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Digitally networked grassroots

Social media and the development of the movement for black lives and immigrant rights movement in the United States

van Haperen, S.P.F.

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Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

What are social movements, and what is the role of social media in how they develop? This chapter discusses relevant theories, defining the concepts used in the research study. First, it establishes an understanding of basic concepts. Next, the development of social movements is discussed in terms of relational dynamics, focusing on scaling up and leadership. In order to do so, the chapter draws primarily upon literature on social movements, complemented with insights from network theory.

Establishing Basic Concepts

Social Movements, Collective Action, Protest

The main topic of this dissertation is the development of social movements. As far back as Aristotle, basic elements of political communities have been laid out:

Now all forms of community are like parts of the political community; for men journey together with a view to some particular advantage, and to provide something that they need for the purposes of life; and it is for the sake of advantage that the political community too seems both to have come together originally and to endure (Aristotle as cited in Ross, 1999, p. 137)

Similarly, in general terms, social movements can be understood as groups of people organizing together for particular interests or aims, as part of some larger community, with something that binds groups together. Over the years, scholars have refined understanding of how social movements develop. In this chapter, the following paradigms from that literature will be discussed: resource mobilization, political opportunities, collective identities, and networks. As a formal definition of social movements I adopt, for reasons discussed below, “networks of informal interactions among a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities.” (Diani, 1992, p. 13).

At their most basic, social movements are social: people acting together. As a concept, they are closely related to ‘collective action,’ i.e., a group of people working together to achieve a common goal. This utilitarian notion of collective action simultaneously emphasizes agency, as well as the collective outcomes of individual rationality, seminaly formulated as prisoners dilemma’s and freeriding problems (Olson, 1965). As a paradigm for social movements, the notion most strongly

emphasizes ‘grievances’ (Smelser, 1962; Turner and Killian, 1987). The addition of ‘movement’ serves to demarcate isolated, private dealings from collective action that engages society broadly.

There is, however, more to collective action than strict utilitarian rationality. Protest is of specific interest to this research project, emphasized in the definition above as “engaged in political or cultural conflicts.” (Diani, 1992, p. 13). Movements may well have cultural rather than political aims, a dichotomy less relevant to the purposes of this research project than the understanding that social movements engage in collective action to effectuate change in society, and as such are contentious. A distinction between formal and informal interactions serves to explicitly include participation outside institutionalized democratic channels (e.g., voting or legal action) to achieve political aims. While such strategies can certainly be part of a movement’s repertoire, the focus lies in collective action outside of formal institutions.

By interacting, people engage in relations, which together form networks. The above definition captures this by emphasizing a network of “individuals, groups and/or organizations.” The addition of a plurality of types of actors serves to capture the notion that networks are organized as clusters of relations among a range of societal actors, a variety of “players” operating within “arenas” (Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015b). The question as to *how* exactly such networks develop bears the brunt of my empirical inquiry. This is engaged with by using the concept of “waves of contention” to leave open-ended the possibility that digitally networked movements (defined below) are less connected than the term “networks” suggests. I adopt a relational understanding of waves of contention: a process involving subjective actors who act collectively and contentiously, engaging in relations with each other, as well as third parties and opponents (Snow and Benford 1999; cf. Tarrow and McAdam 2005: 123).

Social movements consist of networks of relations, constituted by varying groups situated within specific contexts. To understand the development of movements, we must ask how the subgroups of networks come to align or conflict with one another (Crossley, 2010a; Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015b; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Uitermark, 2010). Bourdieu points out the inherent differences in degrees of “symbolic capital and political power” (1984, 1991). For instance, why would members of a relatively privileged group risk their position by forming coalitions with less powerful or even stigmatized groups within a single movement? A privileged group may have more symbolic (the ability to shape

discourse) or political (such as economic resources or legitimacy) capital, allowing it greater influence on the development of a movement (cf. Bourdieu, 1991). While this may put it at odds with other subgroups, it is in a stronger position than less privileged subgroups to compete for capital, alliances, and public support. The resulting dynamics further reiterate and fortify existing distinctions among groups. Understanding the development of networked movements thus invites us to research how groups unite operate as part of broader fields (Bail, 2014; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

This relational point of view allows us to understand social movements in terms of figurations (Dunning, 2004; Elias, 2000; van Krieken, 2001). The process whereby interactions among people shape and are shaped by shared social constructs develops over time. This suggests that social movements expand as aligned groups develop a shared understanding, leading individuals to unite in collective action (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; McAdam and Boudet, 2012; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 2010; Uitermark, 2013). Accordingly, my assumption is that waves of contention emerge from series of conflict events, which are connected through relations among actors. These relations can be studied by means of network analysis, in order to trace the relations among different figurations within and among conflict events.

Digital Networking

How digital tools play into the development of social movements can be conceptualized in terms of “digitally networked action” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011). This concept draws a distinction between the traditional logic of collective action (Olson, 1965) and the logic of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Proponents of the logic of collective action analyze action as the unified outcome of resource concentrations, structural features, or the formation of collective identities. Accordingly, they conceptualize collective action frames as an alignment of meaning structures such as experiences (Benford and Snow 2000: 623), or claims about injustice, agency, and identity (Gamson, 1995). By contrast, the logic of connective action emphasizes the sharing of personal action frames on digital media networks and does not presuppose frame alignment. Against a backdrop of increasingly fragmented and individualized societies, political engagement is increasingly organized around personal action frames: individualized orientations that are expressions “of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances,” rather than collective action frames, which are expressions of “social

group identity, membership, or ideology” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, pp. 743–744; cf. Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015a). This suggests that, more than previously, social media enable fast and far-reaching transmissions of individual expression without requiring the adoption of unifying collective action frames. Connective action thus calls attention to the aggregation of diverse expressions of identity, rather than aligned meaning structures or an overarching collective identity. To emphasize that the development of social movements have become intricately interwoven with social media, I use as a shorthand throughout this dissertation: digitally networked movements.

Social Media

Part of the infrastructure through which social movement activists can network digitally consists of social media. I adopt the following as a formal definition of social media: “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 61). In contrast to similar and more straightforward definitions, I deliberately adopt a definition that includes the concepts Web 2.0 and user-generated content (UGC) (cf. Margetts et al. 2015: 5). Although quickly eclipsed colloquially by the concept of social media, the two are distinct, but often conflated, elements of the internet as it historically developed and the egalitarian ethos at its roots (Lovink, 2002; Zandbergen, 2011). The term Web 2.0 came into widespread use in 2004, referring to a shift from centralized and individualized publication of content to the collaborative production and sharing of content among users (O’Reilly, 2007). This, to a large extent, has determined the technical design of social media platforms, which are built in ways to facilitate the sharing of content (cf. Evans, Pearce, Vitak, and Treem, 2017; Uitermark, 2014). Although semantic distinctions between Web 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 are not necessarily useful to understand activist practices (Barassi and Treré, 2012), this working definition draws attention to the uses of web technology and the distinction between, for instance, personal websites as typical of Web 1.0 and wikis and profile sites such as Instagram and Facebook as typical of Web 2.0. User-generated content refers to information that is the result of creative efforts from end-users, which is publicly available (OECD, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002). Inclusion of this term in the definition allows for the distinction between private conversations, such as direct messaging or e-mail, and professional content, such as journalism. Moreover, it highlights the logic of connective action with its focus on personal action frames

in combination with the constitution of networks, based on a commons-based form of self-motivated production. “In place of content that is distributed and relationships that are brokered by hierarchical organizations, social networking involves co-production and co-distribution, revealing a different economic and psychological logic: co-production and sharing based on personalized expression” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 752). Self-expression and recognition thus motivate content generation, making clear that it is an inherently relational act (Benkler, 2006).

Together, the concepts Web 2.0 and UGC suitably describe the technical, as well as ideological, facets of social media as a communication technology. Social media can be understood as the infrastructure that allows for digital networking, akin to Shifman’s notion of “express paths” as the platforms that accommodate the diffusion of memes (Shifman, 2013). Accordingly, as a shorthand, I use the term social media to refer to platforms like Twitter and Instagram.

Hashtags are key to such express paths, and a defining element of social media platforms. First created for Twitter by Chris Messina in 2007 to allow people to organize conversations, the “#” symbol was easy to use on mobile devices as a way to index topics when added to any word, allowing others to browse for topics that interest them, without having to rely on moderators. “I was inspired by what I saw in open-source software development and wanted to encourage ‘forking,’ or the ability to express a divergent opinion on how things should be without getting prior permission.” (Couts, 2015).

In recent years, social movements leveraged this easy way to create and organize conversations, in ways that became, sometimes dismissively, labeled as “hashtag activism” (Augenbraun, 2011; Freelon, McIlwain, et al., 2016; Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015; Morozov, 2009). Social media, as communication technologies, have ostensibly changed the development of social movements (Benkler, 2006; Bennett, 2003; Castells, 2000; Mundt, Ross, and Burnett, 2018). “Social media have become a fact of life for civil society worldwide” (Shirky 2011: 28), evoking notions of a public sphere, a global civil society united by communication technology (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, 1974; Olesen, 2005). Inspired by prior studies on the intersection of social media and protests (e.g., Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2011; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; González-Bailón and Wang 2015; Howard et al. 2011; Milan 2015a; Tufekci 2017), the current research project focuses on the role of these communication technologies in the development of social movements.

Digital Dualism, Traditional Media

The concept of social media is commonly used in conjunction with an assumed form of digital dualism that often remains implicit, but is important nevertheless to discuss. Digital dualism refers to a supposed distinction between that which is digital and that which is not, as if they were separate realms. There are two reasons to question this assumption.

First, it is analytically problematic to delineate ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, because new communication technologies are introduced incrementally. Digital media have become intricately intertwined with existing practices and institutions, rather than replacing them. Print media, such as newspapers, for instance, have increasingly come to rely on digitalization, and, producing and broadcasting television are thoroughly digitized (Brock, 2013; Thompson, 1995). The relationship between protest and media was already complex before the advent of social media (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, & Freelon, 2012; Chadwick and Dennis, 2016; Lovink, 2002). To indicate this interwoven nature, I adopt the term “traditional media” (in contrast with the definition of social media given above) as: the infrastructure that allows for the publication of information that is not collaboratively user generated. For practical purposes “traditional media” thus indicate platforms dedicated to professional journalism, whether in print or digital form.

Second, digital dualism as a demarcation between online and offline is often conflated with a dichotomous “real” or “virtual” (Diani, 2000). In my understanding, online refers to actions taken through the technological means of digital networks, and offline refers to actions that do not occur digitally. These are interdependent spaces with a double character: both communicating meanings and simultaneously shaping them (Geertz, 1993; Sewell, 1997). Online actions can have offline repercussions, and vice versa, shaping social realities. Rather, since social and traditional media both indicate specific communicative infrastructures, the key distinction for me concerns the question of power in the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The contrasting definitions of social and traditional media invite us to consider how “different social forces have varying degrees of *power over* what comes to count as everyday reality” (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 26, emphasis in original). In that vein, my working assumption is that media traditionally have been focused more on the publication of information about the social, and that social media constitute for people the “spaces where, through communication, they *enact* the social” (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 2). This not only raises questions about access to the production, distribution, and

consumption of content using technology, it also raises questions about how social media change the way we understand the world and act within it (Milan and van der Velden, 2016).

The Affordances of Social Media

To understand the role of social media, we need to consider how people use these infrastructures, to pose the question as to what technology allows people to do. Social media provide affordances, which are leveraged for digital networking. These affordances are defined here as “possibilities for action” that arise “between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context” (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, and Treem, 2017, p. 36). Leveraging any specific social medium thus introduces constraints and options unique to the platform. For instance, the affordances of Twitter are different from those of Facebook. Twitter is designed to facilitate public sharing of user-generated content, providing the affordance of visibility. This serves to enable the expression of personal action frames: easy creation and sharing ideas and orientations pertinent to a social movement, by reducing informational transaction costs (Coiera, 2000), creating common ground, and maintaining relationships (cf. Evans, Pearce, Vitak, and Treem, 2017; Vitak, 2014). Action frames created and broadcast on Twitter can in turn be adapted and rebroadcast easily throughout increasingly farther-reaching personal networks. Engagement in the form of creating and sharing personalized content thus enables “coordinated adjustments and rapid action aimed at often shifting political targets, even crossing geographical and temporal boundaries in the process” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 753). This engagement is “motivated by the potential of personally expressive politics animated by social networks where information and action tend to be integrated and authenticated in trusted peer-to-peer relationships that promote engagement” (Bennett, Freelon, and Wells 2010: 128). Going further, Stefania Milan suggests that social media not only serve as channels for the representation of identity, but actively shape collective identities (Milan, 2015a). Engagement with social movements through personalized networks facilitates the scaling up of movements as the diffusion of action frames inspires others to take action or to adopt shared understandings. Engaging in digitally networked action, activists in one location can use Twitter to create and share content with little effort, spreading action frames far and wide at a quick rate so that others elsewhere may pick them up.

Key Dynamics of Social Movement Development

To clarify the roles of social media in social movements, I will discuss two key relational dynamics: scaling up and leadership. The following sections first discuss the existing body of literature with regards to both, before taking into consideration the role of digital networking.

Scaling Up: Transcending Location and Resource Mobilization

The ways in which social movements develop beyond the confines of specific localities is a long-standing question in social movement literature: how do contentious episodes “spread beyond the setting in which they first developed?” (Tarrow and McAdam 2005: 126). This question is understood as scale shift: “collective action at a different level than where it began” (Tarrow, 2005, p. 32). The challenge is to understand how “People all over the world have been inspired by the Black freedom movement to forge activist movements addressing oppressive conditions in their own countries” (Davis, 2016, p. 90). The notion of the grassroots is one common answer to this question (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; Lewis, Gray, and Meierhenrich, 2014; McAdam, Tarrow, et al., 1996; Routledge, 2003). This suggests that close-knit, local communities interact with similar communities in other locations, allowing social movements to extend beyond local communities, to scale up to form large scale movements. The notion of grassroots movements remains an elementary hallmark of the literature on social movements, both as a normative ideal and historically as empirical focus (Chong, 1991; Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; McAdam et al., 2001). Over the years, the question of scaling up has been addressed from various perspectives focusing on transcending locales through resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, and identity.

First, mobilization of resources is essential to scaling up social movements. Because resource needs to organize movements can be high, social movement organizations (SMOs) benefit from economies of scale: the advantages gained by the concentration of resources on otherwise prohibitive organizational costs (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Staggenborg, 1988; Walker, 2014). The March on Washington in 1963, for instance, involved staggering logistical organization, from the 30,000 sandwiches prepared by women behind the scenes, to the audio installation necessary for broadcasting the now-famous “I Have A Dream” speech (King, 2003; LogistiKHD, 2013; Payne, 1995). Master planner Bayard Rustin insisted on the best audio equipment available on the market at the time. While

the price was considered exorbitant by the leadership and represented a substantial share of the budget for the march, Rustin realized with historical foresight the importance of making the speeches heard in the best way possible (Tufekci 2017: 67). Such logistical needs necessitate amassing financial, political, and discursive resources, as well as the professional management of those resources, or the costs of organizing would otherwise overwhelm small scale organizations (Bennett, 2005; Clark and Heath, 2015; Nicholls, 2009; Routledge, 2003). These accumulations are rooted in specific locations, given the availability of resources (Jessop, 2002; Storper, 1997). Cities, in particular, provide incubation spaces for social movements with a prior accumulation of capital, infrastructure, and the availability of diverse views (Nicholls, 2008). As a result, contention is “likely to grow large and be sustained in cities and especially in cultural, economic and political capitals” (Uitermark, 2013: 15). This makes scaling up challenging, because, although loose links of solidarity may develop among geographically distant activists, they are less likely to invest scarce resources, resulting in “partial commitments, verbal compromises, and organizational drift from one issue to another as priorities and agendas change” (Tarrow and McAdam 2005: 146). The need to accumulate resources thus makes it exceedingly difficult for social movements to scale up beyond the confines of specific locations.

Digital networking potentially alleviates the difficulty of mobilizing resources, both by enabling more efficient resource allocation and reducing coordination costs (Benkler, 2006). Examples of this potential alleviation from other domains include the sharing economy and the disruptive business models of companies such as Airbnb and Uber, illustrating how efficient coordination and resource allocation obviates the need for a concentration of resources. In similar vein, digital networking allows social movements to more efficiently share and allocate resources along distributed chains (Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar, 2015). Many scholars point out that the coordination of massive groups has become less dependent on hierarchical control, as “larger, looser groups can now take on some kinds of coordinated action, such as protest movements and public media campaigns, that were previously reserved for formal organizations” (Shirky 2011: 35). As a result, coordination is less of a confining factor to the scaling up of social movements. In the Occupy movement, for example, local camps used digital networks to coordinate resource allocation, allowing camps to communicate and provide, where necessary, resources such as tent equipment, cooking gear, or technical skills (Lovink, 2008). Rather than a single overarching headquarters

charged with resource allocation, each camp autonomously coordinated with other camps (cf. Uitermark, 2015). Digital networking relies less on “the transmission channels of the pre-digital environment, characterised by high costs of entry and a difficulty in accessing large audiences, necessitated formalisation of some kind” (Peters 2015: 85). By contrast, Peters suggests that scaling is achieved in digitally networked movements through many-to-many forms of communication, which allows for broad public appeal with diminished needs for the concentration of resources.

Scaling Up: Transcending Political Opportunity Structures

A second aspect of scaling up processes to consider are political opportunity structures. These are the institutional factors facilitating or impeding collective action, used to elucidate why similar movements in different settings take varying courses (Goodwin, 2001; Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, and Giugni, 2015). Eisinger states, “The manner in which individuals and groups in the political system behave, then, is not simply a function of the resources they command but of the openings, weak spots, barriers, and resources of the political system itself.” (1972: 2). This includes such qualities as the relative openness of a political system, the stability of elites and alignments with them, and the state’s propensity for repression (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996). Political opportunity structures are strongly rooted in geography because the specificity of locations offers unique institutional settings (Kitschelt, 1986; McAdam, 1982a; McAdam et al., 2001; Meyer, 2012; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). The reasoning is that these settings matter to the scaling up of social movements because “collective action spreads across countries to the extent that (national) political opportunities are present in the country which are taking up the stimulus from abroad.” (Kriesi et al. 2015: xxv).

Digital networking potentially provides new avenues for transcending the confines of local opportunity structures. Recent scholarship has conceptually nuanced understandings of institutional settings, teaching us that it is exceptionally difficult to delimit arenas (Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015b; Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Uitermark, 2013). Rather than clearly demarcated actors within stable settings, social movements and opportunity structures are marked by contradiction and multiplicity (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Goldstone, 2015). To understand the development of social movements, then, “we need to focus more on seeing how state, movement, and social groups and actors overlap and forge relationships, how those relationships shift, and how the arenas and institutions in which they

are working shape and constrain their choices and actions.” (Goldstone 2015: 236). Digital networking catalyzes relationships across overlapping arenas. The reasoning here is one of variation and selection. Rather than engaging in the top-down assignment of tasks within a single setting, grassroots activists have access through digital networking to a wide variety of information from which to select which they can then adapt to their specific circumstances. It is not only easier for them to reach potential elite allies beyond their immediate locales, instances of say, police brutality, are also easily broadcast through social media, reducing local authorities’ “propensity for repression” (cf. McAdam, McCarthy, et al., 1996; Tufekci, 2017). Thus, digital networking opens up political opportunities beyond the confines of the local.

As an example of how digital networking transcends local opportunity structures, consider the ways in which immigrant rights struggles successfully strategize where and when to spearhead legal action, the lessons from which are subsequently made use of in other states (Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017, 2018). Another example may be found in the way that the Dreamers have innovated a variety of tactical repertoires. Local groups of Dreamers all over the U.S. employ a wide variety of tactics. One of these consisted of a local group of Dream activists who, adopting a classic direct-action tactic (Crimethinc., 2006), successfully blockaded the entrance to the Hartford courthouse by locking themselves to concrete-filled barrels and to each other with lock boxes (Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement, 2018). Blockading bottleneck points in the deportation apparatus has proved an effective disruptive tactic. Reports of the action were shared online, with images of activists locked arm in arm. From among a variety of tactics, blockading became visible as effective and was selected by other groups elsewhere. Recurring elements were the lock boxes, slogans, and symbols. However, in adapting to local circumstances, the tactic was improved and innovated upon. Other bottlenecks were targeted, such as detention centers and deportation buses. These turned out to be even more successful in generating attention for and awareness of the cause. In this example, we see how digital networking can turn the constraints of local circumstances into an advantage: unique settings generate a wide variety of ideas (or tactics), from which activists can then select for subsequent local adaptation.

Social Movements and Scaling: Transcending Location and Identities

Third, questions of identity are essential to the dynamics of scaling up social movements (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; Melucci, 1996; Tarrow, 2005). To

bring together a plurality of actors in collective action, some form of shared identification is necessary (Benford and Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1995; Melucci, 1980). An essentially contested concept in the literature, I adopt the following as a preliminary working definition of collective identity: “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society” (McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1217). The process of identification allows for relational (or direct) scaling up. Tarrow and McAdam identify three pathways along which this occurs: indirectly through non-relational diffusion, directly through existing relations, and by brokerage of previously unconnected groups (Tarrow and McAdam 2005: 127). They, and others, also suggest scale shift involves identity shifts: “an alteration in shared definitions of a boundary between two political actors and of relations across that boundary” (Della Porta, 2005; O’Brien and Li, 1996; Tarrow, 2005, p. 122). Setting aside for the moment indirect diffusion through mass media such as television, brokerage is of most relevance to the current study, as relying strictly on preexisting relations would result in severely confined movements. Tarrow and McAdam suggest that both relational diffusion and brokerage operate through the attribution of similarity and subsequent emulation (Tarrow and McAdam 2005: 128). In this sense, scaling up is a matter of shared claims: “actors in different sites identifying themselves as sufficiently similar to justify common action” (Tarrow and McAdam 2005: 128). People do not simply adopt observed behaviors, ideas, actions, or discourses unless identities are in some way aligned (Benford and Snow, 2000; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1996; Gamson, 1995). Inspired by the diffusion of innovation, this suggests that scaling up relies on homophily and preexisting social relations (McAdam and Rucht, 1993; Rogers, 2003; Soule, 2013; Strang and Meyer, 1993). The interrelatedness of identity and geography is an important factor to the scaling up of social movements because social relations are to a large extent organized by proximity (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007; Feld, 1981). Relations tend to develop among those who are nearby and similar to one another, whether due to homophily or mutual influence. For instance, it is common for neighborhoods to develop local scenes based on a shared sense of identity among residents (Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015a; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017; Storper, 1997). Moreover, cities in particular offer not only the highly symbolic halls of power made visible, but also the availability of divergent groups and of specialists with skills (Lefebvre, 1976; cf. Lipsky, 1968; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017; Routledge, 2010).

At the same time, the concentration of activist scenes in particular areas may make scaling up social movements more difficult, if engagement remains limited to these areas. Tarrow and McAdam show that movements relying primarily on relational diffusion suffer from restricted size and narrower geographic scaling, “because such movements rarely transcend the typically segmented lines of interaction that characterize most of social life” (2005: 128). In other words, because proximity organizes social relations, scaling up relies on means for transcending proximity.

Digital networking potentially allows us to find and connect to like-minded people beyond immediate locales (Kavada, 2015; Stefanidis, Cotnoir, Croitoru, Crooks, and Rice, 2013). Essentially, collective identity results from a “network of active relationships between actors” (Melucci 1996: 71). Thus, digital networking facilitates scaling up by brokering and reinforcing relations among otherwise unconnected groups, bringing them into the movement fold: “they continuously activate the relationships that maintain collective identity and joint action” (Milan 2015a: 893). At the same time, online networks on social media closely mirror the relationships we foster offline (Beneito-Montagut, 2015; Dunbar, Arnaboldi, Conti, and Passarella, 2015; Papacharissi, 2002). Indeed, social media may even provide “a vehicle for the creation of new forms of proximity” (Gerbaudo 2012: 13).

As any collective identification depends upon the attribution of similarity, emotions are central to understanding the scaling up of social movements (Aminzade and McAdam, 2002; Goodwin et al., 2009; Jasper, 2011; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). Randall Collins suggests sustaining and scaling up movements depends upon interaction ritual chains in which symbols are charged with emotional energy, to produce forms of collective effervescence (Collins, 2001, 2004; cf. Durkheim, 1912). Successful interactions, he shows, rely on four ritual ingredients: barriers to outsiders, a shared focus of attention, a common mood, and physical co-presence. This raises the question whether and how emotions are mediated through digital networking, in the absence of physical co-presence. Indeed, Collins himself notes that is the question he is most often asked about interaction rituals (IRs): “whether new electronic media are changing the conditions for IRs” (Collins, 2011). It has been demonstrated that traditional media frames can have a strong emotional influence (Bail, 2012; Van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegthart, and De Vreese, 2015). If emotions can be successfully mediated through social media, this would provide enormous potential for

social movements to reach like-minded people in many locations at once to forge “networks of outrage and hope” (Castells, 2012; cf. Bail, 2016). How digital networking plays into the dynamics of scaling up movements will be the focus of Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

To summarize, the question of scaling up remains relevant to today’s movements that seek to amass support and increase their capacity to effectuate change in national or transnational politics (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005; Tufekci, 2017). The above has outlined the challenges of scaling up social movements in terms of resources, political opportunity structures, and identity, revealing how geography is a key organizing factor for each. This invites us to analyze how digital networking provides affordances to transcend the confines of a specific location (Ayres, 1999; Bonilla and Rosa, 2015; Mislán and Dache-Gerbino, 2018).

Leadership in Digitally Networked Movements

A second key relational dynamic in the development of social movements concerns leadership. Increasingly, the literature pays attention to digitally enabled forms of leadership, since for scholars and activists alike, social media renews aspirations of decentralized leadership (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2000; Centola, 2015; Conover, Ferrara, et al., 2013; Goel et al., 2012; Rane and Salem, 2012; Tremayne, 2014). This section considers the role of digital networking in the relational dynamics of leadership, by contrasting traditional understandings of leadership with the dynamics of leadership online.

Traditionally, leaders have long been understood as exceptional individuals with particular skills or attributes (Ganz, 2010; Weber, 1946; Zald and Ash, 1966). Such views of leadership seek to explain prominence by ascribing a range of personal characteristics to leaders that allow them to inspire action or compel others to join a movement because of their ability to articulate what a movement represents (Gusfield, 1966; Weber, 1946). Thus, highly symbolic capital ‘prophets’ or radical militants can generate visibility during the formation of a movement; formal representative skills and abilities to accommodate are necessary to negotiate the process of movement formalization; administrative skills are essential during further institutionalization (Blumer, 1969; Rothman, 1974). Tensions resulting from these shifting leadership demands are common to all movements, which is illustrated by the challenge of maintaining supporters acquired when shifting modes and encountering opponents that are not militant. Such characteristics

are commonly shared among multiple individuals. In fact, it is rare that a single individual possesses more than a couple of these attributes (Curtis and Zurcher, 1973).

The rise of the new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which were innovative in terms of employing decentralized organization, prompted scholars to increasingly emphasize the capacity of leaders to bridge meanings, frames, and identities in order to facilitate collective action. Leadership and authoritative communication requires particular kinds of knowledge, for example, of “local idioms, values, and practices” to unite diverse groups into a mass base (Barker, Johnson, and Lavalette, 2001; Veltmeyer and Petras, 2002). Such deep understandings of community grievances and contexts are ‘localized cultural capital,’ while connecting across communities requires ‘universalistic cultural capital’: the “knowledge of the values, sympathies, cultural principles and political trends within the broader public they seek to engage,” and transcultural skills to “to operate effectively in multiple milieus among widely differing audiences” (Nepstad and Bob 2006: 4). These transcultural skills include speaking languages and the ability to convey messages (Bob, 2005; Ganz, 2000). The shift to more relational understandings of leadership developed parallel to aspirations for decentralized leadership that have been around since at least the civil rights movement, if not before (Juris 2005: 260). It is an aspiration well-understood today by the founders of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors:

“We create much more room for collaboration, for expansion, for building power when we nurture movements that are full of leaders, and allow for all of our identities to inform our work and how we organize. This then allows for leadership to emerge from our intersecting identities, rather than to be organized around one notion of Blackness. Because of this, we resist the urge to consolidate our power and efforts behind one charismatic leader. When we center the leadership of the many who exist at the margins, we learn new things about the ways in which state sanctioned violence impacts us all” (Tometi et al., 2015).

This notion of leader-inspired movements can be traced back to a tradition of organizing in the Highlander Folk School of New Market, Tennessee. For his leadership of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King became known as the charismatic figurehead. The emphasis on a single charismatic (and male)

leader led to both widespread acclaim, as well as internal criticism and concern. Ella Baker, co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) together with King, became increasingly critical of the organization's focus on charismatic leadership. Educated in the same Highlander Folk School tradition that promoted social change and emphasized community leadership (Horton, 1989), Septima Clark, whose role in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) made her an important leader and innovator in her own right during the civil rights movement, established several Citizenship Schools (Payne, 1995). These schools aimed to identify, develop, and foster local community-based leadership, to provide "assurances that when the direct action is over, every community is left with leaders qualified to continue the struggle" (King 1965: 3). Leadership in this organizing tradition is a matter of people's power, based on a relational understanding of leadership that empowers and is enabled by followers of a movement (Alinsky, 1972; Alinsky, 1971; Freire and Horton, 1990). This understanding of leadership emphasizes community: leaders rely on the power a community grants to them and their ability to understand community concerns. From this perspective, leadership is rooted in local communities—a perspective with undiminished resonance today.

Social media potentially enables forms of leadership strongly embedded in communities, allowing for multiple voices to make themselves heard, in lieu of that of a single charismatic leader. But, whether they actually do is an empirical question warranting more research. Patrisse Cullors succinctly formulates this in discussing the Black Lives Matter network of 26 local chapters, when she states, "Chapters work within the communities where they live and work. They determine their goals and the strategies that they believe will work best to help them achieve their goals" (Moore, 2015). A sense of community is essential to online interactions (Turkle, 1995), so much so that the internet is in fact designed to support "the very thing that creates a community-human interaction" (Dyson, 1998, p. 250). Mutually shared interests typically guide the search for peer groups; rather than meeting people in your own vicinity and discovering whether your interests and values match, in online communities "the topic is the address" (Rheingold 2000: 11). One can go directly to a forum about, for instance, computer hardware, to find others interested in the same subject matter.

Online communities have specific features. For instance, status and prestige in online communities are strongly tied to displays of expertise and contributions of knowledge (Hennis and Kolschoten, 2010; Rheingold, 2000; Ridings and Gefen,

2004; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Gulia, and Haythornthwaite, 1996). Going further, Beyer suggests that anonymity is conducive to the formation of such communities and to community organizing, noting how a shift away from the anonymous internet towards profile-centric social identities inhibits all sorts of political action (Beyer, 2014). The idea is that anonymity allows for experimenting beyond fixed identities, “such as gender, looks, and disabilities. People choose to explore certain sides of their personalities (e.g., assertiveness) more extensively online, or even invent virtual life personae different from their real life personalities” (Bolter, 1996). This may be particularly important for historically marginalized people constructing relatively safe spaces outside otherwise uncivil spaces (Crossley, 2017; Taylor, 1996; Taylor and Whittier, 1992; Williams, Bryant, and Carvell, 2019). Contrary to traditional understandings of community, online actions can contribute to a strong sense of shared identity (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev, 2011; Norton, 2012). The Anonymous movement adopted this as its very moniker. “In the beginning, Anonymous was just about self-amusement, the ‘lulz,’ but somehow, over the course of the past few years, it grew up to become a sort of self-appointed immune system for the Internet, striking back at anyone the hive mind perceived as an enemy of freedom, online *or* offline. It started as a gang of nihilists but somehow evolved into a fervent group of believers.” (cf. Beraldo 2017; Fuchs 2015: 95; see also Uitermark 2017). At the more extreme end of the spectrum, Anonymous provides a powerful demonstration of open-source coordination as a political project:

Anonymous is a classic “do-ocracy,” to use a phrase that’s popular in the open source movement. As the term implies, that means rule by sheer *doing*: Individuals propose actions, others join in (or not), and then the Anonymous flag is flown over the result. There’s no one to grant permission, no promise of praise or credit, so every action must be its own reward. (Norton, 2012)

Social movement leaders today, unlike their civil rights era predecessors, can leverage these digitally networked communities to elevate themselves beyond their immediate locales:

[The innovation of Black Lives Matter] has been to marry the strengths of social media—the swift, morally blunt consensus that can be created by hashtags; the personal connection that a charismatic online persona can

make with followers; the broad networks that allow for the easy distribution of documentary photos and videos—with an effort to quickly mobilize protests in each new city where a police shooting occurs. (Kang, 2015)

Digitally enabled leadership makes use of the broad audiences accessible through social media and the connections among them. New means to communicate provide the affordances through which aspirations of decentralized movements may be fulfilled, due to the unprecedented ease of establishing and maintaining connectivity within and among diverse communities (Huffaker, 2010; Raelin, 2005). This sort of “cloud activism [...] gives voice and visibility to personalized yet universal narratives: this hashtag-style collective narrative is flexible, real time, and crowd controlled. It connects individual stories into a broader context that gives them meaning.” (Milan 2015b: 6). As such, these media tools offer leaders new forms of performing authority (Hajer, 2009).

As suggested above, online communities can be reached on the basis of specific topics or interests, rather than through grounded locales. It is common to assess the importance of networks in terms of social capital, forms of value drawn from contacts with other people (Putnam, 2000). While associations with strangers or followers on social media can be seen as superficial or easily abandoned, in comparison to physically proximate relations, the topic centrality of online communities makes them more accessible, and leaders play an important role in this. “Self-branding through social media pivots on attention and narrative, yet significantly extends the potential for fame and celebrity. Compelling narratives potentially attract audiences for a multitude of reasons—they could be inspirational, relatable, instructive, cautionary and so on.” (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017: 196). This allows narratives to stand out in the attention economy, as “audiences/followers/fans embed it within their own individualised media flows through likes, shares and comments.” (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017: 196).

For leaders in social movements, these communities provide the “potential of reaching a multiplicity of receivers, and of connecting to endless networks that transmit digitized information around the neighborhood or around the world” (Castells 2012: 6). Thus, this relational understanding of networked leadership emphasizes leadership not as a function of personal attributes, but rather of status ascribed by others in networks (Bourdieu, 1991; Diani, 2003; Ganz, 2000). For movements, these networks “are critical because they can create or solidify

bonds with a far larger audience than direct social interactions could reach. As such, they help leaders disseminate information, recruit followers, and appeal for support.” (Nepstad and Bob 2006: 4). Others have noted that mobilization through strangers may in fact be a powerful motivation for participation in protests (Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010). Online communities can acquire impressive degrees of commitment and gain significant political traction (Beyer, 2014; boyd, 2014; Rheingold, 2000), even when their allure remains restricted to the thrill of being part of a mass of aggregated strangers (Juris, 2012; Uitermark, 2017).

This networked leadership potentially allows for grassroots movements to forge connections beyond immediate locales. As Andrews states, “strong movement infrastructures have diverse leaders and a complex leadership structure, multiple organizations, informal ties that cross geographic and social boundaries, and a resource base that draws substantially on contributions from their members for both labor and money” (2001: 76). A challenge for social movements is to bind together a wide variety of communities from different locations (Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). As such, scaling up movements critically depends on brokering information from and among diverse communities, and by occupying structurally strategic network positions leaders have a capacity to mediate information among communities:

The hashtags in those stories were picked up by an ever-widening spiral of Twitter users: friends of the hashtag originators, friends of their friends, then local grass-roots groups who are plugged into the community begin tweeting about it. Eventually—but always last, Jackson said—those conversations land on the radars of national civil rights groups and elite media. (Demby, 2014, p. 3)

Thus, the question of networked leadership asks us to consider structural positions in relational configurations, for example, as gatekeepers of information or brokers among otherwise unconnected groups.

However, there is reason to expect that social media networks encourage centralizing tendencies that run contrary to the ideal of decentralized movements. As Zeynep Tufekci notes, “ostensible leaderlessness does not stop de facto leadership from springing up, and de facto leadership is often composed of those with the most time, tenacity, energy, extroversion, preexisting social status, and even plain aggressiveness” (Tufekci 2017: 79; cf. Freeman 1973). In her recent

study of the Chilean student movement, Von Bülow (2018) finds that social media reinforces inequalities within the movement in spite of efforts by some groups of activists to mitigate them. Such problems are exacerbated by the digital divide: the reproduction of inequalities in connectivity and inclusion online (Flesher Fominaya and Gillan, 2017; Saleminck, Strijker, and Bosworth, 2017). Social media network dynamics may reinforce, rather than remedy, such inequalities.

The generative mechanisms in complex systems and self-organization may themselves contribute to centralization and the reproduction of inequality. A firmly established finding with regards to natural, technical, and social networks is that degree distributions are often heavy-tailed: a few nodes account for a disproportionately large share of all connections in the network (Broido and Clauset, 2019; Clauset, Shalizi, and Newman, 2009). Cases where the distribution of ties follows a power law are often associated with scale-free networks; a structure commonly generated by mechanisms of preferential attachment (Barabasi and Albert, 1999; Dorogovtsev and Mendes, 2002; Khamis et al., 2017). Social media networks likewise “emerge from distributed local interactions [...] We can therefore expect that certain groups consolidate and acquire central positions within the movement’s network system” (Uitermark 2017: 4). In fact, “networks do not appear to self-organise their way *out of* power laws” (Nunes 2014: 32). A key question that has thus far remained unanswered in the literature is how the competing dynamics of decentralization and centralization of leadership play out in digitally networked movements.

Given the antagonism prevalent on social media, there is an increasing amount of attention paid to the burdens that online prominence incur (Clark-Parsons, 2018). The reality of activists online is riddled with conflict and backlash, from external opposition to internal divisions. Prominent activists face constant opposition, ranging from disagreement and ignorance to outright racism and death threats, especially if they are women and/or members of LGBTQI communities (Gray, 2012; Sobieraj, 2017). But conflict is not limited to external sources, as social media can make internal movement divisions more explicit. Social media gives increased salience to divisive complexities, possibly fortifying them.

One likely reason that social media may reinforce inequalities is the affordance of visibility, “the nature of social media can cause us to be more aware of the people in our networks—especially when our online social networks encompass individuals from social circles that were traditionally considered separate” (Williams et al. 2019: 2). Strongly tied to communities with a specific interest,

prominence and ‘celebrity’ are based on forms of public recognition (boyd, 2014; Senft, 2008). The size of one’s following, or the number of likes received, are powerful markers of status. The downside of this publicness is that celebrity draws criticism and other forms of negative attention (Ferrara, Interdonato, and Tagarelli, 2014; Marwick, 2015). Visibility creates its own opposition by creating “the conditions for the mobilization of countermovement” (Zald and Useem 1987: 247–48). In turn, oppositional conflict dynamics are central to the development of social movements. “Much of the mobilization potential of a movement, its tactics, and its ultimate fate stem from its battles with a countermovement” (Zald 1979: 3). Like supporters, the opponents of social movements can leverage the affordances of digital networking. Historically, countermovements have taken on organizational forms and tools of the movements to which they are opposed (Mottl, 1980). Similarly, today, for adversaries who might otherwise be unconnected, coordinating negative attention directed at prominent activists has become more feasible as a result of social media. In fact, fomenting disruption is likely easier than sustaining constructive organizing efforts. Despite substantial amounts of hostility on social media, empirical research on digitally networked backlash and countermovements remains scarce.

While digitally networked leadership potentially allows activists to attain their long-held aspirations for decentralized movements with relational and community-based leadership, social media is also likely to reinforce inequality and incur a heavy toll on those who become prominent online. An analysis of leadership in digitally networked movements asks us to consider these dynamics, which have thus far remained understudied in the literature. That will be the focus of Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10.

Summary of Key Concepts

Social movements are groups of people organizing together for political interests, as part of some larger community, with collective claims that bind these groups together. The development of social movements depends on a range of relational dynamics. Two of those dynamics are scaling up and leadership.

Scaling up concerns the question of transcending local settings in the development of social movements. Groups in disperse locations need to collaborate in collective action in order to develop (trans-)national social movements. This

scaling process depends on, and shapes, the mobilization of resources, political opportunities, and collective claims. A grassroots model of scaling up suggests that it occurs when relationships form between local, otherwise unconnected, communities.

Leadership concerns the role of individuals in the development of social movements. Leaders are essential and prominent in hierarchical organizations, typically charismatic or otherwise skilled individuals, who manage to accumulate resources, advance political opportunities, and represent collective claims.

Digital networking concerns the affordances of digital communication technologies. In theory, digital infrastructures such as social media allow for interaction and feeling part of communities on the basis of shared interests, without the necessity of bodily co-presence. For instance, the affordance of visibility allows users of social media to monitor interactions about specific topics.

It is possible that digital networking plays a role in scaling up social movements. Social media allow for interactions between individuals who share a common interest, enabling access to communities and new means of signaling power without requiring bodily co-presence. This may in turn allow for accumulation (or diminished necessity) of resources, change political opportunities, or the formation and affirmation of collective claims.

It is possible that digital networking plays a role in the development of social movement leadership. Digital networking in theory allows for the formation of decentralized organizations that rely less on hierarchical leadership. Rather, the role of leaders in such a structure is to both represent and bridge a variety of communities. In network terms, this form of connective leadership can be understood and studied as brokerage.