

## **Collective Mass Behaviour and Spontaneous Protests**

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**Abstract:** This article aims at achieving a theoretical incursion into the specialized concepts underlying spontaneous protests and collective mass behaviour. The article proposes an interdisciplinary approach of the specialized concepts, operating from an abstract perspective and assuming its general feature. The general objective is to provide the prospect of concrete cases that help to understand how social networks can be used in public protests, thus contributing to the existing studies in the field. As a prerequisite, the article starts from the idea that social networks can change course or help organize spontaneous protests in a state. Mobilizing the crowd into protests is done using several techniques and tactics of influence that we have identified as social media indicators of the phenomenon. Starting from the findings of some authors, the objectives proposed in this study are: to determine the basic concepts with which to work in the study of collective mass behaviour; which are the indicators by which the effectiveness of social networks can be analysed as a mobilizing tool.

**Keywords:** social media; protest dynamics; mobilizing messages

### **Some Theoretical Arguments**

Social regulations are effective when people feel the need to comply with social norms. By fear of disapproval, social sanctions or other consequences, people will self-regulate their behavior. While social pressure operates in almost any type of social interaction, its impact on crowd behavior takes a completely different form. The social and moral norms in a set are quite different than the average values of individuals, they are fundamentally affected by the anonymity opportunity and the phenomenon of dissociation. At the same time, maintaining the pressure to comply with the crowd increases dramatically. As the power of the crowd is strong enough, noncompliance subordinates the individual to major risks.

A lot changes a person's mental state, being perceived as an authority. People will complete their tasks, otherwise unthinkable, simply because of social pressure and

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the fear of a punishment from an authority. As people avoid social embarrassment, they are quite likely to behave according to the social norms set by the crowd.

People need to be able to respect or understand socially acceptable behaviors. In the crowd, individual feelings are not relevant, they do not matter in the sense of group as a substitute for the individual. It is obvious that those who act against the crowd will be punished and so they act together with the crowd against social norms.

The crowd encompasses both social determination and social change, which calls for an approach to the full complexity of human sociality and the inherent relationship between man and society by reconceptualizing the social context, identity and intentionality as interactive and developed over time. The crowds are always regarded as “something odd, pathological, monstrous, with awe and fascination” (Reicher, nd, p. 2), they are difficult to define because they “are dependent on the situation and time of the approached group” (Wijermans, 2011, p. 11), and most definitions have developed around the concept of assembly. Thus, the tactical options of police force must be directed towards non-confrontation through communication and interpersonal interaction in order to be able to assess the risks, correct targeting of their resources, development of liaison channels and collaboration. Although the crowds tend to be deliberate and relatively organized, they are often formed to change the social system, and “the rules governing the behavior of its members are designed to counteract the wider social system rules that are seen as inappropriate” (Bourgeois & Harton).

The protests of recent years highlight “the most important challenge - the paradox of persistent participation, activism despite pessimism over the objectives of the action” (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010, p. 7). Research shows that participation generates positive socio-psychological transformation and participation in the protest strengthens identification and incites collective empowerment” (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010). It can be anticipated that protests carried out without positive results can turn these behaviors into policies. Collective protests are designed in a social and political context, and repelled in such a context. The Government's intentions of pardoning and amending the Criminal Code, decriminalization of abuse of service, Ordinance 13, anti-corruption, the fiscal revolution created the context of a season 2017-2018 active from the perspective of street protests in Romania. Known as Tineriada and #Rezist, they are the generator of the socio-psychological transformations that young people have identified with.

Social networking platforms have exponentially multiplied the possibilities for retrieving and disseminating political information, thus providing Internet users with a variety of additional access points at the political level. The strategic role of these instruments as actors consists predominantly of such actions conducted on non-institutional themes, in that part of the policy outside the field of conventional political participation has been complemented by the decentralized and informal additional procedures that the Internet provides for mobilization.

Internet and social media “have not changed the fact that popular mobilization is made, rather they have changed the landscape, allowing individuals to participate in a different set of rules” (Lopes, 2014, p. 11) Such interactions between social media and various aspects of political and economic life have created a multiplier effect that stimulates the creation and formation of social protests. Thus, social media acts more like a variable than a causal one because people are much more connected, they have the opportunity to communicate their views at low costs to the speed and scale of group coordination.

As Samuel Huntington states, when state institutions can not keep up with changes in a society, people will strive to replace current institutions with those that can meet today's social and political demands. However, social media remains a significant predictor from the statistical perspective of protest actions.

With regard to situations in which members of a culture feel threatened by certain unpredictable situations, the protest is the way in which these inconveniences are reported every time. As presented in a study in 2017, Romania recorded a high level of people's acceptance and application of certain uncertainties and unpredictable situations compared to other countries such as Sweden, China, Germany etc. (Pirju, 2017, p. 83).

### **Socialization Networks and Crowd Behavior**

Starting from the initial findings, the role of social networks and digitized networks in general can affect the behavior of the masses and the way in which spontaneous protests take place.

Nowadays, the internet has the role of facilitating the transformation of political actions, mechanisms for mobilizing social movements, organizing and communicating in different ways. This can be easily justified by the low cost of communication and mobilization which: allows for quicker and easier distribution of information about organized movements and protests, and allows people to stay in touch with more people, communities and causes (Theocharis, Lowe, Jan W. van, & García-Albacete, 2015, p. 204).

The nature of the way in which protest groups give meaning to the protest itself is often distorted by the fact that the media often choose to concentrate only on violent protests or their violent nature (Wasserman, Chuma, & Bosch, 2018, p. 155).

In an article on exploring the effects of social networking groups as a tool for mobilizing and organizing student protests in the UK in 2010/11, the results showed that Facebook and Twitter can facilitate collaborative engagement and mobilization of offline protests by allowing campaigns to build quickly and efficiently (Hensby, 2017, p. 475). The accessibility and adaptability of these tools enabled activists to

respond quickly to the ad and build a campaign to communicate directly with students and the media.

The concept of spontaneity in protests has not attracted much attention to researchers, and the dynamics of social movements are often assimilated to the organization in general (Anisin, 2016, p. 413). When discussing collective movements spontaneity can be influenced by certain conditions such as: lack of a hierarchy in the group; the existence of ambiguous, uncertain actions; emotional and behavioral training; contextual, ecological or spatial constraints (Snow & Moss, apud Anisin, 2016, p. 413).

In this context, we can talk about the dynamics of the protest, as a variable that can be traced in the analysis of several protests.

Social media communication has allowed people dissatisfied with the conditions at universities in Austria (Maireder & Schwarzenegger, 2012, p. 189) to join the protests without preoccupation with affiliation to a particular political group or identification with a certain ideology. In this way, the detachment from the protester group could be done without problems if the activities were diverted from the original principles. In this way, the dynamics of the protest was encouraged by identifying the group with community<sup>1</sup> issues and avoiding political affiliations, with a multitude of possible interpretations of the protest agenda.

Spontaneous Balkan protests have also had a social media mobilizing tool. The protest wave, which encompassed Slovenia at the end of 2012, provided the prospect of street mobilization through Facebook (Musić, 2013, p. 321). In Greece in 2011, actions against austerity in Syntagma Square turned into a massive public gathering that evolved into a camp and then to daily rallies and protests every Sunday through a Facebook post (Dalakoglou, 2012, p. 537).

After such protests organized through social media, as a means of communication, communities are formed that focus on processes of inclusion or exclusion and identity negotiation.

In another study, the role of leadership / leadership plays a vital role in targeting disputes and controversies on social platforms, an argument developed in the interaction study between administrators and Facebook users Kullena Khaled Said, the most popular platform online during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 (Poell, Abdulla, Rieder, Woltering, & Zack, 2016, p. 994). Conducting protest activities through formal organizations and traditional collective strategies remain at the second level, because page managers, called “conectiv leaders”, are using sophisticated marketing strategies that connect users / participants to online streams and networks. For example, connections between Facebook's “friends” and those connections between Twitter users tend to be more horizontal.

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At the same time, we can pursue another indicator, that of the content of mobilizing messages, that can influence *political communication, mobilize or organize social protest movements*. In the case of online protests, mass mobilization can be done through e-petitions, special pages on social networks, viral videos (Hensby, 2017, p. 468).

The subjects in question were noted as the support or rejection of tuition fees or the accessibility of programs, but also the issue of the level of personal effort and the “real” support of the movement.

From the analysis of Maireder and Schwarzenegger (2012, p. 190) in the study of student protests in Austria, it was obvious that the imposition of more obligations on participants (commitments to certain essential notions of the essential movement issue, motivation, affiliations) and less individuality would clarify and condition the quality of the protester as part of the community and would have had negative effects on the dynamics of protest and motivation to participate.

In a study that analyzed the political discourse in the Russian tweetersphere (Spaiser, Chadeaux, Donnay, Russmann, & Helbing, 2017, p. 147), the authors demonstrated that the Twitter discourse reflected major political events quite accurately underlining the importance of social media as a forum of the political dispute. In this case, the Tweeter network represented a space of disputes: the deliberate campaign to discredit the pro-Putin camp, which contributed decisively to weaken the sympathy for the opposition movement and thus contributed to the failure of a new opposition mobilization (Spaiser, Chadeaux, Donnay, Russmann, & Helbing, 2017, p. 147). From the perspective of the content of disseminated messages, pro-government users have employed a variety of communication strategies to change political discourse and to marginalize opposition voices on Twitter, demonstrating how authorities can dismantle regime critics and successfully manipulate public opinion through social media.

Another study explains the appearance of the Gezi protest in 2013, which was the largest in the Turkish political era led by the Justice and Development Party (Anisin, 2016, p. 411). The level of indignation at Gezi was enormous and was subsequently channeled by protesters in an informative and non-violent manner across many social networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and the personal blogs of activists. This protest was noted for analysts through a general range of protesters that would not have been reached without Twitter and Facebook social sites. These were the specific platforms where messages were sent to hundreds of thousands of observers. From the perspective of the content of the messages, they focused on transmitting the dissatisfaction expressed by protesters through art and symbolic satire in the form of street signs, graffiti and political slogans. To disseminate information and to raise awareness of violence, some of this information contained short commands, while other portions contained links to blog posts and uncensored media articles (Anisin, 2016, p. 423).

Another indicator, which can be closely related to the content of mobilizing messages, is that of the social context in that country. This differs from one nation to another, depending on the internal factors that customize national contexts and play a role in the structure and content of message exchanges.

The question of whether social media is ultimately oppressive or liberating can not be answered because the answer is relevant when we consider each political context separately (Spaiser, Chadeaux, Donnay, Russmann, & Helbing, 2017, p. 149).

The research by the authors Yannis Theocharis, Will Lowe, Jan W. van Deth & Gema García-Albacete (2015) about the protests in Greece, Spain and the United States shows that the Twitter platform was mainly used to facilitate discourse between activists, media and the public on the one hand and to support the mobilization of movements already taking place through other online platforms and offline channels on the other hand (Theocharis, Lowe, Jan W. van, & García-Albacete, 2015, p. 215). Their results show that the use of Twitter's social network for protests was consistent (as is usually the case with social movements) and specific (for example, the platform was mainly used for conversation and for linking information, and less for the call to action and organization).

It is important to note that the Facebook page Kullena Khaled Said, the most popular online platform during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, was developed in a certain political and cultural context: the dynamics of the page were greatly influenced by the authoritarian political system of Egypt; administrators' attempts to remain anonymous; the extensive efforts of the Mubarak regime to sabotage communication on the page (Poell, Abdulla, Rieder, Woltering, & Zack, 2016, p. 1010).

From the start, we identify several other content pointers of mobilizing messages: conversation, linking information, calling to action, organizing call, processes of identity negotiation, inclusion and exclusion, self perception as part of a collective, and establishing common ways of action.

It is obvious that youth protests are the main source of social media mobilization. As assessed by Axel Maireder & Christian Schwarzenegger (2012, p. 189) in their study of Austria's largest protest after 1990, their analysis showed that communicating through social networks was essential because allowed protesters to participate in the protest in the same way they were accustomed to participate in any situation in their everyday life, without removing them from their comfort zone, and it was not necessary to attract people for protest because it was naturally distributed.

Another study shows that internet use has increased access to information in authoritarian regimes despite authoritarian attempts to control cyberspace. The article presents situations during the Tunisian Revolution (2010-2011) and suggests that this increased access to information positively affects protests in authoritarian states by: reducing communication costs for opposition movements; instigating change of attitude; reducing information uncertainty for potential protesters; the

mobilizing effect of widespread videos and images (Ruijgrok, 2017, p. 498). Another study explores how social networks have acted as a catalyst for mobilizing protests during the Tunisian revolution, which is an important resource for popular mobilization against the Ben Ali regime. The “mobilizing resource” theory demonstrated here shows that social media: has enabled a “digital elite” to pass through national media through the intermediation of information for media coverage; has provided a platform for group collaboration; has transmitted the magnitude of the events, providing the perception of the success of potential protesters; has additionally provided an “emotional mobilization” by representing the worst atrocities associated with the regime's reaction to protests. (Breuer, Landman, & Farquhar, 2015, p. 764)

The Internet and social media have helped overcome geographic and socio-economic disparities and have provided the basis for building a national collective identity that supports the protest against an increasingly unpopular regime. In this way, the Internet served as a foundation for the articulation and aggregation of injustices. The Internet has acted as a significant resource that helped overcome the problem of collective problems and led to a change of regime. In particular, under the authoritarian regime, the internet offers a way to overcome the problems of the collective acting in ways that can incite the opposition to turn into a disagreeable regime (Breuer, Landman, & Farquhar, 2015, p. 782).

In this way, we consider it plausible to conclude that the Internet and, implicitly, the social networks make a significant contribution to mobilizing the protest by the viral nature of the broadcasts. Mobilizing participation in protests is encouraged by the internet as an easy-to-use, adhering and retired communication tool - identified as a crucial factor for the success of any social manifestation in the 21st century.

We argue that this study is a theoretical basis for observing the structures, dynamics, interconnections, peculiarities and factors relevant to real development, growth and mobilization of the problematic community that is beyond the political agenda of a particular state.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, we can appreciate that the world of protest has become global and that the tendency of “politicizing public order” is increasingly manifested. The spontaneity of the current protests is also determined by the manifestation of three major factors: the contrademocracy through its vigilance, denunciation and surveillance functions; impolite and virtual democracy. According to the last factor, today the citizen is increasingly active in supporting, rejecting or canceling a social change. As social technologies shape events, such social movements also require a political opportunity. Combating law enforcement is done not only in the real space

but also in the virtual space through an adequate pre-event communication and correlation with the citizen of a massive and commercially domestised society.

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