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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Conclusions:
Social Media and the Relational Dynamics of Social Movements

Sander van Haperen
Subject and Research Questions

A Brief Historical Perspective: The Rise of Digitally Networked Movements

How have social media changed the development of social movements? To place digitally networked movements in perspective, it is worthwhile to consider briefly the development of social movements more generally. Communication technologies have always played an important role in the development of social movements. From pamphlets (Daudeij, 2009; Haverkate, 2019) and the printing press that allowed Luther to go “viral” (Jara-Figueroa, Yu, and Hidalgo, 2019; Tufekci, 2017, p. 262), from telegraph in the American Civil War (Bates, 1995; Brock, 2003), to radio in the Civil Rights Movement (Ward, 2004), cassette tapes in the Iranian revolution (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1990), and television broadcasts of events in Los Angeles in 1992 (Hunt, 1997), communication technologies have again and again proclaimed the “demise of distance” (McCusker, 2008). Digital technologies have likewise been closely tied to the development of social movements, since the anti-WTO summit protests of the early 2000s, if not before (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Downing, 2001; Milan, 2013; Preston, 2001; Scholl, 2010; van Zoonen, 1992). In a globalized world, activists have increasingly leveraged the internet to mobilize networks around the globe (Aelst and Walgrave, 2002; Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor, 2001; Atton, 2003).

The starting point of the current study were renewed waves of contention, that coincided with the advent of social media. They include the Arab Spring (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, and Freelon, 2012; Howard et al., 2011; Koopmans, 2004b; Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheafer, 2013), particularly in Tunisia (Breuer et al., 2015; Lotan et al., 2011), and Egypt (Hamdy and Gomaa, 2012; Poell et al., 2016; Zhuo, Wellman, and Yu, 2011), protests in Moldova (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu, 2009), los indignados (Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2014; Gerbaudo, 2017; Glasius and Pleyers, 2013), Occupy Wall Street (Juris, 2012; Tremayne, 2014) and Anonymous (Beraldo, 2017; Fuchs, 2015; Uitermark, 2017). Popular and scholarly accounts typically emphasize the role of social media in these protests. Dubbed ‘Twitter Revolutions’ and ‘Facebook Revolutions’ (Ahmed, Jaidka, and Cho, 2017; Attia, Aziz, Friedman, and Elhusseiny, 2011; Hodge, 2009; Lotan et al., 2011; Margetts et al., 2015), the prominence of technology-enabled movements on the world stage led Time to proclaim the anonymous protester Person of the Year in 2011 (Andersen, 2011). In today’s parlance, movements and social media are intertwined to the point of synonymy, with movements typically referenced
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by hashtags, such as #Kony2012, #NoDAPL, and #MeToo. Social media are now entangled with every stage in the development of social movements (Bennett, 2005; Juris, 2009; Tarrow, 2005; Tufekci, 2017).

Research Questions
The advent of social media in the development of social movements informed the two main questions of this research project:

1) What is the role of social media in the relational dynamics of digitally networked movements? and;

2) How can these dynamics be analyzed using computational methods?

This chapter answers these questions, by drawing on a number of selected descriptions from the empirical chapters to illustrate key findings.

It has been suggested that social media allow activists around the world to form connections far and wide beyond their local settings (Benkler, 2006; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Rainie and Wellman, 2012). These digitally networked movements leverage the affordances of social media to mobilize networks of outrage and hope (Castells, 2012). It is possible that social media allow for the creation of symbiotic relationships “between struggles abroad and struggles at home, relationships of inspiration and mutuality” (Davis, 2016, p. 90). This raises questions concerning how social media play a role in the development of social movements: how connections are made between struggles and how the voices of inspirational leaders can rise on social media (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon, 2011; Flesher Fominaya and Gillan, 2017; Milan, 2013; Tufekci, 2017, p. 263).

From a rich and varied literature on social movements, I focused on two staple dynamics: scaling up and leadership. While not the only dynamics relevant to the development of social movements, both scaling up and leadership are well-established and regularly subject to empirical examination, as well as widely recognized as key to movement building by scholars and activists alike (Bennett, 2005; Campbell, 2005; Diani, 2003; McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). Scaling up concerns the question of transcending local networks in the development of social movements (Bennett et al., 2011; Flesher Fominaya and Gillan, 2017; Milan, 2013; Tufekci, 2017, p. 263). Leadership plays a critical role in this process (Araujo et al., 2017; Bail et al., 2018; Diani, 2003; Huffaker, 2010; Poell et al., 2016).

Social media data provides new opportunities for scholars to analyze the development of social movements. On the frontiers of social movement
studies, computational methods are employed in innovative and powerful ways in the service of long-standing questions about social movement development. Computational methods, in conjunction with digital data, enable network analysis on an unprecedented scale (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, and Labianca, 2009; Diani, 2000; Watts, 2007). The availability of data from social media makes it feasible to examine millions of interactions simultaneously, including geographical and temporal meta-data (Beraldo, 2017; Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2011; Freelon, Mcilwain, et al., 2016; Milan, 2013). This allows us to map how engagement with a social movement develops over time across multiple locations, and examine the prominence of leaders among these groups and locations.

**Studying the Development of Digitally Networked Movements**

**Two Social Movements**

The channeling of outrage and hope through social media played a role in the development of the Movement for Black Lives and the immigrant rights movement in the United States. Both movements represent prominent examples of digitally networked protest, that have contributed significantly to the American political field.

First, this research project examined the immigrant rights movement in the United States from the early 2000s onwards. Widespread protests in 2006 brought immigrant rights to the fore of U.S. policy debates (Bloemraad and Voss, 2019). Those protests catalyzed the integration of a fragmented field of activists and advocacy groups (Nicholls, Uitermark, and van Haperen, 2019). In this context, we can examine how activists’ use of social media affected the development of the movement. In 2013, a coalition of radical grassroots activists and organizations mobilized the #not1more campaign to end deportations. It was designed explicitly to take advantage of social media to allow for forms of leadership that could connect different groups across the country (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Franco et al., 2015; Nicholls et al., 2016). In addition to other channels of which the activists made use, social media facilitated local hubs of participants to coordinate a sustained nation-wide campaign. Digital networking thus allowed activists, such as the Dreamers, to outmaneuver more traditional hierarchical organizations (Nicholls et al., 2016; van Haperen et al., 2018).

Second, this study examined the Movement for Black Lives. Mobilizing around the slogan Black Lives Matter and the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, the
movement represents a broad coalition of groups and organizations organizing against violence against Black communities in the United States (The Movement for Black Lives, 2019). While firmly rooted in a long history of struggle against racism and police brutality, it was in 2013 that a sequence of tragedies led to a resurgence of outrage and hope channeled through social media (Cohen and Jackson, 2016; Khan-Cullors and Bandele, 2018; Mckesson, 2018; Tometi et al., 2015). This contributed to the development of a social movement from shared but otherwise loosely connected experiences. The mediatization of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri served as a catalyst, asserting the potential of social media to contest power by documenting and sharing perspectives (Freelon, McIlwain, et al., 2016; Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015). Social media allowed millions of people to unite under the hashtag #blacklivesmatter and engage with issues of social and racial justice.

In both the Movement for Black Lives and the immigrant rights movement in the U.S., digital networking allowed activists to connect and share experiences across the country, and as a result, to develop social movements. From their struggles and their leaders, we may learn about the role of social media in the development of social movements.

A Relational Approach

Understanding the dynamics of digitally networked movements calls for a relational approach that allows for analysis of digital networks, while accounting for activists’ experiences. This is because networks and experiences are mutually constitutive, an assumption based on an understanding of the social world in terms of figurations: “networks of interdependent human beings, with shifting asymmetrical power balances” (Van Benthem van den Bergh, cited in Fletcher 1997, n.p.; cf. Elias 2000; van Krieken 2001). How people make sense of the world depends on their social relations. Studying networks is therefore important because the experience of being in a social movement shapes, and is shaped by, relations among people (Collins, 2004; Crossley, 2010a; Emirbayer, 1997; Melucci, 1980).

To understand the relational structures in social movements, I adopted methods from social network analysis (Diani, 2013; Diani and McAdam, 2003). Because I am interested in the development of digitally networked movements, I drew on data collected from social media. This analysis was inspired by recent social movement research that employs network measures in combination with
social media data (Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2011; Conover, Davis, et al., 2013; González-Bailón et al., 2011; Tremayne, 2014). I collected roughly 20 million posts with hashtags related to one or the other movement on Twitter and Instagram, yielding networks of roughly 4.5 million unique users. I developed a range of computational methods to analyze these relations, including network measures and image recognition. The resulting social network analyses describe and map how relationships among these users develop over time and in various locations.

In order to understand how such network structures shape the experience of individuals, I employed qualitative inquiry. As suggested above, relational structures and meaning-making are mutually constitutive. Thus, understanding the development of social movement networks necessitates analysis of the contexts within which relations develop (Bail, 2014; Cox, 2017; Crossley, 2015; Elias, 1995, 2000; Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015; Lind and Stepan-Norris, 2011). I drew upon qualitative inquiry to understand the relational dynamics of digitally networked movements employing a variety of specific contexts. Formal interviews and informal conversations (92 in total) with activists prominent to greater or lesser degrees, as well as with their adversaries, were conducted in a range of U.S. cities, including Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Francisco, California, New York, New York, Cannon Ball, North Dakota, Ferguson, Missouri, Selma and Birmingham, Alabama, Seattle, Washington, Chicago, Illinois, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Phoenix, Arizona. In addition, my analyses drew on a variety of sources, including blogs, biographies, activist memoirs, policy documents, newspaper articles, IRS records, and White House visitor records. These qualitative sources informed an iterative process that integrated computational analyses, facilitating an understanding of how relationships developed in digitally networked movements.

**Scaling Up Digitally Networked Movements**

My study shows that the uses of social media are embedded in community networks and practices. Accordingly, the development of digitally networked movements is closely interwoven with the communities which are at their roots. I show how, because of this, social media produce and reproduce dynamics of power in the ways that social movements develop, rather than fundamentally changing relational dynamics. The following sections highlight a number of selected empirical findings to illustrate my argument.
Theories About Scaling Up

Scaling refers to how social movements expand beyond a local setting (Nicholls, 2009; Routledge, 2003; Sikkink, 2005; Soule, 2013; Tarrow, 2005). The basic idea is that even large-scale transnational social movements begin with a small group of people (Barabasi and Albert, 1999; Newman and Watts, 1999; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). Typically, people who know each other well enough to take action together tend to live close to each other (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007; Centola, 2015; Centola, 2013; Feld, 1981). By forming coalitions with other groups of activists elsewhere, such a movement begins to expand (Givan et al., 2010; Tarrow, 2010).

The development of social movements, from the perspective of scaling generally and in terms of networks, depends on the formation of connections between diverse groups of people (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973).

Theories of social movements and social media suggest that digital networking may be ideally suited for forging connections between disperse communities. As infrastructures that encourage interactions, social media ostensibly facilitate the transcendence of geographical barriers in scaling processes that transform localized activism into national movements (McAdam, Tarrow, et al., 1996; Soule, 2013; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). Close-knit, localized communities can use social media to easily interact with communities in other places. This is important for grassroots movements to emerge from local communities and scale up to form national movements (Chong, 1991; Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; McAdam et al., 2001). In terms of digitally networked movements, the forging of such connections is a question of the diffusion of (personal action) frames, as “individualized orientations that are expressions of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances” instead of collective action frames, which are expressions of “social group identity, membership, or ideology” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, pp. 743–744; Olson, 1965). While Bennett and Segerberg claim that identification with personal action frames relies less on collective appeals, others suggest social media allow for new ways of relating to collective identities (Beraldo, 2017; Crossley, 2010a; Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015a). Thus, social media may increase the traction of (personalized) frames by affording individuals new ways of reaching beyond strictly pre-existing local networks (cf. Tarrow and McAdam, 2005).

These scaling processes have been the focus of recent advances in the study of digitally networked movements, describing how relational structures develop in social movements. This important body of work describes in detail the anatomy of various contemporary social movements, such as the Indignados, Occupy,
and Anonymous (Beraldo, 2017; Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2014; González-Bailón and Wang, 2015; Tremayne, 2014). Studies have also demonstrated that online movement networks are rooted in distinct geographies (Conover, Davis, et al., 2013; Hemsley and Eckert, 2014a; Wallace, Zepeda-Millán, and Jones-Correa, 2013). This helps us understand, for instance, how structural network relations shape the behavior and the roles of individuals (Barberá et al., 2015; González-Bailón et al., 2013; Varol et al., 2014), as well as the ways in which information diffuses through brokers in social movement networks (González-Bailón and Wang, 2015), and the recruitment processes that result from these diffusions (Crossley, 2015; González-Bailón et al., 2011).

**Contributions of This Study to Theories About Scaling Up**

I contribute to research on social movements by expanding on how relational dynamics of digitally networked movements are embedded in communities. With regards to scaling, I argue that social media have not diminished the importance of communities in social movements (Andersen, 2011; Cobb, 2016; King, 2015; Margetts et al., 2015). Although the theories discussed in previous chapters emphasize the ephemerality of ties on social media, there were remarkably consistent relational patterns in the digital networks that I studied, for instance in degrees of engagement and recruitment processes (Chapters 3, 4, 9, 10), formation of antagonistic counter-movements (Chapters 5 and 6), as well as the mediation of emotions and solidarity on social media (Chapters 5 and 8). I show how the digital networks that I studied were embedded in firmly established grassroots communities (Bastos and Mercea, 2016; Diani, 2015; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). Because interactions on social media are rooted in communities, these were a key factor in the scaling of digitally-enabled movements. Local networks provided a degree of consistency, because they were configured through shared location and interests, as demonstrated in this project (see also: Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2011; Conover et al. 2013; González-Bailón 2013; Tremayne 2014; cf. Feld 1981). This allowed for sustained online engagement and provided a stable foundation for consecutive mobilizations. Thus, while social media allow for interactions with like-minded strangers, digitally networked movements reliance on small-scale local communities allows them to go big. This helps to understand scaling processes in digitally networked movements in three respects: the development of relational structures online, how these are configured by specific locations and interests, and how these structures allow for the transmission of emotions.
In both movements that I examined, the relational structures among participants developed in similar ways. Typically, people interacted online with others who lived nearby and/or shared an interest. That range of interests was as broad as the experiences of everyday life, and served as a testament to the diversity of both movements. Overall the online networks were relatively sparse, while local subgroups’ structures were cohesive. This suggests that people are part of local communities, and use social media to connect with distant, otherwise unconnected, groups. The existence of this polycentric network structure, rooted in distinct geographies, indicates that social media allow for scaling, as might be expected from various theories (Burt, 2004; Donatella Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; Granovetter, 1973; Tarrow, 2005). Similarly, the polycentric network structures of the immigrant rights movement (as described by focusing on the Dreamers in Chapters 3 and 7) suggested strong relations in local communities, connected across places by interest-based interactions. Through social media activists bridged communities strongly embedded in the local milieus of hubs like Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. New York City, and Chicago. This confirms what we would expect from digitally-enabled scaling: allowing local activists to transcend their locales through social media to build grassroots movements. Thus, social media played a key role in the formation and trajectory of both movements and the relational structures at their roots.

Counter-movements present an intriguing exception to the role of social media in digitally-enabled scaling, as detailed in Chapter 6. Mediatized conflicts proliferate on social media, with different sides seeking to shape public debate by valorizing the affordances of social media. Characterized as the alt-right, certain opponents who are not territorially embedded, but from many dispersed locations, occasionally focus intense but brief attention on #blacklivesmatter. They do not rely on community structures for scaling up. Paradoxically, their pervasive individualization can be conducive to coordination, allowing activity to cascade through aggregated crowds without the structural bottlenecks typical of community-based relational structures. Thus, while the affordances of social media are leveraged by both supporters and opponents of progressive movements, contrary to utopian visions of technology-enabled decentralization (Nagle, 2017, p. 3), individual agents may be better positioned than communities to derive scaling benefits from social media.

Having described the structure of online connections, I sought to better understand how they function in the scaling up of movements. It is one thing
to know that there are connections between people in Ferguson, Missouri and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it is another thing to understand if social media allows a person to feel connected to a local protest. If networks scale up as a result of sharing “outrage and hope” (Castells, 2012), how are such emotions mediated on social media (cf. Bail, 2016; Goodwin et al., 2009; Jasper, 2014; Tufekci, 2017, p. 111)? Drawing on interaction ritual theory to understand scaling in terms of emotions (Collins, 2001, 2004, 2011), I found that emotions are mediated online as four types of interaction rituals, and that each is rooted in a distinct geography. Embodied rituals (direct action and social gatherings) take place in specific locations: respectively the arenas and milieus of a movement, whereas other rituals do not rely on physical co-presence (meme and lifestyle related). This typology helps to understand how different configurations of ritual aspects facilitate different kinds of engagement with online social movement in an online context. Again, we see the crucial importance of local activist scenes to grassroots movements: contentious actions and social events take place in arenas and milieus that provide the setting and infrastructure for the sorts of relations that sustain social movements. These are the locations where local groups develop strong ties, accounting for a large share of social media traffic. However, digital networking allows people who are not direct participants to tune in to personal experiences of such settings, for instance, by viewing friends in photos during a rally on the National Mall in Washington D.C. This makes group boundaries ambiguous among the various and overlapping audiences with which we deal on social media. If such rituals are still marked by physical co-presence in the first order, social media allow for engagement without physical presence in subsequent higher-order rituals online.

This project also illustrates how online relational structures shaped, and were shaped in, the context of the development of a national immigrant rights movement. For instance, as remarkable as the use of social media was for the impressive trajectory of Dreamers, social media alone does not sufficiently explain their rise to national prominence. Crucial changes occurred not only in their adoption of social media –digitally networked immigration advocacy was nothing new- but in the configuration of broader relational patterns. Dreamers had to contend with minimal resources, operate in a fragmented field, and face adversity both from regulatory agencies and organizations competing for the same resources (cf. Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015b; Nicholls, 2013). The digitally-enabled scaling processes described were by no means spontaneous. In Chapter
4, their rise in consecutive reconfigurations is contextualized in the broader field of immigrant rights struggles. While social media facilitated networking and allowing the diffusion of frames, context allows us to understand this process better. For instance, the mobilization of resources, a long-standing tenet of social movement literature, remained indispensable for the immigrant rights movement. From primarily local struggles in the 1990s, it evolved into a coherent national movement in the decades that followed. Against this background, I demonstrated how the field needed to be reconfigured at the national level by resource-rich national organizations for the Dreamers to gain access to power. Otherwise limited to the local arenas where their closest relations and constituencies were based, it took, among other things, substantial resources concentrated in national advocacy organizations to develop a durable infrastructure from which the Dreamers could benefit (Clark and Heath, 2015; Davies and Featherstone, 2013; Kohl-Arenas, 2016; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017). Not only did their rise require resources, this scaling relied on strong relations developed over time and steadfast accumulation of discursive resources (Fiorito and Nicholls, 2016; Gnes, 2018; Nicholls et al., 2019). As a subgroup, Dreamers leveraged digital media to mobilize around a shared identity. While benefiting them as a group (and specific individuals) in terms of prominence and capacity, this reconfiguration of the field also incurred burdens on themselves and others.

Leadership in Digitally Networked Movements

With regards to leadership, I argue how its development online reproduces traditional conflicts while introducing new inequalities. Because social media users are part of communities, digital networking plays into the dynamics of social movement leadership in both expected and unexpected ways. Particular perspectives on leadership are rooted in the traditions and practices of those particular communities. Digitally networked leadership affords new ways to connect communities, while (re)producing existing conflict and inequalities. My work contributes to the literature on social media and social movement leadership by expanding on how leadership on social media develops in terms of relational structures. I show in detail how leadership in networks develops structurally over time (Chapters 7 and 9), but also explore how these structures shape and are shaped by perspectives on leadership (Chapter 4 and 10), as well as the burdens incurred
by prominence on social media (Chapters 8 and 10). These findings indicate how much, and how little, social media have changed the role of leadership in the development of social movements.

**Theories About Leadership in Digitally Networked Movements**

Scholars, activists, and pundits suggest that digital networking affords powerful new means for fulfilling leadership roles. Social media take center stage in the rise of leaders in the general news, from politicians (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Foley, 2015; Harfoush, 2009), to sports heroes (Harwitt, 2017; Hoffman and Minsberg, 1980), to artists and other celebrities (Hargittai and Litt, 2011; Marwick, 2015; van de Rijt et al., 2013). Specifically, the development social movements may also benefit from well-known leaders who are adept at using social media to connect with others. Leaders play a key role in scaling up movements, because they are rooted in communities. This is what Black Lives Matter activists invoke with the concept of a ‘leaderful movement.’ Rather than deferring to hierarchical leadership structures, they argue for distributed, community-based leadership across diverse groups of movement participants (cf. Raelin, 2003, 2005; Wood and Ladkin, 2008). Not only have social media drastically altered ways of creating and reaching audiences, the technology may create new ways of organizing social movements, by reinvigorating aspirations of egalitarian forms of leadership in social movements (Freeman, 1973; Nepstad and Bob, 2006; Nunes, 2013; Poell et al., 2016; Polletta, 2002; Tufekci, 2014b, p. 13). Empirical research in recent years has routinely established that prominent individuals on social media play a critical role in waves of contention (Breuer et al., 2015; Lim, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Tufekci, 2017).

In terms of networks, social media may allow leaders to reach otherwise unconnected network communities (Diani, 2003; González-Bailón and Wang, 2015; Milan, 2015a; Theocharis, 2013). This is what Tarrow and McAdam call brokering, connecting local groups to other, previously unconnected groups elsewhere, in ways that resonate with the norms, values, and goals of the various groups, thus helping to expand and strengthen networks (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Keuchenius, Törnberg, and Uitermark, 2017; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). For social movements, it allows for horizontal forms of leadership between the communities of which leaders are part (see also Castells, 2012; Juris, 2005b; Tufekci, 2017). These leaders represent groups that afford them authority, and from whom they derive legitimacy (Payne, 1995), helping them to align goals,
repertoires and different kinds of (economic, symbolic, discursive) capital. This allows them to transcend parochialism, aligning and coordinating with others across geographical, sectoral, and ideological differences. Typically, these are community-based leaders with many acquaintances elsewhere, who are also members of national organizations.

**Contributions of This Study to Theories About Leadership in Digitally Networked Movements**

Among Dreamers, there are powerful examples of digitally enabled leadership. Having developed strong local bases of support and a strategy for securing local policy wins, they connected a broad coalition in a bid to influence national policies. The digital networking efforts of the #not1more campaign were essential to this. Digital networks facilitated collaborations covering a broad repertoire (from sit-ins, rallies and hunger strikes to an ‘Undocubus’ and musical performances); they developed frames and messages; and diffused their message among allies across the country. These leaders, in other words, derived (discursive) power from the relational structures in which they are situated (Berbers, Uitermark, Traag, and d’Haenens, 2019; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005; Uitermark, 2012). Thus, connective leadership on social media was instrumental to scaling up the movement (Araujo et al., 2017; Boler, Macdonald, Nitsou, and Harris, 2014; Tarrow, 2014).

Communities provide the conditions that allow leaders to become eminent. This is why digital networking alone cannot suffice as an explanation for the rise and sustained energy of leaders in the movements I studied. The position of those select few leaders who do manage to consolidate their fame developed in ways that contradict accounts of overnight success. Leaders in the immigrant rights movement and Black Lives Matter did not become famous only because of social media. Chapters 4 and 10 serve as contextualization of the tireless organizing and networking necessary for gaining and maintaining attention on social media, emphasizing how leaders’ positions developed in concert with their experiences. For instance, in Chapter 10, traditional understandings of community organizing are juxtaposed with “viral” notions of online leadership. In this account, I detail the persistent efforts that precede the emergence of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. One perspective emphasizes the importance of grassroots organizing, complemented by social media as communication tools. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that Cullors, Garza and Tometi, who succeeded in catalyzing the Movement for Black Lives when they did, brought to bear years of activist networking and hard-
won experience as community organizers. The other perspective emphasizes new networking possibilities offered by social media, suggesting that it enables new forms of leadership. The rise of Johnetta Elzie and DeRay Mckesson are exceptional examples, but I demonstrate in Chapter 10 that it cannot be said that fame came easily to them: they networked tirelessly on the ground as well as online. These findings reaffirm the salience of experience and strong, locally rooted networks for the development of the Movement for Black Lives, even with the available digital tools.

These digital networks simultaneously (re)produce inequalities. For instance, not everyone can rise to prominence: In a limited attention space, a limited number of people can gain prominence (Collins, 2001; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans, 2004a). The same holds for the limited attention space of social media (Tufekci, 2013). As a result, a select few leaders receive disproportionate shares of attention, as shown in Chapters 3 and 10. This is a common finding in social media networks, as well as for media celebrity (Marshall, 2014; van de Rijt et al., 2013), and many kinds of networks more generally (Barabasi and Albert, 1999; Clauset et al., 2009; Newman, 2005). Contrary to what the literature on online leadership has thus far emphasized however, the measure of this unevenness fluctuates significantly on a day-to-day basis. Only a select few leaders manage to solidify their fame: roughly 99% of the leadership online changes on a daily basis. In terms of consolidation, the leadership of #blacklivesmatter is consistently diverse with new voices regularly coming to the fore. While we find degrees of leadership concentration in digitally networked movements, there is very limited consolidation of such prominence in the highly contentious attention space of Twitter.

Leadership online also incurs heavy burdens. It comes at a price. In interviews, high-profile activists emphasized that they commonly faced backlash from both opponents (as expected), as well as other supporters of the movement (often unexpected). While factional struggles within social movements are nothing new, social media increases the salience of internal divides, as well as that of support bases. Social media’s affordance of visibility not only allows people to reach diverse audiences, it also contributes to controversies. The backlash for perceived missteps in the public eye can be brutally overwhelming, making those in leadership positions increasingly vulnerable (cf. Clark-Parsons, 2018). In Chapter 8, this dynamic is explained in terms of distinction and solidarity (Bourdieu, 1984). The notion of cleft habitus (habitus clivé) captures well how Dreamers balanced their
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distinction as ‘privileged’ with solidarities among their larger group: a disjunction between the primary habitus (i.e., the embodied dispositions and schemes of perception developed early in life) and the secondary habitus required in a new field (Bourdieu 1984; Friedman 2016; cf. Du Bois 1903). Drawing on Bourdieu allowed for an examination of leadership dynamics that entailed conceptualizing movements as fields of struggle and contested power (Bourdieu, 1991; Uitermark, 2010). For the leaders among the Dreamers, prominence on social media confronted them with a paradoxical challenge.

The very affordances of digitally networked visibility that facilitated the rise of Dreamers simultaneously underlined ambiguous group boundaries within the movement, generating conflictual dynamics (cf. Boy and Uitermark, 2019). Because anything we post on social media is visible to multiple audiences (e.g., friends, colleagues, parents, adversaries), we have to consider how that single message addresses the different meanings those audiences might assign: a “collapse of context” (boyd, 2014; cf. Meyrowitz, 1987). The Dreamers, benefiting from social media to call attention to themselves as a distinct subgroup marked as well-adjusted (and thus deserving), simultaneously set them apart from the local communities out of which they had emerged. The framing of one group as “more deserving” publicly demarcated boundaries between subgroups, generating conflict inside the movement (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont and Molnár, 2002). The Dreamers’ position came at a price: the act of connecting different communities led those communities to question the Dreamers’ allegiances. In response, at the height of their prominence, the Dreamers sought to reaffirm their solidarities with groups with little symbolic capital, such as day laborers. Thus, these findings show how relational structures of online leadership both shape and are shaped by conflictual dynamics.

This study illustrates how the affordances of social media (re)produce inequalities that exist in the communities in which digital networks are embedded. The accessibility of deliberative spaces on social media may undermine the egalitarian ethos of progressive social movements (as well as the early internet), that was intended to create spaces for deliberation. To be clear, I do not suggest that grassroots movements or communication technology are new, rather that fragmentation is increasingly visible on social media. Visibility on social media, for instance, allows leaders to foster solidarity between diverse communities, while their position simultaneously accentuates boundaries between communities. As leaders gain distinction on social media and profit from it politically, they may
become distanced from the very communities that they have connected and which are less inclined to, adept at, or capable of leveraging the affordances of digital networking to gain prominence. The increased salience of boundaries between different groups on social media forces those who might broker between fragmented communities to speak to multiple publics simultaneously (Boyd, 2010), which often (but for exceptional cases) diminishes their authority among those very publics. Thus, context collapse, in combination with limited attention spaces and network dynamics such as tendencies towards the concentration of prominence, exacerbates a classic problem of social movements: reliance on a limited number of highly visible leaders.

The burdens of connective leadership bring to mind the double consciousness involved in having to contend with two conflicting worlds (Du Bois 1903). In social media’s hyper-connectivity we contend with a multitude of conflicting views, forced to look on ourselves through the eyes of varied audiences in different locations (cf. Johnson, 2018). If viewing oneself through the other’s eyes allows for a “redoubling” of our comprehension of the complexities of “this American world” (Du Bois 1903: xiv), perhaps the context collapse of hyper-connectivity allows for even deeper comprehension. But, we must consider the possibility that it further reinforces alienation, measuring “one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 1903:8).

Methodological Contribution and Limitations

Computational methods promise a solid base for analyzing social media networks, providing unprecedented means for studying social movements. But the implementation of these methods raise technical and epistemological challenges. It is hard to keep track of interactions on social media, even with computational methods. This is why a relational understanding of social movements is at the heart of this research project. Relational approaches propose that networks shape, and are shaped by, the way people make sense of the world (Crossley 2015; Diani and McAdam 2003; Emirbayer; 1997; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Lind and Stepan-Norris 2011; Uitermark, 2010). On the one hand, relational structures are best studied using network analysis, and combining this with digital data and computational methods is particularly powerful. Important work is being done to advance computational analysis on the frontiers of social movements studies,
allowing us to map millions of relations in time and space (Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2014; Conover, Davis, et al., 2013; González-Bailón and Wang, 2015). On the other hand, relational dynamics are best understood in context of qualitative inquiry, that can develop a sense of the meanings and practices that bind and divide communities. A combination of these advantages allows us to map relational structures and better understand the communities in which the developmental dynamics of digital networks are rooted. This research project proposes an integration of computational methods and qualitative inquiry to compound said analytical benefits in innovative ways, while introducing limitations, as well as avenues for further work, which are outlined in the following sections.

Although computational methods shed new light on the relational dynamics of social movements, they simultaneously introduce new technical and epistemological challenges. The explorative design of this study allowed for the development of a relational approach that draws on computational methods combined with qualitative inquiry. This entailed an iterative process of exploring patterns in digital networks, interviewing respondents and making field observations, and subsequently adapting the computational methods to better serve the data.

Computational methods are a useful tool in unpacking the relational dynamics of social movements because they draw upon large scale longitudinal datasets and network analysis. Describing, for instance, the scale-free nature of the 15M social movement, Borge-Holthoefer et al. pioneer the application of power law measures to online social media protest data (Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2011). González-Bailón et al. uncover the various roles involved in the diffusion of information related to network structure in the indignados movement on Twitter (González-Bailón et al., 2013). Similarly, Tremayne employs network measures on Twitter data to examine centrality in relation to frame diffusion in the Occupy Wall Street movement (Tremayne, 2014), while other studies focus on examining the geospatial characteristics of these networks (Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2014; Conover, Davis, et al., 2013). What these studies demonstrate is that the combination of computational methods and digital data yields powerful approaches for examining the relational dynamics at the heart of social movement development in unprecedented ways.

I sought to advance these methods by integrating structural analysis with qualitative inquiry. For instance, computational analysis allowed me to examine the network centrality of leaders, but it did not allow me to understand how these
leaders are rooted in the traditions and practices of the communities to which they are central. I therefore selected interview respondents on the basis of their network centrality, and gave them the opportunity to reflect on their structural positions within their networks. This, in turn, was essential to interpreting subsequent computational analyses, for instance, in the task of differentiating supporters from opponents. When not initially clear from network patterns, interviews and content analysis made apparent the urgent need to account for the nefarious opposition constituting substantial parts of the network. Computational measures of that activity subsequently informed qualitative engagement with opponents to understand how they leveraged social media in their daily lives.

Through this iterative design, my approach calls attention to the conflictual dynamics introduced by digital networking, bringing into clear focus the ambiguity and contradictions inherent to social movement networks (cf. Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). Recent scholarship has been gradually veering away from essentialist conceptualizations of social movements (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015a; Uitermark, 2013, 2017); a shift further spurred on by methodological advances, notably by network analysis. Moving away from static explanations of movements requires us to contend with messy developmental patterns that may make movements seem contradictory (Beraldo, 2017; Goldstone, 2015). Digital networking and its empirical traces bring into sharper focus what ties different people together into social movements. We know what the networked grassroots look like structurally: tight groups of strong relations and loosely coupled links between those groups (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Nicholls et al., 2016). The relations within these groups are affirmed by what could be mistaken as the mundane facts of life: having dinner together, enjoying art shows, or a shared interest in a music genre. Instagram serves as a reminder that so much of the social movement experience takes place in our everyday lives (Crossley, 2017; Duyvendak, 2011; Hanisch, 2000; Taylor and Whittier, 1992). By contrast, static abstractions of networks make ambiguous and fluid group boundaries appear contradictory.

Indeed, computational methods come with limitations, and it is not without irony that new black boxes are introduced by the very tools that help to unpack the relational dynamics of digital networking. Chapter 11 discusses these limitations in detail. On the one hand, it is now feasible to chart with precision how (and where) people interact topically concerning a social movement – albeit biased in specific ways (González-Bailón, Wang, Rivero, et al., 2014; Milan, 2015b;
Tufekci, 2014a). For instance, employing network analysis, we can model what kind of relations are likely to develop, or measure prominence and examine how it develops from among millions of social media users. On the other hand, the convenience of these tools belies technical challenges that warrant a closer look in their own right. Technically, these tools commonly rely on algorithms based on assumptions, such as the Riemann zeta function, that are opaque to the researcher. Moreover, commonly designed to generate results easily—an important reason catalyzing their widespread adoption—the underlying processes are resistant to error checking, while susceptible to misapplication and abuse.

To address those challenges, this study contributes new conceptualizations and operationalization of network measures, advancing sociologically relevant and empirically grounded mixed-method approaches that will be valuable for future research on how social media interact with the development of social movements. I sought to examine the computational methods for blind spots that they create, and to use them in tandem with qualitative research so that each informs the other. This relational approach accounts for the development of relational structures situated in social contexts, while advancing reliable and accurate algorithmic automation (cf. Bail, 2014). Further refinement of this relational approach can account for other patterns in large-scale digitally networked movements over time, while allowing for the meaningful incorporation of ambiguity. With modification, this approach could also be used to study other digitally networked movements. While the relevance of Twitter and Instagram may diminish over time, it seems reasonable to expect that social media will continue to play a role in the development of social movements for the foreseeable future.

In short, this project shows how social media (re)produce already existing relational dynamics in social movements, while simultaneously providing a window into understanding how these dynamics function. Scaling and leadership are core dynamics of social movement development. Social media provide activists with new opportunities for engaging a wide variety of dispersed and otherwise unconnected communities in their movements. Forging such networked collectives is challenging, but both cases in this study provide numerous examples of how activists succeed in doing so. Empirical analysis, drawing upon computational and qualitative analysis, highlights how activists’ individual efforts are embedded in relational structures and broader political and institutional settings. Those relationships are strongly rooted in specific communities, which become connected as networks through the relational dynamics of scaling up and leadership, which
are consistently core dynamics in the development of social movements. Those relational dynamics, however, do not inherently (re)produce egalitarian outcomes, and contrary to popular understandings, are just as likely to increase as to decrease inherent social tendencies for inequalities and conflict.