Citizenship-as-practice: 'movement social learning' on Twitter in the UK People’s Assembly Against Austerity

‘Citizenship, Social Imagination and Collective Action’ Seminar Series, Department of Social Science, UCL

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The People’s Assembly: an Anti-Austerity Movement

• > 2011: wave of anti-austerity protest directed at govt. policy and more deeply at party politics and representative democracy (Biekart and Fowler, 2013; Fenton, 2016)

• Europe: disconnect between movements of ‘ordinary citizens’ and trade-union protest against austerity (Petersen et al., 2015)

• People’s Assembly: a meeting-point for ‘individual supporters, unions nationally and locally, anti-cuts campaigns, and other student, pensioner...women’s, Black people’s, youth and LGBT campaigning organisations’

• May 2015-January 2016: demonstrated against welfare cuts, scrapping of maintenance grants and rising tuition fees, the Trade Union Bill, new contracts for junior doctors in the UK
• Rising prominence of personal networks in collective action alongside modern organisational structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013)
• Autonomous movements forming through ‘collective learning’ about shared concerns, worldviews, identities, sense of solidarity and knowledge on how to mobilise to effect social change (McGregor, 2014).
• Fall in union membership (dwindling resources/influence), rise of alternative representation for workers and hardship wrought by neoliberalism (Luce, 2014)
• In UK, historically patchy relations between union & civil society organisations (Heery et al., 2012)
• Rapprochement enacted in mutual development of rallying discourse regarding shared concerns, facilitated by ‘bridge builders’ (2012:147)
• Social movement capacity to ‘converge on areas of shared concern’ (Rogers & Haggerty, 2013)
Citizenship and Social Learning

• Rising levels of civic knowledge and participation especially among younger generations (Galston, 2001; Zukin et al., 2006 Dalton, 2008; Bennett et al., 2009)
• Penchant for involvement in activism intent on a more immediate enactment of social change and leveraging of internet technologies (Anduiza et al., 2014; Dalton, 2008)
• Civic knowledge as fruit of learning through socialisation, subjectification (Biesta, 2014): one is a citizen as soon as she participates in self-actualising process of aligning one’s personal concerns with those of others in a collective search to satisfy public interests or to secure public goods (modality of citizenship ‘as practice’)
• Alignment through social learning: making concerns public as a way to begin to address the conflicts they encapsulate (Wildemeersch, 2014: 22)
Movement Social Learning

• Social learning more likely the more information is shared and validated by other ties in one’s network (Dimaggio & Garip, 2012)

• Social learning through retweeting
  • Retweets amplify significance of message, affect (‘sentimental arousal’ Hansen et al., 2011), signal approval (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013)
  • Expedite knowledge pooling among listening social contacts (Stephansen & Couldry, 2014)

• **Movement social learning on Twitter:** a diffusion process (Earl, 2010). Sharing and validation of information in retweet networks may contribute to transformative outcomes for social movements such as cooperation among theoretically disparate social movement actors
Indicators of Movement Social Learning

• Expression of **the issues** at the heart of the movement (e.g. austerity policy)

• **Critical analysis** of those issues

• Communication pertaining to
  • **skills for effective organisation** (including an appreciation of shared identities)
  • **strategies for action** (e.g. non-violent direct action)
  • building up **group efficacy** (problems solved through collective action)

(Rogers & Haggerty, 2013)
Hypotheses

• **H1**: To engender cooperation, disparate entities among the People’s Assembly partook in construction of *in-group identity* on Twitter (Yardi & boyd, 2011; Giglietto & Lee, 2017) **around common concern with austerity**

• **H2**: an *in-group* among the participant entities in the PAaA pivoted on **anger at government and political parties** (out-group; Petersen et al., 2015)

• **H3**: social learning about common issues, their critical analysis rather than organisation, strategy or group efficacy (see Theocharis et al., 2015).
National Day of Action on Saturday 30 May to preface 20 June demonstration, 30/05/2015

Protest on 23 May in Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester, 23/05/2015

Crowds protest the Queen's Speech at Downing Street, 26/05/2015

National Demonstration Against Fees and Cuts, 04/11/2015

National Demonstration, Bank of England and March to Parliament, 20/06/2015

TAKE BACK MANCHESTER I Protest the Tory Party Conference, 03/10/2015

#GrantsNotDebt: student protest against scrapping of maintenance grants, 19/01/2016

Stand Up to Racism, Anti-racism Day, 19/03/2016

Junior Doctor’s First Strike, 12/01/2016
Methods

- Social network analysis to separate out discursive communities
  - @pplASsembly, #endausteritynow, #nomoreausterity, #JuneDemo, #takebackMCR, #freeeducation, #grantsnotdebt
  - 199,440 retweets by 48,350 users
  - 24 retweet clusters
- Topic analysis of communication between communities (Latent Dirichlet Allocation)
  - Top 10 topics
- Discourse analysis
  - Intertextuality
People’s Assembly Retweet Network
Findings

• ‘bridge-builders’: wide spectrum of social actors—from individuals to myriad activist groups, trade unions and left-leaning political parties, namely Labour and the Green Party

• most prominent topics cutting across the discursive communities in the network spanned a range of concerns

• T4, T5 and T9 pertained to mobilisation, the organisation of collective action and onsite logistics. Topics featured references to bridge builders among participant entities—eg Labour and the Greens, the TUC, Unite, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), the Stop the War Coalition and local chapters of the People’s Assembly
Findings continued

• T1, T2 and T4 were appeals to mobilisation, more generally in opposition to the Tory government (T1) and specifically in support of two major protest events, the June 20 National Demonstration (T2) and the Tory Annual Conference in Manchester (T4)

• Topics T1, T2 and T7 added a further dimension to collective identity that appeared to evidence a process of social learning not solely about intersecting issues but also about the merit of displaying a sense of solidarity to boost group efficacy

• T3 encapsulated appeal to democratically voice opposition to austerity
• Topics T5 and T9 encompassed information relevant to both action coordination and onsite logistics

• Topics T8 and T10, testified to the disgruntlement with the implementation of austerity measures in higher education

• T8 and T10: recurring information pertinent to participant mobilisation juxtaposed with reporting on the enactment of collective action

• Topic 8 made visible first a critique of the issue and latterly a preoccupation with strategy, specifically to do with activist responses to police action
• Topics connected distinct protest events
• June March referenced in topics T4 and T5, T6 and T9
• The same topics linked into the Tory Party conference protest (T1,2,3) and the student marches (T8,10)
• Connections were made through the reproduction of references to identity (voicing solidarity and opposition to austerity), strategy (to deal with the police, to mobilise participants), the organisation of collective action (marches, demonstrations and sub-unitary participant blocs) and critical reflection (on Tory policies)
• References illustrated how intertextual links between topics spanned a period extending over multiple events. Alluded to chronological dimension of social learning
Cross-cutting Topics

**Topic 1: Unite against Tory Austerity**

Emiloldskool RT @unitetheunion: Tory austerity is destroying our services. Hurting our kids | Join the march #EndAusterityNow LDN 20 June #JuneDemo

Kazimierz66 RT @HackneyKONP: Solidarity to everyone protesting against Tory austerity tomorrow #takebackmcr http://t.co/Z0rDs8P8xa

jenniferDarchRT @Harrystand: It's not about economics but ideology b/c Tory austerity has made nearly 100k kids homeless #CPC15 EndAusterityNow

**Topic 2: Rage against the Tories**

suzyflipp RT @Tony2Wilson: Primary purpose of austerity is to move public money into private pockets it is class war says @chunkymark #PeoplesPost

Chunkymark RT @pplsassembly: @charlottechurch: The public are being misinformed, as soon as people realise the extent there'll be anger #JuneDemo

chunkymark RT @pplsassembly: Tories=CUTS, PRIVATISATION, DEVASTATION! Protest their MCR conference, say NO MORE! 3-7Oct
Conclusions

• Social learning entwined with identity-building. Retweeting: mutual recognition, display of **boding affect and anger**

• Visibility was not a mere performance of an activist identity (Milan, 2015): signalled symbolic membership of an activist in-group

• Social learning: **making public multiple discrete concerns** with austerity coupled with critique of Tory government

• Circulation of information regarding organisation, group efficacy or shared strategy helped **actualise** the Assembly as a social movement gathering wide-ranging entities

• Retweeting network showed links extended across discrete protest events. Further research into semantic as well as chronological dimension of social learning

• Published paper available here: [http://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/D37kAbmFiTgJib6sXbJX/full](http://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/D37kAbmFiTgJib6sXbJX/full)