**Open networks and secret Facebook groups: exploring cycle effects on activists’ social media use in the 2010/11 UK student protests**

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**Abstract**

Much has been written in recent years about the growing impact of social media on social movements. Whilst authors have extolled the virtues of Facebook and Twitter as organisational and informational tools for a range of movements from the Arab Spring to Occupy, evidence remains patchy as to under what conditions social media is most effective at engaging and mobilising the wider public. Authors such as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have claimed that the openness of information and communications technology (ICT) networks have fundamentally reshaped how social movements organise and interact, creating new mobilising opportunities under an emerging ‘connective action’ logic. However, studies by Flesher Fominaya (2015) and Kavada (2015) point to more familiar ‘collective action’ tensions around identity and hierarchy with recent movements’ social media use.

Drawing on the work of Tarrow (1998), this article considers the impact of cycle effects on the effectiveness of social media as a mobilising and organising tool for the 2010/11 UK student protests. Although preceding the broader ‘movement of the squares’ contention cycle (Kavada, 2015), the protests made similar use of social media for generating mass participation. Yet its mobilising power was dependent on a number of temporal factors, including amplification through mainstream media, and the urgency of its initial campaign goal. Moreover, towards the end of the cycle, activists were found to be using social media – via ‘secret’ Facebook groups – in ways that reinforced emerging group hierarchies, arguably contradicting their initial commitment to open-access networks and participatory democracy.

Key words: social media, Facebook, Twitter, collective identity, mobilization, protest cycle, student activism

**Introduction**

Since 2011, a great deal of attention has been paid to the ‘movement of the squares’ contention cycle, incorporating the Arab Spring revolutions, the Indignados movements in Spain and Greece, and the global Occupy Movement (Gerbaudo, 2013; Biekart and Fowler, 2013; Kavada, 2015). Although physical encampments were at the core of many of these movements, activists’ use of ICT and social media networks have arguably gained the most interest from scholars. These networks have quickly become an essential tool for social movement organising, a tool which according to Bennett and Segerberg (2012) facilitates more personalised and interactive forms of communication under an emerging logic of ‘connective action’. This creates new opportunities for engaging and mobilising mass-audiences, both online and offline. Unlike traditional forms of collective action, the authors claim that this does not rely on organisational resources or binding collective identities as it transmits ideas and messages virally through social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Although recent movements appear to illustrate many of these transformations, Bennett and Segerberg are less clear on the temporal dimensions to connective action. Social movements, Mattoni and Treré (2014) remind us, are ‘ongoing and evolving processes’, which leads us to question *under what circumstances* social media might be more or less effective for generating protest. Recalling Tarrow’s (1998) concept of the protest cycle, one can identify flows and challenges that movements typically face over their lifespan, from the ‘flurries of innovation’ and ‘rapid diffusion’ that characterise their inception, to dilemmas over radicalisation or institutionalisation further down the line. These flows and challenges affect how movements – especially at a group level – are organised democratically, and generate forms of collective identity among participants. This article posits that these flows and challenges also affect activists’ social media use.

Studies of recent movements have indicated some evidence of cycle effects. Tremayne (2013), for example, claims that the proliferation of social media content created for Occupy Wall Street was a key driver of the movement’s upward ‘scale shift’ to a worldwide phenomenon. In the case of Occupy Boston, Juris (2012) observes how in its initial stages Facebook and Twitter helped quickly mobilise audiences beyond usual activist circles, but that this openness proved difficult to sustain as the physical camp became more organised.

Social media cycle effects are explored further in this article’s case study. Although preceding the aforementioned protest cycle as per Gerbaudo (2013) and Kavada’s (2015) definition, the UK student protests of 2010 and 2011 shared many of its characteristics, including the use of occupations as radicalising spaces; the advocacy of leaderless self-organisation, and a commitment to spreading informational openness and participatory democracy. Framed by the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government’s austerity agenda of public sectors cuts, the student protests responded initially to plans to treble the cap on tuition fees for students in England to £9,000 per year, as well as cut 95 per cent of universities’ teaching budget. Although part of a wider reform programme designed to marketize the entire HE sector (McGettigan, 2013), these proposals were subject to a Parliamentary vote only seven weeks after their announcement in October 2010.

To the surprise of many, students quickly responded with a mass campaign, featuring multiple weekly national and regional demonstrations and a reported 51 occupations of campus buildings across the UK (Solomon and Palmieri, 2011: 60). With limited involvement from the National Union of Students (NUS), the campaign was mostly driven by a network of occupation spaces (Theocharis, 2012). These drew extensively on social media as ‘organising agents’ to pressurise Parliament – via the mainstream media coverage it generated – into voting down the fees bill. Although the bill was narrowly passed by Parliament, the speed and scale through which they mobilised left many activists feeling optimistic about the self-organising potential of social media for building a wider student movement against higher education marketization. Much of this energy fed into wider anti-austerity protests in the UK throughout 2011 – including the Occupy Movement – but the student movement itself soon stalled, with follow-up mobilisations against the Government’s White Paper struggling to engage the wider student body on a scale comparable to the protests the previous autumn.

This article traces the narrative of the 2010/11 student protests through the interview accounts of student activists from four UK universities. Findings show how important social media networks were to the mobilisations of autumn 2010, both in engaging an audience beyond traditional student activism networks, as well as creating an ‘informational exuberance’ (Chadwick, 2012) which contributed to the campaign’s upward scale shift. Analysis then turns to students’ use of social media after the fees vote, findings indicating that much of its mass-mobilising capacity soon deflated, leaving a nascent movement suddenly short on organisational power. Students’ use of social media also began to evolve in unexpected ways, notably contributing to forms of boundary-drawing through its ‘secret’ Facebook groups. Whilst this reflected the greater costs and risks incurred by core activists, they also reflected emerging collective identity differences.

**Social media and social movements**

Much of the perceived promise of social media networks stems from fundamental transformations in web technologies over the past fifteen years. During this time, we have seen the exponential increase in peer-to-peer ICT usage, from smart phones to WiFi networks. According to Hands (2011: 79), these technologies have created a platform for the emergence of ‘Web 2.0’, defined as ‘the proliferation of user-created content and websites specifically built as frameworks for the sharing of information and for social networking’. Its fast, memetic distribution is a driver of what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call the logic of ‘connective action’. Within this logic, activists can disseminate first-hand accounts of events via social networking sites – events which previously might have received one-sided coverage in the mainstream media or no coverage at all. Moreover, these sites are extremely popular, enabling activists to connect with like-minded people across the globe, as well as open their campaigns out to wider, less-politicised audiences – particularly younger people (Bennett, 2008).

With these developments forcing traditional political agencies into adopting forms of ‘organisational hybridity’ (Chadwick, 2007), the range of online tools available – including blogs, discussion forums, crowdfunding pages, media-sharing sites, and social networking sites – creates opportunities for more spontaneous, ‘entrepreneurial’ forms of activism. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), this enables large audiences to be engaged and mobilised at short notice and for very little cost. Facebook and Twitter in particular are commonly used for this purpose, functioning as ‘stitching technologies’ to quickly assemble networks, share information and recruit actors for political participation.

Whilst one can point to numerous examples of mass-mobilisations for online protest – such as e-petitions, Facebook page ‘likes’, and viral videos (Gaby and Caren, 2012; Morozov, 2011) – its mobilising of actors for *offline* protest has drawn more scepticism from scholars. Many subscribe to Diani’s (2000) argument that recruitment for higher-cost/risk activities such as demonstrations and occupations relies on social ties cultivated through face-to-face interactions. Evidence from recent movements further muddies the waters: Juris (2012), for example, found that social media served as a powerful mobilising tool for Occupy Boston, though its ‘smart mobs’ of multiple interpersonal networks were found to disaggregate as quickly as they aggregated. Mercea’s (2012) study of Climate Camp mobilisations saw potential for more durable engagement, finding that the availability of information, resources and debate online helped ‘unaffiliated’ actors accrue knowledge independently of activist ties. Whilst this provided a foundation to plan their own participation and ‘develop an activist mindset’, it did not necessarily extend to feeling an active part of the movement.

Understanding how these affinities are formed brings us to the extensive literature on collective identity formation. Although there has been some debate over the usefulness of the concept when applied to network-based movements (e.g. McDonald, 2002), Melucci’s (1996) conceptualisation as a process borne out of ‘identization’ arguably remains relevant to the sustenance of any movement. Admittedly, these processes are more easily observable at a *group* level, as identization refers to the building of interpersonal relations of trust out of day-to-day interactions, as well as protest participation (see Saunders, 2008). However, Flesher Fominaya (2010) argues that these relations can also outlive contention cycles and sustain groups through latency periods while they prepare for new activism opportunities.

Given this emphasis on the day-to-day, one might assume collective identities are more likely to be forged offline than online, but the two can intersect in productive ways. In her study of the Occupy Movement, Kavada (2015) found that collective identity was strengthened through regular communication and codified practices on social media networks, even if this tended to reinforce existing offline ties rather than create new ones. This partly reflected the fact that Occupy was at its core a physical encampment, though the shared rituals, common practices, and emotional attachments Melucci considers essential to ‘creating the collective’ were ultimately a product of sustained activist *conversations*,be they online or offline.

This overlapping of online and offline networks also blurs distinctions of who might be considered ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the movement, which has consequences for how it practices democracy. In the case of Occupy, Kavada (2015) found that activists’ commitment to the principles of autonomism and horizontality resulted in a fluid and open attitude towards rule-making. The practice of group decision-making, however, took place offline via a system of working groups feeding into consensus-based general assemblies. This owed to practical constraints in facilitating multi-participatory discussions online, though it also reflected core activists’ tendency to prioritise individual commitment through their physical participation.

As deliberation spaces, online platforms were also found to generate problems of their own. In her study of the Global Justice Network in Madrid, Flesher Fominaya (2015) found that activists’ commitment to participatory democracy processes seldom extended to online interactions. Although opening up activist conversations to the public seemingly reflected a commitment to democratic engagement, the nature of these conversations remained implicitly hierarchical. For Flesher Fominaya, this lack of regulation or reflexivity appeared to contradict the movement’s commitment to horizontalism as practiced offline, instead conforming to Juris’s (2012) pithy depiction of social media as generating ‘ego-centred networks’.

Democracy and horizontalism can also be compromised in more structural ways. Despite Occupy’s commitment to ‘leaderless’ practices, Kavada (2015) noted that unintended positions of authority were nevertheless created through camps’ Twitter use. Given the increasing importance of social media as the movement’s *de facto* mouthpiece, activists responsible for updating these accounts came to play a more decisive role in shaping the politics and identity of individual camps, leading to frequent struggles over password and administration rights. Kavada (2009) also noted similar unintended hierarchies in an earlier study of email lists in the alter-globalization movement. In this instance, a ‘secret’ list was set up to by a sub-group of ‘horizontals’, as the main list was considered too large and unwieldy to hold more effective discussions or build collective identity relations. In both cases, Kavada noted how these structural machinations appeared to contradict the values of openness and inclusivity seemingly integral to activists’ political identity.

In sum, the literature identifies numerous opportunities and challenges for social movements in their use of social media. Whilst its tools and platforms enable fast mobilisation, efficient organisation, and collective identity-building as per Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) ‘connective action’ logic, recent studies suggest that it can also create more familiar ‘collective action’ problems, namely divergent identities, accidental hierarchies, and barriers to participation for the socially disconnected. Although studies point to the temporality of some of these problems, studying movements’ use of social media from a protest cycle perspective may offer a better understanding of when and where these factors come into play.

**The case study: research methods**

This article makes use of 42 student interviews, ranging from committed activists to non-participants, who were studying at in UK universities at the time of the protests. The vast majority were recruited via a survey questionnaire, although certain activist organisers were approached using forms of purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews are taken from four universities – University of Cambridge, University College London, University of Edinburgh, and University of Warwick. As large Russell Group universities, the account of the protests presented in this article is not necessarily representative of UK universities overall, but they were selected on the basis that each featured a certain level of high-cost/risk activism throughout the 2010/11 cycle, as well as returning a high number of prospective interviewees.

Interviews were typically conducted on campus, and focused on capturing interviewees’ personal experiences of the student protests, depending on their level of involvement. A degree of representativeness was sought in capturing the story of how occupations were organised by ensuring that a minimum of four students were interviewed from each university who took an active role in their initial planning and day-to-day running. Interviews took place in spring/summer 2012, enabling activists to reflect on the 2010/11 cycle in its entirety. Although most remained proud of the protests’ achievements, the passing of time enabled activists to be more objective and self-critical with regard to decisions made and how groups and campaigns were organised. This inevitably impacts on how interview data should be interpreted, as discussions at earlier stages in the cycle may have elicited different perspectives.

The material presented in this article additionally draws on informal participant observation in student occupation spaces and on groups’ Twitter feeds and Facebook pages between 2010 and 2011. As well as supporting the preparation for student interviews, this ‘background ethnography’ proved valuable for understanding how students made use of offline and online spaces, including their interactions with the wider student community.

**Beginnings and opportunities**

In many ways, the university campus is an ideal field for mobilising actors for protest participation. As well as being ‘structurally freed up for activism’ (Crossley, 2008), the student body represents an interconnected network, with members linked by their collective sharing of courses, accommodation, friendships, and the campus itself. Within this broader network, Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) identify a distinct *activism* network, which coalesces around multiple foci such as the student union and political societies. Although tightly-knit and sometimes considered cliquey to outsiders, Crossley (2008: 18) argues that the interconnectedness of the overall student network creates the potential for activists to generate a ‘self-perpetuating dynamic of politicisation’, drawing other socially-connected students into taking part.

Although Crossley and Ibrahim say little about the role of social media, Loader et al (2014) find that this activism network is replicated online through a virtual architecture of Twitter feeds and Facebook pages. Recalling Bennett and Segerberg’s terminology, one of its principal uses is to ‘facilitate connective engagement’ among the wider student population. This was certainly a key goal in autumn 2010: with the fate of Government proposals to effectively treble tuition fees to be decided by Parliament in December, students had seven weeks to pressurise MPs into voting down the bill. With the late 2000s representing a relative fallow-period for education-based campaigns, activists’ initial efforts to organise were dependent on email lists and Facebook pages from other left-leaning groups, such as Students’ Justice for Palestine (SJP) and People & Planet. The organisational flexibility of social media sites therefore enabled activists to quickly and fluidly assemble an anti-fees campaign. Organisers on each of the four campuses recalled initial meetings quickly attracting 80-100 people, including students hitherto unconnected to the activist network.

Invitation processes for student societies and campaign groups drew strongly on Facebook’s ‘event’ function, which enables users to create a specific webpage for an event and invite friends or group members to join. Invitees are encouraged to RSVP by clicking ‘join’, ‘maybe’ or ‘decline’. For public events, attendees can add others not currently included on the invite list. On university campuses especially, this snowballing effect enables activists to assemble a long list of potential participants very quickly. Echoing the findings of Loader et al (2014), interviews with students both inside and outside of activism networks noted that Facebook events were the principal means of communication for activism events on campus:

If you're gonna organise a protest you put it on Facebook – that’s how I find out about protests. So I think definitely that’s how you spread the word – yeah, it’s primarily through Facebook. (Angie, Cambridge)

Initially, activist groups and student unions rallied around the NUS demonstration, scheduled for 10 November. To the surprise of many, this drew the participation of 50,000 people, generating widespread media coverage. Whilst its turnout owed to a great deal to the organisational power of student unions and the NUS, attention quickly focused on a minority of students who had peeled away from the march to attack Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank. These attacks were quickly condemned by NUS President Aaron Porter, and the organisation’s effective withdrawal thereafter created a vacuum for media-savvy alternative voices to define the campaign themselves. For many activists, this had clear advantages as they felt the media coverage caused by ‘Millbank’ (as the event quickly became known) had given them access to a greater power, namely the ability to shape the mainstream news agenda:

Millbank gave us coverage in terms of all of a sudden every newspaper in the country would be calling you going ‘when is the next big mobilisation?’ (Damon, UCL)

In other words, appealing to mass media *directly* was considered more effective for mobilising students and generating publicity than operating via the bureaucratic machinations of the NUS. This fed into the next major event: a ‘National Walkout and Day of Action’ proposed by emergent campaign network the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC). Key to the event’s power was providing a focal point for student groups to mobilise *simultaneously* across the UK, either by organising new protests or coordinating already-existing plans. Although NCAFC’s press release suggested ‘university occupations, banner droppings and walkouts’ as examples of ‘creative forms of political protest and direct action’ (NCAFC, 2010), campus organisers were ultimately free to define this in whichever way they saw fit. In this sense, the day of action was a highly-effective means of creating a single media-friendly spectacle out of multiple local events, yet one that required relatively little in the way of co-ordinating resources beyond NCAFC’s website and social media pages.

Activists on the four campuses had similar plans in mind for the day of action, namely advertising a march to campus that would finish with the occupation of a university room or building. As well as representing a well-known student protest repertoire, some activists had been involved in a network of occupations across the UK the previous year for the Free Palestine Movement, and saw an opportunity to repeat this on a larger scale. Much of the planning for the day of action took place offline between experienced activists, though advertising of the march again drew strongly on Facebook event pages. This, too, succeeded in mobilising a mass of students which extended beyond the familiar activist core.

Of course, the number of students who attended the march and resultant occupation did not reflect the scale of opposition to the fees increase. Qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that whilst Facebook events mobilised students without prior activism experience, they were likely to have had pre-existing social ties to other participants (see Hensby, 2014; 2016). This did not necessarily mean all participants were connected to the event’s *organisers*, as the march attracted clusters of ‘unaffiliated’ friendship groups, but it nevertheless indicates that mobilisation via Facebook events is somewhat dependent on students finding an *offline* social context to their potential participation. This is illustrated clearly in Rick’s recollection:

Most people who were going invited people just through massive Facebook events, and I think for most of those I clicked ‘no’ or ‘maybe’ – because ‘maybe’ is just a polite way of saying ‘no’ – but I never really had to explain myself for not going […] because the people who I know who went on those demos are people who I don’t tend to interact with too much directly – it’s mostly online. (Rick, Edinburgh)

Once in occupation, students quickly established a system of consensus-based general assemblies, and a structure of multiple working groups. This included a media group, which set up Twitter accounts and Facebook pages to share articles, press releases and blogs about higher education funding and the anti-fees campaign. In so doing, members recognised implicitly the importance of generating ‘informational exuberance’ through its social media output. Whilst this strategy adhered to the classic counter-hegemonic maxim of ‘don’t hate the media, become the media’, it also, somewhat paradoxically, set out to keep the campaign high up the mainstream news agenda. There were also conscious efforts to mediate the occupation space through posting photos and making videos. The latter especially had a ‘connective action’ rationale in seeking to engage wider audiences virally by presenting occupations as fun and creative spaces. This was illustrated most memorably in the UCL vs Oxford occupation ‘dance-off’, which quickly gained more than 15,000 views on YouTube. To the surprise of more experienced activists, this overall media strategy succeeded in attracting regular mainstream media interest for the occupation spaces, especially at UCL:

We had journalists coming in all the time – they’d be like, ‘do you want to do an interview for Sky News?’ ‘Do you want to do Radio 5?’ The moment where you have any kind of political agency where the media is *coming to you*, that’s really rare – most of the time if you're involved in any kind of political activism, you're chasing the most minute bit of coverage. (Brett, UCL)

This informational exuberance was also directed at the student body. Interview accounts indicate that social media enabled students interested in politics but lacking personal ties to occupiers to develop their own knowledge independently, much like Mercea’s (2012) ‘unaffiliated’ Climate Camp activists:

I remember reading about [the tuition fees increase] online, probably through Facebook – someone would link a blog and I would read it. I remember reading and just thinking in my head, and speaking to my friends who were more politically engaged than I was at the time. (Danny, Edinburgh)

The occupations’ mediation reflected back through the regular stream of supportive wall posts, hashtags and retweets also helped strengthen participants’ commitment to the space, as it served to visualise their wider impact and equip occupants with a sense of collective agency:

I got Twitter that week, and if you're following it online and realising how big it was it was… I’d never been in something that felt that big, this national thing where all these people were feeling similar things and it might’ve gone somewhere and, you know, achieve something. (Rhiannon, Edinburgh)

In more practical terms, occupation Facebook pages and Twitter accounts were utilised to mobilise for spontaneous marches or flash-mobs. These hastily-arranged actions had powerful effects, with events quickly attracting crowds far in excess of the occupiers themselves:

We had two of our own demos whilst we were in occupation. Each time we were getting maybe 400 people or so, not doing any real publicity – just putting it online, tweeting it and saying ‘Let’s meet here’. (Jeremy, Edinburgh)

We could get demos weekly by demand – just call a demo, make a Facebook page and a couple of hundred people show up. It was simple. Those were the times we were in. (Eric, Cambridge)

Eric’s somewhat elegiac recollection implies a temporality to these mobilisations that will be discussed in the following section, though one can again highlight the ease through which large crowds were mobilised. Indeed, the target for some of these actions reflected a broadening of students’ political critique, with protests drawing attention to perceived inconsistencies in the Government’s austerity agenda, notably its negligence towards corporate tax avoidance:

We held the first Topshop occupation in the country […] We showed up and called loads of news cameras – we chose a Monday because we knew it would be a slow news day and we could get it fairly up the agenda. Every time we saw that our space in the media narrative was dropping we would invent something to put us back in. (Gaz, UCL)

Although these actions generated a great deal of media interest – helping promote emerging campaign network UK Uncut in the process – they perhaps also reflected a more general tendency towards the ‘mediatization’ of activists’ repertoire choices (Mattoni and Treré, 2014). Although in many ways justified for the purposes of pressurising MPs into voting against the fees bill, it arguably ran the risk of maintaining a mainstream media profile becoming an end in itself. As Gitlin (1981) recalls from his experiences of student activism in the 1960s, the media can also be a capricious platform on which to base a campaign, especially if it turns on the activists or loses interest in them.

Yet these issues were not considered problematic by the day of the Parliamentary vote in December 2010. November’s day of action had established 51 occupation groups across the UK, of which around 30 coalesced into a powerful network of intercommunicative protest hubs for the next 2-3 weeks (Theocharis, 2012). This network also helped mobilise for numerous national and regional demonstrations, including one in London on the day of the vote which drew 30,000 people. Moreover, in the effective absence of the NUS, the campaign was mostly run from social media and occupation blog sites, as well as physical occupation spaces. In other words, social media contributed significantly to the campaign’s rapid upward ‘scale shift’, not only through its functionality as an organising agent, but its capacity to quickly gain traction from mainstream media.

**After the vote: downward scale shift**

With the fees bill narrowly passing in Parliament, occupiers recalled feeling physically and mentally exhausted by the time occupations closed down in mid-December. Despite this, many felt that they had undergone a transformative social and political experience over the preceding seven weeks. In collectively bearing the risks of eviction, legal action, not to mention physically sharing the same living space, occupying had generated strong solidarities and friendships among its regular participants. In more practical terms, they felt that these ties, together with the momentum and media traction achieved the previous semester, could and should form the basis of a UK-wide student *movement* against austerity and the marketization of higher education.

Yet this momentum and traction proved difficult to sustain. The previous semester’s mass-mobilisations had at their core a relatively simple issue of grievance, namely the trebling of the fees cap. As Ibrahim (2011) argues, this appealed to students’ ‘moral economy’ and sense of fairness – a position hardened for many by the fact that as junior partners in the Coalition Government, the Liberal Democrats had controversially u-turned on its electoral pledge to oppose any increase to fees. By early 2011, however, the political consensus of the previous semester appeared more vulnerable in the absence of a common grievance and purpose:

That entire [previous] semester there wasn’t much structured political discussion. We had a purpose – we were all there because of the fees thing, and the fact that some people were SJPs and some were anarchists didn’t matter – it was kind of like, ‘We all agree on this’. That caused problems when the vote happened because it wasn’t clear anymore what we were united on. (Peter, Edinburgh)

In addition to joining forces with wider anti-austerity coalitions, student-centric protests resumed in early 2011 in much the same fashion as the previous semester, with Facebook events used to mobilise the wider student population. The difference, however, was that the absence of the fees vote meant that protests focused instead on displaying a more general resistance to the marketization of higher education, a focus which mobilised far fewer people than the previous semester:

The first thing we needed to deal with was a lot of people giving up because the bill had gone through, and our numbers shrank because of that. (Andrew, Cambridge)

We were still very high-profile, we had a lot of support – a lot of *latent* support – but when we didn’t have an active issue to grapple around, that became a problem […] Because we had attached our political actions to the actions of Parliament, we’re then subservient to their timescale, and as soon as they stop doing things relevant to us, we cease to be relevant. (Gaz, UCL)

In other words, the fees grievance had given activists an issue that had appealed to the wider student body, but in so doing came to define the protests’ perceived purpose and lifespan. While in occupation, students soon recognised that the fees issue was symptomatic of wider marketization trends, but as a basis for new protests this did not carry the same sense of urgency as before. This made it harder to mobilise the student body as widely and spontaneously as the previous semester, though as Gaz admitted it also reflected activists’ increasing reliance on the attention of mainstream media. The fees issue had made for an appealing narrative for the UK press as it dovetailed with the already-prominent news story of the newly-formed coalition Government and the Liberal Democrats’ policy u-turn. As a result, the events of Millbank and subsequent wave of occupations were given extensive coverage. For activists, this had given greater voice to their arguments whilst effectively promoting their protest actions through mass-media channels. Taken in combination, this served to amplify the protests far in excess of the organisational resources they had at their disposal. As Damon recalls, this amplification had been critical for engaging the wider student body:

Students believe that a student movement is worth fighting in when they see it reflected by an alternate reality – when the mainstream media is writing the same kind of articles that appear in their student paper, they go ‘ah, wait – this one matters then’… [But] there is a limit to how much you can use the Guardian front page as your main communications tool. (Damon, UCL)

It is thus argued that the ‘alternate reality’ created through mainstream media coverage was an essential component to Facebook event pages’ capacity to generate mass-mobilisations. For politically-engaged individuals who were socially unaffiliated to occupations or activism networks, this coverage provided a context and relevance to Facebook events which transcended the usual hubbub of campaigns on campus, whilst helping legitimise it as a ‘topical’ issue. Students receiving these invitations therefore recognised that in attending these protests they were also participating in a significant *national event*. Yet, recalling Juris’s (2012) observation on the ‘smart mobs’ of Occupy Boston, these were subservient to the campaign’s perceived lifespan, meaning that in the absence of strong ties these mobilisations disaggregated as quickly as they aggregated, contributing to a just-as-rapid *downward* scale shift.

**Making a movement**

As already noted, much of the power and momentum the protests achieved in autumn 2010 owed to the speed at which they mobilised large numbers. This left many commentators and activists reflecting in the aftermath of the fees vote on the possibilities these new forms of networked mobilising had created. Mason (2011), for example, linked the student protests to unfolding uprisings in North Africa when arguing that ‘horizontalism has become endemic because technology… kills vertical hierarchies spontaneously’. Aitchison and Peters (2011) saw its porous network structure as indicative of an ‘open sourcing of political activism’, but echoed Diani (2000) in noting the importance of affinities forged through autumn’s occupations and demonstrations for building a more sustained student movement.

The protests’ downward scale shift in early 2011 not only reflected the loss of a uniting cause, but also different levels of collective identification that had formed the previous semester. Whilst core occupiers had forged close ties through the intensity of their involvement, this did not extend as far as members of the Facebook-mobilised ‘smart mobs’, whose participation soon dropped off after the fees vote. This fed into differing views over how to build a student movement. Recalling the ‘institutionalisation or radicalisation’ dilemma in the latter stages of Tarrow’s (1998) protest cycle, some felt that the drop in mass-participation exposed the students’ organisational and financial limitations. Consequently, they advocated putting anti-austerity candidates forward for sabbatical positions in forthcoming student union elections to give the movement a stronger organisational base. Others, however, felt that the protests’ most powerful legacy was their spontaneous, networked forms of organising. From their perspective, this was what put students on the front pages, and the relationships of trust and solidarity that had formed between participants could be used to mobilise for further empowering actions. These students therefore continued organising impromptu flash-mobs and occupations. Whilst such actions illustrated the strength of participants’ interpersonal relationships, they arguably also reflected the extent to which they had become disconnected from the wider student body:

People became slightly ghettoized, and there were fewer people joining in as the months progressed – it became much more of a group of friends. (Brett, UCL)

These tactics also presented new organisational challenges. The openness through which occupation groups communicated the previous semester – both offline and online – had left them increasingly vulnerable to forms of surveillance: some interviewees reported undercover police officers attending general assemblies, whereas others claimed that their phones had been tapped. Whether these students *were* actually under surveillance is a moot point (for this article at least); what remains significant is that they began to adapt their behaviour because they *felt* that they were being watched. As a result, groups became more selective in the sort of information and language they used to report meetings or planned actions. More problematic, however, was their increasing reliance on invitation-only ‘secret Facebook groups’:

With Facebook groups, we have one which is a secret group, which has about 40 people on it, and then there is a broader one that has about 300, so I think that would be the core and periphery balance. We eventually became aware that we were being monitored from the Facebook group by security because they started turning up for our meetings, so we set up this secret group. (Raphael, Warwick)

We have a [Facebook] page where we broadcast messages, and there’s the secret group, which in a way isn’t very healthy – it’s a terrible way of organising. (Damon, UCL)

When occupations were initially set up, participants had been freely added to this group, but as Raphael suggests, these were later changed to invitation-only. Meanwhile, a separate ‘public’ page was retained for forms of open discussion and micro-broadcasting. Although partly the outcome of efforts to counter the threat of surveillance, by mid-2011 the invite-only group had effectively become a secret planning and discussion space. Recalling Kavada (2015) and Flesher Fominaya’s (2015) cases, this posed obvious problems to occupations’ commitment to horizontalism and participatory democracy. As with most protest camps, the student occupations had developed an implicit core-periphery structure among its participants (Hensby, 2014). Yet in practice these boundaries were arguably more malleable, depending to a large extent on how much time students typically spent at the space. The establishing of public and closed Facebook groups would later replicate this core-periphery balance, but it crucially also gave *structure* to these hitherto-fluid boundaries.

This had consequences for students both inside and outside the ‘secret’ group. Echoing Flesher Fominaya’s (2015) findings, some members on the inside admitted that the space had begun to function as an echo-chamber for upholding certain beliefs, with one voicing frustrations at how certain members could dominate discussions in ways that would not have been tolerated in consensus meetings. For students on the outside, the secret group represented a boundary between themselves and core activists. One such student was Danny, who had political interests but felt insufficiently connected socially to get involved in the 2010 Edinburgh occupation. Over time, he strengthened his social ties to activists, but still had to overcome certain barriers of affinity and trust:

So there’s a secret Facebook page and that’s where a lot of organising used to happen. It used to be quite a little hub and I wasn’t let on it for several months just to make sure I was all right – if I’m a cop I’m not going to tell you, right? (laughs) […] If you’ve got connections then they assume you're good, whereas if they’ve seen you around campus, they sort of know who you are but they don’t really know your politics it takes a while to get their trust, which felt a little bit alienating to be honest. (Danny, Edinburgh)

Whilst concerns about commitment and trust are typical of most radical movements, it is significant how Facebook – depicted as a driver of networked openness and ‘connective action’ by many scholars – came to play such a key role in drawing hierarchical boundaries and maintaining network secrecy. Even taken as an unintended consequence of students’ concerns over surveillance (as Danny’s comment alludes to), the irony that such practices should exist within a year of occupation arguably points to the enduring significance of cycle effects on student activists’ social media use. Nor was this irony lost on students when eventually granted access to these groups:

They made me an admin… I see it as some sort of symbolic thing, like, ‘you're in with us now’. No one else was made an admin and I just thought, like, that’s not really cool… It’s a bit elitist, a bit cliquey. (Bekka, Edinburgh)

**Conclusion**

In studying activists’ social media use across the 2010/11 protests, this article has highlighted the enduring importance of cycle effects in contemporary media-centric movements. Findings have shown that Facebook and Twitter can facilitate connective engagement *and* offline protest mobilisation, enabling grassroots campaigns to build quickly and effectively. However, the case study has indicated that these powers might be temporal and more susceptible to longstanding collective action trends as the cycle progresses. Moreover, these findings show the malleability of social media as an organising tool, with its capacity to facilitate network secrecy and hierarchy as well as openness and horizontality.

At the beginning of the cycle, students’ use of Facebook and Twitter contributed significantly towards the campaign’s rapid upward scale shift. The accessibility and adaptability of these tools enabled activists to respond quickly to the fees announcement and build a campaign that communicated directly with students and mainstream media. This was illustrated most powerfully in NCAFC’s ‘Day of Action’, which spawned an interconnected network of occupation spaces. Occupiers took advantage of social media platforms to arrange multiple spontaneous, media-friendly mobilisations, as well as provide a regular supply of tweets, blogs, articles and videos. Whilst their viral distribution through personalised communication networks recalls Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012)’s logic of connective action, generating this ‘informational exuberance’ was also a deliberate strategy for maintaining the interest of mainstream media.

The emphasis on building and sustaining the campaign’s mainstream media presence reflected a need to pressurise MPs into voting down the fees bill. The amplification it created arguably strengthened activists’ ability to rally unaffiliated ‘smart mobs’ in the run-up to the vote, but the media narrative of the fees vote ultimately came to define the students’ perceived purpose and lifespan. The resultant downward scale shift echoes Gitlin’s (1981) observations on student movements in the 1960s, and the mixed blessings of mainstream media amplification. Moreover, this loss of attention exposed the fragility of students’ organisational power, as the lack of strong ties and a uniting cause saw the disaggregation of smart mobs at a time when many core occupiers were trying to build a wider student movement. These occupiers *had* built strong ties, but in their efforts to counter surveillance threats they had become increasingly disconnected from the wider student body. Social media ironically gave structure to this disconnection via ‘secret’ Facebook groups, arguably contradicting the values of horizontalism and democracy occupation spaces were initially founded upon.

In sum, the case study has identified certain limitations to social media’s effectiveness as a mobilising and organising tool, limitations which are perhaps more likely to emerge over the course of a protest cycle. Although it is doubtful whether the accountability structures of the NUS and student unions could have led a campaign as dynamic as activists achieved in autumn 2010, the mobilising power of social media rested on temporalities specific to the cycle’s early stages. This is not to say that social media lacks mobilising agency. Rather, it is to point to its limitations for creating mobilisations that extend beyond ‘sporadic’ episodes (Theocharis, 2012). Nor does this mean that students mobilised initial through Facebook events did not go on to become committed activists after the fees bill passed. The creative means through which occupations formed ensured that they attracted a significant number of participants with little or no prior activism experience. Yet their development and growing commitment as *activists* arguably owed more to the ties and collective identities formed in the physical space itself.

The organisational expression of these strengthening ties and identities through ‘secret’ Facebook groups calls into question the perceived affinity between ICT networks and the values of horizontalism as proposed by Mason (2011) and others. Activists’ use of Facebook in particular has shown that social media is a malleable organising tool, one that evolves in accordance with activists’ changing needs. In this respect, this article echoes Flesher Fominaya’s (2015) argument that activists need to be more reflexive in their online organisation in order to sustain their commitments to horizontalism and participatory democracy, particularly in how it responds to authorities’ efforts to suppress their connective power.

Whilst findings point to cycle effects in the student case study, it remains to be seen whether cycle effects can be applied to contemporary media-centric movements more broadly. Certainly, studies by Juris (2012) and Tremayne (2012) suggest similar effects in protests’ early stages, as do Flesher Fominaya (2015) and Kavada (2015) in their latter stages. It is therefore proposed that future studies of social movements employing elements of a ‘connective action’ logic take greater consideration of the extent to which these processes evolve, and are shaped by how activists respond to more familiar ‘collective action’ problems.

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