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Pirate culture and hacktivist mobilization: The cultural and social protocols of #WikiLeaks on Twitter

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Abstract
This article uses the case of Twitter activity under the #WikiLeaks hashtag to address issues of social movements online. The aim is to analyze the potential of elusive web spaces as sites of mobilization. Looking at linguistic and social aspects, our main questions were: What are the characteristics of the communication in terms of common discursive codes versus fragmentation? In what respects can social order be distinguished, and to what extent are connections between users simply random? Are there any prominent patterns as regards the commitment of participators over time? With the help of tools from semantic, social network and discourse analysis, we were able to show that common codes, networks of connections and mobilization do exist in this context. These patterns can be seen as part of the elaboration of a 'cognitive praxis'. In order to organize and mobilize, any movement needs to speak a common language, agree on the definition of the situation and formulate a shared vision. Even though it is global and loosely-knit, Twitter discourse is a space where such processes of meaning-production take place.

Keywords
discourse, hacktivism, social networks, Twitter, Wikileaks

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In this study, we will focus on the practice of online politics within pirate and hacktivist cultures, and we will do so through a case study of how creators, supporters and users of the much debated WikiLeaks website engage and are mobilized through the Twitter micro blogging service. In our present day and age, there is much debate about the role played by new digital media for political participation, campaigning and for the mobilization of social movements (Boehlert, 2009; Chadwick and Howard, 2008; Kahn and Kellner, 2003). While some claim that the internet will, or in fact already has, radically altered the face of collective action (Mason, 2008), others are more skeptical (Keen, 2007). Employing a constructionist conception of social space (Lefebvre, 1974), this article uses the case of Twitter posts relating to WikiLeaks to analyze the actual potential of elusive and fluid web spaces as sites of mobilization and opposition.

In line with current literature on digital culture (Benkler, 2006; Rheingold, 2002), one can conceive of political grassroots projects carried out online in terms of peer-production. From that perspective, the culture surrounding WikiLeaks on Twitter can be seen as an example of a 'networked public' (Ito, 2008), a participatory and collaborative environment where technology and tactics are used and developed, where interests are shared, where meanings are appropriated, re-made and re-distributed and where enthusiasts and volunteers create something together.

It is, however, important to note – not the least because much literature about new media has a utopian bias – that the full potential of cooperation and democratization is not necessarily realized in a completely frictionless and symmetric way. Some participants exert more power than others, and some have greater abilities than others to participate (Jenkins, 2006: 3).

Henry Jenkins (2006: 133) distinguishes between interactivity and participation. His idea is that strictly technological aspects of certain media forms allow for differing degrees of interactivity: Reading a newspaper allows for a lesser level of interactivity than a video game in which players can act upon the world that is represented. Participation, on the other hand, does not rely on technology as such, but instead on the ways in which media use is shaped by cultural and social protocols. Protocols are understood in this article as the materialized and materializing codes that lie underneath collective action in digital networks (Galloway, 2004). The aim of this article is to study the protocols of Twitter activity relating to WikiLeaks. This will be done with a focus on the *linguistic* as well as on the *social exchange* that characterizes this particular networked public. Our main questions are:

- What are the characteristics of the communication in terms of common discursive codes versus fragmentation?
- In what respects can social order be distinguished, and to what extent are connections between users simply random?
- Are there any prominent patterns as regards the commitment of participators over time?

These questions were derived from Quentin Jones' (1997) writings on 'virtual settlements'. According to Jones, an online place where group communication takes place has to meet four basic conditions to be labelled as a virtual settlement: '(1) a minimum level

of interactivity; (2) a variety of communicators; (3) a virtual common-public-space where a significant portion of interactive group-CMCs occur'; and '(4) a minimum level of sustained membership' (See http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00075.x/full). We will use these four criteria to address the question of whether an essentially borderless and elusive site such as the symbolic space of a Twitter hashtag can be thought of in terms of a virtual settlement. How is the culture surrounding the hashtag constituted? How are participators positioned? Which fundamental patterns does its social interaction adhere to?

Background and concepts

What we propose to call *pirate culture* – social contexts online where information is remixed, re-appropriated, shared and re-circulated – is therefore an emerging source of power. Pirate culture takes in groups, media projects, interventions and networks that resist, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant ways of doing media and politics. These include new social movements, radical citizen journalism, extremist media, remix culture, copyleft, peer-to-peer and fan culture.

WikiLeaks, a so-called *hacktivist* project started in 2007, is an international organization posting documents that would otherwise be unavailable to the public through its website (http://wikileaks.org). Among the more notable leaks are the 2003 standard operating procedures of the US Army at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp (leaked in 2007), the contents of Sarah Palin's private Yahoo email account during the 2008 US presidential campaign, the 2009 leak of 570,000 pager messages sent during the day of the 9/11 attack in 2001 and the 2007 Baghdad airstrike video (leaked in 2010). The much debated organization, directed by Australian journalist Julian Assange, has won several media awards and has received a lot of attention from the news media. Activists connected to WikiLeaks have often reported that they have been harassed and monitored by governments, police and intelligence agencies. The 'About us' section on the website states that:

> WikiLeaks is a multi-jurisdictional public service designed to protect whistleblowers, journalists and activists who have sensitive materials to communicate to the public. Since July 2007, we have worked across the globe to obtain, publish and defend such materials, and, also, to fight in the legal and political spheres for the broader principles on which our work is based: the integrity of our common historical record and the rights of all peoples to create new history.
>
> […]
>
> WikiLeaks combines the protection and anonymity of cutting-edge cryptographic technologies with the comfortable presentation style of Wikipedia, although the two are not otherwise related. Our network also collects materials in person and from postal drops. We also run a network of lawyers and others to defend our work and our sources. WikiLeaks information is distributed across many jurisdictions, organizations and individuals. Once a document published it is essentially impossible to censor.

The WikiLeaks site is hosted by a company based in Sweden which offers 'refugee hosting'. The company website at http://prq.se states that their 'boundless commitment

to free speech has been tested and proven over and over again. If it is legal in Sweden, we will host it, and will keep it up regardless of any pressure to take it down'. According to Wikipedia, this company is owned by two of the people behind the much publicized and prosecuted file sharing tracker The Pirate Bay.

The term hacktivism, an aspect of pirate culture, refers in its broadest sense to 'the fusion of hacking and activism; politics and technology' (metac0m, 2003). It is about situations and strategies where digital tools are used with the purpose of campaigning and working for social and cultural change (Jordan, 2002; Jordan and Taylor, 2004). Sociologist Tim Jordan (2008) identifies three forms of digital political action that are often perceived as aspects of hacktivism. These are:

- mass embodied online protest;
- internet infrastructure and information politics; and
- communicative practices and activity organizing

The hacktivism which is an integral part of WikiLeaks – the acquisition, as well as the distribution, reception and appropriation of the documents – can be seen as the expression of a new form of media 'audience' situated at the intersection of old and new media logics, and empowered by new technologies (Jenkins, 2006). It is of interest to analyze hacktivist mobilization and organization for at least two reasons. First, it is obviously a process where the knowledge and resources of a number of contributors are pooled, which makes it an example of what Pierre Lévy (1999) calls collective intelligence. Second, one might assume that it is based on honor codes similar to those of hacker culture in general (Busch and Palmås, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Wark, 2004). This means that it is about networked collaboration, but still under a relatively strict social code.

Unraveling the protocols

In order to study the linguistic space, relational text analysis (RTA) was used (Diesner and Carley, 2005; Doerfel, 1998; Hartley and Barnden, 1997; Van Atteveldt, 2008). This is a method which can be used as a supplement to qualitative analysis of smaller text sets, or as a stand-alone method for doing more approximate cultural analyses of larger bodies of text. The goal of RTA is to reductively transform a text corpus into networks that consist of edges and nodes. A comprehensive definition of the method is offered by Landwehr et al. (2009: 4–5):

> At a minimum, relational text analysis (RTA) involves the following steps:
>
> Development of a research goal or question. […]
>
> Identification and extraction of relevant entities (nodes) and the relations (edges) between them from texts. This process is also known as relation extraction.
>
> Representation of the relational data.

Network analysis of the data.

Interpretation and validation of the results.

Some relation extraction and network analysis techniques treat all nodes as instances of the same class (one-mode networks). Such networks are often referred to as semantic networks. Other methods facilitate the classification of nodes (multi-mode networks) and/or edges (multiplex networks) according to pre-defined or data-induced classification schemata.

The linguistic analyses carried out in this article are based on the semantic, one-mode, technique. For the analysis of the social space of WikiLeaks on Twitter, straightforward social network analysis (SNA) was used (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Data was downloaded through the Twitter archiving service TwapperKeeper (http://twapperkeeper.com). A total of 1029 tweets (Twitter posts) that used the #WikiLeaks hashtag (a type of user-set tag reflecting the topic) during May and June of 2010 were collected.

This corpus was then subjected to several iterations of cleaning, vetting and refining to prepare it for the network analysis. Most of the text-based operations were made with the help of the AutoMap software (Carley et al., 2009a) which can generate semantic network data which is represented in the DyNetML format, that can in turn be brought into ORA – a software tool enabling the visualization and analysis of the network data (Carley et al., 2009b). Networks of users were mapped with the help of the Bibexcel (Persson et al., 2009), Pajek (Nooy et al., 2005) and Map Generator (Edler and Rosvall, 2010) software packages.

An important aspect of our choice of method is that it aims to bridge the divide in text analysis between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Our combination of RTA and SNA presumes that selective qualitative close readings of parts of the empirical material are made in order to inform crucial decisions in the quantitative parts of the analysis, and also that several of the quantitative steps are validated through qualitative measures (Lindgren and Lundström, 2009).

Language is social, and social interaction revolves per definition around various forms of language use. In spite of this, we have chosen to distinguish two levels of analysis for the purpose of this study. Firstly, we will look at online culture surrounding WikiLeaks through its written discourse in the form of tweets (posts to the Twitter micro blogging service). Secondly, we will look at the social network relations among the tweeters. In concluding, these two levels will of course have to be discussed together.

Wikileaks on Twitter: the semantic network

Figure 1 – which is also to be found in a higher resolution version at the end of the article – is a visualization of the semantic network of tweets on #WikiLeaks. The spherical objects (so called vertices) are of various sizes that indicate how common certain words are, and the arrows binding them together illustrate links in terms of semantic connections between them. If one looks more closely at Figure 1, one finds a number of discursive themes, or clusters, that show how tweet topics relating to WikiLeaks are ordered. Some groups of vertices (so called clusters) are about general issues of censorship and

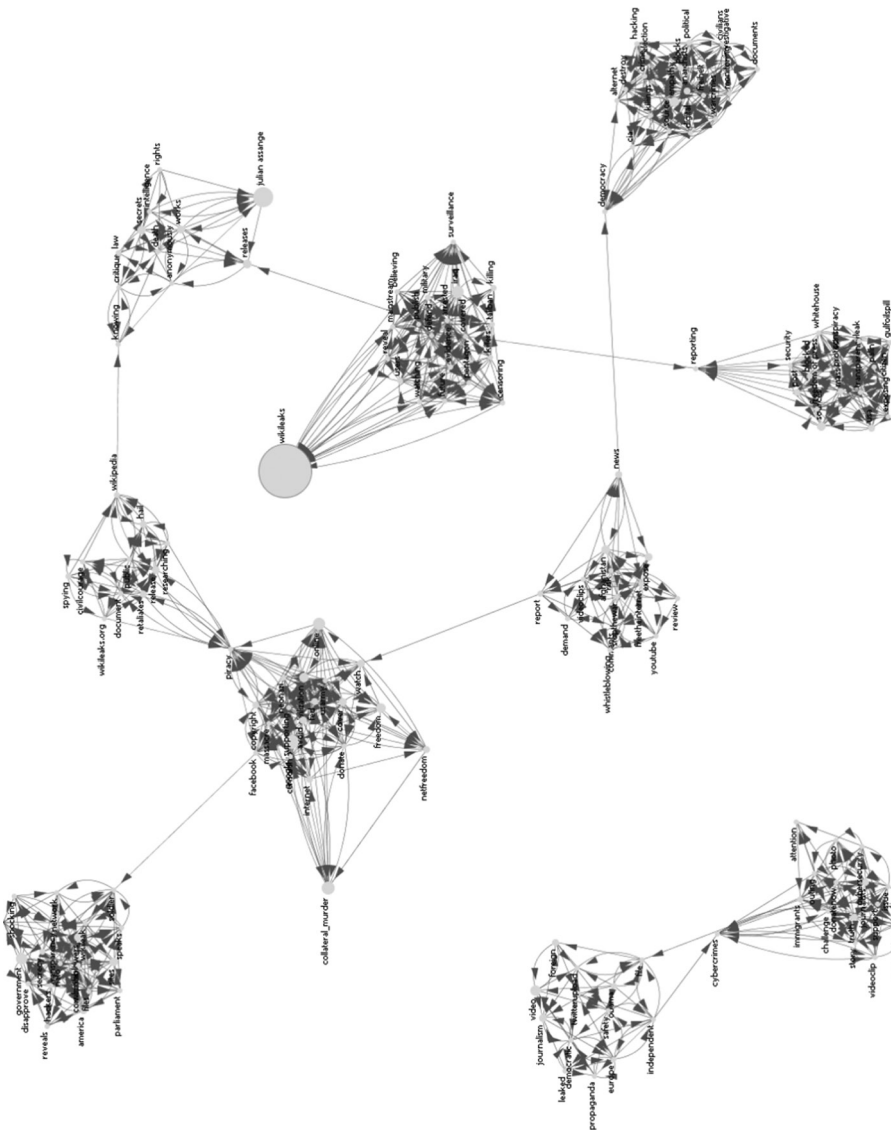

Figure 1. The semantic network of #WikiLeaks on Twitter, May–June 2010

democracy; others are about promoting WikiLeaks and asking for donations, others are about specific leaks and their reception, etc. Without going into detailed analysis of any of this, which would of course be highly interesting as a research task in its own right, the main point here is that there is indeed linguistic structure, even though Twitter as a platform is completely open (apart from the 140 character limit for tweets) and does not require this. Still, as Figure 1 bears witness to, there is indeed a thematic structure underlying the individual tweets.

In addition to mapping the basic semantic structures of the collected data, a closer reading of the actual tweet content, aiming to trace dominant themes in the 'common language' of the #WikiLeaks Twitter space, was also conducted. During the reading process, certain categories of tweets and themes within these emerged as more prominent than others. In the following section, a few of these categories bearing direct importance for the mobilization and organization of political, hacktivist, practices will be discussed further.

First of all, a very large number of tweets consisted of links to different kinds of news items. Primarily, these links point to news articles and television documentaries produced by British and American media corporations. Often formulated explicitly as reading suggestions, these tweets are often re-tweeted extensively, making this category of posts quantitatively larger than all of the others discussed here. One of the core themes in the material is, in other words, the sharing and circulation of knowledge and information. A few examples of tweets belonging to this category of tweets are shown in the following section of quotes. The first two quotes are of a very common type: Positively articulated suggestions to read dominant media news items that appear to support WikiLeaks in one way or another. But suggestions to read other kinds of texts are also quite common; the third quote links to a video of a European Union hearing, and the last one contains a link to a more critical text.

> Excellent read: Hail to the whistleblowers http://bit.ly/d0Z5mj (via @ggreenwald) #wikileaks #afghanistan

> awesome ABC doco on #wikileaks interviews, details on how they protect sources & seeking world wide free press history http://bit.ly/aWsHQl

> Watch the summary of the #aldefe seminar (Self) Censorship with @marietjed66 Julian Assange #wikileaks a.o. http://youtu.be/DFSHv9c0CN8

> Federation of American Scientists: #Wikileaks aren't whistleblowers, they're 'information vandals' http://tinyurl.com/252ahv9

The views and interests represented and referred to are, in other words, not necessarily of a strictly homogenous character. Even though posts that explicitly and unequivocally support WikiLeaks clearly dominate the data, the number of links to texts making critical or more complex arguments also indicates that this particular social space is not closed for other arguments or further debate. Since such a large portion of these tweets refer to discourse produced by large Western media corporations, however, many of the voiced

tensions and conflicts of this particular discursive space are to a large extent reflecting those produced in dominant media discourse.

Another prominent group of tweets in the data are those that call for various forms of direct action in support of the WikiLeaks organization. In this category of tweets, the most common action called for is the donation of money. Among the following four quotes, the first belongs to this particular group of tweets while also representing the category of reading suggestions discussed above. The second quote also calls for a donation while simultaneously calling for further sharing of the link. In the analyzed Twitter activity, then, sharing information and encouraging participatory action are often inextricably linked practices.

> #wikileaks #stopthewar #cowardlypredators Photo and article of one of the great heroes of our time: http://is.gd/cZ5oz - Donate today

> RT @soloojos @graziano: Support and donate to #Wikileaks http://www.countercurrents.org/assange150610.htm Share and favor the notice!

> R @wikileaks: Another way you can help #WIKILEAKS: run a Tor server http://torproject.org/

> Sick and tired of the corruption around. Anyone willing to take the photos with me and put them online #wikileaks kenya

The last two quotes in the section above are tweets suggesting even more direct forms of political action. Even though such calls are less prominent and re-tweeted less frequently, it is nevertheless apparent that concrete, hands-on, political action is also part of the discourse.

A third category of tweets consists of political and philosophical slogans and proverbs used to defend free speech and a free press. Three examples of this are quoted below. In tweets like these – one may argue – complex political relations are reduced to oversimplifying distinctions between symbols such as 'the truth' and 'the liars'. But, even though tweets like these link the practices and ideals in ways that in some respects could be interpreted as naïve or misplaced, they also indicate how highly these Twitter users regard the issues and questions being discussed.

> OH: 'Want a revolution? Just being able to hear the truth will change the world' #dancarlin #opengovernment #wikileaks

> The truth harms only the Liars. The lies cover up the murder of thousands of innocent civilians. #WikiLeaks #WhistleBlowers # TruthTellers

> RT @freakingcat: 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter' MLK jr. #wikileaks #thai #government #censorship

The use of political slogans such as these, then, not only serves the purpose of framing the political ambitions of the WikiLeaks organization in positive terms. It also constructs digital political space as a crucial arena for political action in a very broad sense. From

the perspective of these particular Twitter users, hacktivism clearly deals with political issues reaching far beyond strictly digital space.

While the tweet categories discussed above are part of themes dealing with the articulation of common values, identities and practices, other categories of tweets construct the identity of the political enemy. Among the following six quotes, the first four articulate antagonistic relations between WikiLeaks and symbols representing the nation-state, whereas the final two quotes frame large corporations as possibly threatened by the organization.

> #Obama cracks down on truth & justice, these elements are very bad for our national security?, HUH? (maybe BAD 4 Obama's image! #wikileaks

> RT @anarchisms: RT @anarchists: Classic!! @wikileaks Julian Assange out-lawyers the lawyer in Euro Parliament http://bit.ly/dnpM2X #wikileaks

> RT @DominiqueRdr: RT @glynmoody: Australia retaliates against Wikileaks - http://bit.ly/bgbQjw intimidation much? (via @br3nda) #wikileaks #censorship

> Whistleblowers play big role in exposing crimes in #China. http://bit.ly/dCALwC #wikileaks #ChinaEdition

> Next #spill is #wikileaks to take out Rupert.

> RT @KateSherrod: A call for BP workers to step up and spill to #Wikileaks http://c4ss.org/content/2956

Whereas the identity of the common 'we' is defined without reference to territorial, national or ethnic relations, but rather clearly in an explicitly global sense, it is interesting to note that its antagonists are clearly marked by their government or corporate identities. Using a term developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), it could be argued that representations of government and corporate identities and interests such as these, through 'chains of equivalence', group those actors and relations together, and articulate them as having agendas that are in conflict with that of WikiLeaks, and those of the globally defined, common people. This imagery is further strengthened in the large number of tweets foreseeing a forthcoming WikiLeaks publication, allegedly regarding a global internet surveillance system.

> #Wikileaks founder Assange drops mass spying hint http://j.mp/banxab abcNews #Orwell

> RT @h4ck3rm1k3 #wikileaks supposedly Assange has uncovered vast worldwide survailence & monitoring of people, oh really, what @telecomix

> The next big leak will might reveal a global 1984 surveillance system ? http://bit.ly/bF7RGr #wikileaks #freemanning

The main idea in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory is that connections between meaningful elements within a discourse can be analyzed in terms of how links between concepts are asserted and authorized, how signifiers are grouped, and how certain arrangements cling together. Looking at concept frequencies in the data, and reviewing parts of the data qualitatively, the impression is that Twitter discourse on #WikiLeaks generally tends to be in favour of the activities of the organization, and that the need for its actions is presented in terms of democracy, anti-censorship and activism.

The social space of the subscene

These dynamics can be further investigated by analyzing not only the written discourse, but also the social positioning and hierarchies of the participators. In order to be able to 'give an account of discourse; we need to know the conditions governing the constitution of the group within which it functions' (Bourdieu, 1977: 650). Jones (1997) proposes the term 'virtual settlement' as a name for the online place where a virtual community operates. He writes that a virtual settlement can be defined as 'a cyber-place that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest and within which a significant proportion of interrelated interactive group-CMC [computer-mediated communication] occurs'. This is, in fact, similar to how Bourdieu (2000: 15) states that any social field is always delineated by a 'doxa' – a set of fundamental rules or presuppositions that are specific to the field: 'All those who are involved in the fields [...] share a tacit adherence to the same doxa which makes their competition possible and assigns its limits' (Bourdieu, 2000: 102).

Let us look specifically at Jones' (1997) second criteria for a 'virtual settlement'. He states that 'a variety of communicators' is a condition that is highly intertwined with the condition of 'interactivity'; 'Clearly if there is only one communicator there can be no interactivity,' he writes. By seeing the variety (more than two) of communicators as a necessary condition, one is able to exclude one-way email lists and other database type interactions from the analysis of virtual communities. Figure 2 illustrates a number of participants (horizontal axis) listed by their numbers of tweets using the #WikiLeaks hashtag in our data from May and June of 2010.

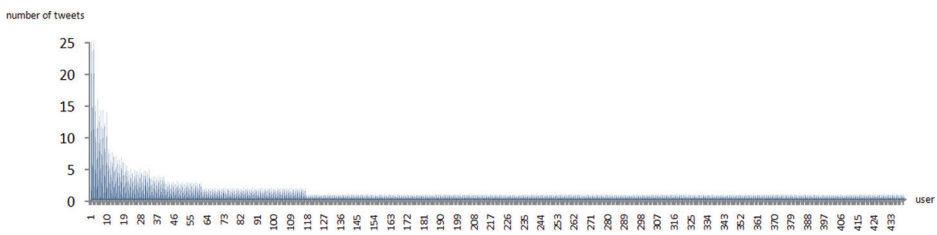

Figure 2. A long tail of participants

While a little more than 70 percent of the users have merely authored one single tweet, 25 percent have written two to nine tweets, and a two percent core of users stands for 20 percent of the posts. The figure mimics the well known 'long tail' curve as popularized in net research by Anderson (2006). Anderson's argument does not relate directly to issues of community, but rather to matters of supply-and-demand economics. His point is that in a cultural landscape where nearly everything is available, the true face of demand will reveal itself. He predicts that the future of business lies in catering to a large number of niche tastes. Re-interpreted and applied to the #WikiLeaks context, Anderson's idea raises the question of what the long tail represents in this case. Does it mean that the majority of participants are non-committed or semi-accidental supporters, or does it make us aware that participation might be defined as such even though it is limited to contributing extremely small numbers of tweets?

Liu (1999) writes that '[a] group of "lurkers" [non-contributing web forum users] who do not communicate cannot be called a community. For a group of individuals to qualify as a community, these individuals have to communicate and interact'. According to Steve Jones (1994: 17) 'computer-mediated communication is, in essence, socially produced space'. To get a grip on the spatial logic of social interactions through the #WikiLeaks hashtag, we have performed a social network analysis (Nooy et al., 2005) of relations of co-authorship (Persson et al., 2009). In this case, co-authorship was defined, firstly, as the relationship which is established when two users contribute to the same tweet thread by public replies to each other using the @-symbol. Secondly, so called re-tweets (confirmatory echoes of what others have tweeted, using the RT-abbreviation) were also included. The sample is once again from the May to June 2010 tweets using the #WikiLeaks hashtag (1029 tweets by 439 users).

The idea behind this part of the analysis was to try to map and visualize the 'common-public-space' established through this hashtag, and to identify basic dynamics of 'interactive group-cmc' within it (Jones, 1997). Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the relations between the participants in the studied context. Each vertex represents one single user. Vertex size indicates the level of activity of each user (that is, how many relationships of co-authorship they are involved in), and the positions of vertices and the connections between them represent the strongest links (in terms of co-authorship) among contributors. While the scene is marked, in its peripheral regions, of unidirectional and non-hierarchical connections (Figure 3), the patterns become more interesting as one moves closer to the centre of the network (Figure 4).

Looking at Figure 4, it is once again obvious that this setting centres around a relatively small number of key contributors (cf. the fifth to tenth largest vertices), around whom the rest of the social space is ordered. A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that there are indeed leaders as well as followers.

As an example, let us look closer at the Twitter activities relating to the user *freakingcat*, represented by the formation of nodes at the absolute top of Figure 4. This sub-network represents a series of tweets made by this user, and subsequent re-tweets of these by other users. In this particular case, all of the tweets relate to an apparent/alleged government blocking of the WikiLeaks website in Thailand, the country where *freakingcat* resides, and they were all posted between June 28 and 29. In Table 1,

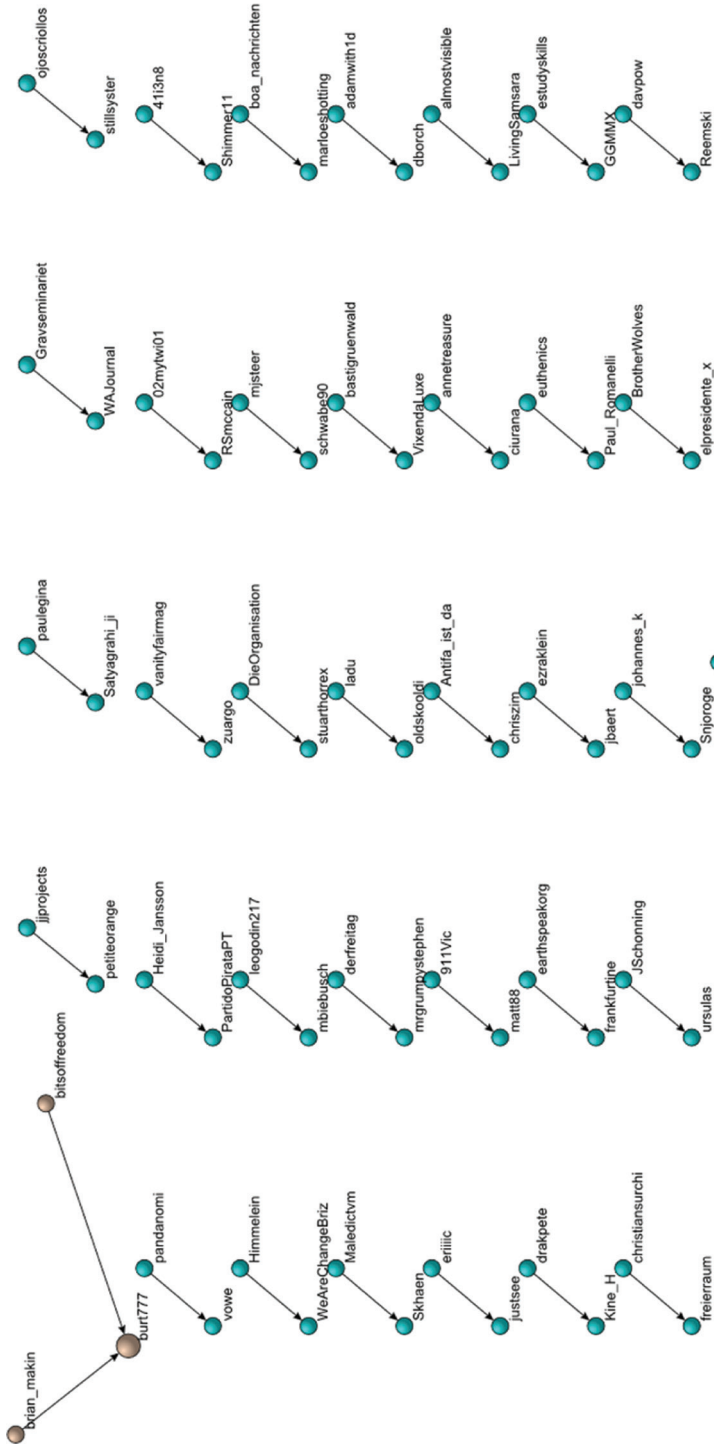

Figure 3. Co-authorship under the #WikiLeaks hashtag (periphery of network)

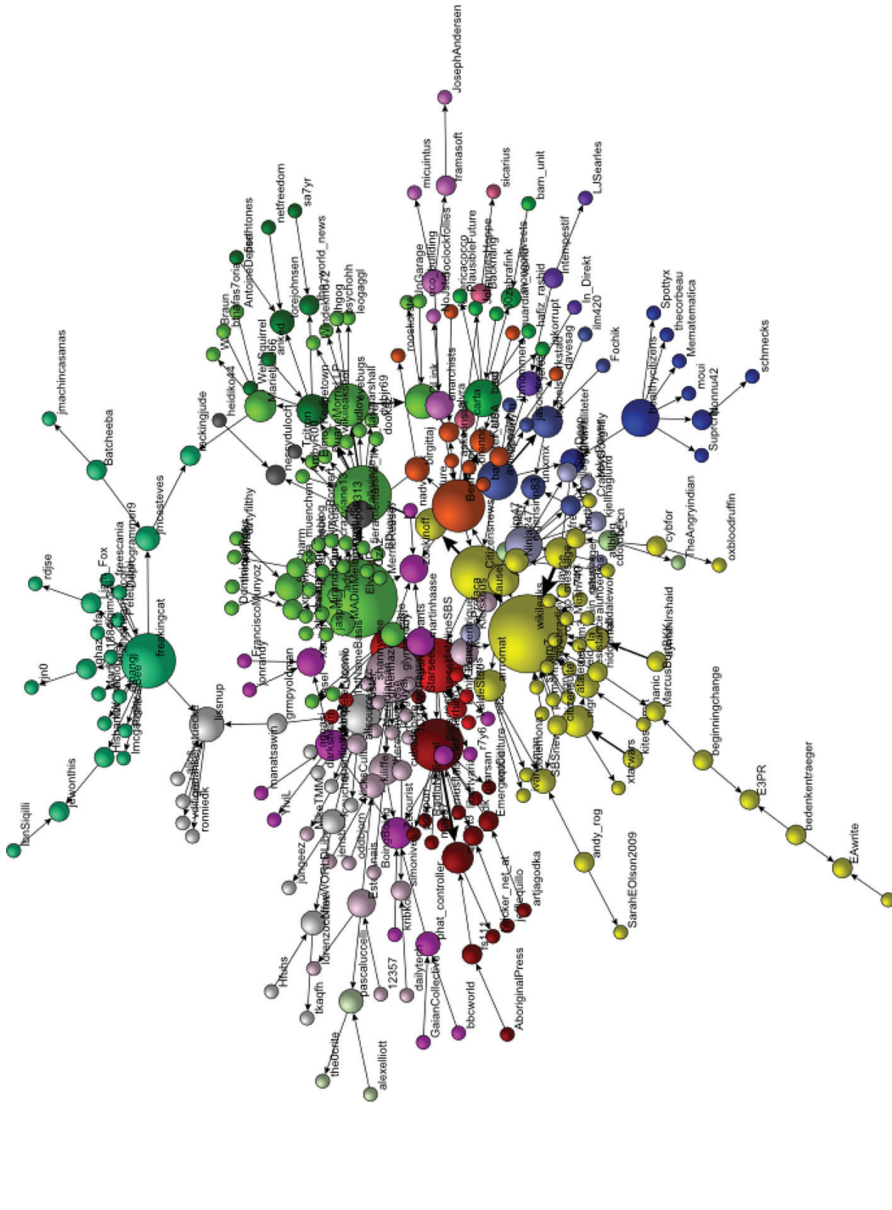

Figure 4. Co-authorship under the #WikiLeaks hashtag (core of network)

Table 1. Tweets using the #WikiLeaks hashtag relating to Twitter user *freakingcat*. Posted on 28–29 June 2010

User	Content	Elapsed time
freakingcat	**Freedom of information took a heavy beating today with Thai government censoring #wikileaks.org - raises question what they want to hide?!**	0.00.00
Mark_Coughlan	RT @freakingcat: Freedom of information took a heavy beating today with Thai government censoring #wikileaks.org - raises question what ...	0.02.09
freakingcat	**I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it! #wikileaks #thai #government #censorship**	2.52.04
FreeTheInternet	RT @freakingcat 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it!' #wikileaks #thai ... #FreeTheInternet	2.56.21
elgrodo	RT @freakingcat: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it!' #wikileaks #thai #government #cens ...	2.57.06
freakingcat	**This Twitter Petition to demand unblocking of #wikileaks will be sent every day, until hopefully somebody will listen! Please RT it!**	14.06.09
hbmacale	RT @freakingcat: This Twitter Petition to demand unblocking of #wikileaks will be sent everyday, until hopefully sum1 wil listen! Please RT!	14.07.32
jonrandy	RT @freakingcat: This Twitter Petition to demand unblocking of #wikileaks will be sent every day, until hopefully somebody will listen! ...	14.11.22
freakingcat	**After #thai #government blocked #wikileaks you can still access it through their mirror sites: wikileaks.info wikileaks.se nyud.net**	15.24.42
Johan_Munkestam	RT @freakingcat: After #thai #government blocked #wikileaks you can still access it through their mirror sites: wikileaks.info wikileak ...	17.17.46
BangkokBill	RT @freakingcat: After #thai #government blocked #wikileaks U cn still access it thru thr mirror sites: wikileaks.info wikileaks.se nyud.net	20.07.33

four tweets by *freakingcat* during this period are shown in bold, followed by a selection of re-tweets in italics. As can be seen in the table, which was also indicated by the co-authorship analysis in Figure 4, *freakingcat* is not just re-tweeted by a few individual users, but rather by a large number of different users. Furthermore, as can be seen in the elapsed time column, most of the re-tweets are made within mere minutes after the initial post. *Freakingcat*, then, clearly represents a user who is able to influence and regulate speech among a larger numbers of users fairly rapidly within this particular discursive field.

Further readings of the tweets and re-tweets in Table 1 reveal that these particular posts also correspond to several of the previously discussed key categories of #WikiLeaks tweets, as well as to key moments of hacktivism and social movement formation. The posts clearly illustrate an antagonistic relationship between democratic freedoms and a national government. They also employ quotes of anti-censorship slogans to assert the political legitimacy and magnitude of the issue. Furthermore the two final tweets, and subsequent re-tweets, call for collective action, in the form of re-tweeting, as well as sharing links to actual hacktivist responses to government control, in the form of established mirror sites. This example further shows how closely related these different aspects of social and political mobilization are, and how tightly linked they are to the common language and practices of the digital political space.

Let us finally briefly consider the condition that a virtual settlement is supposed to have a minimum level of sustained membership (Jones, 1997). Erickson (1997: 1) writes that virtual communities can be defined as 'computer-mediated social interaction among large groups of people, particularly long term, textually-mediated interaction'. The existence of online discourse on a topic does not necessarily mean that an actual community exists, and it is therefore of relevance to evaluate the degree of participator commitment over time.

Figure 5 is based on the entire TwapperKeeper archive of the #WikiLeaks hashtag (37,416 tweets), and the vertices in it show clusters of the most prolific users from each month from April to August of 2010. Clusters are positioned in the column corresponding to the month of their debut as contributors to the hashtag, and the lines between them indicate the frequency by which they have posted during following months. One

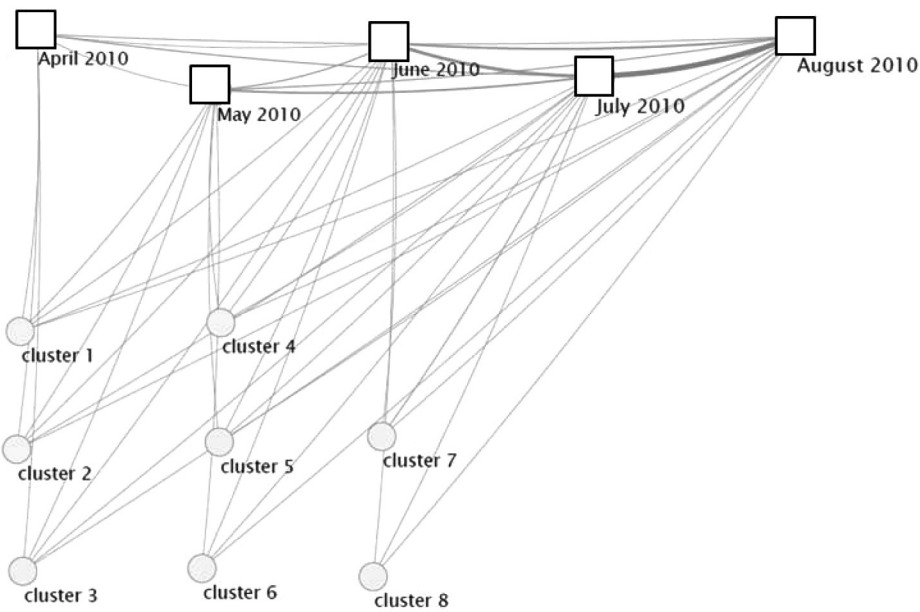

Figure 5. Sustained contributions to the #WikiLeaks hashtag, May–August 2010 (n = 37,416)

example is cluster 3. While the contributors making up this group can be identified as a cohesive unit in the data in April 2010, the same cluster has continued to tweet throughout May, June, July and August. As a whole, the results of the analysis definitely indicate that there is 'a minimum level' of sustained membership on this scene. Even though it is reasonable to assume that a substantial amount of participators makes single posts or takes part in one specific thread on the forum, this is certainly not a pattern which is valid for the core clusters of contributors. There are relatively substantial groups of key tweeters who stay faithful to the scene.

Conclusions

The social and the spatial are always interlinked, as space is constantly structured by those who occupy it and by how they appropriate it (Lefebvre, 1974). Space is therefore always a social product marked by various spatial practices that can be read and interpreted. The aim of this article has been to analyze the potential of elusive and fluid web spaces as sites of mobilization and resistance. We used the case of the #WikiLeaks hashtag on Twitter, and looked at the cultural and social protocols governing this hacktivist space. This entailed an analysis of the linguistic as well as the social exchange which is taking place. In order assess the potential of this hashtag as a site of mobilization, we looked at criteria derived from Quentin Jones' (1997) writings on 'virtual settlements'. This meant posing questions to the material regarding the existence of a common discursive code, social order and commitment.

Our semantic analyses showed that the flow of tweets under the #WikiLeaks hashtag is by no means an expression of random or fragmented communication. There is a general discourse, in relation to which each social utterance is made. Tweeters who choose to use the #WikiLeaks hashtag to indicate the 'linguistic field' (Bourdieu, 1977: 647) within the bounds of which their speech act is to be understood are not explicitly coordinated in any way. Rather, each user is seemingly free to decide upon the tweet content. But in spite of Twitter's apparently anarchistic mode of operation, an expected type of utterance evolves and leads, at the aggregated level, towards tweeting patterns that give rise to a terminology shared to some extent by anyone entering the field. This terminology is the result of an interactive and constructive process of *semiotic dynamics*. This concept refers to 'a new field that studies how populations of humans or agents can establish and share semiotic systems, typically driven by their use in communication' (Cattuto et al., 2007: 1461). This is a process similar to what can be observed in traditional human languages, where naming conventions, the employment of neologisms, etc. crystallize over time.

Furthermore, our social network analyses show that this linguistic structure is paired with a social structure where there clearly are leaders as well as followers. In this sense, the space of Twitter relations shown in Figure 4 is an illustration of what Bourdieu (1977) means by saying that social structure can be conceived of as relations of symbolic power, and that the 'linguistic competence' of a speaker is impossible to separate from his or her position in the social structure.

From the perspective of theories about social movements, the emergence of this discourse and its materiality might be seen as part of the elaboration of the 'cognitive praxis' (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991) of this branch of the hacktivist movement. In order to

organize and mobilize, one needs to speak a common language, agree on the definition of the situation and formulate a shared vision. Even though it is global and loosely-knit, the linguistic space of Twitter discourse is a space where such processes of meaning-production and organization take place.

In other words, the #WikiLeaks hashtag can certainly be perceived as a site of resistance of mobilization, in spite of its seemingly open, fluid and anarchistic modality. This case study is one illustration of how grassroots politics, resistance and corporate media criticism can play out in digital media. But, as Henry Jenkins (2006: 246) writes about convergence culture, we are still 'testing the waters and mapping directions'. There is definitely a need for more practical knowledge of the 'dynamics of these cooperation systems' (Rheingold, 2002: 202).

The concept of 'subpolitics' (Beck, 1997) refers to the ways in which individual, small-scale, decisions achieve political significance either because they have a direct political frame of reference, or simply because of their aggregation. This present article contributes to illustrating that the internet has a particularly strong potential for channeling the actions of large numbers of individual users into something larger. But the potential movements of the internet are by nature more abstract than traditional social movements since they appear – by pre-internet society measures – as relatively fragmented systems of joint action. The idea behind the notion of subpolitics is that, instead of suggesting that politics and morality are on the wane in the 'faceless' or 'post-modern' world of digital media, one can just as well argue that such claims are actually the result of a misconception of current social reality. The fact that many people have a declining interest in traditional formal politics should not necessarily be interpreted as an indicator that there is an actual lack of political orientation or action in society at large. This point is illustrated for example by the occurrence of activities such as hacktivism (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003), culture jamming and adbusting (Klein, 2000; Wettergren, 2005) and online campaign organizations (e.g. avaaz.org).

Beck (1997) writes that we must avoid looking for politics in the wrong places – in political parties, parliamentary debates or elections. In today's world, politics are emerging from new places. We would argue that the linguistic and social patterns discerned in this article can be seen in terms of subpolitical practice – as politics emerging from such new places. We have to do, then, with new forms of political engagement, emerging from new places and spaces, which demand new perspectives and tools for studying this new generation of social movements. In the field of social movement studies, the present-day forms of political activism have been much debated. The so-called new social movements of the late 1960s (Melucci, 1989) differed from traditional movement such as the workers' and socialist movements in many ways. These new, or second wave, movements were concerned with 'issues such as women's rights, gender relations, environmental protection, ethnicity and migration, peace and international solidarity – with a strong (new) middleclass basis and a clear differentiation from the models of working-class or nationalist collective action that had historically preceded them' (Della Porta and Diani, 2006: vii). The distinction made between the first and the second wave is mainly based on a shift from class conflict to issues of identity.

Since much has happened since the 1960s when these new social movements emerged, one might ask whether it is possible to distinguish specific features characterizing a third

wave of social movements. In the field, issues of globalization and new spaces for political participation are being explored in relation to the study of social movements. Eyerman and Jamison (1991), however, argued two decades ago that the new forms of political activism seen back then, for example protest actions regarding animal rights or anti-globalization activism, had not yet achieved the distinctive status, character or cultural significance of earlier movements. They argue that the construction of an imagined opponent – an Other – is too vague, that the actions and forms of protest are remains from earlier movements, not adapted to the new issues and that the support from the public is too weak.

Telling from our case study, it seems now that these arguments are no longer valid. Rather, there is a lot to suggest that the third wave of movements is now here. This is, however, something which remains to be shown through further empirical research. This article has merely revolved around one example, but it would also be of interest to further investigate similar processes of language and social organization in other cases of online mobilization. This relates to studies of social and cultural protocols surrounding other hashtags or similar flows of information, but also to analyses of how NGOs and grassroots movements that are more traditional in their organization are required to transform their strategies in relation to the digital.

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