The Motivation and Process behind the Formation of Social Movement Coalitions

Final Project Proposal

by An MIT Student

Abstract

When confronted with issues that are both broad enough to draw opposition along a spectrum of ideologies and so significant that social movement organizations (SMOs) feel that their resources alone would be insufficient to affect meaningful change SMOs form coalitions. Coalitions are groups of SMOs that normally operate independently and have a variety of differing ideologies, tactics, and identities which cooperate for a short time to effect change on a grander scale than any individually would have been able to accomplish. To better grasp the process by which SMO coalitions form I will undergo a case study of The Day We Fight Back protests, analyzing the links between SMOs in the form of shared identities and shared significant individuals. I will also compare the SMOs and NGOs that participated in The Day We Fight Back protests to the SMOs and NGOs that participated in the

Research Question(s)

What broad set of factors allow for the emergence of SMO coalitions and by what process are they created? (Are there any similarities in ideology/identity/tactics between SMOs? If so, which ones are important/common between the most SMOs in the coalition? Which individuals within each SMO have the formal or informal task of coordinating with other SMOs? Why these people?)

Case Selection

On February 11, 2014 a coalition of Social Movement Organizations held a worldwide day of activism to protest the NSA's continued use of mass surveillance against citizens of the United States and other countries globally. Dubbed 'The Day We Fight Back,' this protest was the product of cooperation between SMOs and non government organizations (NGOs) such as Access, Demand Progress, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Fight for the Future, Free Press, BoingBoing, Reddit, Mozilla, ThoughtWorks, and others. The result of this coordinated action: Near 90,000 phone calls and 500,000 emails sent to Congress as well as over 300,000 signatures on petitions demanding the right to privacy. This yield represents greater results than

simultaneous individual action by each of the SMOs which joined 'The Day We Fight Back' protests.

Methods

- Data Collection
    - o I plan to scrape Twitter to collect tweets during and about the TDWFB protests. This will give me information about which actors on Twitter were most active in promoting the protests, which were most retweeted (i.e. which had the most impact in informing the public), which actors were central to the network of people tweeting about TDWFB, and other such concrete data.

- Actor Type Classification
    - o I then plan to classify the significant actors that I found via the data collection stage using a similar classification scheme to the one used by Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, Pearce, and Boyd. Examples include organizations, individuals, and bots with organizations and individuals differentiated into several subtypes based on occupation, identity, and influence on Twitter.

- Interviews with Significant Actors
    - o I plan to interview two sets of significant actors. First I will contact and attempt to interview as many of the organizers listed on the Reddit AMA posted by the TDWFB organizers on February 11 since I know already that they were involved in organizing the protest and coordinating between SMOs. (They all set up the AMA together, were involved in the organization of TDWFB, and belong to separate SMOs/NGOs). Second I will contact and attempt to interview significant individuals that belong to SMOs/NGOs involved in TDWFB who were revealed by my Twitter data collection and are not members of the set of previously contacted people.