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Being a Serial Transnational Activist

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Transnational activism endures as a political practice turning a mirror onto the world's powerbrokers. We analyse a variety of transnational activism best characterized as serial by virtue of an observed systematic time and border-spanning commitment to protest communication. Following statistical disambiguation of a dataset of 2.5 million unique Twitter users, we identified a subset of exceptionally prolific communicators and interviewed 21 of them. We show that a noted prominence in networked communication of otherwise unremarkable Twitter users may be an upshot of purposive strategies intended to publicize, support or help orchestrate collective action. Accordingly, we propose the term “engagement compass” to address the relationship between activists' life-patterns and their personal investment in protest over time.

Key words: transnational activism, social media, diffusion, celebrity, frame clouding, disengagement

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In the wake of the Green Revolution in Iran, the Arab Spring or Occupy Gezi, insights surfaced of intense global activity on social media amplifying the public consciousness of those popular uprisings (Aday, Farrell, Freelon, Lynch, Sides, & Dewar, 2013; Tufekci, 2013). With this article, we expand the conceptualization of serial activism to capture and extricate present-day transnational movement entrepreneurship. Previously, we undertook an examination of cross-national protest communication via Twitter aimed at repurposing the term serial activism so as to highlight the prolific, sustained and boundary-spanning activity of individuals who would otherwise remain ordinary due to their relatively modest followings (Bastos & Mercea, 2015). In what follows, we advance the analysis of serial activism by theorizing the transnational dimension of the observed activity, querying the practices and self-perceptions of serial activists relative to their prodigious cross-hashtag activity, reviewing potential problems to arise from it and, finally, evaluating its sustainability over time.

At the most general level, we trace the origins of this enquiry back to foregoing research on transnational activism. Political culture—those dispositions towards the political system and one's relationship to it (Almond & Verba, 1963)—has a cosmopolitan avatar linked to an expansive though unequally distributed acuity for globalization and its myriad political implications (Dahlgren, 2013). The latter sensitivity is galvanized by media—both the reporting organizations and user-centric services such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. Most notably, over the last decade, such a cosmopolitan outlook has been recorded in multiple instances of transnational activism taking aim *inter alia* at global inequality (Juris, 2005), war (Gillan, Pickerill & Webster, 2008) or climate change (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011).

Communicative activism on Twitter has at once been a continuation and a departure from the entrenched early 21st century activist practices encountered in those protests. On the

one hand, hitherto emphasis on subordinating digital media to deliberation and consensus-building has been largely outstripped by a preoccupation with just-in-time aggregation of critical masses (Juris, 2012). On the other, continuity may reside in the fact that protests commanding transnational support on social media may add to a notion of cosmopolitan citizenship predicated on a deterritorialized democratic culture of political participation (Dahlgren, 2006). Having already empirically verified the cross-national scope of serial activism (Bastos & Mercea, 2015), at this juncture we propose a reappraisal of transnational activism and its cosmopolitan foundations.

At the turn of the century, the ranks of boundary-defiant activists were filled with *rooted cosmopolitans* (Tarrow, 2005). The unlikely association of terms alludes to a position — social and physical — that simultaneously straddles intersecting social networks and geographical places (Tarrow, 2005:42). Rooted cosmopolitans ranged from activists involved in advocacy around international or regional organizations such as the E.U., to local networks of groups and individuals immersed in globally connected protests as was the Global Justice Movement or diasporic communities mobilizing in homeland-facing collective action (Tarrow, 2005:44-54). Such transnationalism seems to have endured, even becoming augmented due to ongoing upheaval in activist networked communication pertaining to speed, size and an expeditious capacity for the collective articulation of goals, solidarity and the choreographing of action (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Howard & Hussain, 2013:66-67). Nonetheless, we would question afresh the nature of its *roots*.

The standing account of the rooted cosmopolitan engaged in transnational activism depicts a globally-minded local activist (Tarrow, 2005:42); someone who is highly invested in collective deliberations and decision-making (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter, 2006:10). Local here refers to a cache of experience and social connections one derives from affiliation to proximate activist networks which in their turn link into worldviews and

concerns held beyond a single locality (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991). Equally, we have witnessed activists operating remotely in support of on-the-ground coordination of protests far removed from their immediate circumstances or their geographical coordinates (Lim, 2013). These were individuals who aided in the propagation of the Tunisian democratic revolt alongside citizen journalists embedded with the protestors and transnational media organizations able to shun government censorship (Lim, 2013:933). It is this latter form of participation that has prompted the present attempt to revisit the concept of transnational activism.

The uprising in Tunisia is one illustration of exponential discourse networks of communicative political activism that burst onto the scene in the Middle East as early as the 2009 post-election demonstrations in Iran. Subsequent events in the Arab Spring were portrayed as a catalyst for the Indignados movement in Spain and the Occupy encampments in the U.S. which later spawned across the world (Mico & Casero-Ripolles, 2014). This cross-national diffusion may be pinned onto radical *segmentation* (Gerlach & Hine, 1970:41), an organizational trait previously described as “a great variety of localized groups or cells which are essentially independent, but which can combine to form larger configurations, or divide to form smaller units”. If, on the other hand, one scrutinized diffusion as a communicative practice, the notion of rooted cosmopolitanism may fail to account for this flurry of *civic* cosmopolitanism (Dahlgren, 2013)—actions in support of global others induced by democratic morals (see Boutroux, 1921)—that appears to have erupted independent of concerted efforts to that end by globally networked activist organizations.

Indeed, the Indignados and the Occupy movements have prompted claims that networked communication technologies form a scaffolding onto which scalable movement infrastructures are erected communicatively from the ground up by recombinant collections of loose groupings, individuals and activist organisations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In

this second respect, many latter-day movements seem to stand in some contrast to the digitally networked yet centrally coordinated transnational movements of the previous two decades (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; della Porta et al., 2006). At that time, network technologies were deemed a cost-effective adjunct to face-to-face interaction (della Porta et al., 2006), an effective interface for remote in-group coordination (Kavada, 2009) or self-publication (Castells, 2009). Conversely, the growing number of examples where long-standing activist organizations take a back seat in the orchestration of movement actions amidst a crowd flying many different banners (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) has informed the notion of *participatory coordination* (Mercea & Funk, 2015). The concept captures a concerted yet disaggregated investment in collective action chiefly by individuals and loose groupings whereby a social media footprint directs and maps onto protests on the ground.

How these constitutive communicative elements of present-day transnational movements are combined varies widely. Yet, with the current predominance of social media among networked communication technologies, the grip that any limited set of organizations may have over a movement may have diminished. Indeed, research has evinced that several divisions — organizational, of language register or social station — may be sidelined on Twitter as communication in support of a protest widens (Maireder & Schwarzenegger, 2012). If the latter illustration rings as an assessment in need of some revision, it may be because of qualifying evidence proposing it is *influentials* — high-profile network actors who are targets of messages they may help to popularize — and *broadcasters* — sources of such messages — who are able to respectively concentrate and disseminate the largest share of protest communication on Twitter (Gonzalez-Bailon, Borge-Holthoefer & Moreno, 2013:957). A fundamental aspect of the work influentials perform is the facilitation of recurrent exposure to multiple sources. On Twitter, this activity translates into the mediation of repeated encounters with dedicated protest hashtags (Bastos, Raimundo & Travitzki,

2013). In the last instance, both influentials and broadcasters represent an emergent and organic communication elite providing comprehensive coverage of physical protests (Papacharissi & Oliveira 2012: 274-75).

If, to various degrees, the two capacities meet, the result is a polyvalent actor, the *networked microcelebrity activist*. This is the preeminent network agent who “uses affordances of social media to engage in [the] presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimony, advocacy and citizen journalism” (Tufekci, 2013:850). Microcelebrities are positioned in the midst of peer networks rather than at the helm of protest groups. They are not spokespersons for them but rather authority figures commanding important attention and recognition (Tufekci, 2013:851). In turn, we place the limelight on those among activists who are entangled in the cultural and political phenomenon of extensive communication in multiple, transnational political protests (Bastos, Puschmann & Travitzki, 2013). We undertake to locate them in this increasingly crowded activist field where influentials, broadcasters and microcelebrities and, perhaps serial activists also, sit side-by-side.

Research questions

The distinctiveness of transnational serial activists might reside in the following characteristics. Individually, they are each distilled into five research questions (henceforth RQs). Firstly, we explore the activity patterns of high-functioning activists who post vast amounts of content across multiple hashtags in order to determine whether they may be described as transnational microcelebrities — broadcasters and frontline news anchors all at once—and, relatedly, to examine their diffusion practices (RQ #1). A capacity to overcome borders — geographical, of time and linguistic — so as to build and maintain transnational activist networks is by no means new. It was a key attribute of the movement entrepreneurs depicted by Tarrow (2005). What may set transnational serial activists apart from their

predecessors is the fact that they single-handedly contribute to *relational, nonrelational and mediated* (Tarrow, 2005:101) diffusion of contention all at once. To take these in turn, relational diffusion occurs in networks of strong social bonds between actors who help propagate the ferment of collective action. Nonrelational diffusion pertains to the circulation of dissent through public broadcasting channels online or otherwise. Mediated diffusion is the fruit of movement brokers who intermedicate between otherwise disconnected areas of transnational activist networks.

Through their cross-hashtag activity, transnational serial activists may be able to link together disparate areas of global movement networks (Bennett, Segerberg & Walker, 2014). They do this as individuals who, we would posit, are the human operators behind what Bennett and colleagues (2014) termed *stitching technologies*, i.e. the nexus of human activists and non-human network technologies that orchestrates contemporary distributed collective action. They would assemble transnational followings that they directly sensitize to collective action (Penney & Dadas, 2013) and indirectly use to spread its underlying contention (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013).

Further, we have already provided a descriptive account of how serial activists are able to overcome linguistic barriers. Here, and in direct continuation of our preoccupation with presenting signs of a shift from rooted to civic cosmopolitanism, we aim to reveal the reasons impelling serial activists to take this course of action. We have a cognizance that Twitter communication tends to cluster according to shared coordinates of physical place, language and nationality (Takhteyev, Gruzd & Wellman, 2012). Evidence has nevertheless been adduced of users bridging language communities when tweeting with multiple political or protest hashtags (Bastos, Puschman & Travitzki, 2013). In addition, we have an appreciation of why activists may revert to English in the interest of “acquiring international attention” to their struggle (Tufekci, 2013:856). The reverse phenomenon, however, whereby transnational

activists translate their messages into the local idiom of a protest does not seem to have been likewise documented. We therefore queried the incidence of this practice among serial activists (RQ#2).

Conversely, we note that a prodigious aptitude of serial activists for cross-hashtag publication may have problematic implications. On the one hand, it may potentially put any emergent 'personal brand' deriving from a remarkably active Twitter persona in tension with the substantive contention they support should prolific activists become microblogging celebrities in their own right (McCurdy 2013). Celebrity activists have the uneasy task of having to boost their prominence without deflecting the limelight reserved to their favored causes (McCurdy, 2013:315). In her analysis, Tufekci (2013:868) contended that rather unlike their earlier counterparts whose media savviness elevated them to unassailable stardom, activist microcelebrities stay within the fold and ethos of social movements.

Instead of dwelling on the question of fluctuations in the status of transnational serial activists amongst their peers, we interrogate the extent to which they are reflexive of their standing and whether they use any resultant cognizance towards self-regulation (RQ #3). Self-regulation here refers to a goal-oriented capacity to systematically manage one's activity so as to attain a set aim (Cho & Shen, 2013:290). Put differently, we hoped to discern what combination of perceptions relative to the status and assumed communicative roles might result in a tendency towards stardom, grounded application to the task of generating movement visibility or an in-between position.

On the other hand, we recall that just after the turn of this century, organizations spanning a global network such as ATTAC were throwing their weight behind resonant social and political causes, assisting in raising transnational support for them. In very large part, this was done by recourse to the digital communication tools of the day such as websites or email (Le Grignou & Patou, 2004). The French ATTAC sub-network is a chronicled

example of this phenomenon. Yet, its generous endorsement of cognate struggles was viewed by many internally as *frame clouding* (Snow, Burke Rochford, Worden & Benford, R.D, 1986; Le Grignou & Patou, 2004:172). Frame clouding is a risk that activist organizations run of estranging their core membership and/or more distant following whenever they take up “goals and issues beyond their original platform” (Snow et al., 1986:478). If, in the way outlined, goal consistency may be critical to organizational communication, we undertake to determine the degree to which serial activists often acting as sounding-boards for numerous causes recognize frame clouding as a potential downside to their communication and whether they have any strategies in place to address it (RQ #4).

Finally, we consider the question of disengagement from activist operations (Fillieule, 2014). In the main, disengagement pertains to an individualized, biographical process of extrication from an activist organization. This aspect of the activist life course has been largely sidelined in favor of a more systematic preoccupation with mobilization into collective action (2014:2). However, the possibilities for continued participation short of direct involvement in organizational workings have been previously visited and remain on the agenda for students of media and political participation (Bimber, 2003; Uldam & Vestergaard, 2015). In our turn, we explicate the withdrawal of transnational serial activists from the Twitter activity they undertook in support of multiple instances of protest. We assay its incidence among the research participants, the personal reasons together with the organizational and social constraints (Fillieule, 2014:2) which might galvanize or otherwise restrict disengagement (RQ #5).

Data collection and analysis

In recent years, there have been numerous instances of protest which have risen to prominence on social media and beyond. Foremost examples are the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, the Indignados and the Occupy movements, Occupy Gezi and the 2013 Vinegar protests in Brazil which erupted against hikes in the price of public transportation fares. Our present report of them is intended as a lateral step from existing accounts that have been quantitative and broad-based in scope (Gonzales-Bailon et al., 2013) or entirely ethnographic and particular to a protest locale (Postill, 2014; Fernandez-Planells, Figueras-Maz & Pàmols, 2014). To that end, we adopted a sequential research design (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2008) whereby by means of statistical disambiguation we identified a sampling pool of serial activists for subsequent qualitative interviewing.

Within a period of over four years — from July 2009 to August 2013 — a total of nearly 20M hashtagged protest tweets (19,879,893) posted by over 2.5M unique users (2,657,457) were gathered through the Twitter Streaming API on a rolling basis. The number of monitored hashtags was 193. From that raw data, in an initial preparatory step to the analysis, we excluded all user names which appeared within only a single hashtag community. This was done in order to identify individuals who engaged in what we have described as cross-hashtag activity, namely the seeding of messages either simultaneously or at different points in time with several protest hashtags. The result was a narrower sample of 1.5M unique users (1,537,342).

Subsequent data preparation included the coding of the 193 hashtags geographically which rendered 17 area bands. Thus, we were able to control for variability in the number of hashtags associated with a single protest. For instance, the Occupy Movement in the USA produced 60 hashtags whereas the Brazilian Vinegar protests had 29 dedicated hashtags. Second, we proceeded to the elimination of multiple messages by users in the same band, thus controlling for the skewed distribution of hashtags per protest movement. This step

brought down the number of unique users to 1M (1,177,549) prolific postees who tweeted with multiple hashtags across several area bands. This practice was the main empirical indicator of serial transnational activism on which we relied to generate our interview subsample. The latter comprised the 200 most active individuals who tweeted with at least 43 and up to 101 protest hashtags (mean of 53 and median of 56 hashtags across at least 8 and up to 17 area bands) in the interval documented in this article. A more detailed account of the sampling procedures is provided elsewhere (Bastos & Mercea, 2015).

In the following step, prior to contacting the 200 postees to solicit an interview, we contemplated the ethical implications of our sampling technique. Our Twitter data was the product of unobtrusive observation of public communication deemed so because of the absence of a requirement for researchers to register their presence with participants in order to gain access to their posts (Svenningson Elm, 2009:75). To mitigate against potential harm to the observed population resulting from data processing carried out to identify serial activists, all personal user information was excluded from the output of that initial analysis. This phase of data gathering culminated with the attempt to initiate communication with the potential research participants via a predefined Twitter message sent out to our target population. It contained a request for their participation in a research interview and a hyperlink to our research website for further information on the aims of the research.

Within the span of four months, we communicated with 37 of those potential participants of which 21 agreed to be interviewed. An interview protocol (see Bastos & Mercea, 2015) was created for the purpose with standardized open-ended interviews conducted in English, Portuguese and Spanish. Participants' retrospective insights, we expected, would enable us to develop a grounded understanding and propose inductive theoretical propositions in response to our research questions (Miles & Huberman,

1994:147). We relied on clustered summary tables to catalogue our data and sort cases so as to generate “integrative cross-case depictions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994:181-82).

The data was coded typologically (Elman, 2005). The process started with a classification of interview segments revealing the personal circumstances surrounding serial activism; the communication practices of the interview participants (e.g. bearing witness through testimonials, advocacy, citizen journalism, diffusion, translation) and their perceptions thereof. All along, our aim was to discern any potential “typical stories” (Miles & Huberman, 1994:177) of serial activism emerging from first order concepts put forward by the participants. Our intention was to organize such stories around modal circumstances, practices or perceptions linking these to thereby advance possible model(s) for serial activism open to subsequent testing through both case and variable-oriented (i.e. statistical) analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994:173).

Results

Elsewhere we pinpointed the structural location of the interviewees encompassing their geographical coordinates, socio-economic status and the pertinent demographic indicators of age, gender and education (Bastos & Mercea, 2015). In terms of age distribution, there was a sizeable contingent of mature young individuals in their 30s (9 interviewees); an almost equally large cohort of seniors in their 50s and 60s (8 interviewees); the remainder were in between those polar age brackets. Participants were split into two broad educational clusters with a third having secondary degrees and 3 in 5 holding some college or higher education degrees. Yet, more than two thirds viewed themselves as low-earners (n=14) in their respective countries despite having recently been or presently being in high-skilled occupations (n=17). The observation was partly explained by the precariousness interviewees experienced as self-employed IT experts (n=10), as pensioners or due to job insecurity as a direct result of structural readjustments in the economy.

The robust relationship between the two socio-economic variables was plotted in Figure 1 with a modularity clustering algorithm (Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte, & Lefebvre, 2008) separating out distinct communities. Female participants were by-and-large highly-educated (n=9), highly-skilled professionals (10) with significant latitude to plan their time either as self-employed (n=6) or retired (3). Male interviewees were on the whole younger, lower-skilled and less well educated compared to the female counterparts. When older, they were also likely retired. All were self-taught activist communicators acting independently of any organization.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Several participants spoke of seizing an opportunity and making a deliberate choice to channel higher resources of time gained as a result of diminishing work commitments into a fuller investment in activist causes local to them and, equally, into activist communication on Twitter. As such, and despite the observed particularities in individual circumstances, all participants demonstrated a high degree of biographical availability which was broadly attributable to four factors, to wit: economic restructuring, job divestment, singlehood or physical incapacitation (McAdam, 1986). Accordingly, support for multiple protest movements was associated not only with the amount of time at one's disposal (Giugni & Passy, 2001), but also with a range of intervening personal variables encompassing periods of unemployment, the type of professional occupation and income. As Valerie (22 April 2014) recalled:

“...at the moment I'm [a] very low [earner]. It's by choice. At the time the protest in Iran started, I'd just been made redundant from a job where I was making 60k [GBP] a year...I was completely active before the protests in Iran but I wasn't active on social media... But when I had this opportunity where I didn't have to work for a time...I wanted to be doing something interesting and my big thing is to be hands-on with technology... [so] what I got sucked into was Twitter and supporting protest movements”.

At the height of their Twitter activity, interviewees dedicated as much as 5 and up to 12 hours of their time to it, in a single day. At its peak point, that regimen resulted in an outflow of 1,200 tweets a day or around 100 tweets an hour with Twitter activity by-and-large following the pace of events on the ground. Widespread among the research participants was a tenacious commitment to the timely dissemination of protest-related information subsumed to the overarching goal to assist on-the-ground contention by rendering it as widely and accurately known as possible. When asked about the number of tweets he would post in a day, George (2 May 2014) recounted that

“...it depended on what’s going on in a given protest at a given time...with some of the events that were occurring with the Occupy movement I put out so many tweets that my account got locked in what we call *Twitter Jail*. I don’t really know what the user threshold is for that but I did get my account locked a couple of times, primarily when the raids were going on in New York...”

To summarize, the peaks in activity identified by the respondents mapped onto periods of unemployment, voluntary or otherwise, a work hiatus in professional careers or renewed attempts to maintain an active and meaningful life during retirement. This set of findings suggested that the relationship between biographical availability and collective action is an object of modulation by activists with what we have tentatively termed the *engagement compass* of serial activism. We develop the concept throughout this analysis but at this point would remark that respondents reported deemphasizing their job commitments or inserting a new routine into their retirement time in a deliberate attempt to either refocus or renew orientations defining their occupational trajectories.

The practices of serial activism

Reflecting on our first research question (RQ#1), we found that beyond a common impulse to support, publicize and generate accurate reports on a tweeted protest, several

interviewees shared a distinct tweeting strategy the main tenets of which were to carefully choose whom to follow, channeling their attention towards two distinct cohorts, namely on-site activists and news media or individual news workers. Lauren (22 July 2014), a research participant told us: “I have kind of broken down people who I follow by category. And I have some for the Middle-East, I have some for Asia, I have women who I think I really important like [name removed], the journalist... very active, humanitarian people globally”.

If activists on the ground were news sources, the news media were regarded as instrumental to echoing protestors’ grievances beyond their immediate constituencies. Thus, interviewees did not seem to be front-line reporters although several among them were ardent broadcasters with a matching preoccupation to provide on-site technical, logistical or emotional support. In one of her comments, Valerie (22 April 2014), one of the IT experts avowed:

“it’s very, very rewarding for me to be able to use all these different skills that I’ve gathered up over my career and apply them in a way that helps other people... to demonstrate to the people who own the issue that there is solidarity with them”.

To further unravel broadcasting we probed diffusion strategies. The layered interpretation of diffusion on Twitter we had envisaged was verified by all interviewees. Of the three types of diffusion delineated by Tarrow (2005), however, relational diffusion among close contacts associated with a protest often happened within a wider communication ecology (Treré, 2012) central to which were secure, open-source platforms. Thomas pointedly stated,

“...There are 3 aspects... One is people contacting you because they want you to amplify something. They contact you on Facebook or Twitter and ask you to take a look at one hashtag and amplify that. The second aspect is the news. The mainstream media influences what’s happening now. The third aspect is my ability to help people

technically so my role is to provide the right tool and applications for the right people who have those needs” (22 June 2014).

As lynchpins of this three-way diffusion system, interviewees were at pains to vet and maintain stable relationships with those on the frontline of a protest; with news workers who could be counted upon to represent activist accounts most faithfully and finally, with other remotely-located activists who would be able to come to the assistance of on-site protestors (e.g. to keep their internet connection alive, Lauren, 22 July 2014). In return, they adhered to stringent, self-imposed codes of conduct predicated on an ethic of dispassionate information curation. Curation was the fruit of two pragmatic and reinforcing assessments. Firstly, factual accounts were expected to propagate wider than emotional appeals, albeit without restricting the choice of protests afforded attention. The tenor of such factual posts mirrored that of the tweeting mainstream media but not its interpretation of protest-related stories. At the same time, this approach enabled activists — as diffusers — to maintain credibility and status among their following. A research participant observed,

“What I try to do is to go at it with the mind of an analyst. So I see myself as a curator of what’s moving, what’s important and then what’s not important... what’s a blatant emotional call...I don’t blame a lot of that stuff but if I see, kind of an article, that has a missing link or explains a thing that most people haven’t caught on to then I’ll pass those on” (Sam, 2 May 2014).

Secondly, whilst widely critical of the media, interviewees were savvy information handlers. They were able to both counter and enlist news media organizations to publicize contentions the world over. On this topic, another participant remarked:

“...over the years I’ve managed to attract a number of contacts in my network who work for mainstream media... I see part of my role to make their job easy for them. So

I am marketing the event to professional journalists because I expect they might have an interest and they might want to pick up on the story” (Valerie, 22 April 2014).

Grappling with our second question (RQ#2), in bridging multiple language communities, these Twitter communicators were infused with a moral sense of solidarity, of concerns or values held in common with popular struggles for democratic entitlement (Walgrave, Wouters, Van Laer, Verhulst & Ketelaars, 2012). An affective investment observed among interviewees was rooted in an arch desire to condemn injustice — either socio-economic or political (cf. Thorson, Driscoll, Ekdale, Edgerly, Gamber Thompson, Schrock, Swartz, Vraga, & Wells, 2013). This perception translated into two types of twinned posts. On the one hand, there were translations into the language native to the protest. Those posts were designed as an international endorsement of the collective action. In her depiction of language-transcendence practices, one participant recalled:

“I think that’s kind of like my signature now, that I tweet in multiple languages... I had to do a shout out on Twitter to say I want something in some language and see what volunteers came up ... People were able to share that and get more people [involved]... It was very infectious. It was groups like that that became the engine to help stimulate the activity from other groups in other countries” (Valerie, 22 April 2014).

On the other, an important amount of the multiple language content interviewees circulated was made up of retweets. Translations and retweets were two sides to the same affective story. Whilst the former aided cross-lingual diffusion, retweets were propagated to reinforce the salience of the original post within selected hashtag networks. Both were integral to an ability to navigate unfamiliar linguistic contexts which we see as another component of serial activists’ *engagement compass*. Illustratively, one respondent expounded: “I tweet in Dutch and English, which are the languages I’m more comfortable [with], but also read tweets in Spanish and Portuguese. I retweet these messages so people

can be informed about what's going on there". Another participant characterized this type of communication as "a conversation without a conversation. Or a very short conversation".

Elaborating on the idea, he argued that "it's good to receive positive support from other people even if it's just a retweet...I don't like tweets to not get retweets. Everybody gets the same reward, knowing that other people agree with you" (Ben, 6 May 2014).

Indeed, concerted retweeting was a primary cause for the high-volume traffic serial activists were able to generate. However, also in relation to our fourth research question (RQ#4), we should remark that the latter practice was not guided by any willful attempt to facilitate multiple exposure across unrelated protest hashtags. On the contrary, efforts concentrated on raising the profile of a single or a limited and closely-related number of hashtags, for instance by way of generating *Tweet storms*, i.e. "everyone sending tweets on the same issue, with the same hashtag, at the same time with the idea to get trending" (Valerie, 2 April 2014). Serial activists may thus stay with a protest for long periods of time, all the while seeking to maintain consistent attention to it. In that manner, many would build up a record of steadfastness and knowledgeability recommending them as go-to sources for reliable information. Respondents appeared adamant on maintaining a good reputation thereby placing themselves in a structural and symbolic position of credibility insulating them against frame clouding.

Returning to our third question (RQ#3), we sought to unravel respondent perceptions relative to their role and status in the networked communication in which they were so steeply immersed. As documented, a dominant self-assigned capability interview participants nurtured was that of information curation. The task was enacted by means of a three-way approach. It subsumed, first, an ability to pick out key counterparts at the heart of a protest communication stream on Twitter (often aided by third party tracking and content management applications). These were most often contacts reporting events from on-location.

Second, respondents viewed themselves as content brokers whose main priority was to “flip” (George, 2 May 2014) important quantities of information sourced from those counterparts across different areas of the former’s carefully crafted social map. Brokerage here takes on a specific meaning, namely that of “bridge-making” or enabling and directing interaction, at times from the midst of it (Sverrison, 2001:314). Such brokering was also itinerant in so far as it connected actors at the heart of a protest with groups far removed from it (Vasi, 2011:14). In her recollection, Jade (27 June 2014) depicted the bridge-making she had performed:

“I have friends on the ground. First it began at [the] local [level]. I tweeted about what I was doing here. It started when I had a child and I could not go to the protest myself. Then I began to understand that the online forums, especially Twitter, are extremely useful and have an enormous outreach... You learn about hashtags and you learn how to use Twitter effectively and strategically. It has now become a very powerful vehicle because now prominent media personalities follow me...I’m one of the cross-sector persons that provide information on a number of different struggles”.

The result was, thirdly, a shared drive to generate networks germane to the maximization of content diffusion albeit not by virtue of their scope but due to a tested mutual commitment of members to harvest, vet and circulate information. Exposing his approach to networking, one interviewee representing a singular exception among its peers — as concomitantly documenter of on-site activity and curator—expounded:

“...the way I sort of did Twitter was in the early days to build who I was following. If I saw an account that said ‘Occupy city name’ I automatically followed this city account. What they [Occupy camps] knew was going on here, at least through cyber-lines, was through my live streams and from me reaching out on Twitter to keep in contact and find out what was going on in the other Occupations” (Peter, 4 July 2014).

As such practices were honed over time, several interviewees formed an appreciation of the pivotal place they had gained in the hashtagged protest communication networks. This consciousness stimulated self-regulation with the purpose of projecting trustworthiness and dependability as bridge-makers. Such discursive impression management (Goffman, 1990) activists envisioned as an antidote to unnecessary stardom and the most reliable manner of minimizing the risk of coming across as self-promoting celebrities. Describing his Twitter activity, one interviewee said:

“I was born a white male in a privileged country and try to use this involuntarily assigned privilege to amplify the struggles of people elsewhere... when there’s a small protest/movement growing that hasn’t broken through to major media I try to amplify this to the point where it becomes news or can no longer be ignored without these major media looking like they are not doing their jobs” (Roger, 23 June 2014).

An outcome we have discussed previously (Bastos & Mercea, 2015) was that serial activists’ networks were larger in size than those of average users at the time of data collection but were significantly smaller than those of influential and active Twitter users. The double-sided role of serial activists as content and relational brokers should help to extend the understanding of high-functioning networked communication beyond activists’ network location (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2013) or social status (Tufekci, 2013). A notion, however, that the noted sustained information curation catapulted its artisans to a place of prominence amongst her/his fellow network members (Bennett et al., 2014:250) was articulated by some and equally infirmed by other research participants. Consonant accounts referenced fastidious efforts to engender loyalty among one’s following; dissonant ones alluded to conscious attempts to avoid personal conspicuousness.

Finally, sustained participation in collective action is notoriously taxing particularly on the most invested among activists who may choose to remove themselves from the frontlines

of protest out of exhaustion (Doherty, Plows & Wall, 2007) or due to extrinsic organizational or social pressure (Fillieule, 2014). The witnessed intensity and length of service dedicated to the hashtagged communication of protest by the interviewees begot the question of disengagement (RQ #5). The outlay of time made in daily instalments — required to post thousands of tweets — dedicated to the communication of protest in the course of at least three years (2011-13) seemed nothing short of full-fledged activism (Bobel, 2007:153). Extrication from this activist role appeared no less complex than in the case of physical participation. Indeed, within that time period, half of the interviewees had combined tweeting with on-the-ground activism at one or more of the protests they joined.

Testimonies by the interviewees attested to the multi-dimensionality of disengagement from collective action on Twitter along the aforementioned personal, social and organizational lines. The least frequent precipitator of disengagement was organizational. Solely one interview participant cited a rift with his local Occupy Camp attributed to disagreements about his tweeted content which eventually led to his defection. However, in that case, it was trying personal circumstances relating to straitened family and employment circumstances that tipped the decision in favor of an exit. Mental fatigue was an equally prominent catalyst of disengagement. Speaking about her experience of gradually downsizing her involvement, Lauren (6 July 2014) remarked:

“I think the last protest I tweeted about was Gezi Park and basically it was just burnout after spending, I don’t know, 3 ½ years like obsessively tweeting, I just got burnt out...I don’t feel like I’ve done anything that’s wrong”.

Conversely, the successful conclusion of a protest would result in the discontinuation of tweeting activity subsumed to the wider demobilization of a movement (e.g. the Taiwanese Occupy Congress). Indeed, demobilization and the breakdown of links with onsite activists was a more recurrent reason for individual disengagement (for half of the respondents) than a

souring of relations with any particular organization that was party to the protests. In such situations, disengagement was associated with a positive sense of achievement rather than with damage control linked to deteriorating circumstances — personal or organizational. Yet, perhaps most significantly, a claim that with only one exception echoed through the ranks of these prolific activist communicators was that despite ebbs and flows in their activity, they had never completely discontinued their involvement. Such persistence reflected a personal ethos underpinned by a moral duty to support peaceful civic struggle—drawing back whenever a violent escalation would displace it. Peaceful contention they aided to carry over in spirit from one protest to the next through the medium of Twitter. Appositely, one interviewee asserted:

“I never stopped. If anything, the whole Occupy Movement has gone worldwide since it started and has spread among many different countries. I’m not just following hypes. I’m following ideas” (Mary, 11 June 2014).

Conclusions

Transnational serial activism is an embodiment of civic cosmopolitanism delineated by a set of characteristics encompassing personal circumstances and communication practices sustained during long periods of time for the benefit of Twitter hashtagged protests the world over. The transnational character of this activism is not an artefact of border-spanning organizational coordination amply evinced in the last decade — in instances ranging from the Global Justice to the Anti-War Movement. A closer fit with the Occupy Movement (Bennett et al., 2014) due to the primacy of personal interaction and of an entrepreneurial as opposed to an organizational mode of engagement (Flanagin, Stohl & Bimber, 2006), this variety of transnational activism represents a continued personal investment in the complex networked communication of protests both remote and close to home (Conover, Ferrara, Menczer & Flammini, 2013). A potential counterweight to indictments by exponents of *clicktivism*

(Morozov, 2011), such involvement is neither fleeting, nor entirely disconnected from embodied participation. If anything, it may constitute a means of sustaining commitment in the face of diminished physical capacity (see also Bennett, 2005; Saunders et al., 2012).

Serial activists were able to single-handedly and at once contribute to (non)relational and mediated protest diffusion. This they achieved by commanding relatively modest Twitter followings (Bastos & Mercea, 2015) whilst seeking to maximize content diffusion through mutual assurance within one's ego network. Thereby, we posit, serial activists testify to the prominent role of what have otherwise been regarded as unremarkable 'common users' (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2013:958), albeit in transnational activism. Unlike either hidden influentials or influentials per se who differentially stand out for their visibility (2013:958), serial transnational activists appear primarily remarkable not for their relative standing in activist communication networks but for their prodigious cross-national hashtag activity and the purposeful information curation they undertake over extensive periods of time.

Fundamentally, serial activism was an act of relaying collective messages. There were very few traces of personal stories (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Tufekci, 2013) or indeed individual rhetoric coloring it. In the end, a dispassionate application to content curation bore out the activists' *stitching* work as theorized by Bennett et al. (2014). In the process, serial activists honed an aptitude for matching the communication needs of those on the ground with the news values of relevant media outlets (Ryan, 1991) which they put to work from a carefully constructed brokering position.

Seriality seemed coterminous with a biographical availability that has long characterized participation in collective action. Likewise, disengagement from the networked communication of political activism may bear similarities with withdrawal from protest movements. An enduring commitment appears to hinge on favorable personal circumstances and germane (diffusion and language) skills, with serial activists calibrating their

communication in line with horizontal coordinates defining their life-patterns (e.g. family life, employment circumstances) and vertical pressure derived from a perceived urgency integral to democratic morality for timely investment in affinitive protest events. Serial activists negotiate this field of action with what we have designated as their *engagement compass*.

Finally, we should qualify the remit of this proposition and the overall discussion to emphasize that despite reporting on a single activist medium — Twitter — our attention did not concentrate solely on it. The use of other communication modalities was considered in the course of the research interviews but Twitter represented the medium of choice for all interviewees. Nonetheless, Twitter was the platform wherefrom they were recruited for this research. Thus, reflecting on the issue of a single medium bias previously raised in studies of activist communication (Treré, 2012), we would stress that our aim all along has not been to extrapolate our findings to a broader scrutiny of online activism (2012:2362). Instead, we have sought to provide more depth to the treatment of protest communication on Twitter that adds granularity to network-level inferences. We envisage extending this research to probing serial transnational activism by way of a comparative—both case and variable oriented analysis—of practices native to other communication platforms.

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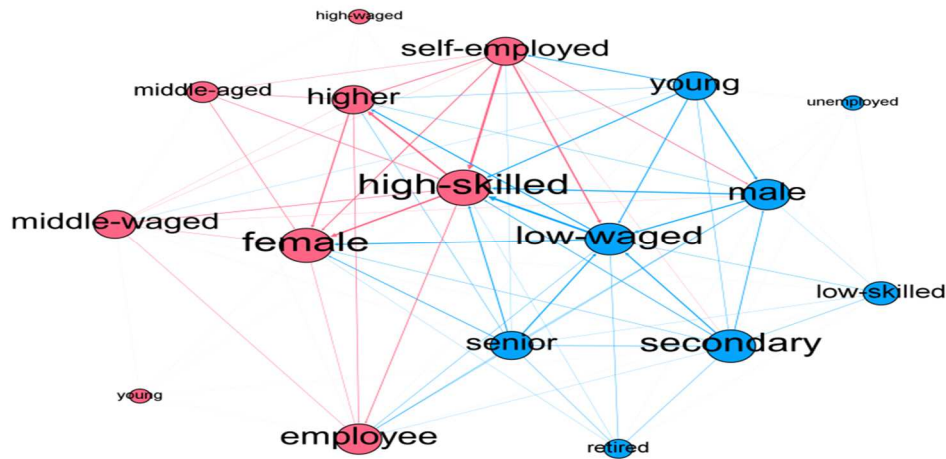


Figure 1: Socio-economic clustering of interview participants ('higher' and 'secondary' refer to higher education and secondary education, respectively)

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