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Ties in Mediated Activism

A Talk about the Possible Importance of Relationships in Risky Activism Online
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What I’m going to tell is a story of ties. By “ties” I mean the relationships between persons and within social networks and the way that these have been glossed over in much research about social movements online.

- 1: Theoretical and historical overview of the research on ties in activism and how networks are commonly treated as a recruitment and mobilization mechanism - but rarely detailed
- 2: Then I’ll ask the question: ‘what is a strong tie?’ And what happens when we add Internet to the equation?
- 3: Then I’ll talk about the case I’m studying
- 4: And why I think this matters

In the olden days, movement mobilization was seen as a psychological mechanism: people are upset > they get upset enough > movements; this was a dominant model for decades, but when people began to research it they found something quite different: recruitment and mobilization is channeled through ‘preexisting network linkages’

**Motivating emotions are insufficient** for understanding participation in activism. This picture of the 1964 Freedom Summer activists, for example: the girls on the left weren’t just pissed off about racism. They had grievances but joined in networks.
iv. **PLOWSHARES**: The peace movement: high-risk Christian peace movement groups form intensely close bonds and give social support to each other in order to mitigate the consequences of their activism.

iv. **STRONG TIES**: Rather than the myth of the alone, isolated terrorist or the so-called ‘wing nut’, these activities are highly social, intensely emotional, closely interacted.
The 2007 London Bombers were not linked to a larger group, but they were linked to each other and participated in sessions of watching films online of the consequences of war in the middle east.

These are stories of ‘community support,’ of interpersonal relations which are entangled with beliefs, commitment, and resources, but that are key for helping groups to persist.
Defintion from Granovetter’s 1973 paper: Time; Emotional intensity; Reciprocity. See networks as mechanisms, while frequently only operationalizing tie strength in data. They have not made clear the nature of the ties.

Operationalized in the literature: overlapping memberships; self-report in data sets; frequency of mutual appearance in different places.
Nepstad 2004 - Strong ties for an anti-war movement which has persisted long beyond much of the rest of the movement from the 1960s mean: a sense of faith and collectivity; frequent “face-to-face” meetings and reaffirmations; reciprocal exchanges and support—if someone goes to prison their child will be raised in the faith. McAdam 1989 - Biographical consequences: persons who went to the freedom summer differed from those who did not: more likely to have worked professionally; less likely to be married (but more likely to be married to activists); networks maintained over time. And friendships develop when people are co-located. Particularly in the emotions of protest, the excitement, the anger, the adrenaline. That is, the extent to which individuals feel emotions and loyalty to the group. - This is a weakness of social movements literature which has a structuralist bias due to a nasty history with emotions within the field. But this is ironic, because it appears to be key to understanding what the mechanism of a network may be.
This whole thing gets more complicated when we start talking about the Internet. In terms of understanding protest, particularly the micro-aspects of protest, mediation has (from what I’ve read) had difficulty coping with emotions and the interpersonal aspects of protest online.
- There are people who question whether a “strong tie” can even exist online.
- Others disagree and the research implies that strong relationships can be developed online:
  - Ties and relationships online have been mapped in a lot of areas; primarily dating and social network sites.
  - People do form relationships; the longer those relationships last the more important they tend to be to the person; divulgence matters; multi-modality matters.
  - The tendency, however, in other areas is the move from mono-modality to multimodality. Ties move from one platform to two, three, etc, and relationships become more personal. Identity matters.
- There is a dearth of research on ties in online activism and I have not seen research about emotions, trust, anonymity and social movements.
Anonymous:
- 1. A networked scene of hackers and activists (and trolls) who do politics online; internet freedom / free speech;
- 3. Repertoire of contention that includes illegal tactics.
- 2. Well over 100 individuals having been arrested.
- 4. Participants engage online in chats, are pseudonymous, and the medium is ephemeral: unlike FB or email, one needs to be present or miss it. SO: It’s high-cost to get involved; and can be high-risk.
- 5) We should expect to see strong ties at work.
- I have been doing participant observation and interviews, and am starting in with qualitative network analysis I hope
Let’s tie this back around: 1) ties are seen as mechanistic in mobilization and recruitment, but in cases where there are risks (such as hacktivism where revealing personal information could get one hacked, doxed, or arrested), it is especially important that they are *strong*; 2) ties online might be operationalized as strong through emotional support, multi-modality, and the divulgence of personal information (WHICH IS A RISK).

So how does all of this *work*?
I hypothesize that networks matter even here. But are likely mediated by grade of perceived risk.

There is a tension between anonymity and sociality. There is a waiting and testing period but individuals make connections.

Once they do, it appears that they become multimodal; but this is not always the case! Risk may mitigate this tendency!

3) Actually, these hacktivists aren’t that different from other activists. While ideology and motivating emotions are important, so are other people: “if it wasn’t for [these two Anons] I probably wouldn’t have stuck it out this long” (Interview 16715)

SM online = Mass society; Intimacy online = 1:1; missing a fascinating and key place where this gets done. Does mediation change involvement and how? This may help to understand both mediated and non-mediated movements.

What is the role of identity in strength of ties? Is it possible to form such ties pseudonymously? Can social groups exert pressure online?

There’s a tendency in the research of online social movements to 1) discount the interactive aspects of emotions and the development of relationships online, while focusing instead on ‘mobs’ and ‘hashtag activism’, which gives an incomplete view of not only what is going on online, but makes the same mistake of ignoring the importance of emotion; 2) while not black and white, hacktivism is frequently discounted because it is argued to be “low cost” or unimportant, while ignoring that certain kinds of hacktivism require a great investment of time and look quite
similar to offline activism. Ignoring the very full, meaningful range of experiences of hacktivists and the importance of the connections they make, suggests a blind spot for social movement studies more broadly. Furthermore, this is an area of relational development and emotional exchange that seems to be under-researched. This calls for moar research.