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Comment on Elena Pavan/4. Relations, Connections and Political Action

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Relations, Connections and Political Action

by Eugenia Siapera

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Writing towards the end of 2013, with the protests of the Arab Spring and Occupy movements all but dead, and the shrill voices celebrating or condemning remaining silent, the time is ripe for some in depth reflection on the empirical realities of the relationship between social media and collective action. These empirical realities should in turn guide our theorizing of the role played by social media in fostering, undermining or more broadly changing collective action. In doing so, we require broader research templates that allow the testing of empirical data against theoretical hypotheses.

The current article by Elena Pavan represents precisely such an attempt to collect and relate empirical data to theorizing the nexus of collective action and social media. The article is premised on an interesting omission: while researchers talk about networked structures, publics, and architectures, there is little empirical analysis and research on exactly the networked structure of collective action and its involvement in the production and circulation of meanings. And this is crucial, because as Castells [2010] argues, power in the network society is about control and circulation or communication of meanings. The stakes are therefore clear: can social media networked structures support collective action and if so, how do they mediate it? Pavan's main argument is that this must be an empirical question, which needs to be answered through some kind of network analysis. Her proposal is to examine relationally actors and contents; "relationally" in this context means not only who are the main actors but how they relate and connect to one another, not only what are the contents of

their contributions but how do they relate to one another. She contends that these relational elements, an integral part of network analysis, are crucial for understanding collective action dynamics because they show on the one hand its embeddedness in local contexts and on the other the various elements that add themselves on the meanings and interpretations of such communications.

In applying this research template to a particular online campaign, the Take Back the Tech campaign, it was found that actors who formed central nodes in the network were prominent campaigners or “issue professionals” but not more broadly Twitter actors or “digerati” [Lotan *et al.* 2011]. Secondly, the contents, which contained both calls for action and information about violence against women, in their trajectory through Twitter acquired connections with other hashtags, both local/country-specific and more general hashtags on violence against women. Interestingly, an actor’s/node’s centrality within the network depends more on the contents of their tweets rather than on their connections. Thus, the relatively cohesive network found seems to support the contention that studying the relational aspects of collective action networks may provide insights into the dynamics on online collective action.

While the article clearly posits itself as an initial study into such relational dynamics, it may also be seen as generating a series of questions, both theoretical/analytical as well as empirical ones. Beginning with the latter, the article focused on a campaign, that is, on a more or less centrally designed and disseminated effort with specific goals and actions. This kind of collective action however may be a very specific form, which already relies on a cohesive network and on clear guidelines and criteria for contents. The issue here is not to dispute the value of studying relational dynamics – this is clear – but to think more closely on the issue of the connections or relationship between these relational dynamics and mediated collective action. To what extent are the findings a result of the decision to focus on such a campaign? Could it be that other forms of collective action, e.g. non-coordinated, more spontaneous forms, do not display such a clear relational structure? Moreover, the snapshot we are offered cannot provide any insights into the development of these dynamics across time. Could it be that after a few more days into the campaign these dynamics would shift? Although it is understandable that an article can only do so much, these questions are linked to important theoretical aspects regarding the relational structure of collective action networks as well as the role of the technical communicative environment.

In some ways, the empirical limitations of the study have an impact on its potential for a theoretical contribution. While the article makes a clear case about the need to study the relationships between and within networks of collective action, it

is less clear on how we may interpret such relationships. From one point of view, by definition collective action must involve some kind of relationship between actors and between their ideas and actions. But different kinds of relationships engender different kinds of collectivities and different kinds of actions. A comparative perspective may illustrate this point. In my recent work [Siapera, 2013] on the online activities of the Greek fascist party Golden Dawn and their supporters, I found that the networks to which they were linked were characterized by high density while in contrast anti-fascist groups were the opposite. Similarly, on Twitter, leading figures of the Golden Dawn pursued a very controlled kind of strategy, they followed very few, were not open to mentions or replies, used almost no hashtags and were based on the principle of one-to-many communication – clearly antithetical to the spirit of social media. While this constitutes an online network of supporters occasionally engaging in collective action, it cannot be seen as “a multidimensional and multipolar system of technologically enabled social relations.” This shows that to some extent the relational dynamics are determined by factors external to the technical system which supports them. Conversely, in his work on Twitter in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, Paolo Gerbaudo [2012] found that “soft leaders” emerged organically as hubs in networks across time and with the support of the broad base of participants in the protest movements, who turned to them for information, emotional support and in order to coordinate (street) actions more effectively. This points to a much looser kind of relationship – Gerbaudo describes such soft leaders as “choreographers” to point to their involvement in the organization of collective action – but which comes together through the creation of shared emotional narratives. Gerbaudo views social media as emotional conduits allowing the expression of emotions such as anger, pride and so on, which were then brought together to form a narrative subsequently used to guide street actions.

My argument therefore is that the relationship between social media, actors, technologies, ideas/narratives and collective actions cannot be stripped of its substantive contents, i.e. its political goals. These must somehow enter into the overall dynamics as they may have an impact on how social media are socialized by different collectivities and on the kinds of relationships between the various actors and their ideas. In other words, we need to understand collective action structures and relational patterns in the context of their specific political goals. In this vein, the analytical question concerns the way in which we can approach these political goals; how contradictory or cohesive, fluid or concrete, open or closed they are, and how this relates to specific socializations of technological systems. Empirically, this represents formidable challenges, because we would be trying to pin down something that is very dynamic and may vary across time. Theoretically, this prioritizes dynamic the-

orizing that pays attention to historical and cultural aspects and issues, rather than orthodox social scientific causal or quasi-causal models.

A related element concerns the issue of power distribution. Often in network theory and analysis the emphasis on relations ends up overlooking the unequal aspects of this relation between the various nodes and the flows between them. While in this article Pavan suggests that power, understood as higher visibility or distribution for one's contents, is the result of the quality and relevance of one's contents rather than a result of their identity or network connections, what is missing is a more detailed theorizing of inequalities or power distribution in networks of collective action. We don't know, for instance, whether this power distribution is specific to campaigns or this campaign in particular. Furthermore, while the case of #TakeBacktheTech is an apparently straightforward one, the power enjoyed by already established Twitter actors, i.e. those with a high number of followers, may be an important factor in other kinds of collective actions – enlisting the help of a Twitter “celebrity” may help make or break a campaign. We need to further think about the role of established actors in existing, ad hoc or newly formed online networks and the ways in which they skew or shape online collective action.

But, these are broader questions that perhaps concern other research projects in the future. For now, Pavan's article contributes to placing online collective action on a relational matrix, and this is a great starting point for further work.

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Comment on Elena Pavan/4

Relations, Connections and Political Action

Abstract: This commentary uses Pavan's article as a spring board to pose questions on the relational dynamics between actors in online networks and their role in political mobilization and action. While accepting Pavan's argument on the importance of these relational dynamics, the commentary asks whether they are determined by factors outside the technology and its potential and dynamics, while they may also be related to the kind of online action studied: an online campaign is different to, say, protests. If that is the case, the question is to find a way to incorporate the various pre-existing relationships between actors, as well as the various political goals sought by different movements while also acknowledging the power of the technology to introduce shifts in the pre-existing dynamics and lead to unexpected outcomes.

Keywords: Relational dynamics, collective action, social media, political goals.

Eugenia Siapera lectures on new/social media at Dublin City University in Ireland and Aristotle University in Greece. Her research interests are in the intersection of social media, politics and journalism. She has written several articles, chapters and books, most recently the co-edited volume *Handbook of Global Online Journalism* (with Andreas Veglis, Wiley, 2012). Email: eugenia.siapera@dcu.ie