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Comment on Elena Pavan/3. Towards a Culture of Connective Active?

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Towards a Culture of Connective Active?

by Brian D. Loader

In her article *Collective Action and Web 2.*0 Elena Pavan contributes to the recent debates about the role of social media in facilitating collective action by examining an international online *Twitter* campaign called *Take Back the Tech!* This is a welcome contribution to an important contemporary concern about how new media technologies may influence democratic governance both nationally and internationally. Indeed, set against a backcloth of world economic recession and growing mistrust of conventional civic and political institutions, the recent outbreak of protests on the streets of many European and North American cities has led some commentators to suggest that we may be witnessing the emergence of entirely new kinds of collective action influenced in part by new media communications technologies [Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Castells 2012; Mason 2012]. From the *Occupy* demonstrations in the USA to the European protests such as "*Put people First*" in London or the *Los Indignados* in Spain, Pavan agrees with others, that it is possible to identify "a 'transformative effect' exerted by social media."

To-date academic deliberation on digitally mediated contentious politics has been too often polarized. Some commentators are sceptical of the sustainability and democratic influence of these variably networked, often simultaneous bursts of protest [Vasi 2006; Pickerill and Krinsky 2012]. They point to the lack of clear objectives and strong collective identity associated with more traditional social movement action. Moreover, the ease of online actions – so-called "clickivism" – demonstrates for them the lack of long-term commitment [Karpf 2010; Morozov 2011]. The oth-

er side of the debate however has too often valorised these spontaneous actions as "twitter revolutions," enabling the emancipation of the individual against the state. Such hyperbole and entrenchment are unhelpful as a means for academic enquiry and Pavan is correct to suggest that we "should abandon radical, extreme positions, and adopt a more complex and flexible approach." But what then does Pavan suggest as a way of modelling these emerging forms of contentious politics? After all, we have been exalted to consider digitally facilitated politics as forms of hybridity [Chadwick 2006] for some time now without any discernable development in our understanding. However flexible and complex our approach there is still surely a responsibility upon us to propose models and theories which might enable critical exploration and produce new insights.

For her part Pavan, as I understand it, focuses in this article upon what she describes as the "relational enrichment of collective action systems" which is enabled by social media platforms such as *Twitter, Facebook* and *YouTube.* More precisely, the "transformative" capacity of social media then lies both in its potential to rapidly increase the number of those networked but also more significantly by producing "a whole new relational milieu for exchanging informational and material resources as well as for creating shared symbolic systems and visions." The latter, as Pavan recognises, have been two of the most important features of the social movement literature over many years in the form of resource mobilization theory and cultural identity politics [Della Porta and Diani 1999]. Whilst many commentators may share this view what has been in short measure has been either the evidence to support this speculation or much understanding of the how these networks might function to create shared cultures of interest.

Pavan uses the freely available open source programme NodeXL to map and analyse the relational network structure of the 2011 *Take Back the Tech!* campaign which was spearheaded by the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Network Support Program. Her analysis provides some insightful findings of both the international scope of the campaign and the prominence of key "professional" activists within the network. Such network analyses of collective actions are always instructive for illuminating the structures and connectivities of movement participants. However, they raise two concerns as a means of evaluating Pavan's contention that they may provide evidence for "creating shared symbolic systems and visions." I will deal with each of these in turn.

First, the desire to use tools such NodeXL to investigate social media is often understandably driven these days by the need to undertake inexpensive research in times of austerity as well as by the drive to adopt novel and innovative methodologies which appear more attuned to the new media age under investigation. Whilst

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these are invaluable techniques which can contribute to any research investigation it is important that we do not make claims for them that they are not designed to test. As Pavan herself suggests her network analysis is "illustrative", "exploratory" and "heuristic" which generally speaking is typical of much analysis of this type when it is dependent upon only one method of investigation. Such techniques, if they are to assist us to explain cultural factors shaping participation, mobilization and political values, must surely be complemented by (admittedly more expensive and time consuming) qualitative methods such interviews, focus groups or participatory observation, more suited to revealing such information.

The second limitation of using network analysis on its own is that it can unwittingly reduce our understanding of collective action to a collection of individuals linked through undisclosed electronic communications with little reference to social relations of power. Whatever we may surmise about the nature of these communications, without in-depth qualitative investigations it is hard to demonstrate that they are in fact "creating shared symbolic systems and visions." Despite Pavan's claim that online networking should be related to offline action she provides very little by way of example in her own case study. Indeed, ironically the example chosen "Take back the Tech" provides a good illustration of the wider socio-techno shaping of social relations of power through social media. Wider social inequalities and power relations enable women to be persecuted online and forms of resistance to such harassment is seen as influencing online usage through legislation, challenging internet providers and encouraging women to shape social media for their own interests. Social media networks thus become the site of political contestation whose outcomes and direction are shaped by the contestants and the resources (technical, social, and cultural) they can command in circumstances configured by wider socio-political factors (social inequality, digital literacy, sexism).

Thus Pavan's network analysis of an online campaign as a form of collective action reveals important aspects of the networked nature of the campaign and its relational structure as collective action. These may indeed help to maintain a sense of unity of purpose and "relational milieu" but qualitative investigation is required through interviews, focus groups or participant observation to support these assertions. Moreover, it remains unclear how such online networks actually "create collective meaning" or frame mobilizations. Tweeting and re-tweeting can hardly constitute a significant challenge to current interests, power structures and discourses. Where is the richness of discourse which might indicate 'alternative' shared collective identities and values?

If such network analyses can only provide a limited (but important) understanding of these new forms of collective action where else might we find attempts

to model these emerging complex and flexible forms of contentious politics? One fruitful answer may be to consider and develop the recent work of Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg who through their extensive investigation of the *Occupy* demonstrations and European protests, suggest that it is possible to discern a new form of social action which they describe as *connective action*. By this term, they mean a form of political engagement whose structure and shared identity is enabled through digital media networks and personalised identity frames; which in turn facilitate the rapid scaled up manifestation of large-scale offline protests; and that are flexible in tracking political targets and bridging diverse issues [Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 742]. Crucially they do not claim that connective action replaces either conventional social movement organizations or mainstream political institutions, but they do provide us with an ideal type conception of what hybrid, complex and flexible forms of contentious politics might actually look like.

Following the influential work of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly [2001] Bennett and Segerberg regard the recent mass demonstrations, protests and occupations as forms of "contentious politics." That is, that those engaged are collectively making claims which conflict with the interests of others; and, that they are political because governments are subject to the claims in one way or another; either as objects of the claims, regulators of the contention, partners of the objects, or as claimants themselves. In his attempt to historically establish the important part contentious politics has played in shaping democratic governance Tilly foregrounded the role of social movements as the means to establish long-term campaigns, develop a repertoire of innovative political non-violent actions, and, the manifestation and maintenance of what he described as WUNC – worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment [2004, 2008]. Scholars have generally agreed that social movements have been a significant means for organising contentious politics and in particular the mobilization and sustainability of the collective action. Indeed, ever since Olson's seminal article of the logic of collective action [1965] outlining the difficulties entailed of encouraging people to make sacrifices and participate in political action when confronted with the alternative of free riding on the efforts of others, effective organization on the part of social movements has been seen as the means to counter this problem [Melucci 1996; Opp 2009].

Yet what is perhaps most notable about the organization of many recent demonstrations is that they seem to challenge our existing understanding of contentious politics. Thus, while social movements may be involved, it may also be possible to discern new forms of contentious political action that are characterised by more spontaneous individualised styles of engagement and are crucially facilitated by digital media communication and social networking. These manifestations may still exhibit

Tilly's WUNC but their organization is either loosely tied to social movement organisations or not at all. Thus they do not display the characteristics of collective action of shared identity. Moreover, their appeal to participants is similarly more individually personalised.

Bennett and Segerberg suggest that despite their variety, it is possible to place these protest actions in a topology of three organizing principles. Apart from the more familiar collective action associated with organizationally brokered networks, two other types of connective action networks could be discerned. The first of these were the spontaneous self-organizing network structures. The second form of connective action networking was what they described as the organizationally enabled variety. Both the latter connective action forms give impetus to a process of personalisation [Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 745], be it of the content – such as collective action frames – or the distribution of such content which is designed to facilitate mobilisation [Snow *et al.* 1986]. Rather than the dissolution of solidarity and cohesion in collective action, personalisation appears to be an opportunity for organisations to strategically harness social media for scalable mobilisation whilst, in its turn, the use of social media raises fresh questions to do with the effectiveness of networked and personalised participation as an avenue for mobilisation and identity formation [Juris 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2012].

The use of social media for connective action has also been seen to facilitate what might be called personal action frames or memes such as "We are the 99%," that provide simple generalizable messages. They also provide personal and mobile communication technology channels for sharing these messages. This process could mark a transition from a drive towards frame alignment choreographed by social movement organisations, to a decentralised and cascading co-construction of frames through mundane acts of personal expression on social network platforms which may translate into participation if they are not associated with a strict ideological and behavioural commitment to an organisation [Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 746-747].

The insights of Bennett and Segerberg provide valuable ground for future research and investigation which accords with and develops Pavan's suggestion to triangulate "the key intervening factors: social dynamics, communications technologies and their (more or less strategic and sophisticated) uses." It requires us to examine those discursive processes that occur on social media platforms (e.g. Facebook pages, Twitter hashtags) that may facilitate interaction around protest events either loosely coordinated or which lack any coordination by organisations. In so doing, we may find what type of personal communication (plans, opinions, impressions or images) come to displace the organisational framework and the interpretive work put into collective action by movement organisations, how and with what potential consequences

for participation. A wide range of communication, including Iris Young's suggestions of testimony, story-telling, greetings and rhetoric, and the like, may all act to stimulate alternative and personalised forms of democratic engagement. Thus, autonomy and self-actualisation may be more widely experienced and performed through less discriminating codes for inclusion in social networks. Such investigations will however require a mixed method approach which comes with a cost that reflects high quality research.

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Abstract: This short article is a critical response to the insightful article by Elana Pavan where she uses a Twitter campaign to explore the potential "transformative effects" of social media to facilitate collective action. Usefully avoiding extreme theoretical approaches Pavan correctly calls for a more nuanced perspective on the current debates. Her use of social network analysis to provide evidence for this new phenomena, whilst informative, is typical of the limited one dimensional studies whose grand claims are not matched by the investigatory tools necessary for in-depth examination. Instead consideration is given to the recent study by Bennett and Segerberg by way of an illustration of the kind of approach which may be required to critically explore such assertions.

Keywords: Collective Action, Connective Action, Twitter Campaign

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