



# Do Social Movements Adapt to Offline Repression by using Social Media?

EVIDENCE FROM POLICE REPRESSION  
OF CLIMATE PROTESTORS IN FINLAND

Sonja M. Savolainen, University of Helsinki

Ville Saarinen, Aalto University

Ted Hsuan Yun Chen, University of Helsinki & Aalto University

22.8.2021

Kone Foundation Grant 202011093

Academy of Finland Grant 320780

# Intro slide

October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020

XR Finland (Elokapina) protests by blocking traffic

Police unexpectedly tries to disrupt the protest by using pepper spray and detaining activists

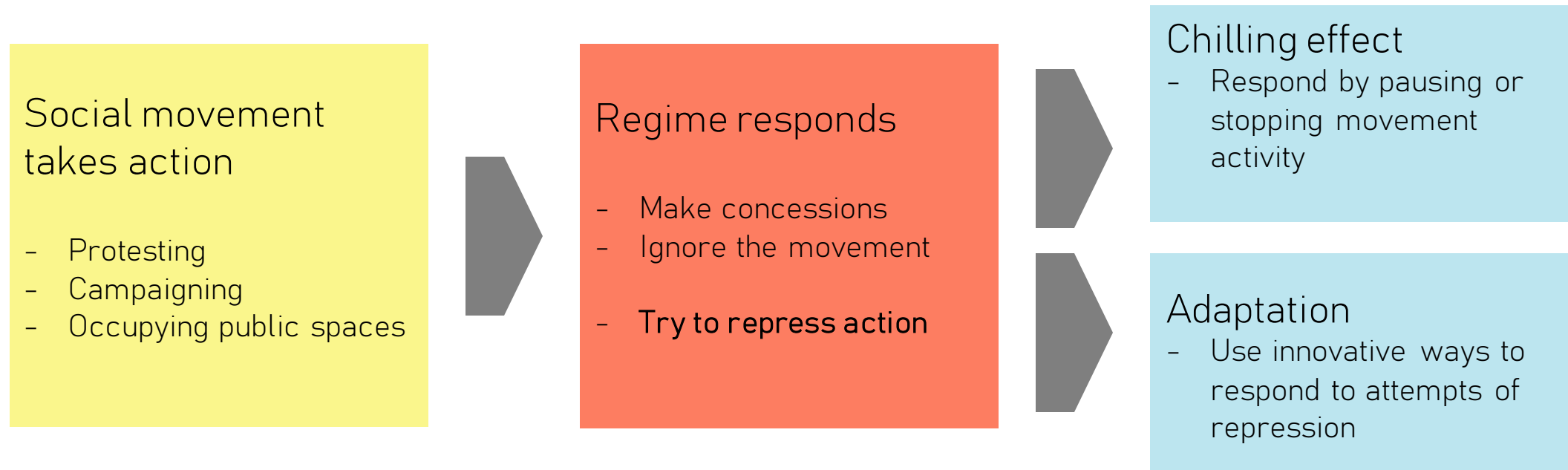
A tweet with a video of the police by an activist spreads quickly in Twitter

The police were later charged with excessive use of force and assault



Photo: CC BY, Elokapina / Extinction Rebellion Finland

# Activism, repression and adaptation

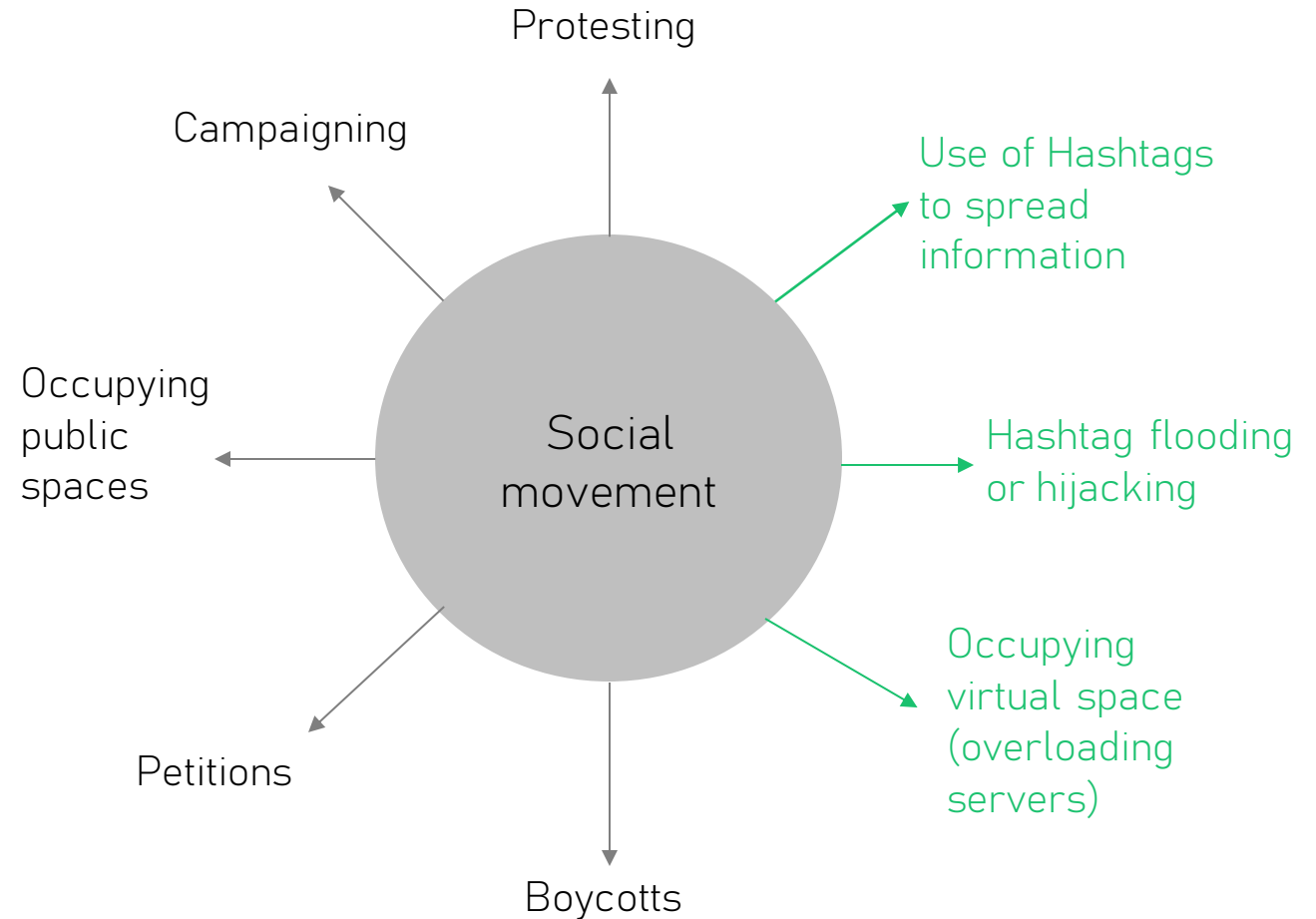


---

## *Do Social Movements Adapt to offline repression by using social media and technology?*

Tilly (2003: 45)

The repertoire is the "set of performances available to any given actor within a regime"





# System openness (Rohlinger & Corrigan-Brown, 2019)

## MORE CLOSED SYSTEM

- A limited selection of venues and platforms available to activists  
Perceived risk of repression is high
- Regime has considerable control over media and is able to exercise censorship
- Regime uses mass media to maintain authority over the citizenry

## MORE OPEN SYSTEM

- A broad selection of venues and platforms available for activists  
Perceived risk of repression is low
- Regime has limited control over media
- Regime and media are open to challenger claims

---

# Movement adaptation

- When faced with unexpected repression, movements look for alternative ways and venues for action
- In open systems, the increasingly legitimate online sphere offers an alternative venue where repressive mechanisms have yet to reach
- Technology and social media lower not only the perceived risk, but other costs of participation as well

 A high volume of 'micro-donations of politics'





# Identifying activists – the baseline

## OFFLINE PARTICIPANTS

- Stronger ties to XR
- Willing to pay more costs for participation
- Decided to protest on the 3rd of October
- Had possibly participated in previous protests
- Could be reached through XR Finland

## ONLINE PARTICIPANTS

- Weaker ties to XR
- A sympathetic group of citizens
- Willing to participate with lower costs
- Had possibly participated in previous online discussions about climate issues
- Could be found based on social media activity

---

# October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020

XR Finland (Elokapina) protests by blocking traffic

Police disrupts the protest using pepper spray and detaining activists

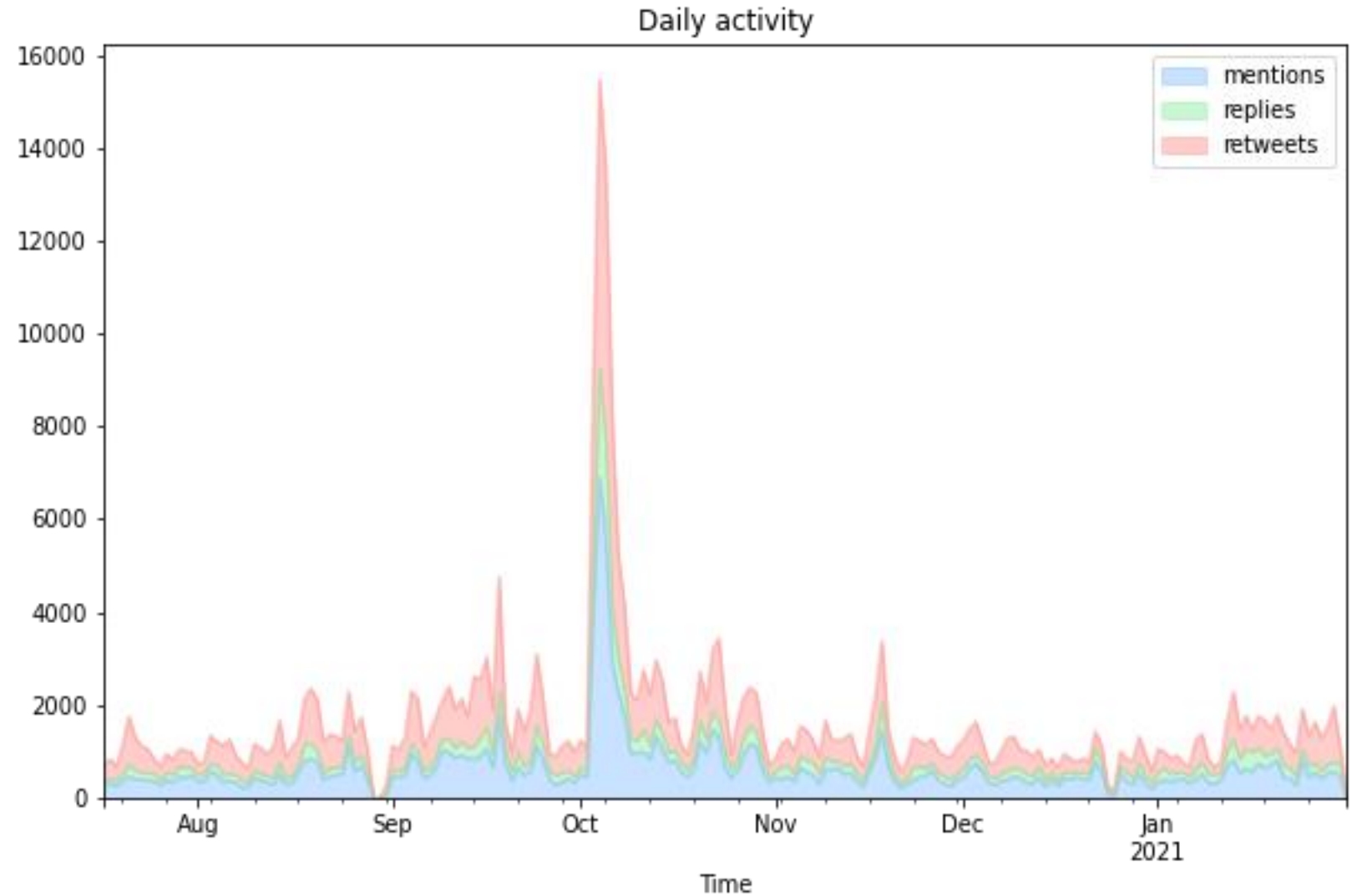
A tweet with a video of the police by an activist spreads quickly, triggering online dissent



Photo: CC BY, Elokapina / Extinction Rebellion Finland



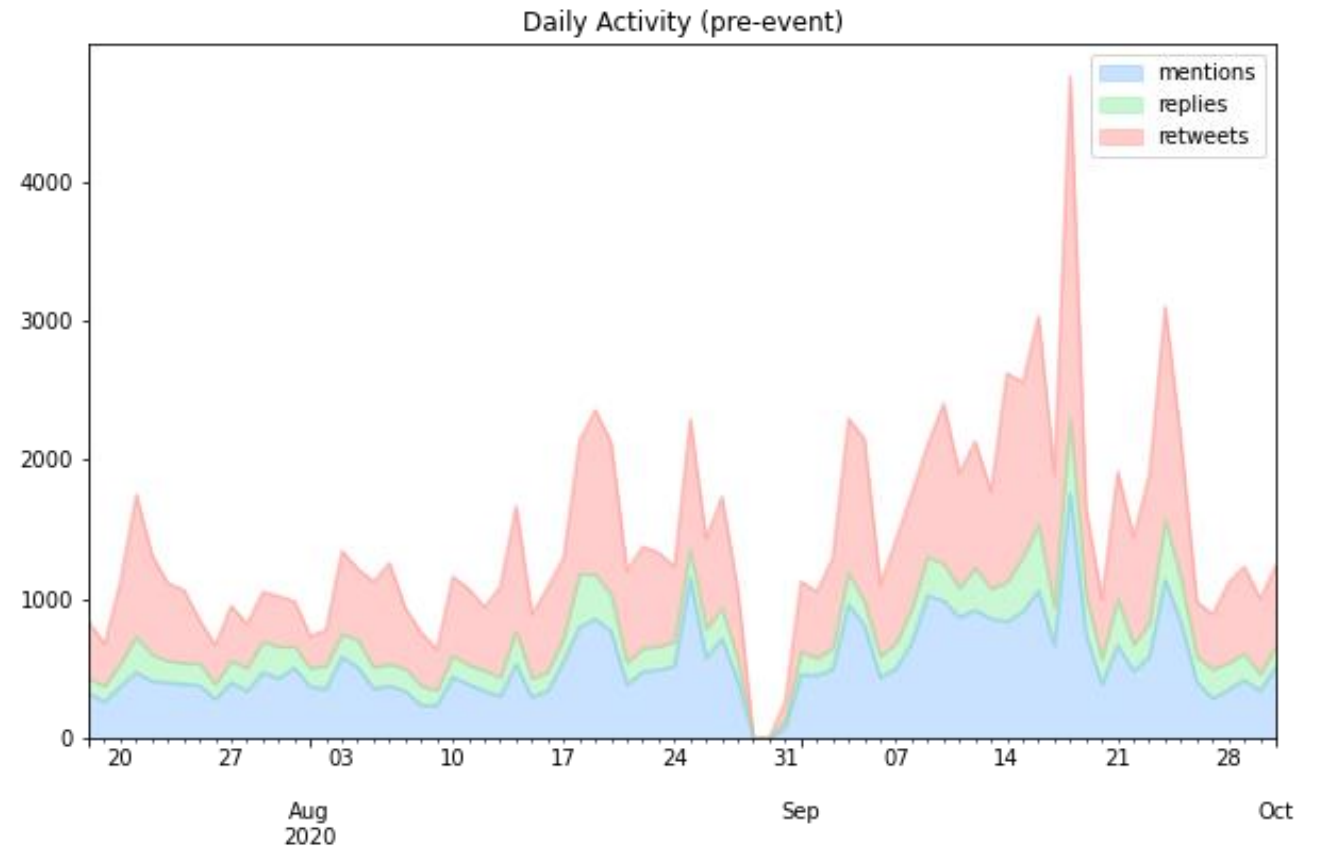
Twitter  
activity before,  
during and  
after the 3<sup>rd</sup> of  
October



# Data

## Public social media posts mentioning 'ilmasto' (climate) in 2020

Source	Number of posts
Twitter	319181
Internet forums	59906
News comments	32745
Facebook	17235
Blogs	12705
Instagram	2177
Youtube	59





# Two approaches to identifying activists online

## 1) Self-professed identifications

- Looking at Twitter users' bios

## 2) Identifiable behavioral patterns

- Consistently tweeting about climate activism
- Increasing precision with second-pass manual-labelling

---

# 1st Approach

## Filtering user bios

- Keyword list of 60 words
- Bios of all users present in the dataset before the event were filtered

2873 users, of which approximately  
78 % were labelled correct

Examples of keywords  
(translated):

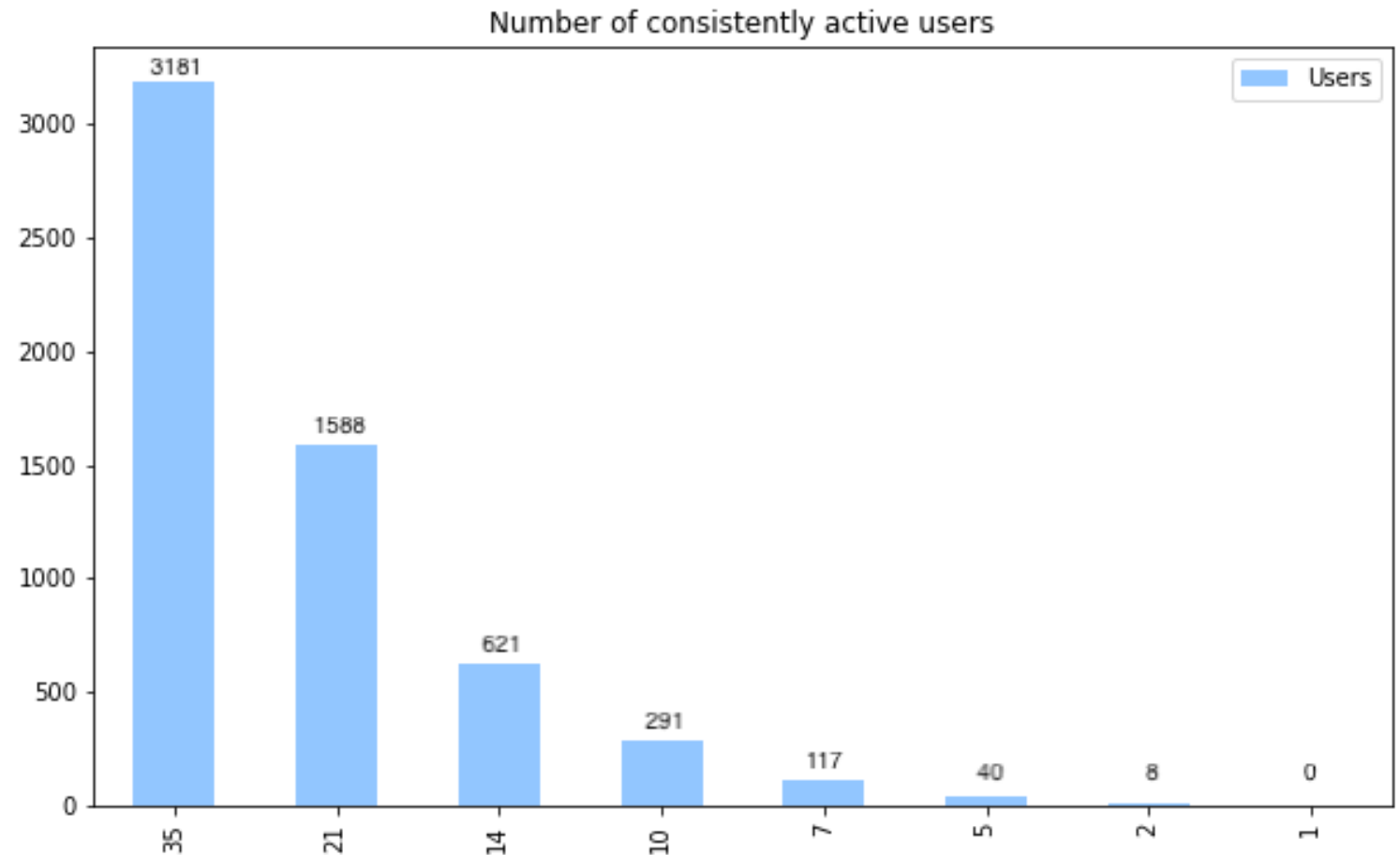
"XR Finland"  
"Activist"  
"Actnow"  
"Climate"  
"Sustainability"  
"Green"

## 2nd Approach

### Behavioral patterns

- Time slicing the data to detect consistency among users

117 weekly users, of which approximately 80 % were labelled correct

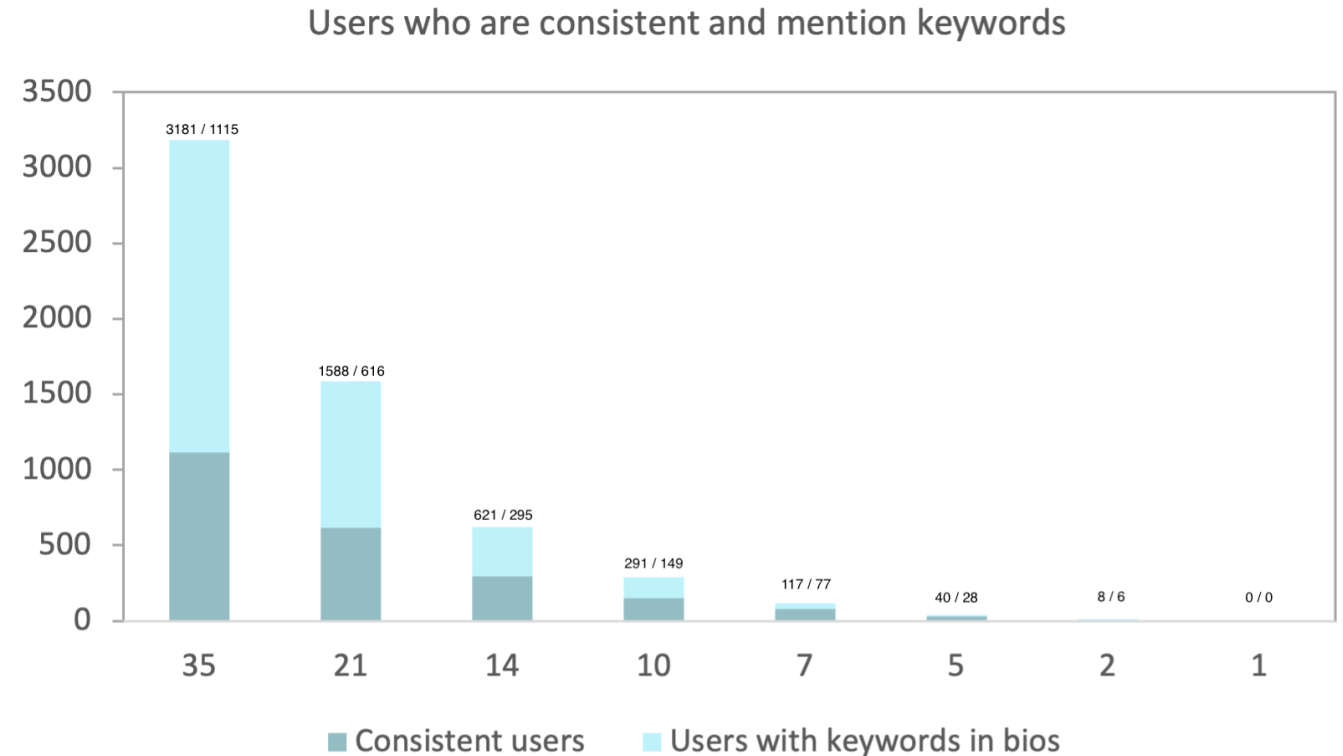




# Comparison

- The more restrictive the consistency criteria, the better it overlaps with the users who mentioned keywords in their bios

75 % of weekly active users were also found with bio-filtering




# Conclusions about the two approaches

---

Both approaches are needed, because they capture different types of online participants (consistent and self-identifying)

If we agree that the different types are relevant, we should use a combination of both approaches

Users who strongly identify as activists on Twitter might not be captured by tweeting behavior alone



## THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

Sonja M. Savolainen

[sonja.savolainen@helsinki.fi](mailto:sonja.savolainen@helsinki.fi)

Twitter: @sonjasavolainen

Ted Hsuan Yun Chen

[ted.hsuanyun.chen@gmail.com](mailto:ted.hsuanyun.chen@gmail.com)

Twitter: @tedhchen / Github: tedhchen

Ville Saarinen

[ville.saarinen@tuta.io](mailto:ville.saarinen@tuta.io)

Github: decitizen

These slides are available at:

[https://tedhchen.com/assets/polnet21\\_slides.pdf](https://tedhchen.com/assets/polnet21_slides.pdf)