

HOW POLICE REPRESSION SHAPES SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ONLINE: EVIDENCE FROM CLIMATE ACTIVISTS IN FINLAND

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BACKGROUND

- October 3rd, 2020
- Elokapina, the Finnish branch of Extinction Rebellion blocked a road in Helsinki, Finland with a sit-in protest
- The Finnish Police pepper-sprayed a group of about 10-15 climate activists
- The police also confiscated water bottles from protestors who were trying to rinse their faces of the pepper spray





THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND OUR CONTRIBUTION

- Given its open political system, the Finnish case allows us to focus on the role of technological affordances
- We look at changes in activist repertoires beyond whether there is a chilling or mobilizing effect of repression
- Beyond considering just individual-level behavioral outcomes, we use a network approach to additionally look at how differences in micro-level behavioral change can yield differences in group-level outcomes



INTERVIEWS

To situate our theoretical understanding and to inform the direction of our empirical examination:

- We conducted a small-scale survey ($n = 43$) and in-depth, semi-structured interviews ($n=8$) with climate activists from Elokapina
- We covered various topics associated with the role of government repression and social media platforms in climate activism



INTERVIEWS

CHILLING OR MOBILIZING?

- We saw a general notion toward repression having a mobilizing effect in our case
 - Most activists stated that the excessive use of force has not made them stay home
- Drivers of responsive mobilization
 - Dismissive and repressive acts by state actors are viewed as activity against the goals of the climate movement
 - This signals to activists that the interests of the two sides are unaligned, and greater action is needed



INTERVIEWS USING SOCIAL MEDIA

- Activists use available resources in ways that they consider effective for advancing their objectives
- In the interviews, activists recognized that police violence and harassment results in negative publicity for the police
 - Errors in judgement have put the police under active scrutiny from the public
 - We expect activists to contest police repression online and attempt to increase public pressure toward the police and government officials



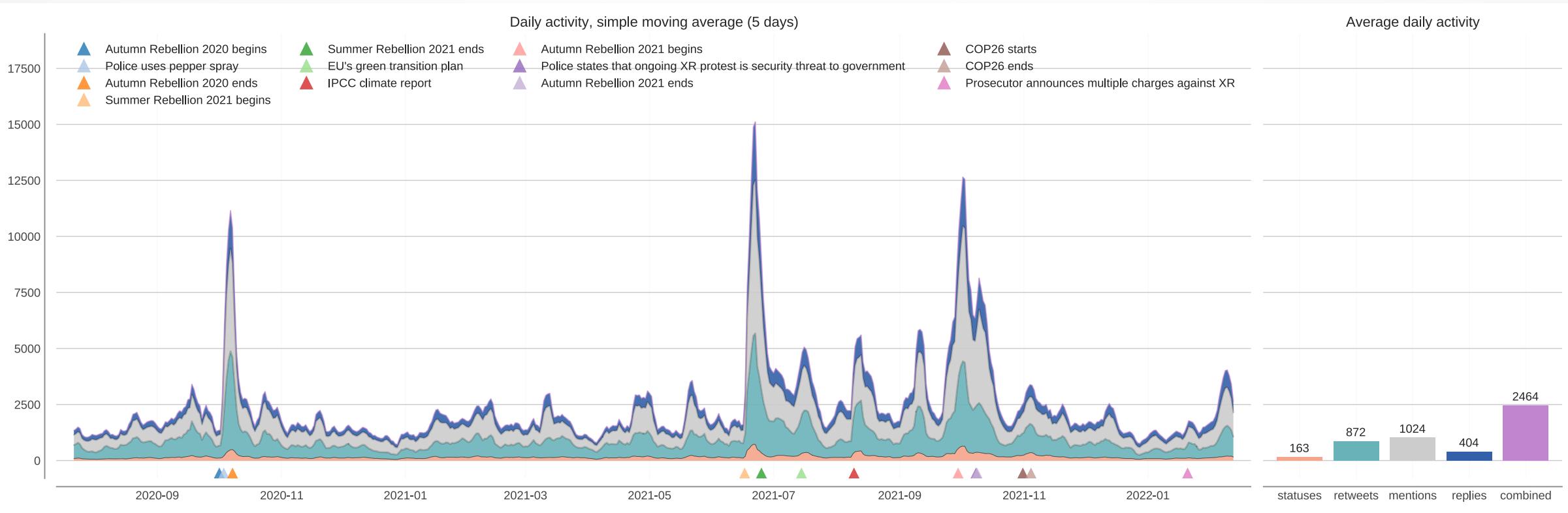
INTERVIEWS

GROUP BEHAVIOR AND NETWORKS

- Potential for changes in group-level outcome stemming from updated activist repertoire
- Micro-level behavior can yield observable structures in activist communication patterns
- We focus on:
 1. Presence of transitivity (i.e. if a retweets b and b retweets c, it is likely for a to also retweet c)
 - Often used to model the presence of cohesion in a social system
 - Transitivity suggests individuals pay attention to the existence of hierarchical information flow
 2. Preferential attachment
 - Leads to a rich-gets-richer phenomenon whereby the distribution of endorsements (i.e. retweets) received is very uneven across nodes in the network



DATA





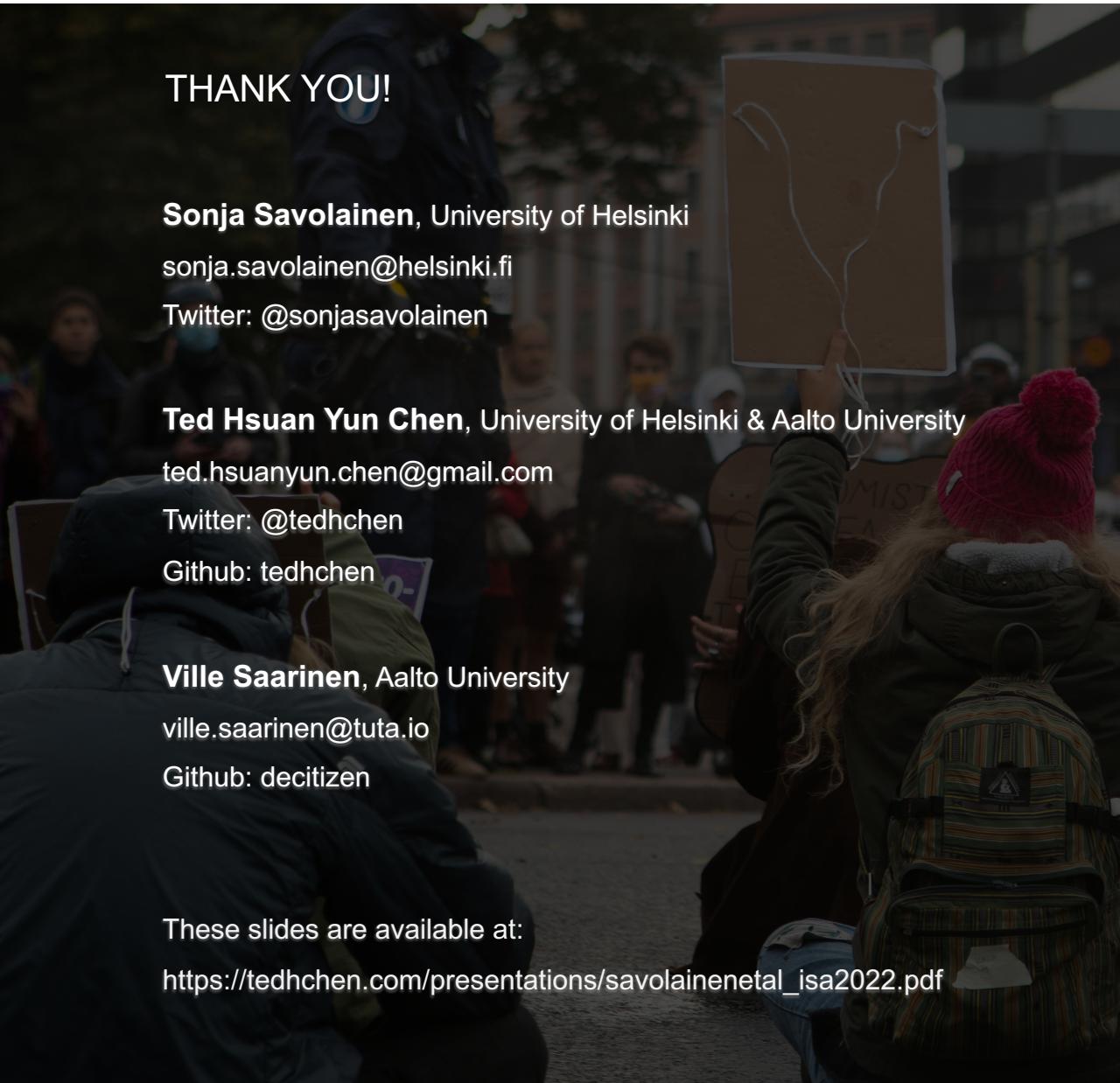
RESULTS

- First, we looked at how activists and the non-activist public differed in their tendency to change their Twitter bios following the pepper-spraying incident.
 - Event had no perceptible effect on tendency of bio change
 - In future iterations of this study, we will extend this examination by disaggregating bio change into mobilization (i.e. adding climate activist identification), chilling (i.e. removing climate activist identification), or non-substantial change.



RESULTS

- We looked at potential for changes in group-level outcome
 - We do not observe meaningful short term patterns
 - There are interesting moderate-level changes over time, most notable being increased spread (i.e. decreased preferential attachment) among climate activists that we do not observe among non-activists.



THANK YOU!

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These slides are available at:

https://tedhchen.com/presentations/savolainenetal_isa2022.pdf

