

Chapter 28

Bridging Women Rights Networks: Analyzing Interconnected Online Collective Actions

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ABSTRACT

In recent mass protests such as the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, protesters used social media to spread awareness, coordinate, and mobilize support. Social media-assisted collective action has attracted much attention from journalists, political observers, and researchers of various disciplines. In this article, the authors study transnational online collective action through the lens of inter-network cooperation. The authors analyze interaction and support between the women's rights networks of two online collective actions: 'Women to Drive' (primarily Saudi Arabia) and 'Sexual Harassment' (global). Methodologies used include: extracting each collective action's social network from blogs authored by female Muslim bloggers (23 countries), mapping interactions among network actors, and conducting sentiment analysis on observed interactions to provide a better understanding of inter-network support. The authors examine these two distinct but overlapped networks of collective actions and discover that brokering and bridging processes can facilitate the diffusion of information, coalition formation, and the expansion of the networks. The broader goal of the study is to examine the dynamics between interconnected collective actions. This research contributes to understanding the mobilization of social movements in digital activism and the role of cooperative networks in online collective action.

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INTRODUCTION

Advanced communication media and technologies, especially the Internet and social media, have transformed the ways people interact, communicate, and share information. In recent mass protests such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements, social media platforms were utilized to assist the protesters in spreading messages, organizing, and mobilizing support for their causes. In addition to assisting mass protests, these online platforms have also facilitated citizens to engage and participate in various cultural, social and political actions. To participate in this type of collective action has become one of the common routes individuals take in their attempt to contribute to the betterment of society:

Online collective action can be defined as a shared endeavor of a set of individuals working toward a common goal in an online environment. It is “a new social community—cultural, religious, or political—that emerges in an online environment” (Agarwal et al. 2012a: 113) that undertakes an action to promote a shared goal and improve the group’s conditions. While it benefits multiple members of the group (e.g. by accomplishment of the shared goal), the action has an associated cost or risk, which is impossible for a single member to undertake. Hence, the action is undertaken collectively to share the cost or risk. The rise of online collective action has attracted much attention not only from journalists and political observers but also from researchers of various disciplines. In recent years, there has been a surge in research devoted to deepening our understanding of online collective action (e.g., Agarwal et al. 2012a; 2012b; Lim 2012b; 2013; Morozov 2010; Shirky 2008). Due to its novelty and complexity, however, more research is needed to further our understanding of the many aspects of online collective action. This research analyzes two online collective actions in seeking to understand the underlying processes of connectivity and developing a rigorous methodol-

ogy contributing to the theoretical advancement of online collective action. More precisely, we examine the transnational nature of online collective action by studying cooperation between the observed networks of distinct but related collective actions. The contributions provide further opportunities to study more fundamental research questions such as, can the networks of online collective action be expanded and diffused beyond national boundaries? How does online collective action evolve across multiple networks and shift between local, national, and transnational scales? What is the role of cooperative networks in online collective action?

In this study, we analyze two online collective actions related to women’s rights, namely ‘Women to Drive’ and ‘Sexual Harassment’. While ‘Women to Drive’ is a collective action predominantly organized by Saudi women in opposition to the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia, the one on ‘Sexual Harassment’ is global in nature demonstrating the universality of this crime against women. These two distinct collective actions are not isolated from each other. They share a collective awareness and aspirations and pursue a similar goal of addressing gender inequality toward promoting women’s rights. Although the ‘Women to Drive’ collective action is specific to Saudi Arabia’s gender-biased laws, there is evidence of global support. The transnational support for the ‘Women to Drive’ and the inherent global nature of sexual harassment both offer the opportunity to study the nature of cooperation between these networks. Existing research has mapped the inter-organizational cooperation structure that develops between groups and organizations in pursuit of mutual goals, whether in the form of ad-hoc coalitions or fully-fledged social movements (Diani and Bison 2004). However, methodological and theoretical advancements are required to fully understand the cooperative and support mechanisms afforded and utilized by each individual collective action (Diani and McAdam 2003).

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