Fragmentation and visibility in a big tent: Digital communication and the People's Climate March

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The September 2014 "People's Climate March" was reportedly the largest climate change mobilization in history (Dastagir, 2014). Nearly 400,000 protesters marched in New York City, and additional rallies were held in 160 countries around the world. As noted in the *New York Times*, "the march was a self-consciously inclusive affair, with the organizers intent on creating a very big tent" (Foderaro, 2014). The website of the march organizers offered tools to visitors to help find themselves within the broader movement (peoplesclimate.org). Visitors could click a button to choose "how do you identify?" (Quakers; Vegans; Skaters; Indigenous peoples, etc.) or "What do you care about?" (Bees; Anti-capitalism; Fracking; Science, and so on). Also featured are the names of various celebrities, athletes, and authors endorsing the march. These communication strategies are outward signs of a broader shift in the structure of social movements, from a focus on *collective action* in which organizations seek to sustain long-term action by reinforcing group identity, toward *connective action*, in which organizations foster more personalized involvement and communication among loosely connected networks of individuals (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

This shift toward increased diversity in the organization of social movements is of particular relevance to climate change activism. Among the varied challenges of mobilization around climate change is the difficulty of organizing across multiple stakeholders who orient to the issue through very different frames (Cox, 2012). We do not yet have a clear picture of how activists are meeting this challenge via strategic usage of distinct social media platforms during specific event mobilizations. The affordances of different social media platforms have discernably different ways of shaping activist communication (Poell, 2014; Ems, 2014). These differences reflect not only constraints and opportunities presented by the structures of each platform—what you can do on Facebook is simply different than what you can do on Twitter—but also the emerging strategic practices of activists as they establish beliefs about what each platform is "good for" (Nitsche, Donges, & Schade, 2014).

In this study, we use data collected from Twitter and Facebook before, during and after the People's Climate March to explore how climate activists used the two social platforms to mobilize engagement. First, we draw on the networked gatekeeping framework (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) to investigate the central actors in the campaign as well as the most popular linked content that circulated in networks of conversation about the march. In doing so, we ask (a) how the central actors and most widespread content differed the day before, during, and after the march, and (b) how the actors and content differed between Facebook and Twitter. Second, we provide analysis of four cases selected to cut across categories of organizations and individual activists—350.org, Sierra Club, UniteBlue, and the actor Mark Ruffalo—that allow us to compare in-depth the practices of strategic communication across two social media services over time. Our particular interest is to clarify how the affordances of each platform as well as the goals

of communicators shaped the kind of content—and timing of posts—produced for each site.

Data and Method

We used a keyword search in DiscoverText, a cloud-based, collaborative text analytics tool, to collect Twitter and Facebook posts matching the term "climate" the day before, the day of, and the day after the climate change march[i]. We searched the public APIs of both platforms every 15 minutes the day of the march and one day before and after. Table 1 reports the number of posts in our collection[ii]. In addition, we collected all the tweets and Facebook posts from our four cases for three weeks before the march.

Table 1: Posts by date and platform

	September 20	September 21	September 22
Twitter	25,137	52,232	30,376
Facebook	3,099	2,613	3,149

Part one of the paper uses computational analysis combined with human coding to identify the most important actors and content on each day, by platform (Lewis, Zamith & Hermida, 2013). First, we use cluster analysis to identify the most widely spread posts on each platform, each day. We use a coding scheme proposed by Nitschke et al. (2014) to identify the communicative actions represented by these central posts (e.g., link to other web content, mobilize users/call to action, address particular target groups). Second, we classify the actor types of the most prominently mentioned actors on each platform, by day (Lotan et al., 2011) (e.g., mainstream news media organizations, advocacy organizations, individual activists, celebrities). Part two of the paper offers a qualitative examination of the way our four selected organizations/activists used—or did not use—the two platforms before, during and after the march.

Findings from this study are expected to contribute to the literature on the changing nature of activism in the digital media era as well as advance our understanding of the communication processes that helped to make the People's Climate March possible. We also aim to contribute to the as yet small body of literature that examines climate change advocacy communication across a broader social media ecology, rather than examining a single platform in isolation (Poell, 2014; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

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[i] We also collected data from Twitter hashtags relevant to the march, such as #peoplesclimate. For this study we draw on the keyword search data to develop a more inclusive population of posts about the march.

[ii] These numbers do not represent the full corpus of all tweets or Facebook posts about the march. In the case of Twitter, we did not have access to the "firehose" of all tweets matching our search term. The API search returns a subset of all relevant tweets (Driscoll & Walker, 2014). In the case of Facebook, we searched only public posts to the platform. This includes individuals who post publicly on the site as well as public-facing organizations and groups that do not require permission to join.

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