The Paradox of (Anti)Social Media: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Conflictual Framing in a Far-Right Social Movement

Thomas Ralph Davidson, Cornell University, Department of Sociology

Whilst social media technologies undoubtably provide an important tool and space for the communication and deliberation of interpretative frames between social movement organisations, members, and potential participants, this study posits that this also problematizes social movement framing efforts. It can be difficult for a social movement to maintain a clear and coherent framing effort when anyone can challenge the movement's frames and deploy their own counter-frames within the same online space. This issue is particularly acute for far-right groups, which attempt to gain popular legitimacy by avoiding framing their politics in overtly racist and violent terms despite the currency of such frames amongst many of their members. This paper engages in a qualitative analysis of comments made on Facebook by members of the English Defence League in order to explore how social media provides an arena for deliberation, and ultimately dissent, problematizing framing efforts as dissident voices undermine SMO framing.

Social media and social movement framing

We must understand contemporary social movements as 'networked social movements', whereby there is no clear distinction between online and offline activism (Castells 2012). Moreover, social media function as both 'tools' and 'spaces' for social movements (Lim 2012): as tools they facilitate new modes of 'bi-directional, interactive and cost-less' communication and organization (Mosca 2007), as spaces they constitute new public spheres for political deliberation and the collective identity formation (Mosca 2007; Della Porta 2013). This paper, however, seeks to explore how these functions can also be detrimental to social movements, specifically, how the interactive and open space provided by social media can not only serve to strengthen social movement organizations (SMOs), but can also foster dissent that can be detrimental to movement goals and outcomes. We shall now turn to the specific problematic of movement framing to better understand this issue.

Framing theory is a way of understanding the 'micro level of social construction processes' that take place between the SMO, activists, and potential participants (Johnston and Noakes 2005). This study operationalizes Snow and Benford's widely used definition of a frame as 'an

interpretative schema that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past experience' (1992: 137). A frame must 'resonate' with potential participants so as to recruit them and mobilize them in collective action sequences (Snow et al. 1986: 477; Snow and Benford 1988); 'potential constituents [must] find its interpretation and expression of grievances compelling' (Johnston and Noakes 2005: 11). Social movements must also achieve 'alignment' between their frames and those of actual and potential participants, forging 'the linkage of individual and SMO interpretative orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology, are congruent and complementary' (Snow et al. 1986: 464). In practice, however, this is difficult to achieve, as frames are challenged by a range of actors including the state, the media, and other movements— hence Tarrow's (1998) characterization of framing as the 'struggle for cultural supremacy'. Social media is used as a tool in these struggles and it is also the space where these struggles occur. Whilst it provides an efficient means for movements to frame their politics, this comes at the price of a loss of control; once a frame is entered into the public sphere it cannot be completely controlled by the actor that produced it, it does not necessarily resonate or align in the way an SMO intends (Williams 2004: 104).

Furthermore, the 'struggle for cultural supremacy' does not just involve competition with external actors, but also internal ones, as participant's produce frames can compete with the SMO's. Participants 'bring values, norms, attitudes, beliefs, and ideological orientations' that play out in negotiations over SMO framing (Johnston 2009: 21). SMO frames are therefore 'shaped, deployed, and reformulated in conversation' amongst participants (Mische 2003: 258). In networked social movements, this conversation occurs within the same space as the SMO framing, to a large extent dissolving any hierarchy between movement and participant framing. This horizontalization can often reinforce and reinvigorate movement framing, but it can also problematize it, as both supporters and opponents can produce frames that challenge and even damage an SMO's framing. This study seeks to explore the extent to which such counter-frames are deployed by movement participants.

Case Study: The English Defence League (EDL)

The EDL frames itself as a non-racist and non-violent group who oppose the purported threat of 'radical Islam' to British society and its values. It is important to note that they attempt to maintain a distinction between opposing all Islam and Muslims and attacking elements of 'radical' Islam that they find particularly abhorrent, however in practice this distinction is unsustainable. Most commentators situate the group within the extreme right of the political spectrum: they have been variously described as an Islamophobic 'far-right social movement' (Copsey 2010), a 'new far right' social movement (Jackson 2011), a 'populist street movement' (Bartlett and Littler 2011), a 'counter-Jihad group' (Goodwin 2013), a 'far-right cultural nationalist movement' (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun 2013), and an anti-Muslim populist group (Busher forthcoming). As with many far-right groups, there is a gulf between their more moderate external image projected by the group and the radical ideas expressed by their members in private (Trilling 2012), the former of which is crucial as these groups must appeal to broader demographics in order to attain any political legitimacy (Kitschelt 1995). Moreover, the veil of anonymity provided by the internet can encourage the expression of more extreme sentiments (Macy and Golder 2014). Consequently, the EDL has struggled to control the way it is framed; there are numerous documented cases of violent incidents involving the group and its members and they have also been associated with other racist groups such as the British National Party and the National Front. Through analyzing the views of the EDL's online membership this study shows that there are indeed strong violent and racist tendencies within the group, which serve to undermine the SMO's framing efforts and foster dissent within the group.

The EDL use a range of online platforms including a website, forum, affiliated blogs, and Twitter, but one website has been particularly important. Copsey (2010: 5) contends that 'the EDL is a child of the Facebook revolution', as the site has been vital to both the rapid organization of a network of supporters and their mobilization on the streets. Furthermore, Bartlett and Littler (2011: 32) argue that insofar as the EDL lacks an official membership list, affiliation with its Facebook page is an effective proxy for membership; it is the 'central communicative and organizational tool' of the group. Jackson (2011: 32-4) argues that their 'online world [is]

constructed from the top down by the EDL leadership and bottom-up by its followers'. Bartlett and Litter (2011: 13) draw attention to the tension between these constructions, and the effect this has on the coherence of the movement's ideology. Through analyzing the framing used by EDL members during a period of heightened activity we can better understand how this tension affects the prospects for successful collective action.

The group was studied following British soldier Lee Rigby's murder on the streets of London at the hands of Islamic extremists. It is a clear incidence of what Jasper (1997: 106) calls a 'moral shock': 'an unexpected event or piece of information [that] raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she is inclined toward political action', regardless of pre-existing social networks. Moreover, Bail (2012: 859) suggests that such negative emotions tend to cause people to gravitate towards 'fringe' groups like the EDL. Following the murder, EDL activists engaged in a flurry of online activity, with thousands joining the EDL's Facebook group: its membership rose from around twenty-two thousand to fifty-thousand within a day; after a couple of days it reached over one-hundred-and-thirty-five thousand. Despite this meteoric rise in membership, a close analysis of the content of members' posting shows a strong rise in dissenting voices during this period, problematizing the EDL's framing efforts and likely contributing to the group's fragmentation and decline towards the end of 2013.

Methodology

The EDL's official Facebook page was closely monitored throughout the study and data was gathered over three week-long periods: one prior to the Woolwich attack, the week of the attack, and a week afterwards. This provides windows into a month of EDL Facebook usage. Comprehensive data was gathered on every post made by the EDL during these periods. A random sample of comments was drawn from a number of these posts. The total sample size is 1210 comments (May 9th-15th n = 391, May 22nd-28th n = 425, June 6th-12th n = 394). This represents just over 1% of the 117,574 comments recorded during the three periods. These comments were then subjected to qualitative content analysis, 'a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1278). It can capture

more nuanced meanings than traditional quantitative content analysis, allowing one 'to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text' (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009). Nvivo 10 was used to assist in the coding process and managing the data.

Limitations

- The manual process of coding is extremely time consuming preventing a large sample from being analyzed. The use of computational methods would facilitate the coding of the entire corpus of data, see Hanna 2013. This would also allow more fine-grained temporal data.

- Demographic and relational data were not capture from individual participants, preventing analysis of particular users' activity or a clear picture of the EDL's online membership.

- Lack of demographic data or network structure prevents determination of the relative influence of particular actors.

- The proprietary nature of Facebook data makes it difficult to gather and often prevents the extraction of more complete data sets (Golder and Macy 2014).

Results and discussion

The murder of Lee Rigby prompted a flurry of activity both online and offline by EDL activists, resulting in a huge increase in online support. The EDL was undoubtedly bolstered by this, but I argue that the rise in counter-frames that contradict the SMO frame was ultimately detrimental to the group. The moral shock provoked outrage amongst many people that was often expressed through attacks on Islam and Muslims that were often racist in nature. This racism can be understood through Modood's (2005) notion of 'cultural racism', whereby it is about Islamic culture in particular, but it sits on a foundation of biological racism, with terms such as 'halfbreeds', 'cross breeds', 'inbreds', 'muzzis', 'dirty pakis', 'muzzrat', 'rag-head dogs', 'poisoning snakes', 'vermin', and 'maggots' being frequently used. Prior to the attack, the group focused much attention on the issue of Muslim 'grooming gangs' and the purported link between Islam and paedophillia, but we can see a drastic shift away from this issue towards Islamic extremism as the group's primary grievance. This suggests that this mode of analysis is suited to capturing fine-grained shifts in sentiment within SMO and participant framing. There was also an increase in calls for capital punishment and even other forms of violence, including attacks on mosques and calls for the formation of vigilante groups, illustrating the violent tendencies of many of the

groups members. Over this time there was an increase in anti-Muslim attacks in the UK, many of which involved EDL members (Copsey et al. 2013), suggesting that this discourse has real implications. Overall this shows that the interactive nature of Facebook prevents the SMO from controlling the expression of racist and violent framing by the group's online members. There were certainly attempts at censorship over the period observed, but the sheer volume of interaction prevents the type of editorial control that occurs on other forms of media.

There was also a massive increase in statements of solidarity with the group and nationalist sentiment, suggesting that the group was indeed bolstered by Rigby's murder and the SMO's reaction, however there was also a large increase in the EDL's opponents using the Facebook group to attack the group and its message. Many of these opponents explicitly evoked the racist and violent frames above in their arguments against the EDL. These frames were subsequently countered by other EDL members who put across their frames to contend their opponents' assertions.

Prior to the attack, most participants were using frames that more or less conformed to the SMO's line, but following the attack we see an increase in deliberation as more extreme members voiced their views, new members joined to express their support and solidarity, and others attempted to counter the extreme voices as they faced attacks from external opponents, all within the same online space. This highlights the problematic of framing within the interactive space of social media, as SMOs lose control over their framing and are vulnerable to attacks from both internal and external opponents. This is particularly acute for the EDL as it has attempted to toe a fine line between peacefully opposing 'radical' Islam and slipping into violent xenophobic anti-Muslim racism.

Conclusion

This inability to control counter-frames had real implications for the group, as these minority voices were often used by the media and the EDL's opponents to characterize the group. Tommy Robinson, the group's leader, resigned towards the end of 2013, stating that "I acknowledge the dangers of far-right extremism and the ongoing need to counter Islamist ideology not with violence but with better, democratic ideas" (Quilliam 2013). Since then the EDL's activity both online and offline has declined; they have not attracted many new followers and have not engaged in any meaningful street demonstrations. The group has not disappeared completely and still

maintains its website and Facebook page, yet it no longer has the public attention it once had that is so crucial for social movements. This is not to say that the problem of far-right extremism in the UK has gone away. The more moderate UKIP has triumphed in the European elections and the far-right Britain First movement has filled the void left by the EDL, they currently have over three-hundred-and-sixty thousand 'likes' on Facebook, far surpassing the EDL's support.

Interestingly, UKIP faced much media scrutiny due to the racist views expressed on social media by their members during their campaign, illustrating how the problematic of control over social media effects not just social movements but also more mainstream political parties.

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