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

EVIDENCE FROM POLICE REPRESSION OF CLIMATE PROTESTORS IN FINLAND

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22.8.2021

Photo: CC BY, Elokapina / Extinction Rebellion Finland

Intro slide

October 3rd, 2020

XR Finland (Elokapina) protests by blocking traffic

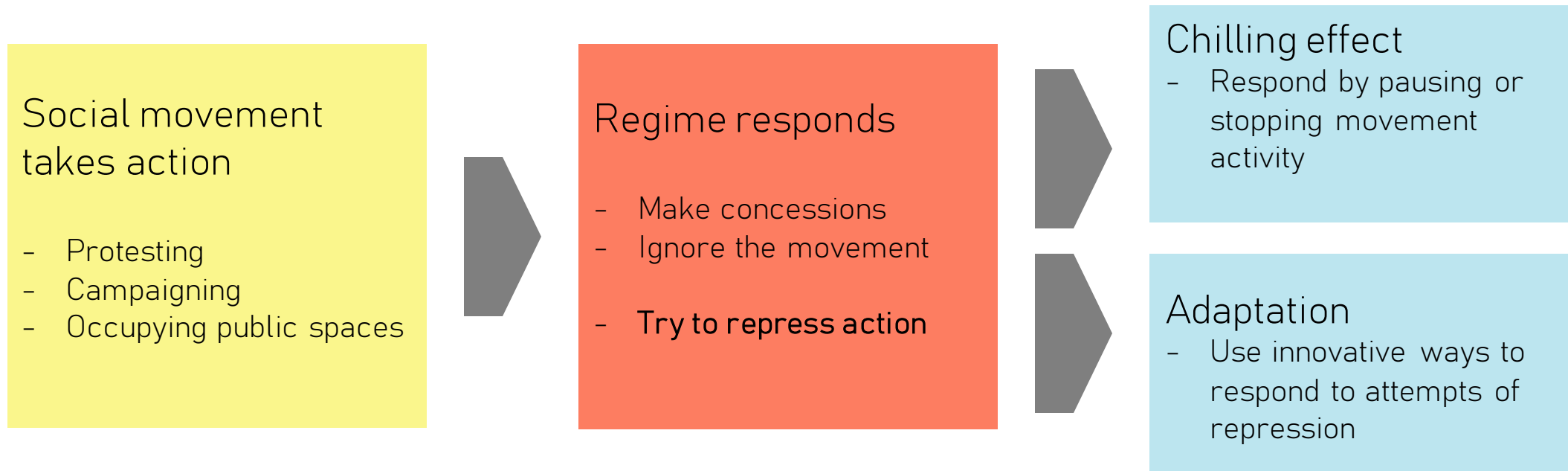Police unexpectedly tries to disrupt the protest by using pepper spray and detaining activists

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

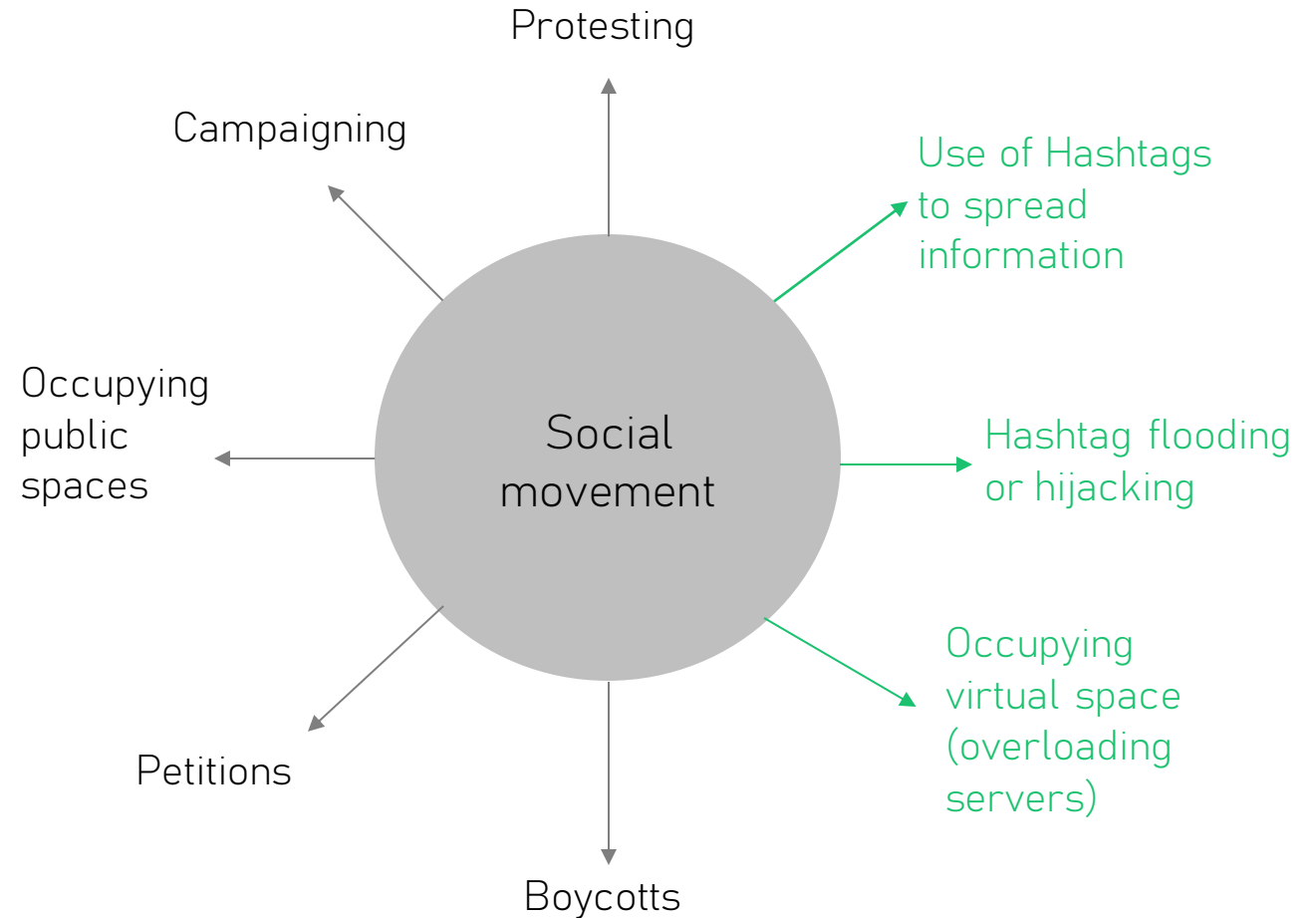Photo: CC BY, Elokapina / Extinction Rebellion Finland

Activism, repression and adaptation

Social movement takes action

- Protesting
- Campaigning
- Occupying public spaces

Regime responds

- Make concessions
- Ignore the movement
- **Try to repress action**

Chilling effect
- Respond by pausing or stopping movement activity

Adaptation
- Use innovative ways to respond to attempts of repression

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*"

Protesting

Campaigning

Occupying public spaces

Social movement

Petitions

Boycotts

Use of Hashtags to spread information

Hashtag flooding or hijacking

Occupying virtual space (overloading servers)

System openness (Rohlinger & Corrigal-Brown, 2019)

MORE CLOSED SYSTEM

- A limited selection of venues and platforms available to activists

    Perceived risk of repression is high

- Regime has consiradable control over media and is able to exersice sensorship

- 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 3rd 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 3rd of
October

Daily activity

mentions
replies
retweets
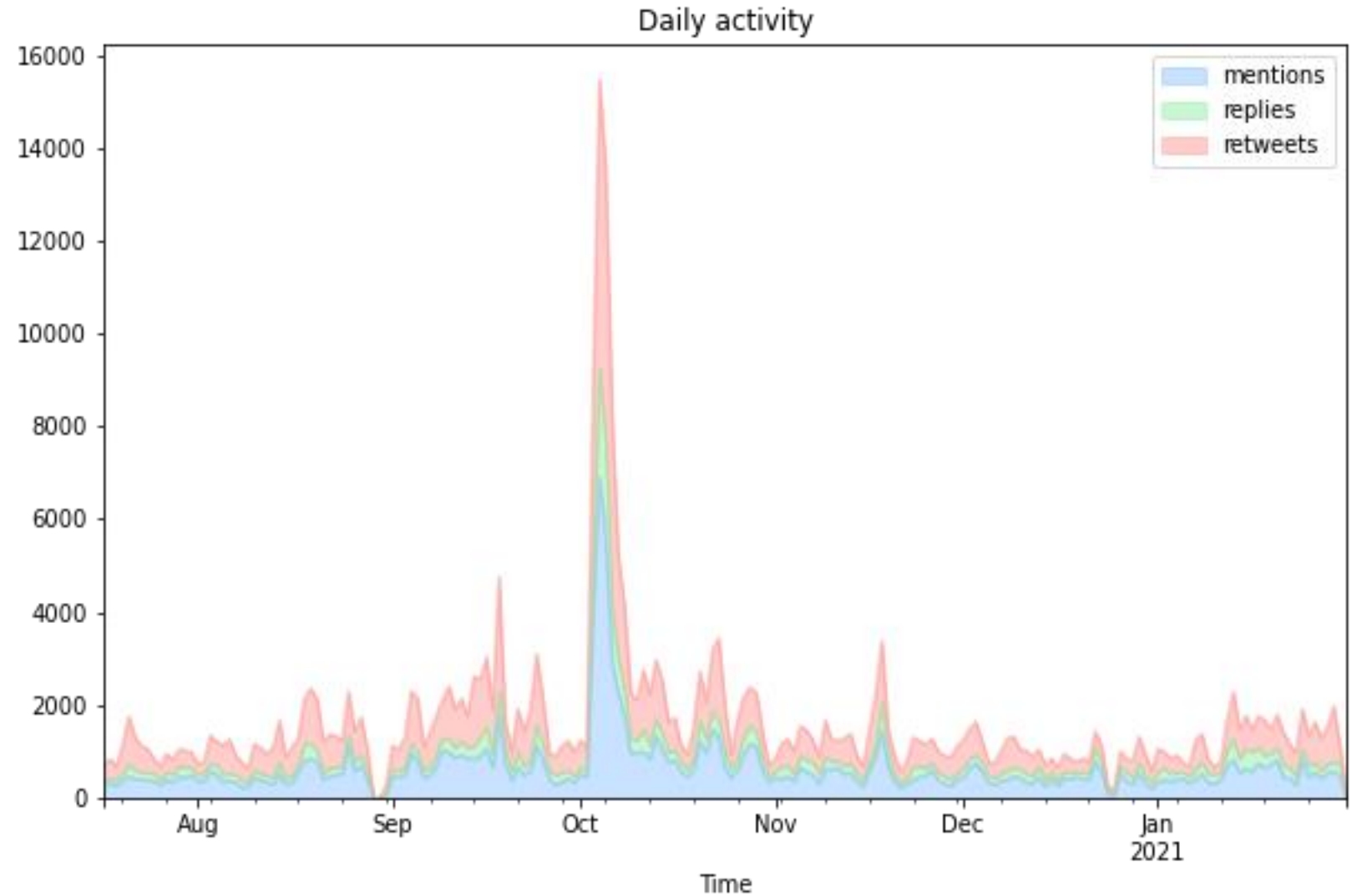
Data

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

Daily Activity (pre-event)
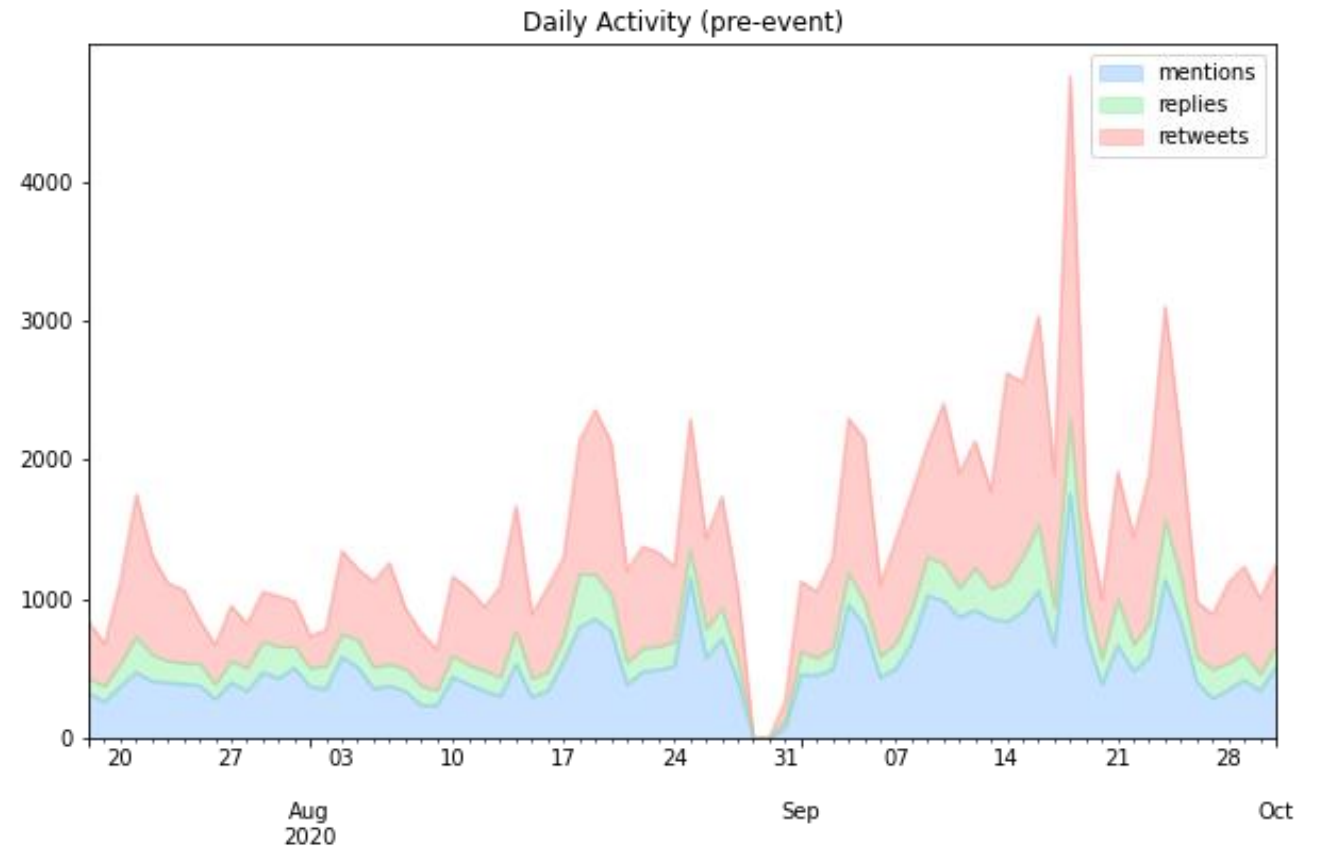
Two approaches to identifying activists online

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

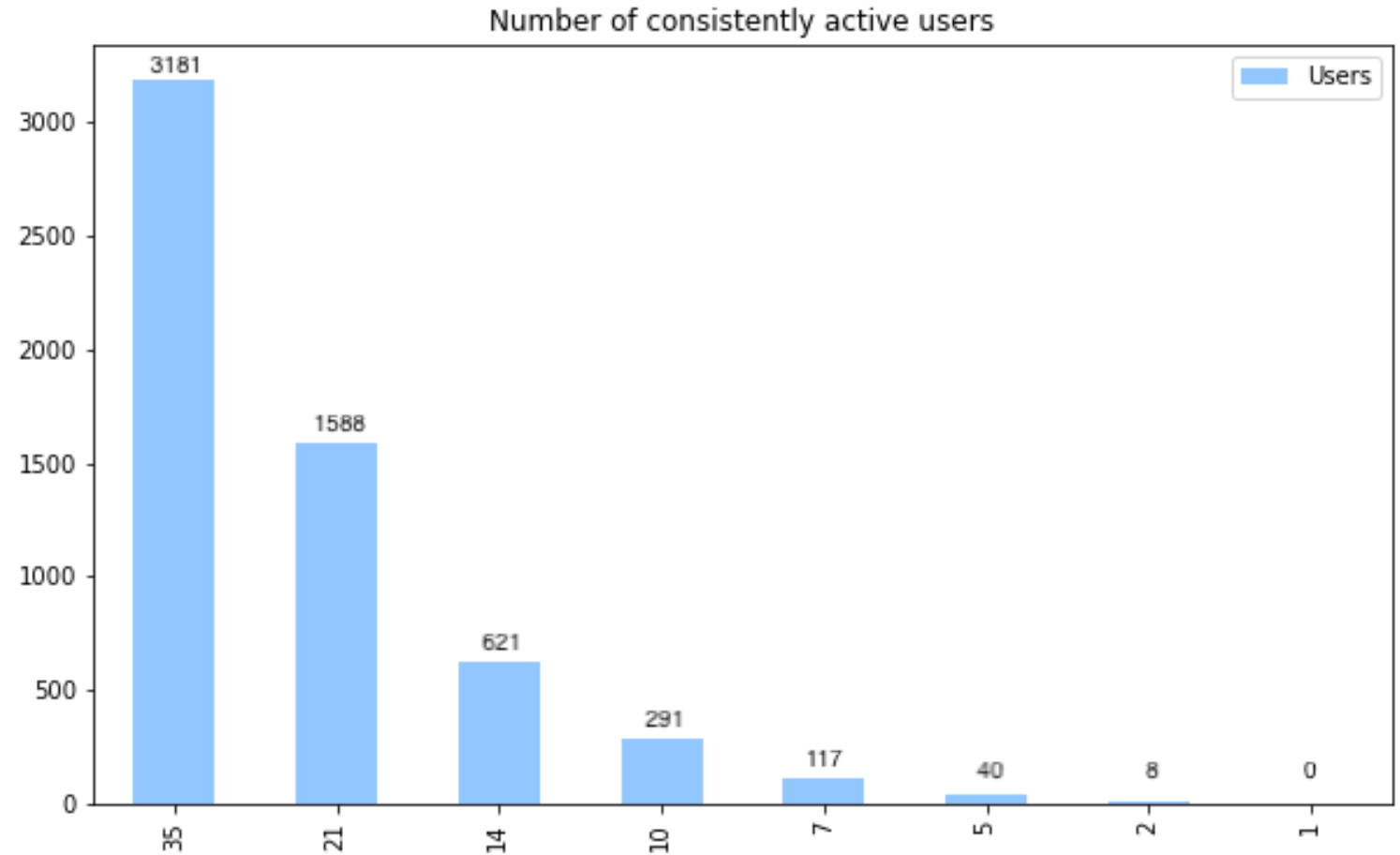- Bios of all users present in the dataset before the event were filtered

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

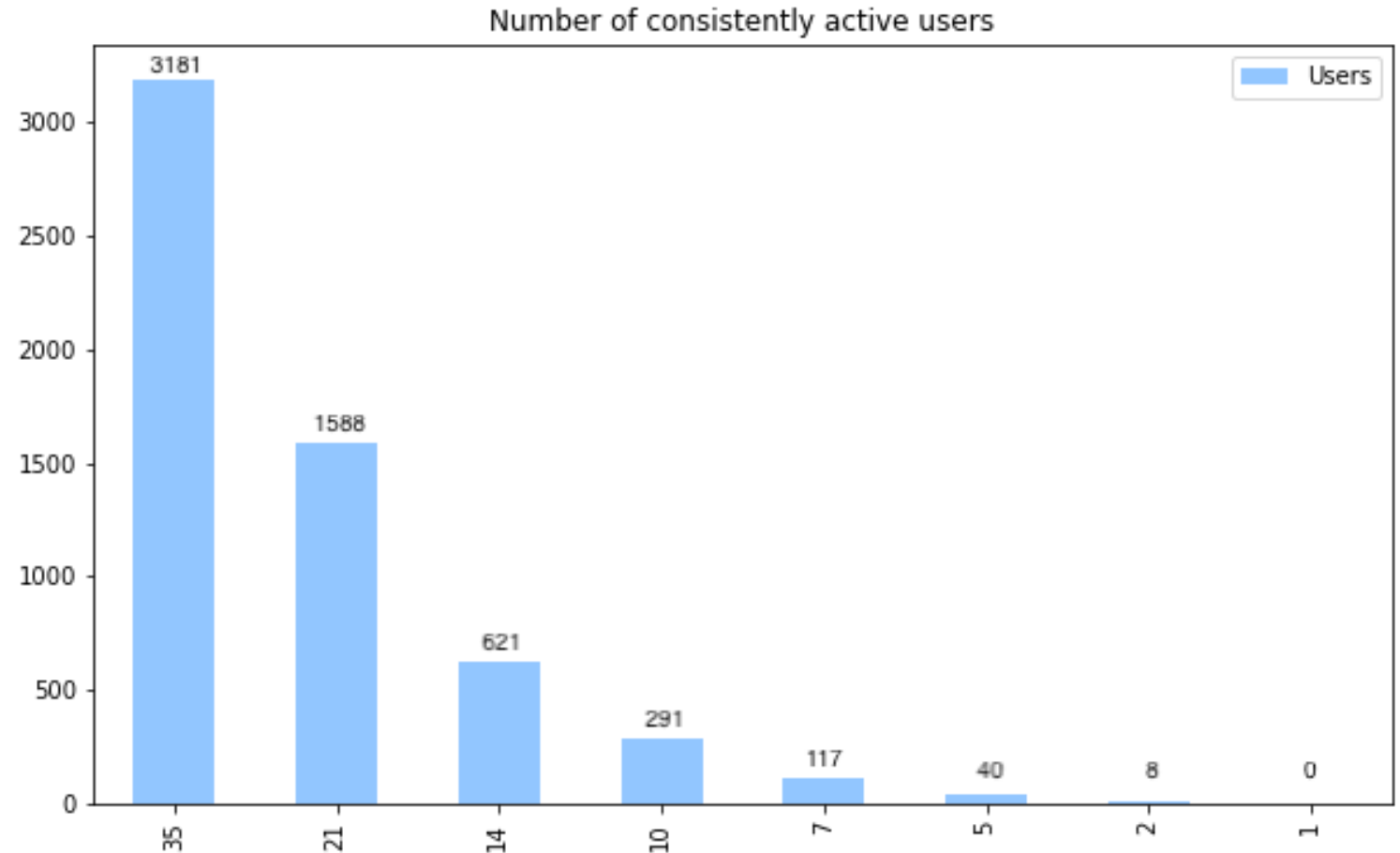Number of consistently active users

2nd Approach Behavioral patterns

- Time slicing the data to detect consistency among users

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

Number of consistently active users

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

Users who are consistent and mention keywords

- Consistent users
- Users with keywords in bios
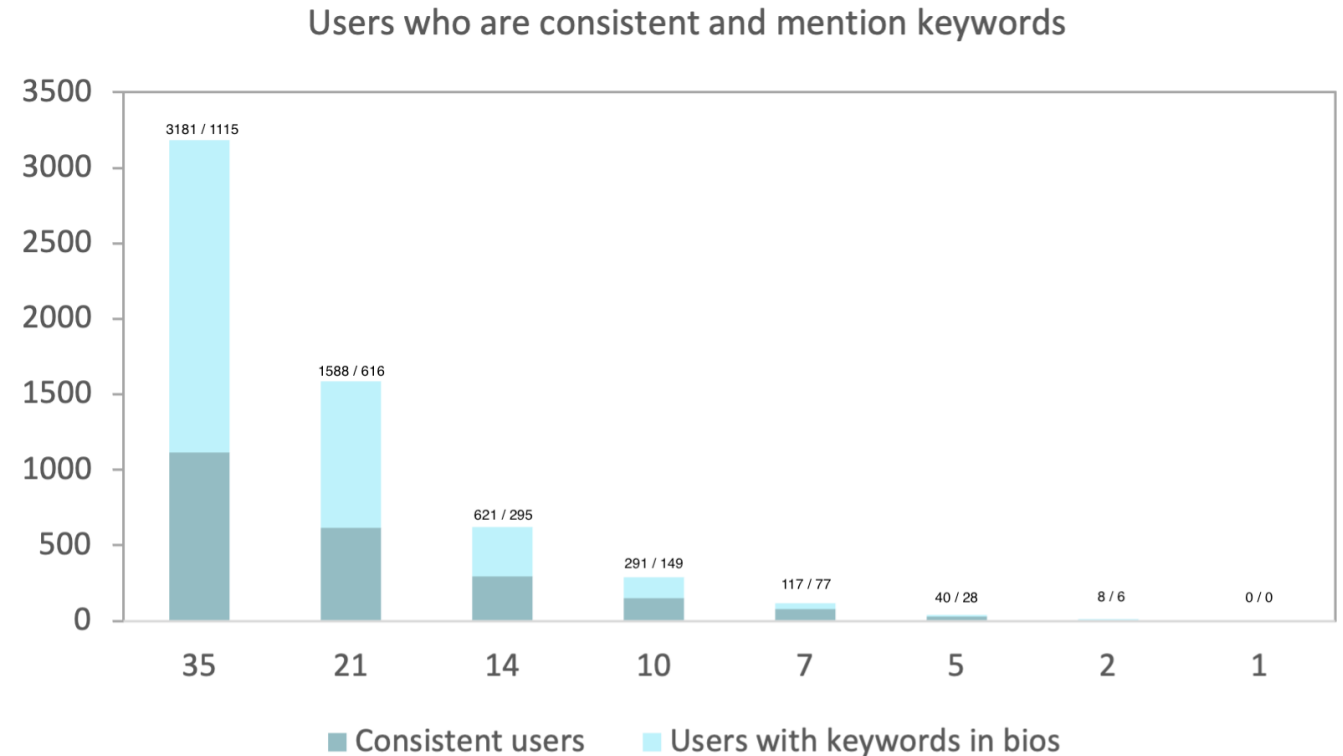
Conclusions about the two approaches

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

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These slides are available at:

https://tedhchen.com/assets/polnet21_slides.pdf

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