

Editorial

Editorial: Networks and Organizing Processes in Online Social Media

Seungyoon Lee

Brian Lamb School of Communication, Purdue University, USA; seungyoon@purdue.edu

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Abstract

Online social media present unprecedented opportunities and challenges for a range of organizing processes such as information sharing, knowledge creation, collective action, and post-disaster resource mobilization. Concepts and tools of network research can help highlight key aspects of online interaction. This editorial introduction frames the thematic issue along three themes of networked processes: identity and identification; interaction patterns in online communities; and challenges and cautionary notes concerning social media organizing. A diverse range of country contexts, as well as theoretical and methodological approaches illustrated in this issue, represent the multifaceted research that scholars can undertake to understand networked organizing on social media.

Keywords

emergent organizing; networks; organizational communication; online communities; social media; social network analysis

Issue

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1. Introduction

Online social media present unprecedented opportunities and challenges for a range of organizing processes such as information sharing, knowledge creation, collective action, and post-disaster resource mobilization. Social media not only provide a ubiquitous channel of communication but also constitute the structure and space of organizing.

The phenomena observed on social media platforms sometimes support and sometimes defy traditional theories of organizing. On one hand, centralized individuals and organizations still play an important role, showing hierarchies and inequalities (Shaw & Hill, 2014). In addition, factors such as status and geographic co-location continue to be important aspects of organizing processes in online spaces. On the other hand, online organizing empowers mobilization without a pre-established or external structure of coordination. Individuals collaborate without tangible incentives, across physical and social boundaries, and through improvising ties from previously weak or nonexistent relationships (Lee, Benedict, et al., 2020).

This thematic issue showcases the value of network approaches for uncovering the structures of interaction on social media. Concepts and tools central to Social Network Analysis (e.g., Monge & Contractor, 2003) can help highlight relational patterns such as connectivity and segregation, leadership structure, strong and weak ties, and diffusion. This thematic issue publishes studies that examine these structures of networks on social media—e.g., who communicates with whom, who collaborates with whom, and who forms groups with whom—to provide insights into the ways in which social interaction shapes emergent outcomes. Three major themes are discussed below.

2. Identity and Identification in Emergent Organizing

Ubiquitous communication through social media allows emergent organizing in response to evolving social issues or crises. Social technologies are the organizing agents of collective mobilization in which diverse actors connect with each other often without pre-existing structures or history of collaboration (Majchrzak et al., 2007; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). Thus, how people form

attachments and identify with other members and groups is a core question for understanding collective mobilization (Ren et al., 2012). The first two articles address the identity of individuals, groups, and leaders in two different contexts of emergent organizing.

Benedict (2022) examines emergent connections formed through Facebook groups after the wildfires of 2018 in California. Facebook groups were coordinated by citizens themselves, and survivors engaged in resilience by identifying with multiple Facebook groups and their members. The study details the ways in which linguistic and communicative choices shaped the identity of both survivors and helpers. Further, while survivors and helpers were the key agents of organizing, this study points to an aspect of traditional leadership reflected in the role administrators played in defining the identity and demarcating boundaries of their groups.

Sorce (2022) provides an analysis of protest mobilization in the 2019 Fridays for Future movement. Interviews with protesters show that several dimensions of Greta Thunberg's identity—age, gender, disability, and class—were perceived differently depending on participants' demographics. The author encourages a nuanced understanding of leadership in social movements, as Thunberg's communication through social media was central to Fridays for Future but her status as a leader was not as commonly acknowledged by activists.

3. Tracing Interaction Patterns in Online Communities

Online communities have transformed the ways in which people co-create and integrate knowledge (Faraj et al., 2011), share information and support (Kim & Lee, 2014; Lee, Chung, et al., 2020), and find company for socialization and bonding (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Relatedly, communities of practice (Wenger, 2000) group together people with shared interests or goals to learn from and support each other. The next group of articles shows the promise of using a high volume of data on social media to examine various aspects of communication in online communities.

First, Foote (2022) highlights systems theory as a framework for investigating complex interdependencies and longitudinal trajectories present in online interaction. The article shows how the unique characteristics of online communities invite communication researchers to adopt systems theory perspectives for both holistic and granular understanding of online organizing. Interested researchers will find useful insights from the examples of research questions—e.g., making community-level comparisons, tracing individual-level participation, and modeling the interaction between local behaviors and global system output—and the examples of data sources that can be used.

The next two articles show examples of utilizing trace data present in online communities. Eddington and Jarvis (2022) consider a hashtagged space, #AcademicTwitter, as an online community of practice which helped

enact resilience labor. By examining frequently mentioned themes in the semantic network of tweets, the authors observe how college instructors responded and adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic. They suggest that the communicative processes on Twitter helped people to: (a) engage in sensemaking about their experiences of online transition; (b) share information and knowledge; and (c) exchange social support.

Wang (2022) introduces a recent feature of entertainment-oriented streaming platforms: Danmu commenting. This unique communication practice allows users to flexibly engage in interaction in real time. Paradoxically, the lack of a structured interface which makes it difficult for users to address others and reveal their authorship also nurtures a sense of belonging and shared enjoyment. The article showcases a qualitative method of analyzing online communication content to examine both the relational patterns among comments and their linguistic features.

4. Challenges and Cautionary Notes Concerning Social Media Organizing

Affordances of technologies are enacted differently depending on the people who use the technologies as well as the context in which they are used (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). There are constraints and risks associated with the unique communication patterns of social media, which can be explained by both the individual level (e.g., motivation, ideological preferences, status, and demographic characteristics) and environmental level factors. The last three studies in this thematic issue shed light on the dark side of organizing on social media.

Chiu et al. (2022) utilize an ingenious study design to conduct a comparative analysis of how true news and fake news about a political controversy diffuse in different forms. The study identifies clusters from networks of users who engage in retweets or mentions. The authors quantify how many people a tweet reached at what speed, and whether the diffusion took the form of broadcast or person-to-person transmission. The results provide evidence of risks associated with fake news tweets, which tend to start to diffuse early and spread to a larger number of people at a greater speed.

In another study utilizing Twitter data, Esteve-Del-Valle (2022) identifies potential risks of echo chambers and network polarization. The author finds that holding similar ideological views explains a higher likelihood of mentions among Catalan MPs but not among Dutch parliamentarians. Such contrast in homophily is possibly due to a more established democratic party system in the Netherlands which encourages coordination among parties. This study offers support for the argument that system-level interactions on social media can be better understood by considering the characteristics of individual members and the broader social contexts.

Lastly, while social movements are one of the central contexts of online organizing, there are associated

challenges. Navarro and Gómez-Bernal (2022) examine how Spanish feminist organizations utilized social media accounts in the context of 2018 International Women's Day events. The authors show that there were unclarity around how the multiple committees should organize together to maintain a collective identity. The authors also provide critiques about forms of activism geared toward gaining attention on online platforms rather than engaging in social change. Their discussions of Slacktivism, pop feminism, and commodity feminism provide a cautious look into the legitimacy of online organizing.

5. Conclusions

In addressing these three themes, the studies illustrate the utility of network theoretical and methodological perspectives for understanding online organizing. Digitally networked spaces themselves reconstitute the relationships among actors and actions (e.g., Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). Unpacking the processes of these interconnections, in addition to examining the characteristics of users or the technological features of social media themselves, can push the boundaries of future research. The range of social and country contexts examined by work in this issue also demonstrates just how multifaceted the landscape is for research on networked organizing processes on social media.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Seungyoon Lee (PhD, University of Southern California) is an associate professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University. Her research focuses on the evolution of communication, knowledge, and collaboration networks and its implications for individual well-being and community resilience.