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REPLY

Organization in the crowd – looking ahead

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Our article in this issue theorizes the organization of public, large-scale crowd-enabled networks using a simple model of nested peer production processes. The empirical case used to illustrate and assess this model is Occupy Wall Street from the height of the US protests in the fall of 2011 through the tailing off period in the spring of 2012. Communication platforms and the networks across them carry relatively more of the organizational burden in crowd-enabled protests than they do in more conventional cases. While we identified Twitter as the key stitching mechanism used to coordinate other actors and platforms within the wider protest ecology, we also note that different research questions, different cases, or future technological innovations may point researchers to other coordinating mechanisms. Such differences may entail some adjustments to our conceptual scheme, but we believe that similar kinds of patterned peer production processes will carry over to other instances of crowd-enabled action.

This said, there is much more work to be done. We thank Donatella della Porta, Paolo Gerbaudo, and David Karpf both for generously highlighting the contributions of our work and for raising important questions that need to be addressed in this area of study. Rather than respond to each set of comments in turn, we will focus on what we see as three sets of common questions raised in interestingly different ways by each of the respondents. These questions echo more broadly among scholars interested in collective and connective action, and grappling with developing appropriate theory and methods.

What kind of collective action occurs in crowds?

One of the sticking points for many scholars observing these large, rapidly forming protest formations is that they involve common identification processes and borrow protest repertoires from conventional social movement action. However, they also differ in puzzling ways. In approaching this analytically, it can be tempting to borrow conventional notions of collective identity processes, organizing, and leadership. Even though real-world protests often mix different action types, relying on the classic analytical frames risks missing what is importantly different about connective action and its underlying logic. In this regard, we particularly appreciate Donatella della Porta's careful reading of our work. Della Porta was among the first scholars to recognize that many post-bureaucratic mobilizations (at least since the rise of the global justice movement) have involved inclusive action frames, relatively horizontal organization, and

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'flexible' political identities on the part of participants. We follow these lines of thinking in applying our earlier model of connective action to the current project. From this perspective, the identity of a crowd is not produced just through the peer production mechanisms that we identify here. Clearly the content and protest repertoires that travel over these production networks become important to understanding common identity. Our focus in this paper is on the production mechanisms themselves, and how they enable the more or less solidary crowd to make plans, to get work done, and to persist over time. Taken alone, production mechanisms no doubt seem rather bloodless. However, the larger project beyond this article recognizes elements such as identity, engagement and commitment to common cause.

Gerbaudo rightly highlights the empirical and theoretical questions that arise around new or alternative forms of 'the collective'. We have tried to underscore that the nature of collectives and their symbolic expression of engagement and commitment, solidarity and 'we-ness' may differ significantly from the collective action framing and conventionally ideological overtones of more classic collective action. What Bennett and Segerberg have earlier termed personal action frames (such as 'We Are the 99%') become memes that invite shared but highly personalized expression that stretches more easily across social and cultural divides than typically occurs with classic collective action frames. The collective action framing associated with traditional movement action requires denser networking, socialization, ritual, leadership, and formal organization to establish more demanding forms of collective identities. To be clear, 'collective action' and 'collective identity' in our work are technical terms referring to particular theoretical and empirical manifestations of the sort that Della Porta traces back to Tilly and his ideas about 'cat-nets'.

In other words, connective action does not preclude common identifications or inhibit acting collectively. Rather, it signals the presence of alternate perceptions, motives, and forms of action. It is imperative to explore what these forms are, or risk confusing how mobilizations differ and how mixed forms may arise within the same movement and over time. Importantly, we do not assume that people acting connectively are alienated rational egoists whose only point of connection is technology (as Gerbaudo seems to imply). On the contrary, we seek to emphasize that exploring contemporary forms of collective and connective action requires moving away from starkly dichotomous assumptions about the individual and the collective. There are different ways of constituting a 'we', and these different methods of political practice matter for the formation, capacity, and possibly the meaning of protest. It cannot be assumed that all collective action must have the same mechanisms and roots.

How does crowd organization work?

Fully understanding how crowd-enabled mobilizations work requires that several analytical and methodological approaches be combined and tested empirically. Given the complexity of many approaches and methods, it is tempting to reduce organization in crowds to essentialist elements that may be illuminating for some questions, but, when taken out of broader context, may miss the larger whole. At the other extreme are efforts to inventory everything going on in these vast networks, which is not only impossible, but results in complex descriptive accounts that lack explanatory power about how things work. Neither reductionist nor exhaustive approaches will engender more general models of how the work of crowds gets done, and why it sometimes does not.

Our model recognizes the complexity of a multi-media landscape that encompasses and switches between social and traditional media, organization sites, and face-to-face and mediated action. Tracking the links in Twitter opens up a broad protest ecology that reveals not just the kinds of media in play, but also the physical locations of actions, and the contributions of

individuals and identifiable networks of actors. This said, it can be important to look at action that takes place away from public view (although some of this is documented and left as artefacts in the digital traces). Ethnographic work is a significant way to enrich and contextualize understanding of the kind of work done in the crowd. Focusing on face-to-face interactions or personal orientations towards technology becomes useful for understanding the perceptions of goals, politics, and identity that animate the crowd. The world away from public view can also be essential for understanding particular questions such as when and why specific constellations of activists and organizations adopt some repertoires of communication over others. Particular aspects of the whole (e.g. particular actors or particular events) should not be privileged just because they are conventionally or normatively assumed to be vital. What is important for our present question is how it all plays into the internal workings of the crowd-enabled network.

A key issue is to avoid reducing the whole of a mobilization to isolated parts. In thinking about the organization we are trying to explain, we have been mindful not to do so. Our computational analyses of Twitter reveal the organizational arc of the public protest ecology. The link patterns open up a window on many of the elements of the larger ecology, including how and when these elements are put into play by the owners of various accounts. Rather than offering a descriptive inventory of the sites of protests, our model shows how they are publicly and dynamically connected through the networking, switching and stitching of social and other media sites and resource types. A natural complement is to supplement this with fine-grained accounts of other parts of the ecology such as the back channels and informal meetings that Karpf describes. For the kinds of questions we are focusing on, it will be crucial to theorize what other observations reveal about the organization of the large-scale crowd.

Our claim, then, is not that we have captured everything about the crowd or that our model of crowd organization encompasses everything about a protest. Since our project aims to model the broader organization of connective action, there are particular questions that we cannot answer, and there are approaches and methods better than ours for answering them. A case in point is that Twitter may do different things in different crowds, and as Karpf notes, key moments in the life of protests may be driven by other technologies or by offline activities. As he also highlights, the public crowd-enabled network may fade or transform to such a degree that it is relevant to shift focus to other organizational forms. A mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches can thus help identify a number of points, not least when shifts in crowd capacity occur as Della Porta points to in her forthcoming work with Alice Mattoni. It is important to continue seeking the linkages between our present work and the approaches highlighted by our commentators. These are all valuable levels of inquiry, and the challenge is to integrate the elements into a compelling and fruitful framework.

Why does theorizing the role of technology in different kinds of collective and connective action matter?

There are several ways in which this work and the conversations it has generated here matter. From an academic or theoretical standpoint, as Karpf emphasizes, it is an important starting point to satisfactorily delineate the crowd as a distinct object of analysis. This includes elucidating the organizational roles of technology in crowds. Crowd-enabled protests are not conceptually or empirically identical with conventional movement action, with the action of discrete groups of activists or organizations, or with bureaucratic movement organization. These conceptual distinctions are important. Drawing out what distinguishes one form of action from another will enrich future work.

Perhaps the most important reason for undertaking such theoretical and methodological work is to better understand practical political outcomes. One important bridge that connects us to all

three respondents is recognizing that the distinctive nature and specific mechanisms of crowd-enabled action affect the capacity and sustainability of such protests. The common search for adequate concepts and methods joins us in an exciting and changing field of study. Dialogues like this one are invaluable, and will hone our tools for comparing organizational forms, tracing trajectories of change, and understanding the conditions under which particular forms of mobilization are produced instead of others.

Making progress in these areas matters for understanding how crowds and, more generally, publics, use technology to become a significant presence in contemporary political life. Figuring out how to compare crowd-enabled and hybrid forms of connective action with each other and with more conventional varieties of collective action will help us understand pathways of change chosen by actors faced with different opportunity structures in different social and political contexts. We share these general concerns with all three respondents. Donatella della Porta, Paolo Gerbaudo, and David Karpf are blazing remarkable and noteworthy intellectual trails into this territory. We appreciate their generosity, and look forward to incorporating their reflections into our future work.