The Social Media Overture of the Pan-European Anti-ACTA Protest: An Empirical Examination of Coordination in Connective Action

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Abstract

This paper proposes an empirical model designed to operationalize the notion of digitally and loosely coordinated collective action as proposed by the recent theory of connective action. Specifically, it examines the capacity for coordination of the expressive participation that is characteristic of connective action proposing that it may be divided into a capacity for motivational coordination and a capacity for resource coordination, respectively. These two dimensions of coordination may enable us to discern how individual motives and collective goals can become aligned through posts on social media. The paper provides preliminary findings that support the two dimensionality of coordination.

Key words: social media, connective action, coordination, ACTA

In the current political climate marked by deep economic transformation, social upheaval is fast becoming a preferred avenue for voicing angst and opposition to austerity and the retrenchment of the welfare state (Castells, 2012). The latest instalments of street protests that have swept the European continent from Greece to France and Spain, Bulgaria to the UK have signalled a deep preoccupation of the European citizenry with social justice whilst also underscoring the centrality of horizontal digital media in sparking and fanning protest. Not least, protest has been directed at preserving the existing scope of digital media for unencumbered information and communication, as witnessed in the cross-national mobilisations against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (henceforth ACTA).

With this paper, we seek to investigate an ostensible process of loose coordination with Facebook and Twitter, which were both used in the pan-European protests against ACTA. The starting point for this analysis is a three-fold question: what were the topics, the participatory scope and the purpose of the communication that ensued on 29 Facebook event

pages (4309 post) as well as under the Twitter hashtags #Stop ACTA, #ACTA (19,000 tweets), two weeks ahead of the last Europe-wide anti-ACTA demonstrations of 9 June 2012? In what follows, the investigation concentrates on the first element of this research question. The paper references an on-going project which will tackle all three elements of the question.

Literature study

There are three streams of literature that inform this study. The first derives from social movement scholarship and alerts investigators to the pivotal position of activist organisations in fostering mobilisation in collective action by way of incentivising prospective participants. This line of argumentation draws on Olson's (1965) theory of collective action which has been critiqued for failing to acknowledge the contingency of the social interaction that allows for an equilibrium to be reached between individual motives and collective goals (Baldassari, 2009:394). Second, and in response to this apparent tension in collective action, it has been posited that social actors are increasingly finding in ICTs the means to choreograph their collective action absent the coordination of movement organisations (Flanagin et al., 2006; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Third, attention has centred on social media, alluded to being an environment where formal organisational structures and organisational mobilisation networks melt into loose networking and decentralised coordination processes (Bennett, 2003; Halvorsen 2012). Yet, the contribution to mobilisation of social media and ICTs more widely is disputed (Verhulst & Walgrave, 2009; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) as the scope for mediated mobilisation beyond organisational networks remains limited (2009: 475). However, there seem to be two distinct theoretical possibilities that invite further evidence-based investigation on social media. First, the question of a quantifiable net contribution to mobilisation may miss on a qualitative shift in the social interaction that prefigures collective action, now progressively more intense on social media. Thus, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) make the distinction between *collective* and *connective* action. The latter is an expressive form of participation that hinges on individual acts of sharing "political demands and grievances…in very personalized accounts" (2012:742). The personal nature of individual contributions, however, does arguably not impede the capacity for coordination towards collective action. Such coordination is made possible by the technology itself which becomes a networked organizational structure (2012:750).

As no operationalization of coordination is provided in Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) paper, we suggest that a grounded understanding of the concept is a prerequisite to extending the theorization of connective action. We conceive of two dimensions to coordination: motivational coordination and resource coordination. The former, *motivational coordination*, we envisage as an expression of one or more of the following constituents of an individual's motivation to part-take in collective action: instrumental motives, identity motives, group-based anger motives and ideological motives (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010).

The latter, *resource coordination*, can best be described with reference to McCarthy and Zald's (1977:1216) resource aggregation, the pooling of requisite means for collective action (material and non-material, e.g. money and labour but also information that may facilitate participation). These two dimensions, we would posit, can enable us to discern how individual motives and collective goals may be aligned through expressive participation in connective action.

The empirical study and preliminary findings

To scrutinize the two dimensions of coordination we examined the communication on Facebook and Twitter with the aim to map out the function (Harlow, 2011) of the expressive participation witnessed in the run-up to the 9 June 2012 anti-ACTA protest actions. The term function is used to refer to an inductively determined purpose of a Facebook or Twitter post. The posts were coded inductively to represent to the full range of topics touched in the communication (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009; Harlow, 2011). A probabilistic sample of Facebook and Twitter posts was drawn from the data at a 99 per cent confidence level and a confidence interval of +/- 3 per cent (N = 3094). Coding commenced with reliability testing by three independent coders on a subsample representing a standard 10% of the sampled units (Neuendorf, 2002; N =342). Below we report preliminary findings from the reliability coding.

Table 1: Function of Facebook, Twitter Posts

Code	Code descriptor	Frequency (N/%)	Krippendorf's Alpha
Personal Opinion Statement	A post expressing a value judgment on the ACTA agreement or an anti-ACTA action.	104 (23%)	.90
Recruitment Agency	A post asking group members to co-opt others into participation in a protest (including anti-ACTA) action.	8 (2%)	.86
Call to Action	A post inviting the participation of group/hashtag members in a protest (including anti-ACTA) action	53 (12%)	.85
Participation Priming	A post referencing preparations to attend a protest (including anti-ACTA) action.	9 (2%)	.84
Personal Communication	A post that is a comment unrelated to ACTA and anti-ACTA actions.	85 (19%)	.83
Factual Information	A post that provides uncommented information on an anti-ACTA action, other protest actions or the ACTA agreement.	165 (37%)	.82
Request for Information	A post that seeks details regarding an anti-ACTA action, the ACTA agreement or other unrelated aspects.	14 (3%)	.73
Solidarity	A post that expresses praise and/or support for an anti-ACTA action and/or participants in it.	10 (2%)	.8628

> Note: The total count of coded units (N=448) is higher than the size of the reliability sample (N=342) because posts were amenable to multiple coding.

Table 1 summarizes the findings from the coding process. Traces of motivational coordination were found in posts expressing solidarity and in calls to action. Solidarity posts extolled participation in protest actions and a sense of belonging to a protest movement against ACTA. Calls to action communicated urgency about the need for widespread involvement in protest actions against ACTA. The two varieties of posts thus appeared to be an early validation of the motivational dimension of coordination, albeit one that hinged on the expression of a shared identity with participants in the anti-ACTA movement and the assertion of the necessity for collective action against the agreement.

Posts pertaining to resource coordination were far more common. They either relayed uncommented information that allowed users to update themselves on the protest movement or included commentary which digested the news about anti-ACTA protests and the fate of the agreement. Particularly posts (e.g. maps, directions, instructions on what to wear, the weather forecast) that would allow users to prepare their participation seemed to closely encapsulate the notion of a coordination resource. In the end, information, commentary and priming materials constituted a collective cache of resources that would expedite individual participation.

These early findings begin to provide some support for the two-dimensionality of coordination in connective action. Subsequent analysis that builds on these findings will probe the robustness of these dimensions by means of an exploratory factor analysis. Further, by means of a connected concept analysis we will provide insights into the network characteristics of the social media ecology we have studied.

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