Article

Twitter as "a journalistic substitute"? Examining #wiunion tweeters' behavior and self-perception

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Abstract

Twitter has been cited as a key factor behind a number of recent protest movements. Through interviews with heavy users of the #wiunion hashtag, this study examines the motivations and perceptions behind its usage during the 2011 Wisconsin labor protests. Findings suggest these users see a blurred boundary between citizen journalism and activism, but that their Twitter behavior is driven in part by distrust of traditional news sources and a desire to present an alternative. Notably, most do not see themselves as citizen journalists because they see journalism as an institutional, rather than individual, practice. Their orientation toward information credibility also diverges from traditional journalism, relying on interpersonal trust and the availability of visual evidence. These findings are discussed in the broader context of protest mobilization through information gathering and sharing.

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When Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker introduced a "budget repair bill" on February 14, 2011, including provisions stripping public employee unions of collective bargaining rights, the response was immediate. Unions began organizing and mobilizing protests at the Capitol that day, and participation quickly spread, with attendance topping out at over 100,000 people. The story of the bill and the protests against it received national attention from both institutional and individual media, with Twitter playing a large part in disseminating information. As an open, public platform, Twitter was used to both mobilize and inform the public, and was used by both supporters and opponents of the protests. The use of hashtags (particularly #wiunion, but also opinionated hashtags such as #killthebill and #standwithwalker) to contextualize and categorize tweets meant that users had a standing destination both to find and distribute the latest information.

But Twitter was neither the only outlet for information about the protests, nor the only place to learn or forward news about the bill; traditional media and other social platforms also allowed those opportunities. Did specific differences between Twitter and other platforms motivate its use during the genesis of the protests? Were there characteristics of the information found via Twitter that privileged it over traditional sources for some users?

Twitter has been studied not only as a social network technology, but also as a platform for citizen journalism (Holton, 2012), or a blurred practice of "news participation" (Purcell et al., 2010). These behaviors both draw from and contribute to an environment of "ambient journalism" (Hermida, 2010). In such an environment, news information is all around, both being provided fully formed by traditional news sources and raw from individuals.

This case study examines the concept in the context of Twitter's role in the early weeks of the Wisconsin protests. Using interviews with frequent #wiunion posters, we examine it as an alternative news source and distribution channel to traditional media, and as a mechanism for mobilizing a new, informal protest movement. These roles present important questions for the use of social media in citizen journalism. Since Twitter presents no barriers between different types of information, and perhaps privileges the combination of news and activist contexts, it challenges our understanding of individuals' contributions to news production. Further complicating this understanding is the ability of mobile phones to post tweets from an event. By relating live voices from activist Twitter users to its technological traits, this study attempts to understand the journalistic nature of Twitter as an ongoing news forum and a motivator of information-exchange behaviors.

Literature review

Twitter motivations

People use Twitter to address a variety of motivations and intentions, including seeking and sharing information, reporting news, interacting with friends, recruiting followers,

checking public opinion, entertainment, and expressing opinion (Hwang and Shim, 2010; Java et al., 2007; Zhao and Rosson, 2009). Compared with full-scale blogging, Twitter's shorter posts lower the time and thought needed to generate content, thus satisfying a motivation for a faster mode of communication (Java et al., 2007).

In addition, the ability to link, tag, address someone in particular, and forward others' messages helps share and highlight information of mutual interest. The public nature of tweets invites a continuous discussion that could be triggered by media coverage, the first-hand presence of Twitter users, or a common interest shared among a group.

Scholars have found that social media increase users' creation and circulation of online content. As a result, Twitter users become "producers" by linking, authoring, recommending, and revising (Brynjolsson and McAfee, 2007; Starbird and Palen, 2012). Features such as hashtags and retweeting help spread news and information faster than other media, whether in normal or crisis situations, and get people with shared interests closer to each other (Boyd et al., 2010).

Twitter has particular potential to be a strong political force due to its open architecture. Unlike Facebook, which defaults to restricted, in-network exposure to other users' posts, Twitter posts are broadcast publicly and can be easily viewed by all users. This creates the ability for users to respond to others, making Twitter a venue for public political dialogue, and helping users publicly affirm positions, reinforce political opinions and thoughts, and exchange opinions with others (Kim, 2011).

In a study of political tweets sent during the 2010 U.S. elections, Conover et al. (2011) found that retweets tended to be segregated by ideology, while ideologically different individuals were more likely to interact by mentioning the opposing user in their post. During the 2009 German elections, Tumasjan et al. (2010) found that Twitter was used extensively for political communication and was even somewhat useful in predicting the election results. That Twitter may be a valuable source of news information, despite partisan balkanization, suggests a role for it and other social media in the production of news by independent citizens, either in one-off situations or on an ongoing basis.

Social media and protest

The Arab Spring uprisings cannot be separated from the mass public's use of social media (Cohen, 2011; Lim, 2012; Webster, 2011), which encouraged people to interact in novel ways (Wall and El Zahed, 2011). This is an example of what Jenkins (2006) called "participatory culture," in which ordinary people, by actively using digital media, can create and distribute their own content, and eventually engage in wider political activities than ever.

This may be attributed to several social media affordances for promoting participation, particularly protest behavior. First, social media overcome physical boundaries, facilitating both strong and weak ties, and enabling social movements to reach the mass public. Social media also function as information hubs that allow users to remain in constant contact and exchange updates regarding collective activities (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012).

This is not to suggest that "leaderless" or purely spontaneous movements are actually that horizontal. Indeed, as Gerbaudo (2012) makes clear, movements formed through social media generally rely on central individuals to form the core of their networks,

spreading from there via interconnected personal networks to create a form of "connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). The interaction of these movements with traditional, formal organizations, such as activist groups or unions, is a point of contention because ongoing communication within the movement and outward replaces the notion of stable membership within an organization (Gerbaudo, 2012).

There are broadly three ways social media relate to protests. First, social media often serve as an ideal information provider to ordinary citizens who may be willing to engage in protest. Social media are possibly the best tool for distributing instantaneous content. Any user can post information about events as they happen, and the characteristics of specific platforms can allow that information to quickly reach the mass public. For instance, vivid pictures of protests abounded on Facebook during the Egyptian revolt (Howard, 2011; Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). Much of the early news about the protests spread through Twitter (Lotan et al., 2011). When traditional media did not have the time to develop fully sourced stories, Twitter worked best where the story was changing quickly (Grusin, 2010). In democratized societies, social media often serve as alternate information sources in social or political conflicts, creating a way around the press's traditional gatekeeping function and contributing to the public's information diet (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012).

Secondly, social media provide for social communication and interaction (Valenzuela et al., 2012). Social media help citizens coordinate opposition or express dissent in the public sphere. For example, during the 2007 Nigerian election, Twitter enabled citizens to participate in public discussion throughout the electoral process (Ifukor, 2010). Social media also create a public space where previously taboo topics can be discussed (Fahmy, 2010). In Egypt, social media were the major channels through which people encountered dissident opinions and engaged in open debate about them (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012).

Lastly, social media often motivate users to involvement in offline political activities (Burgess and Green, 2008). They have been used to inspire citizens to connect their personal networks to their political activities, via "liquid" organizations driven by an influential core but maintained by an ephemeral membership (Gerbaudo, 2012). During the Tahrir Square protests, social media allowed for distribution of information outside the government's control, and helped lead citizens to both participate and believe their participation could be effective (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Social media are developing into a new means for social movements and activists to exercise dissent, potentially creating forms of power capable of countering the status quo (Castells, 2007).

Thus, social media may be viewed as a space for expanding and sustaining the networks upon which protests count (Lim, 2012). They make it easier for people to self-organize and voluntarily participate in collective events (Shirky, 2008), particularly via prompting by core activists that is mediated through personal networks (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Citizen journalism

By lowering the costs of producing and distributing content, the Internet has dramatically lowered barriers to engaging in citizen journalism – that is, the production of news content by ordinary citizens without formal journalistic training (Niekamp, 2009; Witt, 2004). Typically, the content comes from individual participation and engagement with

the entire news production process (Bowman and Willis, 2003). Citizen journalism has often been connected with the distribution of "mobilizing information" (Lemert et al., 1977; Mythen, 2010), which helps people to act on attitudes they already possess.

Perhaps the most important function of this participatory media is that it acts as a bridge between traditional media and both online and offline forms of civic participation (Schaffer, 2007). Though participatory and citizen journalism are sometimes identified as part of the same phenomenon (Lasica, 2003), Nip (2006) conceptually separates them as the two most citizen-focused categories in a five-part typology of connections between mainstream journalism and the public. Participatory journalism – a model in which audience members contribute their voices to a centralized information source, often an established news organization – seems ready-made for social media, in light of the reliance on sharing and redistributing information within online social networks. Citizen journalism can occur without the central presence of a third-party organization, such as the work conducted by bloggers who do original reporting or those who provide on-the-scene, first-hand reports (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2011). Goode (2009) argues that this need not be limited to the online world, and may include examples of "metajournalism," such as occurs at community sites like Digg, where stories are aggregated, discussed, and rated. This broader conceptualization of citizen journalism is driven by its relationship to civic life and what Goode calls the "democratic imagination." In this sense, the group-curated model of a Twitter hashtag can be seen as citizen journalism, with retweets making more prominent what the community is most interested in. In a highly contentious environment, this type of aggregate curation may also be part of the broader process of argumentation, as a hashtag's overall tone shifts to reflect users' opinion.

In this model, a distinction between citizen and professional journalism can be seen – that "no editor comes between the author and the reader" (Lasica, 2003). However, there have been doubts about the credibility of information provided by citizen journalists versus that provided by traditional media. Bowman and Willis (2003) suggest that traditional media's credibility is based on adherence to a filter-then-publish model, in which information comes into a newsroom for editing prior to being released to the public. Conversely, citizen journalism tends to operate under a publish-then-filter model, where information is released to the public and then edited (Johnson and Wiedenbeck, 2009; Shirky, 2008). Whereas the traditional news filter often exists in the form of editors in the newsroom, a citizen journalism filter might be more diffuse, existing in the aggregate form of reader responses. A hybrid "participatory" form might build on the filter-first model by allowing readers to participate in building and critiquing a story, or connecting it to other stories through social platforms (Russell, 2011).

Since Twitter is sometimes used as a news source (Purcell et al., 2010), users typically assess the credibility of tweets based on how reliable and trustworthy the source has been in the past. Morris and her colleagues (2012) found that Twitter users had difficulty assessing credibility based on message content alone, and used factors such as message topic, username, and user image to evaluate a tweet, although this didn't necessarily help them uncover the actual truthfulness of the item. They also found that users are concerned about the credibility of content that does not come from someone they follow. Pal and Counts (2011) found that Twitter users with more followers tend to be seen more favorably than those with fewer followers. Mendoza, Poblete and Castillo (2010) conducted a network analysis of tweets sent during the 2010 Chilean earthquake and found that the propagation of tweets that

correspond to rumors differs from tweets that spread news information, because rumors tend to be questioned more than news by the Twitter community.

The case

This study focuses on Twitter activity related to the protests undertaken by Wisconsin labor unions and their supporters between the February 14, 2011, introduction of Governor Walker's "budget repair bill" and its passage on March 11, 2011. Protests against the bill topped 100,000 people and helped spark protests against similar bills in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana.

During this timeframe, Twitter users used specific hashtags to mark tweets as related to the bill and/or the protests, including several that inherently supported one side or the other (e.g. #standwithwalker and #killthebill). This study focuses on use of the more neutral #wiunion hashtag, which was used by both supporters and opponents of the bill. The choice to restrict our examination to this hashtag was made under the assumption that individuals looking to Twitter for information about the issue might use this well-publicized hashtag as a starting point.

Research questions

With an eye toward filling gaps in previous research on the Wisconsin protests (Veenstra et al., 2014), we examine a series of research questions. These questions deal with user motivations, actions, perceptions, and orientation toward information.

> RQ1. What motivated Twitter use during the protests? Were #wiunion users driven by expression, consumption, information distribution or some combination?
> RQ2. Did the users see their activity as journalistic in nature? Did they see themselves as activists or opinion leaders, trying to build a movement? Do self-perceptions overlap across those categories?
> RQ3. How did users perceive the credibility of the information they received and posted via Twitter? Did they bring traditional journalistic norms to bear when sending information out to their followers?
> RQ4. Did the users' Twitter behavior differ when tweeting from the site of a protest or rally, as opposed to from home, work or some other off-site location?

Methods

This study follows up previous research (Veenstra et al., 2014) examining an archive of 775,030 tweets posted between February 17 and March 13, 2011, with the hashtag #wiunion. That study found that tweets sent from mobile phones – that is, those potentially sent from protest sites – were less likely to contain links, but more likely to link to news sites when they did include links. Link-sharing behavior was also characterized by the inclusion of additional hashtags, suggesting an effort to contextualize the news users distributed to their networks. These behaviors were seen as evidence of journalistic inclinations, particularly among users who may have been tweeting from

protests. However, the tweets themselves could not specifically identify whether mobile users were at protests, or whether news-sharing users were motivated by journalistic concerns.

Using interviews with 14 frequent #wiunion posters, this study attempts to probe and validate those findings, as well as extend the understanding of how and why individuals use Twitter for information consumption, redistribution, and expression during a crisis situation.

Potential participants were first identified through a search of the most active #wiunion users. An arbitrary cut-off of an average of one #wiunion tweet per day during our observation period, or 23 total, was established, which was at the 94th percentile of posters. From this subsample, we randomly selected 70 individuals to invite, removing accounts of traditional news organizations or journalists in order to focus on citizen journalism behavior. These 70 received invitations as targeted messages on Twitter, and were asked to complete an initial questionnaire with basic demographic and media use questions, intended to save time during interviews and better prepare interviewers. Of the initial 70, 31 responded to the message by completing the questionnaire; additionally, several responded directly to the invite but did not want to complete the questionnaire. In total, 14 participants ultimately completed a semi-structured interview. All interviews were conducted via text conversation over an online chat platform, such as Google Chat or Skype, in February and March 2012. Five interviewers were trained to conduct interviews using the protocol found in the Appendix, and to probe for more in-depth responses to each topic. Interviewers also used responses to the pre-interview questionnaire and interviewees' archived tweets to help in these probes. Each interview was conducted by a single interviewer, and each interviewee was asked all questions in the interview protocol.

Results

Though our participants were selected from our sampling frame at random, the sample's small size, combined with different levels of interest and participation, produced a group that should not be considered representative. Primarily, this is because all participants were protest supporters and all were from Wisconsin – six in the Madison area and eight in other parts of the state. This is in some contrast to those who completed a questionnaire but did not complete an interview, who live in seven different states. Additionally, while separate analysis (Veenstra et al., 2013) suggests that protest opponents accounted for 8.5% of #wiunion tweets, no opponents responded to the invitation to participate, perhaps a result of holding the minority position in the #wiunion context. Our participants were also highly active during the early weeks of the protests, posting an average of 301.86 #wiunion tweets each during our observation period.

Participants – four female and 10 male – ranged in age from 25 to 61, with a mean of 39.25. Two participants were members of public employee unions, and another was a non-union public employee. Twelve had at least a bachelor's degree, and four had a graduate degree. Eleven indicated that they had a smartphone, and 12 had a laptop; all had at least one portable computing device. Six participants indicated that they were Democrats; the others had no party affiliation. Eight identified their political ideology as "liberal," with the others selecting "somewhat liberal" or "moderate."

In this paper, all usernames have been stripped to protect participants' anonymity. Participants will be referred to by randomly assigned numbers. All spelling and grammatical errors in participant quotes appeared in the original text.

Motivations for using Twitter

Users' motivations for using Twitter to follow or participate in the protests fell into five general categories: mobilization and coordination of others, mobilization information for oneself, perceived utility as a news source, media critique, and characteristics unique to Twitter.

Six users identified the ability to use Twitter to mobilize others and coordinate group action as a reason for using it. Participant 12, a union communications director, called Twitter the "best [medium] for mass mobilization," noting: "Twitter was great for as-it-happens reporting for the actions and rallies. I was able to give firsthand accounts of what was happening during the rallies." Participant 2 said that "Twitter coupled with Tweetdeck allows you to become a sort of 'remote logistical coordinator' in disasters or movements." He made a comparison to his experience using Twitter to coordinate relief efforts during the 2011 flooding in Queensland, Australia.

Some users saw opportunities to leverage existing social networks for specific mobilization purposes. Participant 5, a Milwaukee resident, saw himself in a position to be a bonding agent (Norris, 2002) between the state's two largest cities: "I had a good sized Milwaukee network (about 500) and most of the Madison tweeters didn't have that, so I felt I had a unique opportunity to get information to interested parties in Milwaukee." Participant 8 saw a similar possibility, noting, "I believe I have a good reputation," and that he thought that would help him to "spread the word" about the bill and the protests.

On the flipside, Participant 9 used Twitter to find mobilization information that he couldn't get through other social contacts: "Because I am not connected to a union, but unions often organize events, I would not find out about them except thru Twitter." Participant 13 also used Twitter to connect with other activists and "keep [his] hand on the 'pulse' of the WI budget protests."

Some users also indicated motivations related to news information – either getting it faster and more easily, or acting as a corrective to perceived bad coverage in traditional media. Participant 9 said his main motivation was "that I can get news in realtime." Participant 10 cited social media's speed as well:

> One thing that became really apparent to me during the protests was that traditional press type releases were painfully slow. I'd hear about developments on [Facebook] and twitter way faster than I'd see an article or post on a media site.

Participant 14, a member of a state employee union, cited speed and breadth of content as motivators, saying, "It's the first place news breaks, the costs to getting on it are quite low, and you can follow a very broad community of people there."

Others were explicit about using their Twitter networks to provide more or different information than that provided by traditional media. Participant 5 noted, "You could turn on CNN, or Fox News who was actually there more, and see a completely different story than what you saw with your own eyes." Participant 6, a blogger, said that "counter[ing] any misinformation that went out on social media and mainstream press" was one of her main

motivations. The results of this motivation can be seen not only in the individuals who made it explicit, but also in the general level of hostility expressed toward traditional media.

These motivations might apply just as well to other social media as to Twitter – indeed, several users indicated using other sites in the same ways, or referred to "Facebook and Twitter" or "social media" instead of isolating their Twitter use. However, some users indicated characteristics that are unique to Twitter as factors in their usage. The most recognizable of these is the ability to use hashtags to filter other people's tweets and to contextualize your own. Participant 9 indicated that the ability to use hashtags to filter information to his interests was an important reason why he used Twitter, while Participant 10 noted that "Twitter make[s] a much bigger conversation possible," and that hashtags make it "really easy to plug into a conversation and follow trends." Participant 14 also noted the "very broad community of people" on Twitter. This echoes a Twitter highlight from Participant 4, that "it is able to be accessed by anybody…there's no need to secure a specific network of others to interact with (e.g. Facebook 'friending' others to build that network)." He also noted Twitter's ability to get "to the source" by "tracking politicians, sometimes while they are in session in the Assembly or Senate."

Perceptions of Twitter behavior

Users were divided on whether their Twitter behavior qualified as journalism. Unlike Holton's (2012) similar study, in which participants rejected the term, some of our participants accepted it enthusiastically. When asked, "Were you seeing yourself like a journalist?" Participant 9 took a broad view: "Yes, and I view many other tweeters as a journalistic substitute for MSM [mainstream media]." Participant 6, having spent the protests transitioning from blogging to "story reporting and investigation," said she now sees herself as a journalist, but that she would have also called herself an opinion leader as a result of her blog.

Others were more circumspect. Participant 11 said that his #wiunion activity was "somewhat" journalistic, "in that I did a lot of blogging about the protests at the time and then about the recall." He says that he is "partisan but fact-based," and also identifies his behavior as activist in nature. And though Participant 12 said her activity was "not really" journalistic, she differentiated it by noting that her "original tweets were more like first-hand accounts than an article," suggesting a more structure- than content-driven perception of journalism. Participant 13, though noting that he "would [never] compare myself to an actual professional journalist," did say:

> I thought of it mainly like a citizen journalist. (Of course, "journalist" in that I was "reporting" what was happening. I didn't really make an effort to be non-partisan and made no secret of my political affiliations. Not NPOV [neutral point of view]!)

Some rejected the term entirely. Participant 2 said, "i dont know if you can really call yourself a journalist when you are putting things out in the universe in 140 characters," making another structural distinction. Participant 5 said, "I just called it like I saw it," and said he could be seen as a journalist "only in a very loose sense." Instead, he identified as an "organizer." Participant 8 presented the most non-committal assessment of his Twitter activity:

Journalists do far more important work than me. I'm sure not an opinion leader; I don't consider myself influential. I guess I'm an activist of sorts. I want the world to be a better place and accept it may not occur without effort on MY part.

Several users identified their #wiunion behavior as activist in nature, including Participant 11, who also saw his behavior as "somewhat" journalistic, and Participant 7, who provided an additional foundation in answering the question of whether he sees himself as an activist: "$800 million was cut from schools and in small towns like mine that hurts. Activist."

Orientations toward information credibility

Although most users expressed at least some concern about the credibility of information they received via the #wiunion feed, they generally felt they had working strategies to determine whether something should be accepted. For Participant 10, this meant going to multiple sources:

yes, there are a lot of credibility issues with my twitter feed. i have learned to take everything with a grain of salt and make sure you hear it from a separate reliable source before you put too much weight on information gleaned from the twittersphere. I was still figuring a lot of this out at the height of the protest, that twitter is a rumor propagating machine, and that fast info isn't also good info.

Participant 12, a union communication director, took a similar strategy regarding retweeting: "I tend to err on the side of caution and only RT [retweet] important information from trustworthy sources. Or I double check the validity before posting." Another union member, Participant 14, used existing trust as a benchmark: "we tried to rely on people who were in the Capitol at that time and who we knew were there, and also political writers."

One validity-checking source that several users made explicit was visual evidence. Participant 7 used this strategy to supplement reliance on journalistic sources: "I usually stick with links to real journalists not opinion, but many protesters supplied photos during protests. BatmanWI traveled to NY & DC and put up photos." Participant 2 took a similar approach, saying, "I thought most of it very credible, especially when backed up by Twitpics and Youtube video links." For Participant 4, this was a guard against rumor, as was the wisdom of the crowd:

Yes…there have been rumors certainly…however, it seems like often information was able to be confirmed, either via pictures/video, others tweeting about the same thing, etc. I have also experienced that "the community" of users self-polices regarding whether things are rumors or able to be confirmed…at least to a certain extent.

Like Participant 12, Participant 6 put effort into explicitly checking facts: "One of the things I work hard to do is actually fact-check things that are getting widely cited and re-tweeted, and use my public platform there to either support or counter stuff, depending on what I find."

Participant 11 connected it to the partisan dispute that was central to the protests:

I always go to the source. When someone cites an academic paper but offers a summary, I'll go to the paper to confirm it. Especially when folks I know are tweeting from the "other side" cite articles. I dig into the material before responding or retweeting.

For several users, the perceived failures of traditional media drove them toward Twitter as an information source without much concern about its credibility. Participant 1:

twitter was invaliable. people would tweet links to bloggers who were "on the ground", and link to articles and colums from "regular" media. I followed a number of facebook pages also that had great information. The 2 biggest newspapers in Wisconsin are the Wisconsin State Journal (madison based) and the Milwaukee Journal sentanal (Milwaukee based) and I found both to be quite biased in their reporting.

Participant 9 was particularly aggressive in his stance, saying, "since MSM is giving so little coverage, I will take something slightly in error as opposed to absence of info." Participant 13 had a similar take, saying of Twitter, "At many times, significantly more credible than local media, and almost always more credible than information from places like NYT, CNN, FOX, etc."

Use of Twitter at protest events

While a few participants were unable to attend the protests in Madison and elsewhere in the state, those that did almost uniformly reported tweeting from protest sites using smartphones or laptops. For Participants 12 and 14, this was explicitly an organizational tool; Participant 5 used live-tweeting to contribute to a shared information network: "I did a lot of live tweeting when I was there, and followed friends' tweets closely when I wasn't."

Among the users' discussion of live-tweeting behavior, three interesting wrinkles arose. First, while our conception of mobile computing relates strongly to cellular networks (particularly 3G and LTE networks), Participant 9 relied on finding an available wifi signal for his laptop to get online during protests. Participant 12 indicated that, while she frequently used her phone, she used a laptop "whenever possible (i.e. hotels, coffee shops)." The prevalence of open wifi networks in cities suggests that, at least in events like this, mobile computing needs to take traditional computing capabilities into account.

At the other end of the spectrum, Participant 10 noted that he did not have a smartphone during the protests. While at the Capitol, he updated his Twitter and Facebook feeds via text message, an option that gets around the potential unavailability of both wifi and high-speed cellular networks.

Finally, Participant 11 indicated that he does "too much blogging and content creation to rely on mobile devices," but that he did rely on his phone to shoot and upload photos and video to social network sites during the protests.

Discussion

Our findings suggest a strong core of committed individuals at the center of the #wiunion protest network. They were highly active during the protests, both online and offline, and see social media as key to their participation. Through the informational and expressive motivations they cited, their thoughts on information credibility and traditional media,

and their qualified acceptance of the "journalism" label, it also appears that this activist network has the makings of a new informational network, driven by crowdsourcing and post-publication filtering, but potentially highly susceptible to confirmation bias.

Study participants particularly emphasized the speed of information dissemination through social media as a motivation for usage versus other modes of news delivery. The immediate and ubiquitous nature of microblogging tools such as Twitter poses a significant challenge to traditional thinking about protest mobilization and crisis reporting. Allowing for quick, decentralized organization means that Twitter not only can help bring protests to life on short notice, but can also privilege informal and interpersonal connections that help to mobilize individuals without direction by a formal protest organization. The Wisconsin protests appear to have occurred under an organizationally enabled connective action model (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), in which formal organizations (primarily unions) mobilized internally using email and social media, and were also joined by unaffiliated but supportive individuals organized through interpersonal and social media (such as Participant 5, who connected Madison and Milwaukee networks). Notably, the central role played by unions – broadly visible both inside and outside the movement – was not mentioned as a potential problem by our interviewees, though the presence of formal organizations in social-mediated movements identified as problematic by those interviewed by Gerbaudo (Gerbaudo, 2012).

This process also provides agency to the disconnected individual, such as Participant 9, who sought out mobilization information on Twitter that he didn't have sources for in his interpersonal network. Most study participants didn't view Twitter as a pure substitute for traditional sources, in part because they used social media in concert with and in comparison to primary news sources, both for validation and to find information to share. Their usage and behavior suggests that Twitter acts as a space for information sharing, among professional journalists as well as individual commenters, to break and disseminate news quickly, and to solicit opinions and feedback. So, while most study participants stopped short of labeling themselves journalists, they did derive immense value and personal satisfaction from their Twitter behavior. Bruns (2005) makes the argument that this suggests a process of news curation, wherein social media users selectively choose to pass along certain articles from other news sources that they have encountered within the broader environment of ambient journalism (Bruns, 2011; Hermida, 2010). The role played by the network established through this sharing behavior in supporting a protest network should be investigated by future study.

Our findings also support the idea that information found on Twitter has become an increasingly prominent part of news discourse, as on-the-scene individuals become more adept at conveying text and visual news information. However, despite the extent to which participants engaged in behavior that could be seen as citizen journalism, they mostly lacked an understanding of that behavior as journalistic. Instead, they tended to see journalism as defined by institutional or structural characteristics – that it is performed by news organizations, and through article-length reporting – rather than by the practice of individual journalists. This is somewhat ironic in light of the broad adoption of Twitter by professional journalists (Holcomb et al., 2011). Although the few participants who did see their behavior as journalistic suggest some difference between an ongoing political event, such as a protest, and a breaking news event, such as the University of Texas shooting (Holton, 2012), it appears that in either case, most people

sharing news and information via Twitter don't see themselves as engaged in journalism. Nonetheless, their behavior seems to mimic what is seen from professional journalists. That is, they used Twitter for eyewitness reporting of live events, getting information to people who weren't aware, retweeting information that they think should be highlighted, and acting as a general conduit for information.

Though most participants did not see their behavior as journalistic, they were highly attuned to the need to evaluate the credibility of information they shared with their followers. However, instead of relying on traditional journalistic norms, they tended to use ad hoc criteria, such as whether they knew the source, or whether the information included visual elements. This behavior fits with a long history of perceptions of photos and videos as "true" (Becker, 1991), though it is somewhat ironic that the time period under observation included an incident in which Bill O'Reilly aired video of a protest in California that he claimed was from Madison (Spicuzza and Barbour, 2011).

There are several key limitations to this study. First, the case study approach allows us a close understanding of this one event, but may lack external validity. Additionally, our interview participants represent the most active segment of users who posted with the #wiunion hashtag. Results stemming from this study cannot be generalized to all Twitter usage, and shouldn't be seen as representative of even other #wiunion posters; however, these results may shed light on how core movement networks form and operate in other protest contexts. The core group that we examine does not include people who might have had shallow involvement with the issue, but have since moved on to other things. As a result, the #wiunion feed as it exists now may be somewhat different from the network that existed during the early protests. While we are limited in not having participants who opposed the protests or who are from outside Wisconsin, this limitation allows our study to focus more directly on this core of #wiunion participators.

To address some of these limitations and expand on our findings, future study would do well to both expand the scope, by examining other protest contexts, and deepen it, by looking at less active users to find out what drew them to #wiunion and why they may have left it behind. Non-protest contexts, such as electoral campaigns, could also provide an appropriate venue for following up these findings.

However, the most direct way may be a longitudinal analysis that examines where the social network movement developed in Wisconsin went after the 2012 recall and general elections. Has the core been strong enough to sustain the movement between major events? Has it connected to other protest networks in Ohio, Michigan, and beyond the borders of the U.S.? Identifying those possibilities will help in establishing the potential of this new model of movement formation.

Funding

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Appendix: Interview protocol

A. Online pre-interview questionnaire, completed prior to scheduling an interview

1. What is your age? (open-ended)
2. What is your gender? (Male, Female)
3. What is your education level? (Some high school, High school graduate, Some college, Bachelor's or Associate's degree, Some grad school, Graduate degree)
4. What is your occupation? (open-ended)
5. Where do you live? (open-ended)
6. What is your political party affiliation, if any? (Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, Green, Other, None)
7. When it comes to most issues, do you consider yourself… (Liberal, Somewhat Liberal, Moderate, Somewhat Conservative, Conservative)
8. Which of these devices do you use? (Smartphone, Tablet computer, Laptop, Other portable computing device)
9. How often do you use the Internet to search for information about current events? (Never, Hardly Ever, Sometimes, Regularly)

10. …use the Internet to search for information about political issues?
11. …watch national television news?
12. …watch local television news?
13. …watch TV news analysis and opinion programs?
14. …watch TV news satire programs?
15. …read a national newspaper, in print or online?
16. …read a local newspaper, in print or online?
17. …read news magazines, in print or online?
18. …read political blogs or other opinion sites?
19. …use political social media, such as Twitter or Facebook?
20. …use Internet news aggregators, such as Yahoo News or Google News?
21. …listen to political talk radio?
22. If a breaking news event, such as a major building fire, happened in your community, what source would you consult first for news about it? (open-ended)
23. If a major national news event, such as a terrorist attack, occurred, what source would you consult first for news about it? (open-ended)

B.   Interview questions regarding media and social network habits

1. On an average day, how much time do you spend getting caught up on news and current events?
2. How do you normally access the Internet when browsing online media for news?
3. Are you active on any other social network services besides Twitter?
4. What percent of your social network time is on mobile gadgets versus desktop devices?
5. In a typical week, how many tweets do you make?
6. What is your primary motivation for using Twitter and how do you use it?

C.   Interview questions regarding the Wisconsin labor protests

1. How did you become interested in the Wisconsin labor protests?
2. How were you impacted by the protests?
3. How did you participate in the protests?
4. What were you trying to accomplish with Twitter during the protests?
5. How did you access Twitter when posting about the protests? Was your Twitter usage different from home vs. mobile devices? When at protests?
6. Did you see yourself acting like a journalist? Opinion leader? As an activist?
7. What were your primary sources of information during the protests?
8. How important was Twitter for you personally during protests? How did your Twitter usage change?
9. During the protests, what was your primary motivation for using Twitter, and what percentage of your tweets was about the protests? What prompted you to retweet, or to include hashtags or links?
10. How did the protests impact your Twitter status regarding followers and you following others?
11. What do you think about the credibility of information about the protests that you received through Twitter? What kind of sources did you follow for protest information?