Contrasting Protest from Mundanity in Communication Networks: Cohesion, Centralization, and the Russian Opposition Movement

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Though the intersection of social movement theory and network analysis has advanced many subjects on social mobilization--including research on interorganizational relationships, diffusion, and recruitment--this research area offers few systematic descriptions of protest sites. Expanding upon McPhail's (2006, 2008) ethnographic work on interaction among protest participants, the study at hand seeks to characterize communication networks at protest sites.

By analyzing communication networks, this study tests the extent to which leadership and solidarity exist at protests. Social movement literature has offered competing descriptions on the nature of leadership. On the one hand, social mobilization requires a set of individuals to assume a disproportionate burden of the initial collective action costs (Oliver, Marwell, and Teixeira 1985) and such individuals may increase the prospects for successful social movement mobilization (Lind and Stepan-Norris 2011) as well as its associated outcomes (Ganz 2009). On the other hand, movements may disagree with the concept of leadership (Polletta 2005), undemocratic regimes characteristically repress movement leaders (Marx 1979; Nepstad and Bob 2006), and previous studies have found an association between the rise of centralized leadership and a decline of direct action tactics (Piven and Cloward 1977) as well as movement exclusivity (Taylor 1989:768-9). This study treats the presence of leadership as a conceptual cognate to centralization in communication networks (Freeman 1977, Shaw 1964). In the context of movement communication networks, betweenness centralization addresses the ability for leaders to bridge audiences, closeness centralization captures the speed at which leaders can disseminate a movement's message, and eigenvector centralization captures the presence of cadres.

The subject of movement solidarity likewise faces two conflicting descriptions. While movements typically display some degree of unity (Tilly 2004:53) and depend upon a shared collective identity that delimits boundaries (Diani and Bison 2004; Diani and Pilati 2011), other scholars have highlighted factionalization (Tarrow 1994), described protests as "patchworked" gatherings, characterized unified movements as rare phenomena (Soule and King 2008:1568), and portrayed movement solidarity as a process that both accumulates and declines (Fantasia 1989). Here, this study relates a protest's "shared sense of 'one-ness' or 'we-ness'" (Snow 2001:2213), to two cognates within social network theory. First, if protests have a high degree of solidarity, then their communication structure should display a high degree of transitivity, as closed triads characterize network stability

and reduce the power of individuality within groups (Krackhardt 1999). A second aspect of solidarity would suggest that protest participants can communicate either directly or indirectly with a great many other protest participants. While this form of communication is not necessarily unified, each participant's message would be accessible to all others. In social network terms, a component represents a subgroup in which each actor in the group has such a communication path to each other actor in the group. Protests with greater solidarity should be characterized as having few components in their communication network.

To offer a systematic characterization of leadership and solidarity in protest communication networks, I contrast a venue's communication network during a protest to that of a mundane period at the same venue exactly one week later. This contrast identifies the characteristics that distinguish protest from everyday communication. The actors in the communication networks are Twitter accounts that produced geospatial enabled updates during the specified times and locations. From these Twitter accounts, I produce a communication network based upon which user at the designated site follows the updates generated by another user at the site. I apply this procedure to seven Russian opposition protests and seven null events held in Moscow between June 2012 and January of 2013. Using communication behavior, rather than self-reports, maintains accuracy (Bernard, Killworth, and Sailer 1982) and Twitter's follower network constitutes both a real and and "imagined" community (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2008) both valid appropriate for research on social movements. To characterize the communication networks at protest sites, for each measurement of leadership and solidarity I subtract the measurement of the mundane networks from that of the protest networks. Using a conditional uniform random graph test (Butts 2008), I compare these differences to comparable differences produced by random graphs that account for the size as well as the indegree, outdegree, and dyad distributions in the observed networks. Lastly, I conduct meta-analyses to summarize the effects across the seven time points. Findings from this study bear implications for future research on the subjects of social movement theory, urban sociology, and network society.

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