

DIGITAL MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORKS: NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL PUBLICS

PRELIMINARY PROJECT REPORT

Alexandra Segerberg, Stockholm University

Research Questions

The project analyses the transformation of civil society with respect to the organisation of national and transnational publics. It focuses on how digital communication is involved in diffusing and sustaining common ideas and action while creating structure in fluid multi-cause, transnational, and virtual public spaces.

Specific aims are:

1. To develop a communication perspective on collective action and civil society
2. To analyse digitally networked advocacy and protest networks according to: (a) How they work; (b) Their democratic quality

The project analyses protest events and issue advocacy networks in two global issue clusters that exist within and across nations as well as in grassroots and state-sanctioned configurations: economic justice and environment/climate change politics. It focuses primarily on EU country contexts (United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden).

Current Project Status

Adjusting the original plan, we now analyse two kinds of cases in the two issue areas: action networks in which organizations are key players and networks in which organisations are marginalised. Our initial exclusive focus on Europe was relaxed to encompass a clear case of the latter. We have analysed public digital communication (e.g. hyperlink analysis; analysis of action framing and technological affordances on websites, Twitter etc.) in the following cases:

- *Organizationally enabled networks*: Advocacy networks at national and EU level in UK and Germany (data gathered 2010) and Sweden (2011; preliminary analysis); Protest and campaign networks: G20 London Summit protests 2009; COP15 London protests 2009; UK Robin Hood Tax campaign 2010-11.
- *Crowd-enabled networks*: COP15 Copenhagen protests 2009; U.S. Occupy protests 2011-2012.

Theoretical and empirical project output has been presented in a series of peer reviewed articles, book chapters, conference papers and one monograph.

Preliminary results

Theoretically: as part of developing a communication perspective on contentious action, we identify a logic of connective action that in turn is associated with distinctive organizational dynamics at the scale of the larger network. This framework contributes to understanding civil society in contexts marked by personalisation, globalisation and digitalisation.

Empirically: examining how connective networks work as action networks and publics, we identify two key types ('organizationally enabled' and 'crowd enabled') and analyse how they organize, when they are politically effective, and what the challenges and trade-offs are in terms of commitment, sustainability, and flexibility. Discourse and technology help configure all the types, as well as conventional collective action networks, but play different roles in each. Political context also plays into network character, dynamics and quality. Preliminary evaluations of democratic legitimacy in terms of depth and breadth in online publics centred on issue advocacy networks suggests that more highly institutionalised networks, such as those at the EU level, are thinner than their less institutionalised counterparts.