"The Spider's Web":
An Analysis of Fan Mail from Amazing Spider-Man, 1963–1995

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Introduction

Our study provides an analysis of thirty-three years of fan mail published in Marvel Comics' Amazing Spider-Man comic book, from the beginning of the series in 1963 through 1995 (issues #1–406). Our study employs mixed methods, including text encoding and analysis, topic modeling, and close reading.

We obtained our data from the DVD title *The Amazing Spider-Man: The Complete Collection* (2006), which includes PDFs of every issue of ASM from the series beginning in 1963 through 2006. The fan mail pages were extracted from the PDFs and automatically transcribed with FineReader optical character recognition (OCR) software.

Transcribed texts were encoded following the Text Encoding Initiative's Guidelines for Electronic Text Encoding and Interchange (see http://tei-c.org). This Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) encoding supports the semantic tagging of the text, and facilitates operations such as filtering out salutations and addresses and producing statistics about letter and word counts.

We developed eXtensible Stylesheet Language Transformations (XSLT) stylesheets to generate basic statistics about the corpus and employed additional text analysis tools, topic modeling software, and close reading to explore the corpus.

We examined in detail three of many discourses found in the letters: discourses on Making and Makers, Characters, and Social Issues.
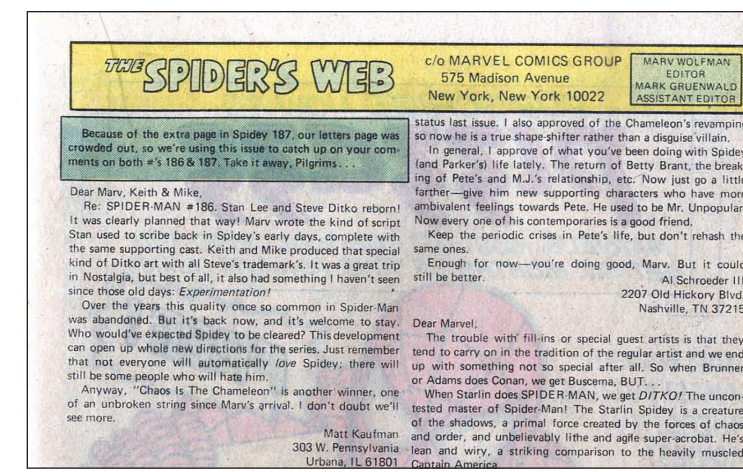
```
1  <div type="group">
2    <div type="letter">
3      <opener><salute>Dear Stan and Steve,</salute></opener>
4      <p>This morning I walked two miles for SPIDER-MAN #5, and it
5      was well worth it! (The comic, not the walk!) Only one thing
6      bugs me — why do you always put exclamation marks after
7      whatever your characters say? (except for questions)</p>
8      <closer>
9        <signed>Gordon Flagg, Jr.</signed>
10       <address>
11         <addrline>1906 Clairmont Terr.</addrline>
12         <addrline>Atlanta, Ga.</addrline>
13       </address>
14     </closer>
15   </div>
16   <div type="reply" rendition="#b #i">
17     <p>There's a reason for the exclamation marks, Gordon … When
18     ordinary periods are used between sentences, they sometimes do
19     not reproduce clearly when the mag is printed and the
20     sentences seem to run together. But, exclamation marks show up
21     much better, thus eliminating the possibility of any
22     confusion.</p>
23   </div>
24 </div>
```
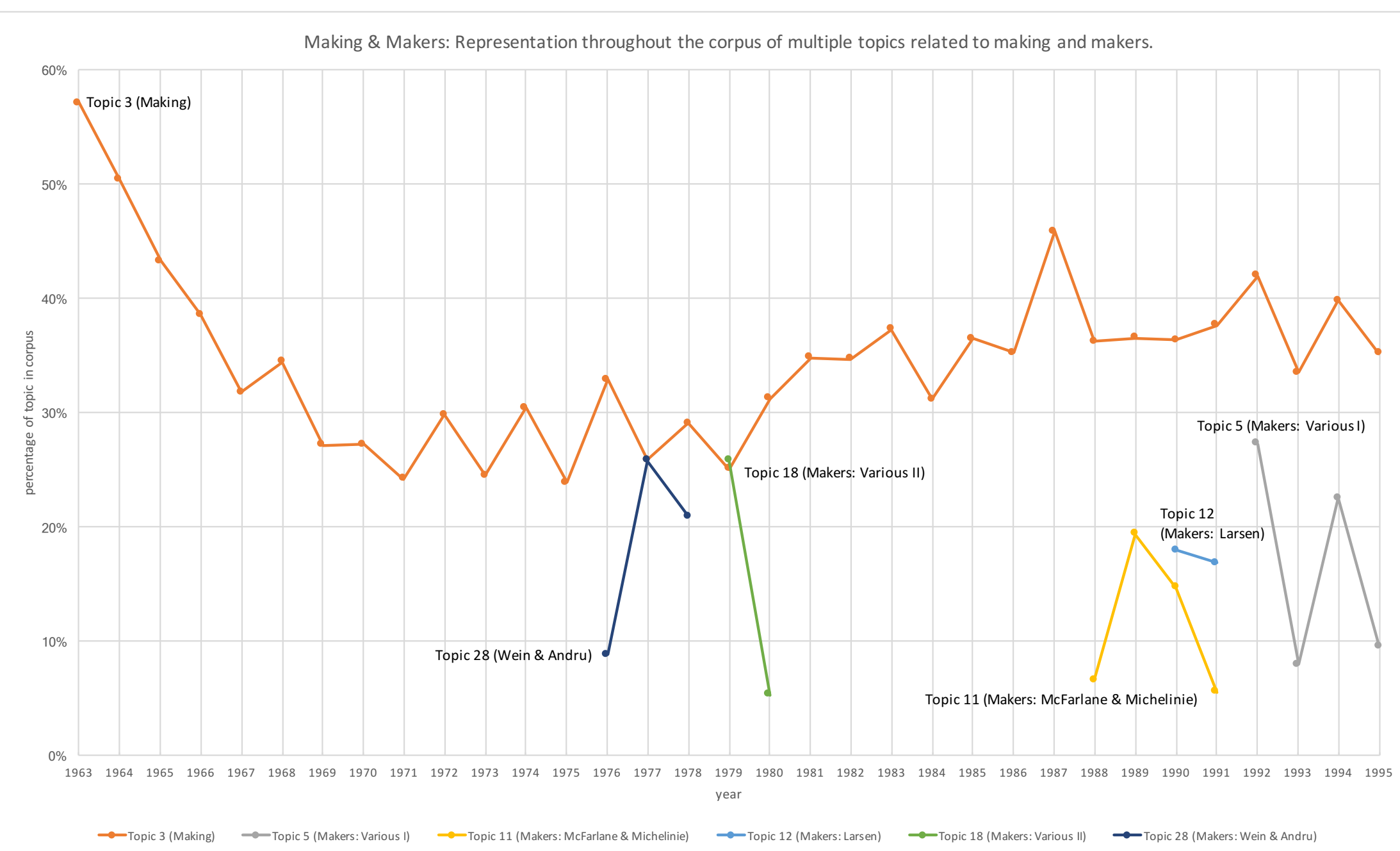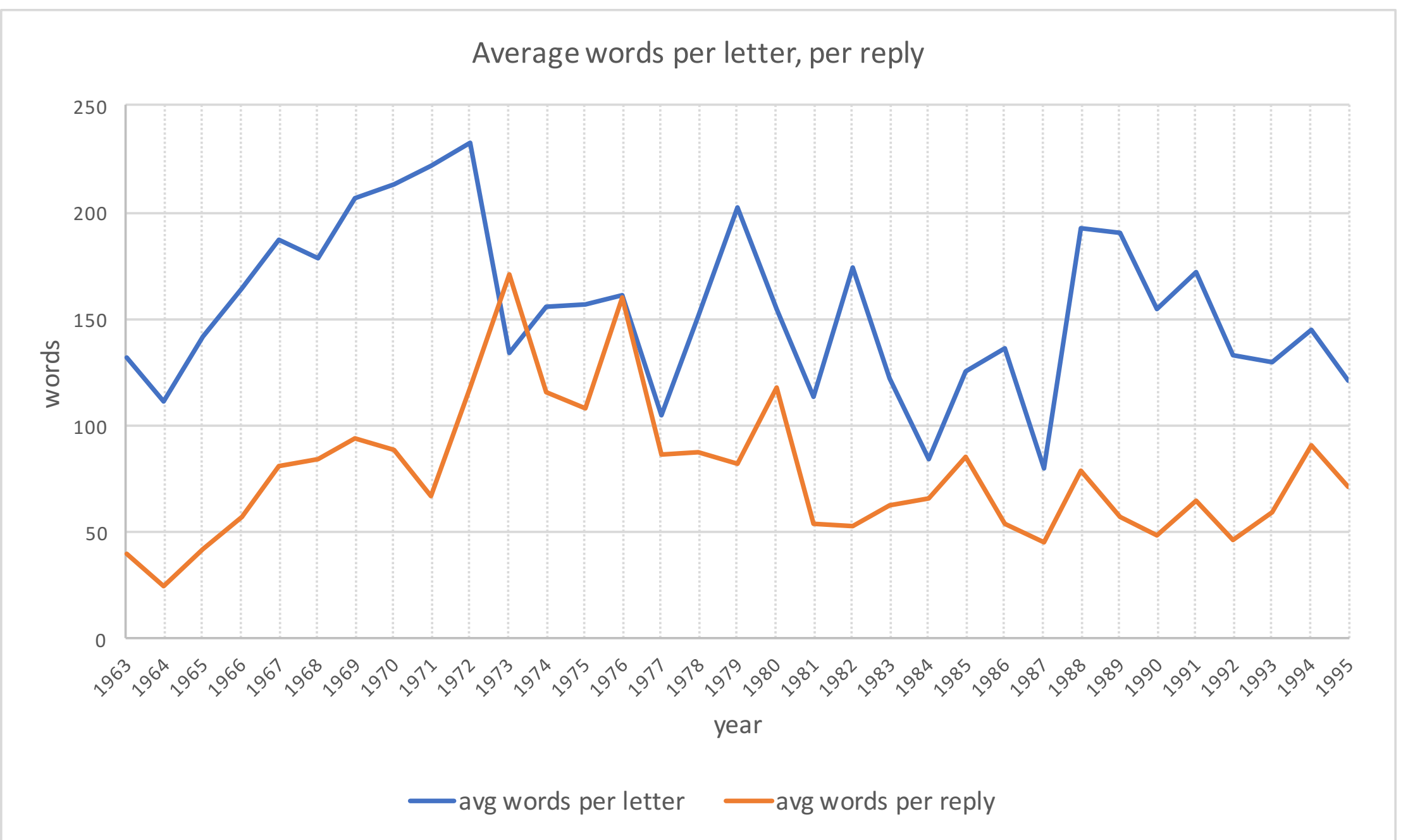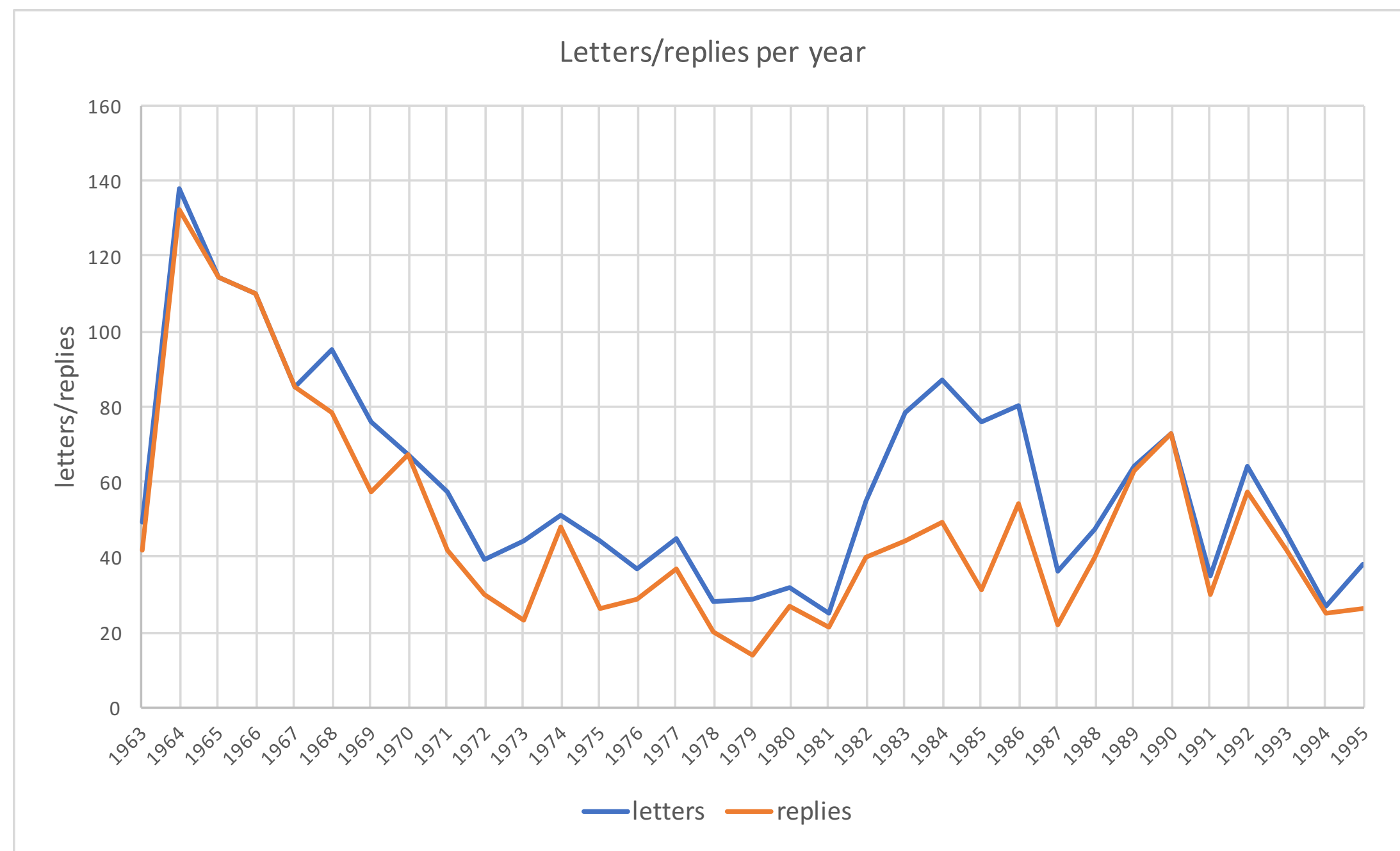
Example 1. TEI XML encoding of a letter-reply group
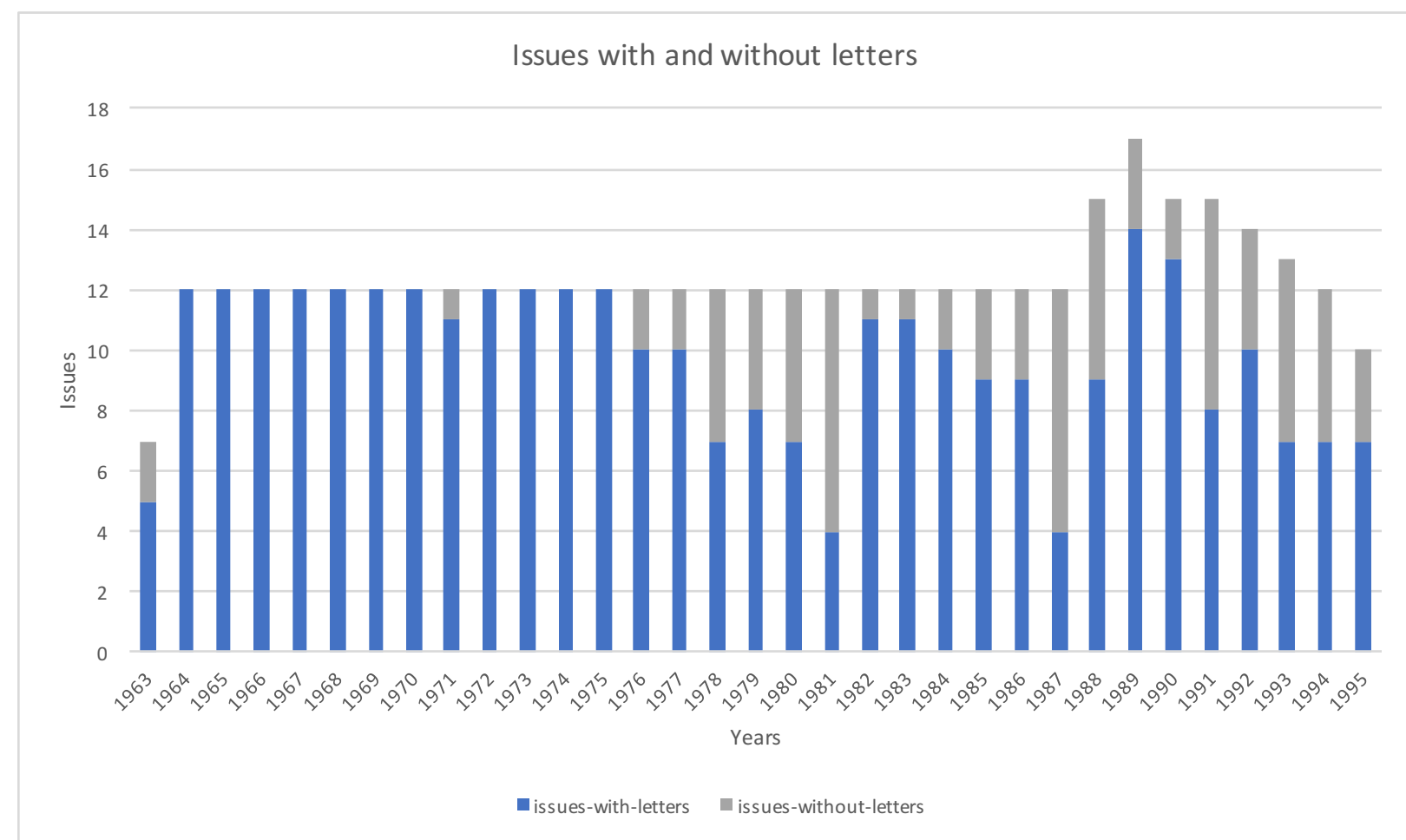
Data Set

The 406 issues in our data set include 1,971 individual letters and 1,598 replies. The letters total approximately 301,079 words. The typically much shorter replies total approximately 110,489 words. In the initial years of the magazine, the number of letters per issue declines while there is a corresponding increase in the average number of words per letter, indicating a trend in publishing increasingly longer letters. From 1964, the first full year of publication, to 1972, there is a steady and steep *decline* in the number of letters published annually, from a high of 138 in 1964 to a low of 39 in 1972, and a corresponding *increase* in the average number of words per letter, with the average word count more than doubling from 111 words per letter in 1963 to 233 in 1972.

Issues with and without letters

Letters/replies per year

Average words per letter, per reply

Making & Makers: Representation throughout the corpus of multiple topics related to making and makers.

"Making and Makers" Topics

Topic 3 (Making)
issue good great story make comic comics read art work time page thing super issues reading cover web made

Topic 28 (Makers: Wein & Andru)
len ross wein *wisp harry nova* **andru** proverbial *molten nightcrawler* panel *hamilton liz stegron* **dying tie mike** *mobile madison*

Topic 18 (Makers: Various II)
marv supporting **lee** *ned* **ditko keith** graduation **mooney byrne wolfman** *jigsaw* **pollard** *leeds* trick *jjj* graduate doubt fact dc

Topic 11 (Makers: McFarlane and Michelinie)
todd mcfarlane *venom* **michelinie david** *mj* mutant suit *brock* prize *caesar* alien *eddie fox sable prowler* rendition humor webs

Topic 12 (Makers: Larsen)
erik larsen power *punisher vulture* sinister storyline mr *ock* eyes characters *nathan* wars nation earth *felicia* nose assassin gravity

Topic 5 (Makers: Various I)
venom **bagley mark** *carnage* **david michelinie larsen erik** storyline *cardiac punisher* series **emberlin** parents awesome *chameleon* major *nova* **randy**

Acknowledgements

Further reading

An extended discussion of this study may be found in our chapter "'The Spider's Web': An Analysis of Fan Mail from A*mazing Spider-Man*, 1963–1995" forthcoming (2018) in *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods* (New York: Routledge), edited by Jochen Laubrock, Janina Wildfeuer, and Alexander Dunst.

Characters: Representation throughout the corpus of two topics associated with major characters, Topic 8 (Character: Gwen Stacy) and Topic 13 (Character: Peter Parker)