

7-1-2013

# Social Movements On The Internet: Together Alone Or Alone Together?

Juan D. Borrero

*University of Huelva, Huelva, Spain, jdiego@uhu.es*

Antonio Díaz Andrade

*Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, antonio.diaz@aut.ac.nz*

Cathy Urquhart

*Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom, c.urquhart@mmu.ac.uk*

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## Recommended Citation

Borrero, Juan D.; Díaz Andrade, Antonio; and Urquhart, Cathy, "Social Movements On The Internet: Together Alone Or Alone Together?" (2013). *ECIS 2013 Research in Progress*. Paper 15.

[http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2013\\_rip/15](http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2013_rip/15)

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## **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ON THE INTERNET: TOGETHER ALONE OR ALONE TOGETHER?**

Juan D. Borrero, Department of Management and Marketing, University of Huelva, Huelva, Spain, [jdiego@uhu.es](mailto:jdiego@uhu.es)

Antonio Díaz Andrade, Business Information Systems, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, [antonio.diaz@aut.ac.nz](mailto:antonio.diaz@aut.ac.nz)

Cathy Urquhart, Marketing, Operations and Digital Business, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, Manchester, UK, [c.urquhart@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:c.urquhart@mmu.ac.uk)

### Abstract

*Sherry Turkle in her groundbreaking book 'Alone Together' suggests that the Internet gives an illusion of togetherness while contributing to isolation. How might this play out in social movements on the Internet? Can social media bring people together? This research in progress explores the role of social media as a way to facilitate collective political action. It discusses the preliminary findings of a grounded theory analysis of the postings to a Spanish online social movement between July and September 2012. Informed by a sociomaterial perspective, by which the social and the technical interact symmetrically, our analysis shows that there are heterogeneous groups cohabiting in the online environment, and using information technology as a platform to make their voices heard. The challenge for them remains in gaining space in the political decision-making process that takes place offline. They may indeed have achieved being 'together alone', but there is still difficulty in accessing power structures that would enable them to achieve social change.*

*Keywords: Online social movements, Collective action, Sociomateriality, Grounded theory, Identity project.*

## 1 Introduction

This paper represents an initial exploration into how social movements might use social media to facilitate collective action, focusing on a Spanish anti-austerity campaign on Facebook. The growing popularity of social media platforms is transforming the ways in which people not only communicate but also demonstrate (cf. Castells, 2012). While the impact of general Internet use on political efficacy is still contested, many scholars are optimistic about the ability of the Internet to increase both online and conventional forms of political participation (Cho et al., 2009; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009) and civic engagement (Xenos and Moy, 2007). We take a more cautious stance. Our analysis seeks to uncover the patterns of online activism and how it might trigger certain mechanisms for collective action, and asks the question: *How is social media used by civil society to facilitate collective action?*

In particular, Social Networking Sites (SNS) - online services that make possible the individual members to share text, images and photos as well as to link other members of the website with similar interests (Kwon and Wen, 2010) - have infiltrated people’s daily life with amazing rapidity to become an important social platform for computer-mediated communication (Correa, Hinsley and de Zúñiga, 2010). Recently, popular SNS such as Facebook have become important resources for the mobilisation of collective action and creation and organisation of social movements around the world, both inside and outside the virtual environment (cf. Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero, 2012; Kavada, 2012). SNS have also been used as platforms to encourage political engagement. However, whether SNS of themselves lead to higher rates of political activity and decision-making processes still remains an open question, especially as it can be argued that SNS’s also foster disengagement and individualism. Our study attempts to examine how collective action might be fostered in a SNS environment.

## 2 A Preliminary Framework: Social Networking Sites for Collective Action

Understanding the social dynamics of practices and use of SNS associated with collective action requires scrutinising both technological and social elements. The use of SNS for collective action can be analysed through an examination of three main elements: social influence, social capital and technology. These three elements capture the interaction between technical and social conditions (Avgerou, Ciborra and Land, 2004). Figure 1 represents our preliminary theoretical framework to accommodate our perspectives on online activism. We emphasise that we use this preliminary framework as a “sensitising device” (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 79); it could be modified in light of the findings of our subsequent inductive analysis.

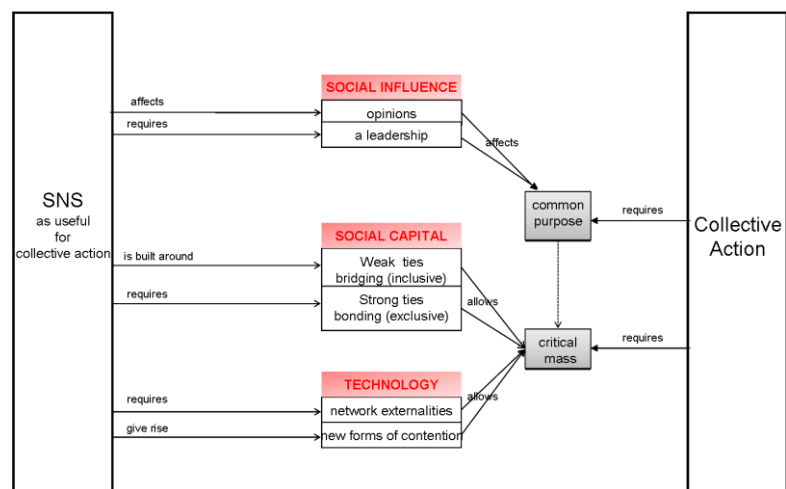


Figure 1. Preliminary theoretical framework.

The outcome of what we call the social influence element is represented by collective action. Collective action theory (Coase, 1937) explains when and how a number of people will act together with a common purpose. It specifies the conditions under which rational individuals join efforts for collective action (Olson, 1965). Leadership to show the way to others becomes of critical importance in developing and establishing social movements (Barker, Johnson and Lavalette, 2001). The opportunity to exchange opinions for mobilising people around a common purpose is equally important. Extant literature suggests that social media completely transforms the key tenets of collective action (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2005). Social media streamlines the process of mobilisation because likeminded people can connect more easily (Pickard, 2008). Thus, an issue considered fundamental to understanding the emergence of Internet social protests is the response capacity to social change (cf. Earl and Kimpton, 2011). For instance, mass protests in Egypt and Iran, where the Internet played a crucial role indicate a shift in the balance of power amongst traditional actors (Castells, 2012).

The technological element helps to build the electronic repertoire for social movements and continues to evolve (Castells, 2012; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). The Internet is extending and complementing the collective action repertoire of social movements pursuing social and political change. Two main ideas can be identified in the literature on the use of Internet technology in social movements. The first one is that social media facilitates and supports traditional – i.e., offline – collective action in terms of demonstrations, transnationalisation and donations. It also creates new modes of collective action such as online petition, alternative media sites, micro-contributions, hacktivism, protest websites and alternative media. The second one is that social media has network externality properties: their usefulness and value increase as the network of users expands (Chen and Lou, 2002) creating the necessary critical mass. And critical mass is requisite for collective mobilisation (Marwell and Oliver, 1993).

Social capital is the third element in our preliminary theoretical framework. Previous research has identified elements of social capital in online social movements (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela, 2011). Communities with “bridging” social capital – characterised by weak ties across groups – as well as with “bonding” social capital – characterised by strong ties within groups – have a higher ability to organise and mobilise effectively for collective action. The high density of the social network of these communities provides the platform for the exercise of reciprocity rules and trust (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). In this sense, SNS also has the ability to accelerate and geographically extend the diffusion of social movement opinions and discussions (Kavada, 2012), joining people with the same purpose (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2005).

### **3 Methodology**

In order to understand the social dynamic of practices and use associated with the features and affordances of information technology (cf. Leonardi, 2011; Zammuto et al., 2007), this study is informed by the principles of actor-network theory (Latour, 1986), which considers both technological and social components in a symmetric relationship. The collection and analysis of data follow an interpretive approach (cf. Walsham, 1995). This approach is deemed appropriate for revealing hidden patterns of the complex reality of the use of information technology by a loose group of people to express their views in a particular political, economic and social context.

#### **3.1 Data collection and case description**

The unit of analysis of this study is *¡Democracia Real YA!* (DRY), which can be loosely translated into Authentic Democracy Now! – see (<http://www.democraciarealya.es/>). DRY is an online citizen’s grassroots movement that started in March 2011 in Spain. Their members identify themselves as the “unemployed, poorly remunerated, freelancers, vulnerable workers and youth”. Their slogan reads: “We owe nothing, we pay nothing”. At the core of DRY’s demand is a change to currently predominant neo-liberal economic policies. DRY members use the Internet as a technological platform

to facilitate global actions to change the situation they consider is affecting their lives. Data was collected from the messages posted on DRY's Facebook site between the 17<sup>th</sup> of July and the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, in the period between the general strikes of May 22, and November 14. The web pages containing the posts within this period were saved in html format on a daily basis. Although SNS make possible the collection of dataset in diverse formats (e.g., audio and images), the data gathering effort was focused on digital text data only. Sampling was designed toward theory construction (Charmaz, 2006). Comments posted on DRY's page were considered as the fundamental texts to be collected for subsequent analysis. Depending on the relevance of their content, hyperlinks to other texts outside the Facebook environment were also collected and analysed.

### 3.2 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted according to the tenets of grounded theory: "the discovery of theory from data" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 1). The ultimate objective of this study is to produce substantive theory that explains how social media facilitates collective action. As we explained earlier, the preliminary framework helped sensitise us to the research problem (Klein and Myers, 1999). Ultimately we plan to engage our emergent theory with our initial theoretical framework. We took care not to impose conceptual labels on the data from the theoretical framework, avoiding preconceived theoretical avenues (Glaser, 1992). Through an iterative process, using constant comparison of data we discovered emergent categories (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992).

## 4 Preliminary findings

The massive economic crisis in Spain surfaced many divisions in Spanish society and provoked the eruption of social movements. The posts on DRY's site reflect those divisions. People are characterised in one of two ways: bankers, politicians, speculators and rich people on one side, and ordinary people who perceive they have been left behind and are unfairly carrying the burden of the severe austerity measures imposed by the government. Postings reveal dissatisfaction with the political class (e.g., "unapologetic politicians", "people have been cheated", "politicians lost sense of reality" and "phoney politicians"). Moreover, some of them go beyond a tone of complaint and make strident calls to abandon the monarchy in favour of a republican system. This high level description of DRY postings sets the stage for the salient categories that emerge from the grounded theory analysis: *voice*, *multiple agendas*, *call for action and identity*.

### 4.1 Voice

Evidence indicates that DRY members use the technological platform to gain visibility in a realm that transcends the purely online environment. Their intention is to be heard and seen beyond the online community. They are making the most of the connectivity and mobility attributes of now ubiquitous technology (cf. Castells et al., 2007) in order to be heard by those outside the community. Technology has an amplifier effect that allows DRY members to go beyond the immediate surroundings in their effort to communicate their message. However, they still face the challenge of competing against mainstream media. Table 1 shows the construction of the category *voice*.

Focused codes (2)	Initial codes (20)
Struggling for visibility	support from overseas; viral action; slogans for supporting actions; call for supporting DRY; unclear goals for outsiders; "call for people who can attract leaders"; "traditional media are not here"; recognition from old people, fire-fighters and policemen; "traditional media do not give us voice"; "foreign media reports our activities"; "overseas people are better informed of what is going on in Spain than Spanish people"; "TV soothing people's attention from the things that matter"; "German, French and Dutch media are not telling the truth"
Platform for expression	emotional expressions; mobilisation as an obsolete action; alternative ways of protest; gaining exposure in traditional media; general call to everybody; call for change;

	people's voice has already being heard
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Table 1. Inductive construction of the category *Voice*.

## 4.2 Multiple agendas

DRY is not a homogeneous group of like-minded people. There is a multiplicity of voices and views representing different groups of Spanish civil society. This heterogeneous composition engenders a feeling of frustration in terms of what DRY is actually achieving. Some members try to reduce the effect of what is perceived as the negative effect of competing views within the group by making calls to organise the movement around unifying ideas. Table 2 shows the construction of the category *multiple agendas*.

Focused codes (3)	Initial codes (30)
Particular agendas	selfish behaviour; against internal divisions; “not addressing the core issues”; “lack of strategic vision”; lack of shared goals; dominant factions that restrict internal freedom of speech; calls for unity; calls for order; call for organisation; unity
Heterogeneous composition	internal disagreements; negative comments among the protesters; grudges between employees and independent entrepreneurs; inappropriate internal behaviour; calls for avoiding symbols, flags; “call for responsible action”; message of unity; call for a constructive discussion; “calls for a rational discourse”
Perceived lack of progress	“these protests go nowhere”; ephemeral results from the social movements; mobilisation with no results; “too much noise but nothing happens”; “losing momentum”; demoralising effect of limited success; “we complain but do nothing”; “nothing will change”; pessimism; “hopeless actions”

Table 2. Inductive construction of the category *Multiple agendas*.

## 4.3 Call for action

DRY members have gained a certain presence in the digital world. However, they consider their online presence to have no consequences in changing the status quo. The challenge for them remains on how to translate the somewhat chaotic participation of a slew of people with mixed interests on the digital space into coherent, tangible action. While the technological platform allows them to express their voice, they are not participating of the decision-making process. In this sense, there are calls for having a ‘real’ presence in the ‘real world’. This presence can be manifested as demonstrations – cf. Rheingold’s (2002) “smart mobs” – or by trying to reduce the distance between the online protest and the decision-making centres – cf. Mansell (2006). Table 3 shows the construction of the category *call for action*.

Focused codes (3)	Initial codes (30)
Calls for mobilisation	call for offline action; awareness of the consequences of civil mobilisation; call for violent actions; call for more frequent mobilisations; futility of “peaceful mobilisations”; old-fashioned mobilisations (e.g., strikes); call for general strike; comparing mobilisations; historical justification for mobilisations; social revolt; massive mobilisation; how and where to mobilise people; alternative ways to protest; need for a new party; need for realising goals; “not everybody pulls their own weight”; only a small group of those affected participate; little responsibility; conformism; ridiculously small number of protesters; no commitment
Platform for transformation	transition from a social protest to a political organisation; “words of support for those who seek the truth”; “greetings from a [social] fighter”
Reinvigorating civil society	“people’s redemption is in people’s hands”; society trusts individuals; “power should be in people’s hands”; “civil society is not part of the decision-making process”; call for a change in the political system; protest vs. vote

Table 3. Inductive construction of the category *Call for action*.

#### 4.4 Identity

Something that DRY members have in common is that they all do not belong to the political decision-making centres. Their common identity is found in their dissatisfaction with the status quo; they all are longing for a different life (Castells, 2004). They feel they have been marginalised. Social media offers them not only a voice but also a means to build group identity to redefine their position in society. DRY members perceive they have been excluded and claim representativeness of those who have been excluded. In this sense, it is not the individual but the collective actor who creates the social movement (Touraine, 2000). Table 4 shows the construction of the category *identity*.

Focused codes (4)	Initial codes (14)
Disenfranchised	rescue people not banks; “priority should be on rescuing households”; sense of powerless; lack of diffusion of people’s struggles
Clampdown	web 2.0 technology facilitates censorship; threats to the freedom of speech; missing posts; calls for demonstration on the internet regarded as illegal
Sacrifice	“sacrifice for the cause”; words of support; unaffected ones supporting affected ones
Representativeness	“we represent Latin American people”; pride of being part of the movement; representing people’s feelings

Table 4. Inductive construction of the category Identity.

### 5 What the data is telling us so far

At this stage, we observe that DRY members’ expressions in their postings resonate well with Touraine’s (2000) interpretation of cultural diversity in a globalised world. The emergent categories reveal three overlapping reasons for using SNS to organise a social movement: 1) to defend against what is perceived as the threat of neo-liberal policies, 2) to enhance the decision-making capability of the protesters in the political system, and 3) to claim the right of being the genuine representatives of people’s interests. Even though DRY members do not represent a homogeneous, cohesive group with an easily identifiable common purpose, a large group of people dissatisfied with dominant system cohabit in the online environment and struggle to make their voice heard in the offline world. The evidence suggests that technology has somewhat increased the opportunity of enrolling more supporters that otherwise could not have been able to join the group. Whether or not they have reached a critical mass that prompts the social and political changes they are fighting for is still open to debate. What they do know that the number of “likes” they get on Facebook cannot be equated to gaining space in the political decision-making process.

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