Emerald Insight

Online Information Review

Are we all here for the same purpose? Social media and individualized collective action

Natalie Pang Debbie Pei Chin Goh

Article information:

To cite this document:
Natalie Pang Debbie Pei Chin Goh , (2016),"Are we all here for the same purpose? Social media and individualized collective action", Online Information Review, Vol. 40 Iss 4 pp. 544 - 559
Permanent link to this document:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/OIR-10-2015-0337

Downloaded on: 15 November 2016, At: 22:59 (PT)
References: this document contains references to 39 other documents.
To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 189 times since 2016*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2016),"Does social media matter for post typology? Impact of post content on Facebook and Instagram metrics", Online Information Review, Vol. 40 Iss 4 pp. 458-471 http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/OIR-06-2015-0176

(2016),"To what extent does the Leiden manifesto also apply to altmetrics? A discussion of the manifesto against the background of research into altmetrics", Online Information Review, Vol. 40 Iss 4 pp. 529-543 http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/OIR-09-2015-0314

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at:
www.emeraldinsight.com/1468-4527.htm

Are we all here for the same purpose? Social media and individualized collective action

Natalie Pang and Debbie Pei Chin Goh
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Received 30 October 2015
Revised 1 March 2016
Accepted 15 March 2016

Abstract

Purpose – Building on studies examining the role of social media in contemporary forms of collective action and social movements, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the link between prior informational use of social media and individualized collective action.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, 220 participants were surveyed in real-time during a protest against overpopulation in Singapore.

Findings – Social media use was significant in disseminating information about the protest, and reflecting perceived personal relevance for specific issues. The authors found mixed motivations for attending the protest, significantly shaped by social proximity to organizers and personal relevance.

Originality/value – The authors address research gaps in the link between social media use and individualized collective action, and real-time data collection during a protest. It is often difficult to study this link, given that social media may not be always the only platform used prior to a protest by participants. The case discussed here provides a unique opportunity for this to be addressed: the protest was not publicized by local mainstream media prior to the event and social media was the only place for both activists and the public to find and disseminate information about the protest. In other words, how participants used social media had a direct and meaningful impact on their participation in the protest.

Keywords Social media, Information behaviour, Individualized collective action, Informational use, Political participation, Protest motivation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

From Occupy Wall Street to Arab Spring, much has been discussed about the role of social media in the exchange of information, persuasion, mobilization, and distribution of otherwise disconnected resources. Not just an information platform, scholars such as Juris (2012) have argued for its influence on the nature of interactions between institutions, governments, and people. Supporting this reasoning is Castells' (2001) description of "networked social movement," where networks of social activists are more prominent, and social movements are characterized by globally connected computer networks. Consistent with Castells' claims, Bennett (2012) suggested that individuals are using social media for "individualized collective action," and such individual usage influences collective action. Unlike traditional collective action which relies very much on having a shared goal and centralized coordination (Olson, 1965), Bennett (2012) argued that individuals now use social media for connective action, which is based on individualized self-expression in the context of loose online social networks. In other words, contemporary collective action can be motivated by individual goals and motivations, beyond simply having a shared goal.

In the case of Singapore, the widely held perception that there is generally a low level of civic engagement is now challenged. The idea that such "slacktivism" is only

Online Information Review
Vol. 40 No. 4, 2016
pp. 544-559
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
1468-4527
DOI 10.1108/OIR-10-2015-0337

useful in making participants feel good about themselves (Morozov, 2009), and may not culminate into true action is challenged with the rise of social movements such as the Pink Dot (Mark, 2012), a social movement which began in 2009 in support of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in Singapore. This was perhaps the first large-scale social movement organized since the relaxation of rules for demonstrations at Hong Lim Park[1] in 2008. Since Pink Dot, there have been ongoing protests and social movements at Hong Lim Park, although somewhat sporadic both in terms of attendance as well as discourse on the internet about each event. In 2013, however, Hong Lim Park saw its first massive protest.

In response to the burgeoning population in Singapore especially in the last decade or so, the state drafted a population white paper with the intention to provide mid to long term strategies to address population growth, projected to be 6.9 million by 2030, 50 percent of which would be made up of foreigners. The Population White Paper, released in January 2013, was a paper written to slow down population growth from its current rate at 29 percent in the last decade (World Bank, 2012) to 15 percent. Responses to the Population White Paper, however, may have taken policy makers by surprise. The issue of overpopulation, framed in the form of the Population White Paper, triggered strong responses among residents as well as politicians, which played out within the parliament and on social media.

Using social media, internet users started call for action. Gilbert Goh, a prominent blogger and activist, organized the first protest against the Population White Paper on February 16, 2013 at Hong Lim Park, just three days after it was passed via majority vote in parliament. Despite the relatively short notice and bad weather, thousands[2] turned up in support of the movement. On March 13, 2013, Gilbert Goh announced the second protest on the Facebook page of his activist group, Transitioning.org. Most of the main alternative media sites and bloggers promoted the event. On local mainstream media, a "blackout" was observed given the absence of reporting about the movement. Social media became the main platform for disseminating and seeking information about the protest. On May 1, 2013, Hong Lim Park was filled with attendees holding placards, signing petitions, speakers, and people with stools and benches ready to listen to what others had to say on the issue. This study is based on our survey of participants who attended this second protest.

The study of social movements in the context of Asia is a significant one, given that much of the work done so far on the topic has been based in western contexts. This could also be due to the fact that societies such as Singapore has experienced long term political and social stability since its independence in 1965, making social movements a rarity.

The active protests and participation in the past five years may now be reflecting a turning point both in Singapore's fabric of civic, political engagement as well as the role of social media in individualized collective action. Although the study is based in the context of Singapore, the case reflects similar shifts and transformations of civic engagement observed in more authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, such as the Tahrir Square protests and Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, and in societies where mainstream media is highly regulated. In terms of political systems, however, Singapore is more comparable to Hong Kong: they are both defined as "partly free" by Freedom House (2014). Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China and has a tradition of free press and citizen engagement, but do not have political franchise. Singapore is an electoral democracy in which the dominance of the ruling People's Actions Party has limited the competition from opposition political parties and where the freedom of expression and assembly are significantly restricted.

In our paper, we argue that the case reflects a shift in the way citizens use social media to seek information. There have been studies exploring informational use of social media in changing and transforming political change and civic engagement, but there is a lack of research based on real-time participation. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) sought to address the gap with their survey of protesters in Tahrir Square; and our study is similar to their project as it is also based on real-time participation.

Literature review

Social movements are defined by Tarrow (1994) as "collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities" (pp. 3-4). Collective action on the other hand, loosely refers to actions made to improve conditions of a common group (Wright *et al.*, 1990) or to resist changes imposed on them (Olson, 1965). Olson's (1965) collective action theory is based on assumptions that successful collective action usually occurs in small and cohesive group, where there is collective belief in the cause and motivation for the action. Collective action can be routine; they are still following norms and rules (whether formal or informal) for any form of actions, or non-routine, where norms and rules cease to operate and collective action can become violent, contentious, or pose challenges to legal institutions, as described by the traditional breakdown theory (Tilly, 1978). The terms collective action and social movements are used interchangeably, not because of the lack of clarity around them, but because of their close associations. Collective action may begin as sporadic discussions, petitions, and rallies, but over time they may become social movements around a cause shared by interested members. In other words, social movements have an enduring nature, one that is usually sustained by active participants and willing organizers.

Social media and individualized collective action

In recent years, scholars have been examining the role of social media in shaping social movements.

By analyzing a large volume of tweets, YouTube content, and blog posts collected during the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, Howard *et al.* (2011) found a myriad of political conversations happening on social media which shaped the public debate, preceded offline mass protests, and brought about a cascade of messages about democratic ideas across the region. They concluded that social media played a central role in the social movement (Howard *et al.*, 2011). This finding is further supported by Hussain and Howard's (2013) fuzzy set analysis of the factors predicting social movement and collective action success across 20 countries involved in Arab Spring. Results showed that high rates of digital media diffusion coupled with low censorship sophistication of the regime predicted how successful the movement was at achieving the immediate goals of regime change (Hussain and Howard, 2013). Based on a review of empirical findings, Tufekci and Freelon (2013) asserted that social media is critical to social movements because they are "now integral components of the formation of the global public sphere" (p. 843).

Scholars who support this view argue that: (a) social media functions as a platform to enable effective dissemination of related information, as well as cascades of information (Gonzalez-Bailon and Wang, 2013) – leading to the shaping of public opinion (Howard *et al.*, 2011) and informal learning and knowledge about the social movement in question (Gleason, 2013); (b) building on Castells' (2001) notion of "networked social movements," social media is argued to provide the critical mass needed for effective collective action by leveraging on loosely connected social networks (in the process, making connections between previously disconnected networks) (Lim, 2012); (c) with (b), social media is argued to nurture imaginations about the community, connectedness, and co-presence (Juris, 2012), developing collective identities and goals; (d) grievances are amplified on social media (Howard and Parks, 2012; Hussain and Howard, 2013; Lim, 2012); (e) social media is significant in diverting or attracting public attention, an important resource for collective action (Tufekci, 2013) and mobilization (González-Bailón *et al.*, 2011; Harlow, 2012; Juris, 2012). Along with commanding public attention, social media is argued to be instrumental in broadcasting social movements to international networks – thus "[globalizing] the reach and appeal of the domestic movement for democratic change" (Lim, 2012, p. 244).

Since early 2000s scholars have begun examining the evolution and reconceptualization of traditional collective action theory given that the diversity of groups on the internet, the lack of central coordinating agency, and the number of participants who can participate can challenge traditional collective action theory. For example, the proposition that cohesive groups are more likely to achieve successful collective action can be contrasted with contemporary evidence of highly successful, yet large and loosely coordinated networks such as Wikipedia, Indymedia and many kickstarter projects or campaigns. The idea of free-riding as undermining or threatening collective action may also be contradicted with evidence of mass participation in online petitions, discussion forums, and virtual communities, where "useful contributions emerge from an interactive process rather than the explicit pursuit of a goal" (Bimber *et al.*, 2005, p. 371).

Bennett (2011, 2012) explained the phenomenon by grounding it against the social backdrop of modernity and increased individualization in many societies, where even public issues such as climate change are personalized via individual narratives and frames. The ease of participation and ego-centric social networks mediated by social media makes it possible to an individual to move back and forth between the private and public, essentially blurring the boundaries between individual expression and collective action. Collective action in other words, is individualized collective action in this contemporary media environment, which can be reflected through individual expressions and motivational frames.

Many studies on collective action and social movements in recent years, however, are not conducted in socio-cultural contexts of dominant political regimes or highly regulated mainstream media. In addition, the main effect of social media could also be undermined by cultures that are already characterized by moderate or high levels of civic and political engagement and political efficacy. These factors, along with the argument that individuals can participate in collective action via individualized motivational and action frames contribute to the proposition that there can be more than one motivation for collective action, i.e. those who participate are not always necessarily there in pursuit of the collective purpose which has been explicitly stated. This contributes to one of the research questions we outline below.

Informational use of social media

Much has been written about the way interactions have changed between producers and receivers of information as a result of the participatory nature of social media. Broadcasters and newspapers, that are accustomed to disseminating information in one direction, are now finding themselves competing for attention, and challenged with keeping up with audience engagement. Yet there is little work and discussion on how social media functions as an information environment other than the use of it to seek information. Traditionally, the discipline of information seeking behavior was developed in the context of users seeking information in libraries, the main information environment for users at that time. Theoretical models of information seeking were developed based on fieldwork done in these information environments. Users then saw the development of mainstream media in the early 1900s – newspapers, broadcasters, and the like. Users found themselves enriched with new sources of information, and studies were usually developed using the approach of objectified contexts of information seeking, instead of interpretive contexts (Talja *et al.*, 1999). However, people were still seeking information, and although recent studies took into account-specific attributes of different media platforms, the assumptions were still the same, namely: that users actively seek information in order to fulfill an information need, actions are defined as steps taken to seek information, and although there are occasionally linked to certain outcomes such as decision making, this is not regarded as part of the information seeking.

These assumptions need to be reconsidered in the context of social media. Qualman (2011) argued that for social media users, information comes to them at such speed that most of the time they may be encountering information rather than actively seeking information. This does not mean that their information needs are diminished; however, it can mean that their information seeking behavior may be deferred because of the expectation that social media will fill the gap of knowledge before having to actively seek for information to fulfill the information need. One possible consequence over time is that users may unconsciously lose critical abilities to consider attributes of information sources that would help them evaluate the quality of information. Since there is greater dependency on their personal social networks for feeds of information, it can mean that the types of information one is being exposed to is insular and homogenous (Granovetter, 1983), possibly leading to greater polarized opinions and regression in epistemic beliefs:

RQ1. What are the informational patterns of social media usage among participants?

We argue that information seeking on social media is increasingly tied to actions and outcomes that users eventually gravitate themselves to in individualized collective action. For example, the intention to support a particular social cause can shape how one looks for information, that is, the selection of sources and the types of information selected as trustworthy or significant. In the context of a rally it could mean that users who wish to support particular outcomes may attend the rally to also seek information. But if they participate in a rally with the sole purpose of seeking information, then it could be due to one or more of the following reasons: there is the perception that information about the rally or issue is inadequate, there could be distrust in the media, and/or those interested in the subject attend the rally to make first-hand observations and gather information for themselves (Cantwell, 1998). The other implication is that there may be mixed motivations for participation, and more research needs to be done to address the possibility that not all participants are there for the same purpose, as well as how different motivations may be associated with each other.

Regarding mobilization, Juris (2012), based on participatory observation of #Occupy Boston, argued that social media contribute to masses of individuals converging and aggregating in offline activities at particular physical locations, which he termed "logic of aggregation." It can be supported by the empirical finding that large volume of conversation pertaining to the movement in social media often preceded major offline action (Howard *et al.*, 2011). Such social media mobilization occurs through disseminating content of symbolically powerful moments in the preparation phase of a social movement framing the online comments to call for offline actions, and through social media-mediated social networks disseminating calls for action efficiently (González-Bailón *et al.*, 2011).

In models of information seeking, salience is regarded as part of personal relevance, one of the antecedents for motivating someone to seek information. Salience is about people realizing that there is a problem with missing information, and then recognizing that the information they are missing is important (Johnson, 1997). The other concept that makes up personal relevance is beliefs, which is operationalized in the study as beliefs toward issues. Beliefs shape motivations: for example, the extent to which an individual believe that there is a problem will determine his motivations to do something about it (Case *et al.*, 2005, p. 358). The concept of personal relevance is used as a key concept in our study, consisting of questions examining what participants believe about issues and their perceived salience of the issues. For instance, if they believe that foreign talent restrictions are important, they are also more likely to perceive that the issue is problematic and likely to impact them.

Personal relevance can be used to explain motivations for collective action. In Spring 2006, USA protests against changes in immigration policies, largely viewed as discriminatory toward the Latino population, Barreto *et al.* (2009) found conclusive evidence that religion and unified identify across Latinos of all national origin groups contributed to the mobilization of protestors. There was widespread ethnic solidarity and uniform perception of the external threat posed by the proposed legislation that mobilized multiple constituencies toward a common goal:

RQ2. How is social media reflecting perceived personal relevance of participants? What is the role of personal relevance in the protest?

Few studies have directly addressed the role of social media and information seeking in leading to action. One possible reason could be the methodological approaches used – many of them utilized computational data including social media content and link structures. Although such approaches have the benefit of observing behavioral data, they are confined to the "observable" and are limited in the study of the links between what is observed online and actual motivations and actions "offline." The question of social media use, including how individuals sought information on the movement and whether or not it leads to action or other motivations is still under-investigation. But there are some exceptions. For example, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) examined the effect of using Facebook, Twitter and blogs as both information sources and communication channels on the decision of participating in protest during Egyptian uprising in 2011 through an infield survey with Tahrir Square protesters. Findings indicate that seeking protest-related information on social media is positively associated with the likelihood of participation, whereas using traditional media for information seeking is associated with a low likelihood of attending. However, when it comes to general information seeking on social media, its contribution to protest participation seems to diminish. Using survey data of demonstrations in Chile, Valenzuela (2013) studied the relationship between social media on citizens' participation and found that information seeking on social media was not found to be associated with participation, neither directly nor mediating the relationship between overall social media use and participation. These findings seem contradictory, but could possibly be explained by differences in the variables constructed for information seeking, and differences between seeking protest-related information using social media vs using the platform as a general source of information.

These studies also assume that the motivation for participation is homogeneous, i.e. participants attend a demonstration with the common goal of pursuing action. As Cantwell (1998) theorized, especially in situations where information seekers need to reconcile dissonances in the information they have acquired, they may turn to gathering first-hand observations for themselves. One way they might do this is by attending a rally.

Our study aims to study the influence of using social media to seek protest-related information as well as using it as a general source of information. As such, interaction effects may also exist between personal relevance and using social media to gather information about the protest before the event. Additionally, because there could be a mix of motivations stemming from informational use and individualized motivations, we are also interested in capture whether or not there may be differences in motivations on a real-time basis:

RQ3. Were there different motivations for participating in the protest?

RQ4. What are the factors contributing to different motivations?

Methodology

Sampling

Because the protest was organized as a two-hour event, there was a limited window to gather respondents for our survey. Quota sampling based on gender, age and race was adopted based on national census distribution. The resulting sample of 220 interviews is therefore one that is representative of the national population in Singapore. The response rate is estimated to be at 65 percent.

Questionnaire and measures

The paper questionnaire, with questions originally developed in English and accompanying translations in Chinese, consisted of 26 questions and took around 15-20 minutes to complete. It comprised of questions in the following areas: demographics (citizenship, highest completed education, dwelling type, gender, age and race), protest motivation (open-ended), perceived purpose of the protest, media use patterns (protest-related and in general), social proximity to protest organizers, past-related protest attendance, and personal relevance of issues relating to three different mobilization messages by which the protest was promoted on social media.

We developed six questions through the three messages (two questions for each message) to measure the concept of personal relevance comprising of sub-concepts of belief and salience. Two researchers coded each of the three messages to identify questions to explicate the concept of personal relevance, and then came together to discuss their coding. Participants were shown each message again during the survey, before responding to questions about it. Personal relevance was collectively measured by these six statements (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.693$) on a four-point scale (see Table I).

Table I.
Issues framed by mobilization messages and measuring personal relevance

Message 1: problem-focussed Problem of overpopulation	How much do you agree or disagree with the message here that "Singapore is overpopulated and this must be stopped"? (Belief) How concerned are you about overpopulation in Singapore? (Salience)
Message 2: solution-focussed Restrictions on foreign talent as a solution and how likely it is to impact participants directly	How important are foreign talent restrictions to you? (Belief, salience) To what extent do you think the issue of foreigners is likely to impact you and your family? (Salience)
Message 3: motivational Focussed on participating in the protest as a way to "make your voice heard, for a better Singapore"	How much do you agree or disagree with the message that participating in today's protest can make Singapore better? (Belief) In your opinion, how important is it for people's voices to be heard? (Salience)

Data collection

Ten interviewers were deployed. Interviews began at 3 p.m., when crowds started trickling in to the protest site. Only native Singaporeans were recruited as interviewers, given the need for native knowledge about the protest and understanding responses. Only experienced interviewers and those who were familiar with pen and paper interviewing (PAPI) were recruited. As we expected participants to come from different age groups, there was a mix of interviewers aged between 22 and 50 years old. At the start of the study the use of computer-assisted interviewing using iPads was also considered given its advantages in cost savings and real-time updates on the sample quota and data collection, but after much consideration PAPI was chosen as the mode of data collection as there was a substantial difference in the digital literacy levels of the interviewers, which we suspect can create confounding results due to the fieldwork process itself.

All interviewers were trained and piloted the survey instrument a week before the protest. The park was first studied for their main entry points, and from the exercise, ten zones were identified with one likely main entry point for participants. Each interviewer was stationed near the entry point, and with the quota of gender, age, and race as a guide, approached participants as they entered the area. Halfway through the fieldwork, interviewers gathered to check on their quota and rotated to other zones to ensure representativeness in the way the area was covered by different interviewers.

Findings

RQ1: What are the informational patterns of social media usage among participants?

Facebook (31.8 percent), blogs (26.4 percent), and word of mouth (21.4 percent) were the top sources by which respondents acquired information about the protest. Because the protest was largely promoted using social media, it was unsurprising that social media (blogs, Facebook, Twitter) accounted for 61.1 percent in terms of how participants found out about the protest. Word of mouth accounted for 21.4 percent for how participants heard about the protest. Figure 1 illustrates the results.

Of those who knew about the protest through word of mouth, 35 percent knew someone who was organizing or promoting the protest so it was likely that they were mobilized and activated because of the presence of these organizers in their social networks. But the fact that the remaining 65 percent heard it from others who were not

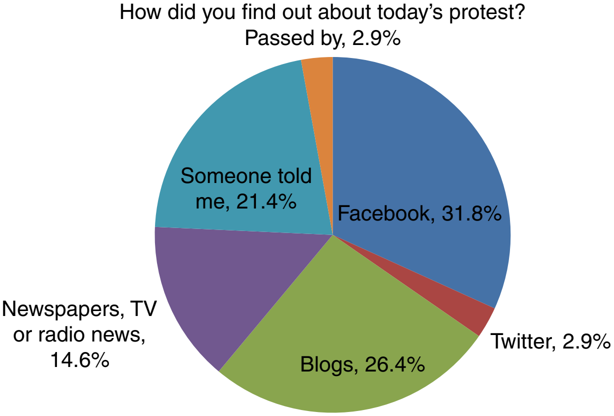

Figure 1. Sources of information about the protest

part of the organizers and promoters of the protest proved Gerbaudo's (2012) argument that contemporary forms of social movements may in fact be leaderless and largely characterized by horizontal communication made possible by communication technologies such as mobile phones or face to face interactions.

Participants used social media as a source of information about the protest. This usage was also significant in influencing their dissemination of the protest using social media. In total, 80.9 percent of those who used Facebook, 87.5 percent of those who used Twitter and 77 percent of those who used blogs eventually shared information about the protest with others using social media. When compared to those who used mainstream media and word of mouth to find out about the protest, only 63.4 percent of those who used mainstream media and 58.3 percent of those who got to know about the protest via word of mouth shared information about the protest with others. A one-way ANOVA test was run to test for significance, and results show that social media usage was significant in determining whether or not participants shared information about the protest ($F(1,218) = 26.309$, $p = 0.00$). This implies that the use of social media to seek information is significant in sharing information.

RQ2: How is social media reflecting perceived personal relevance of participants? What is the role of personal relevance in the protest?

Among issues related to the protest, "making one's voice heard" came up as the most salient, with 100 percent of respondents saying that it is either very important or somewhat important. All participants fully agreed with each other that it was important to make their voices heard, explaining their participation in the protest (see Table II).

Table II. What were the most salient issues in the social movement?

	Message 1: problem-focussed (%)	Message 2: solution-focussed (%)	Message 3: motivational (%)
Very important/concerned	82.7	59.5	95
Somewhat important/concerned	14.1	28.2	5
Not too important/concerned	2.7	8.6	0
Not at all important/concerned	0.5	3.6	0

Correlation tests were also run for those who saw each message vs their perceived personal relevance. For the first two messages on overpopulation and foreign talent restrictions, correlations are not significant. However, for the last message, correlation is significant ($r(220) = 0.203$, $p < 0.05$), implying that social media is reflecting the sentiments of the respondents, i.e. the personal relevance of the issue. In this context, social media was not only useful in disseminating information for the protest, but also augmenting and reflecting how participants felt about the issue. This, however, may be message-specific, given that correlations were not significant for the other two messages.

RQ3. Were there different motivations for participating in the protest?

Responses to the open-ended question "Why did you come to this protest?" were captured verbatim and three participants did not give a response. Both authors coded the verbatim using two rounds of coding: first with open coding, then selective coding. Where responses may reflect more than one motivation, the first response was captured as the dominant motivation. However, responses were still read in full for their context and the meanings that participants were trying to convey. The initial coding generated an inter-coder reliability of 0.86 (Cohen's κ). The differences were reconciled and with the second round of coding, four primary motivations emerged: action, information seeking, bandwagon, and others (Table III). Given the low percentage of responses falling in the "Others" category, they were dropped from subsequent analysis.

The presence of different motivations confirms Bennett's (2011) proposition that contemporary collective action is characterized by a mix of individualized and collective frames, but also relates to information seeking behavior, where participants attend the protest with the intention to seek information and learn more about the protest and/or the issue of overpopulation.

RQ4: What are the factors contributing to different motivations?

The dependent variable, motivation, was recoded to differentiate information seeking from action (1 for action, 0 for information seeking). Bandwagon was dropped from this

Coded motivation	Description	% of sample
Action	A clear intention to support change or the protest itself. The level of engagement is intense compared to other motivations, as responses reflect a common desire for change or resistance out of expressions of dissatisfaction	49.3
Information seeking	Attending to seek more information, to validate information they have read, watched or heard before the protest. Here there is no clear intention to support, but rather, participants are trying to find out more, before deciding whether and how to engage	33.2
Bandwagon	Participate because of friends or family being there, or because they passed by and got drawn in because it looks "happening." Curiosity, if it does not reflect a support intention or finding out more about the issue or protest, is also coded as bandwagon	14.7
Others	Mostly opportunistic, such as hunting for interesting pictures, and to pursue business opportunities	2.8

Table III.
Individualized motivations for participation

analysis as the nature of this is quite different from information seeking and action, and the elaboration of this result would require more space beyond what is permissible for this manuscript. A simple logistic regression was used to study whether or not demographic factors (age, education, and dwelling type as a proxy for household income), social proximity to protest organizers, past-related protest attendance, information sharing, and personal relevance (computed as an index) has significant effects on protest motivation (information seeking vs action). Results are summarized in Table IV. Age, education, dwelling type, past protest attendance, and sharing information about the protest online were not significant predictors.

The overall model is significant ($x^2(7, 173) = 36.02$, $p = 0.00$). The model explained 25 percent (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance between information seeking and action motivations, and correctly classified 71 percent of the cases (48 percent for information seeking and 87 percent for action). Those with greater levels of perceived social proximity to protest organizers and promoters were 1.49 times more likely to engage in action than information seeking. The Wald value demonstrated that social proximity made a significant prediction of action ($p = 0.011$). These results show that social proximity to organizers or promoters of the protest matters in differentiating between participation in the protest as a means of seeking information, or for action. It may also imply that organizers and promoters of the protest are likely to be advocates and mobilizers of those in their social networks toward action.

Those with greater levels of personal relevance were 0.17 times more likely to engage in information seeking than action, and this is significant ($p = 0.002$). Although the odds ratio is relatively small, it should be understood that these values are derived relative to all the other factors entered in the model. The significant result do reinforce existing information seeking behavior literature, where it is argued that individuals seek information because they are driven by an information need (Wilson, 1981). In this context, the need is reflected by personal relevance about issues raised in the protest, leading to attending the protest as a way of seeking more information.

Discussion

Recent studies focussing on the role of social media in mediating, facilitating, or enabling social movements and collective action have shown the usefulness of the platform to disseminate information, mobilize people for action, and encourage political or civic participation. Our findings show that while many are mobilized, there are

Table IV. Results of logistic regression for information seeking vs action motivation

Variable	Regression coefficient (±SE)	Wald	p	Odds ratio
Constant	1.11 ± 1.60	0.48	0.487	3.04
Age	0.02 ± 0.15	0.02	0.898	1.02
Education	0.26 ± 0.14	3.56	0.059	1.30
Social proximity	0.41 ± 0.16	6.46	0.011	1.49
Protest attendance	-0.06 ± 0.40	0.02	0.888	0.946
Information sharing	-0.53 ± 0.39	1.85	0.174	0.59
Personal relevance	-1.76 ± 0.56	9.89	0.002	0.17
Model χ^2	36.02, $p = 0.00$			
Pseudo R^2	0.25			
n	173			

Note: The dependent variable (purpose of protest) in this analysis is coded as 0 – information seeking and 1 – action mixed motivations and participants may not always be after the same goals or intentions. We found evidence of other motivations for participating in a rally, in part agreeing with the literature about collective action being more individualized and personal (Bennett, 2011, 2012; Bimber *et al.*, 2005). At the same time, there is also evidence of information seeking when attending a rally. This raises further questions for research since much information about the protest and the issues of overpopulation are available online. Did participants distrust the information they came across and needed verification in person? Did they attend the protest to get other kinds of information, such as what others thought about the issue? When do online information seeking reach a threshold which crosses over to the "offline" (a protest in this case)?

Information seeking is differentiated from action in our study, as the latter is distinct in its intention to pursue change and mobilize others. Information seeking is informational in nature: responses do not make explicit statements about being there to support the cause. It may be that the behavior of information seeking can eventually lead to action (or the lack of), but such a causal relationship is not possible to discover from cross-sectional data. However, it is our plan to investigate this in future research.

Bandwagoning which emerged from the data may be understood using Bimber *et al.* (2005) insights. As people use technologies such as social media enabling them to move back and forth between private and public domains, boundaries between these domains are increasingly weakened. As Bimber *et al.* (2005, p. 384), noted, "many factors in addition to how people use technology shape the nature of private-public boundaries at any one time." In this case, because the protest has been created and promoted online prior to the event, the ease of participating online may have been manifested in real life via bandwagoning. Online, it is easy to like, to share and leave a comment – but those who do so may not necessarily be advocates of the cause. This online behavior spills over to the "offline protest." It is the socio-technical, the intertwining of elements from both the social context of contemporary collective action and social media.

Do people always have greater autonomy, if they feel compelled to respond to people in their social networks who are seeking to mobilize them for collective action? Our study finds that social proximity to organizers or promoters of a protest contributes significantly to predicting action over information seeking. Unlike times when social media did not exist, once individuals are part of the social media network, they cannot easily "switch off' with new norms that are being constructed in the social media space.

Social media can mean greater access to information and thus provide opportunities and enough knowledge for individuals to participate, as shown in our study. In the context of the case explored here, where information about an emergent collective action may be filtered out, social media becomes a critical platform for creating and disseminating information about a protest. Even for those who did not use social media, they were able to acquire information about the protest via word of mouth, reflecting the horizontal and leaderless characteristics of contemporary social movements. This can also mean that as individuals, organizations and interest groups mature in their use of social media, societies can see more collective action and social movements emerging. Individuals have many choices: they can choose to participate to support the intended causes; in the process, construct individual and collective identities for themselves (both online and offline), participate with other intentions such as seeking information, and such intentions can also shape their usage of social media.

Yet such possibilities bring to mind a certain problem associated with the abundance of representations produced by social media users, as highlighted by Simmel (1896, cited in Henning, 2006). In the attempt to make sense of diversity, the individual may then choose to develop "insensitivity to the differences between things" (Henning, 2006, p. 41) and reduce multiple content to the same or some level of unity to the extent that underlying interactions, contrasts, and meanings are forgotten. In other words, individuals can develop cynicism and indifference toward fundamental purposes and problems behind a myriad of collective action and social movements, and develop insensitivity even to the information they receive on social media.

Given the relatively peaceful nature of the protest and the fact that the issues raised by the messages used to frame the social movement are of a non-disruptive nature, the social movement in this case may be regarded as one that is routine, like most forms of collective action today. The prominence of different messages may have to do with how they were produced, disseminated and received. The issues highlighted in the first and third message in Table I were both disseminated on Facebook, whereas the second message was created as a blog post. Here, distinctions between them have to be made by highlighting the structural features of each platform. As van Djick (2013) argued, the "Like" button, a central feature of Facebook pages, connects users with each other, turns "personal data […] into public connections" (p. 49). The way this feature is designed and presented calls the user's attention to it, and this is more so for Facebook pages, where the only way to stay posted of updates on the page is to like it. And once clicked, it connects everyone in the user's network and sends information cues about the popularity and importance of the message. As argued by Diani (2011), the more someone is embedded in a particular social network, the greater the influence on deciding whether or not to participate in collective action. The network effect activated by Facebook can perhaps account for why issues presented by messages circulated on Facebook were the most dominant.

The diverse motivations found here should also be understood in the context of the routine, non-disruptive nature of the collective action in our study. Although close to half of participants were of the same mind as organizers to support action, the rest are not – some are there to seek further information, and the rest because of bandwagon behavior or others. Non-routine, disruptive types of collective action, such as the "Sunflower Movement" in Taiwan at the moment would be expected to have more homogenous intentions, although factors such as personal relevance and social proximity may still be significant.

The concept of personal relevance is significant in driving information seeking, as shown in our findings. It is different from the disruptions theorized as one of the antecedents of non-routine collective in breakdown theory, as personal relevance reflect beliefs and perceived salience about the issues, not necessarily leading to disruptions in social norms or economic deprivations.

Conclusion

In this paper we examine the informational patterns of social media use in shaping motivations to attend a protest, and identified personal relevance and social proximity to organizers/promoters to be significant in shaping information seeking and action motivations to attend a protest. Attendance at the protest, as well as interactions with others when at the protest can in turn shape personal beliefs, perceived self-efficacy and what participants believe they can do with media, but such questions can only be answered via a longitudinal study design, which forms a main part of our immediate work.

There are some limitations. The concept of personal relevance was explicated in our study as beliefs about issues raised in the context of population as well as the perceived salience of these issues. Given the significance of this factor, more work needs to be done to improve the overall reliability of the concept, given its Cronbach's α of 0.693 in our study.

Other future work includes the testing of the model in different variations of collective action and social movements over time, in diverse social contexts and media contexts, such as India where there are fewer regulations of the media or Indonesia where there are many citizen-led movements.

Notes

1. Hong Lim Park is the holding area of the Speakers' Corner in Singapore, the only area in Singapore gazetted for free speech and demonstrations without the need to apply for licenses under the Public Entertainments Act since September 1, 2000.
2. The actual number attending the protest is impossible to verify, given conflicting reports given by AFP, *The Straits Times*, and social media.

References

Barreto, M.A., Manzano, S., Ramirez, R. and Rim, K. (2009), "Mobilization, participation and Solidaridad: Latino participation in the 2006 immigration protest rallies", *Urban Affairs Review*, Vol. 44 No. 5, pp. 736-764.

Bennett, L. (2011), "Digital media and the personalization of collective action", *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 14 No. 6, pp. 770-799.

Bennett, L. (2012), "The personalization of politics: political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 644 No. 1, pp. 20-39.

Bimber, B., Flanagin, A.J. and Stohl, C. (2005), "Reconceptualizing collective action in the contemporary media environment", *Communication Theory*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 365-388.

Cantwell, J. (1998), "Resolving conflicting information", *Journal of Logic, Language and Information*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 191-220.

Case, D., Andrews, J.E., Johnson, J.D. and Allard, S.L. (2005), "Avoiding versus seeking: the relationship of information seeking to avoidance, blunting, coping, dissonance, and related concepts", *Journal of Medical Library Association*, Vol. 93 No. 3, pp. 353-362.

Castells, M. (2001), *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Diani, M. (2011), "Social movements and collective action", in Scott, J. and Carrington, P.J. (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 223-235.

Gerbaudo, P. (2012), *Tweets and The Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Pluto Press, London.

Gleason, B. (2013), "#Occupy wall street: exploring informal learning about a social movement on Twitter", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 57 No. 7, pp. 966-982.

Gonzalez-Bailon, S. and Wang, N. (2013), "The bridges and brokers of global campaigns in the context of social media", available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2268165 (accessed November 30, 2015).

González-Bailón, S., Borge-Holthoefer, J., Rivero, A. and Moreno, Y. (2011), "The dynamics of protest recruitment through an online network", *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 1 No. 197, pp. 1-7.

Granovetter, M. (1983), "The strength of weak ties: a network theory revisited", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 201-233.

Harlow, S. (2012), "Social media and social movements: Facebook and an online Guatemalan justice movement that moved offline", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 225-243.

Henning, M. (2006), *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory*, Open University Press, Berkshire.

Howard, P. and Parks, M.R. (2012), "Social media and political change: capacity, constraint, and consequence", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62 No. 2, pp. 359-362.

Howard, P., Duffy, N., Freelon, D., Hussain, M., Mari, W. and Mazaid, M. (2011), "Opening closed regimes: what was the role of social media during the Arab Spring?", PIPTI, Seattle.

Hussain, M.M. and Howard, P.N. (2013), "What best explains successful protest cascades? ICTs and the fuzzy causes of the Arab Spring", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 48-66.

Johnson, J.D. (1997), *Cancer-Related Information Seeking*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ.

Juris, J.S. (2012), "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation", *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 259-279.

Lim, M. (2012), "Clicks, cabs, and coffee houses: social media and oppositional movements in Egypt, 2004-2011", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62 No. 2, pp. 231-248.

Mark, G. (2012), "On, online, off, offline", *The New Paper*, April 18, available at: www.asiaone.com/print/News/Latest%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120416-340131.html (accessed November 1, 2013).

Morozov, E. (2009), "The brave new world of slacktivism", *Foreign Policy*, May 19, available at: http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism (accessed October 1, 2013).

Olson, M. (1965), *The Logic of Collective Action Theory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Qualman, E. (2011), *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way we Live and do Business*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ.

Talja, S., Keso, H. and Pietilainen, T. (1999), "The production of 'context' in information seeking research: a metatheoretical view", *Information Processing and Management*, Vol. 35 No. 6, pp. 751-763.

Tarrow, S. (1994), *Power in Movements: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Tilly, C. (1978), *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.

Tufekci, Z. (2013), "'Not this one': social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 57 No. 7, pp. 848-870.

Tufekci, Z. and Freelon, D. (2013), "Introduction to the special issue on new media and social unrest", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 57 No. 7, pp. 843-847.

Tufekci, Z. and Wilson, C. (2012), "Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: observations from Tahrir Square", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62 No. 2, pp. 363-379.

Valenzuela, S. (2013), "Unpacking the use of social media for protest behavior: the roles of information, opinion expression, and activism", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 57 No. 7, pp. 920-942.

Van Djick, J. (2013), *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Wilson, T.D. (1981), "On user studies and information needs", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 3-15.

World Bank (2012), "World DataBank: World Development Indicators", available at: http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx (accessed October 28, 2013).

Wright, S.C., Taylor, D.M. and Moghaddam, F.M. (1990), "Responding to membership in a disadvantaged group: from acceptance to collective protest", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 58 No. 6, pp. 994-1003.

Further reading

Tilly, C. (2004), *Social Movements, 1768-2004*, Paradigm, London.

Useem, B. (1998), "Breakdown theories of collective action", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 215-238.

Weick, K. (1979), *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd ed., Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.

About the authors

Natalie Pang is an Assistant Professor in the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University. Her teaching and research interest is in the area of social informatics, focussing on basic and applied research of social media, information behavior in contexts of uncertainty and crises, and structurational models of technology. Natalie Pang is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: nlspang@ntu.edu.sg

Debbie Pei Chin Goh is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Journalism and Publishing at the Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information. Her research focusses on digital inequalities, media framing, and the processes that influence how marginalized communities engage with new media technologies.

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: **permissions@emeraldinsight.com**