantly negative public perception. These anomalies, or outliers in the statistical sense, are particularly valuable for historians, fostering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted legacy of Spence's Plan across borders. Our methodological results thus underpin the notion that statistical significance does not always translate into historical significance.

This article set out to lay the first brick of an ambitious research project, which might be expanded in terms of chronology (by taking into account a period spanning at least until the end of the nineteenth century), geography (by including not only other parts of the British Empire, but also the rest of Europe and the world), sources (by including not only newly digitized British periodicals, which are

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[124]*Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser*, 14 May 1817.
[125]*Working's Man Advocate*, 8 June 1844.

being added to online databases on a monthly basis, but also newspapers other than in the English language), and technical sophistication (by going beyond binary scales of text sentiment and shifting towards so-called transformer-based models). The increasing number of digitalization projects currently being carried out are making endangered newspaper archives newly available to historians.[126] Once applied to these sources, DH techniques can play a crucial role in furthering the study of the still underexplored histories of radicalism.

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[126] See, for example, the newspaper collections recently digitized for the Endangered Archives Programme.