

Drive-By Solidarity

Conceptualizing the Temporal Relationship between #BlackLivesMatter and Anonymous's #OpKKK

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Abstract: This article offers a theoretical and empirical exploration of a form of solidarity in which one group spontaneously mobilizes in support of another, unrelated group. It is a fleeting solidarity based not on shared identity but on temporarily aligned goals, one aimed less at persistence and more at short-term impact. We call this *drive-by solidarity* because of its spontaneous, unilateral, and unsolicited nature. We argue that it is a “thinner” form of solidarity in comparison to “thicker” forms usually conceptualized in the social movement literature. We examine the case of Anonymous’s “Operation KKK” (#OpKKK), an online hacktivist campaign to expose Ku Klux Klan members carried out in support of #BlackLivesMatter protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, in November 2014, and we use social media data to show that, while BLM and Anonymous networks temporarily coordinated during the protests, there is no subsequent evidence of long-term coordination.

Keywords: Anonymous, Black Lives Matter, collective identity, hacktivism, Ku Klux Klan, social networks, solidarity, Twitter

Following the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement resurged as a wave of protests swept across the United States and even spread abroad. Spontaneously re-emerging on the scene were also Anonymous hacktivists (“Anons”), who after several years of relative silence acted in support of the protests by hacking the Minneapolis Police Department’s



website, disrupting Chicago Police radios, leaking private documents from hundreds of US law enforcement agencies, and even teaming up with online K-pop fans (or “stans”) to take over and disrupt white supremacist hashtags online (Beran 2020; Griffin 2020; Lee 2020). This was only the latest in a series of interactions between Anonymous and BLM that, as we describe in this article, began in November 2014 when hacktivists successfully intervened to defend BLM protesters from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

Mobilizations like these show evidence of one group (Anonymous) acting in solidarity with and in support of a separate and very different group (BLM). Yet, these mobilizations seem qualitatively different from more traditional examples of solidarity, such as honoring picket lines or coalition-based social movements. They feature a fleeting or “thin” form of solidarity based on temporarily aligned goals and short-term impact. They therefore operate differently from the types of solidaristic actions generally described in the field of social movements, and offer insight into an underexamined form of solidarity that is short in duration, less demanding in terms of mutual commitment, and potentially high in impact. In this article, we explore such mobilizations, offering fresh insight into the potential and limitations of this form of solidarity.

Most of the literature on solidarity sees it as fundamentally a project of relationship- and identity-building, with long-term cooperation as a goal (Davis 1998; Fantasia 1988; Fireman and Gamson 1979; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Some scholars emphasize the challenges of trying to build and maintain solidarity across social divisions (Beckwith 2000; Einwohner et al. 2021; Montoya 2021; Polletta 2020; Smith 2008; Tormos-Aponte 2017; Whittier 2018; Young 2002). More recent research has illuminated the sometimes spontaneous (Cheng and Chan 2017; Snow and Moss 2014) and fluid nature of diverse participants and alliances in contemporary mobilizations (Papacharissi 2015; Tillery 2019; Tufekci 2017). Others have even argued that social media has replaced the traditional politics of identity with more individualized collective action (Bennett and Seaborg 2013; Milan 2015a). Theoretical work on solidarity has distinguished between several broad forms (social, political, etc.), but the application to different types of social movement mobilizations has not been fully elaborated (Scholz 2008). As such, we still lack a robust conceptual treatment of the specific forms that solidarity may take, including a full account of more ephemeral and unidirectional types of coordination. This gap in the literature is becoming more salient with the proliferation of digital protest, as these forms of solidarity may be more prevalent—or just more visible—in digital interaction.

This article aims to address this gap by exploring a particular form of solidarity, one that can exist temporarily between two very different movement campaigns, and that does not involve the development of shared identities or even mutual consultation. Due to its spontaneous, one-sided, and unsolicited nature, we conceptualize this phenomenon as *drive-by solidarity*, a serial strategy employed by some groups to briefly and unilaterally share resources and labor with another group before moving on to new campaigns. This form of solidarity, we suggest, is fleeting and less demanding than solidarity built on robust relations of trust and deeply held shared identities, and in this sense is “thinner” compared to these “thicker” versions. Drive-by solidarity is theoretically compelling, because it helps us to see and explain emerging empirical phenomena (e.g., Anonymous, TikTok teens, K-Pop stans) in the realm of collective action that are temporary and digitally facilitated, thus making us think about solidarity in new ways. Moreover, short-term campaigns of drive-by solidarity offer a different metric for considering social movement success, which has traditionally been measured by the ability to impact policy or sustain long-term movements. However, these interactions are not without risks. Because such actions are unilaterally initiated, they may also generate power asymmetries between groups that can be potentially risky for those on the receiving end.

We illustrate this concept through an examination of the case of “Operation KKK” (#OpKKK), an Anonymous online hacktivist campaign carried out against the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan to support BLM protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, in November 2014. First, we compile a timeline of events from secondary sources. Second, we examine how users of Anonymous and BLM hashtags on Twitter interacted during the campaign to look for evidence of solidaristic engagement. We use a complete database of over three million tweets to identify the most active users of the respective sets of hashtags. We then model the networks of retweets and mentions across the two online discursive spheres. While Twitter represents only one aspect of each of these larger social movements, it offers the advantage of being able to visualize engagement *in situ* (Earl et al. 2013), thereby helping us see examples of coordination that would be difficult to see outside of the digital world.

We graph the period of the 2014 #OpKKK campaign (November 1 – December 31), followed by its revival one year later in 2015 (October 15 – December 31), to address the following questions: Can a short-term, unilaterally initiated campaign be an expression of solidarity between two different groups? If so, what might such a relationship look like, and how might it change over the long term? Are these kinds of unrequested

alliances persistent, or do they burn brightly and then quickly fizzle to nothing? Our findings show that Anons exhibited what we call *drive-by solidarity* with BLM. The networks of the two groups became politically coordinated in period one, originating primarily from Anons, while period two showed no evidence of long-term coordination.

Our goal is not to test a theory; instead, we use our example to develop conceptual and empirically informed insights into new ways of thinking about solidarity. Below, we develop our theoretical framework for the concept of drive-by solidarity, followed by an overview of the two movements in our case. Through our empirical analysis, we demonstrate how success within this case occurred in part because of the short-term, thin solidarities developed between Anonymous and BLM. We conclude the article with a discussion of both the potential and limitations of short-term solidarities between movements. We suggest that developing a more robust account of different forms of solidarity can deepen our understanding of social movements.

Theorizing Thick and Thin Solidarity

Typically, solidarity is conceptualized as the ties that bind social groups together (see Polletta 2020), but it takes on a particular meaning in terms of social movements, where it is more focused on political action and participation in organized protest. For these purposes, the distinction between social, civic, and political solidarity is helpful (Scholz 2008). Social solidarity refers to feelings of community or shared identity, a recognition of connection and mutual obligation that often is associated with support for generous social policies (Banting and Kymlicka 2017). But political solidarity encompasses a different range of phenomena (Scholz 2008). Political solidarity is sometimes defined quite broadly as encompassing any collective action aimed at responding to a perceived injustice, but it is also sometimes defined more narrowly, focusing on the intentional coordination of action for specific ends. If *political solidarity* occurs when groups of people specifically coordinate political behavior or symbolic action for mutual benefit (Pitkin 1981), or involves “the preparedness to share resources with others by personal contribution to those in struggle” (Stjernø 2004: 2), then social movements represent an opportunity to study such solidarity, as they comprise key moments in which people choose to coordinate their action (Ayoub 2019; Rai 2018; Scholz 2008). Sally Scholz defines political solidarity as a “form of commitment to challenge injustice, oppression, [or]

social vulnerability” (Scholz 2008: 10–13; see also Arendt [1965] 2006). We use this definition of solidarity in this article— that is, the voluntary coordination of symbolic action and/or resources in pursuit of social change. We treat this intentional coordination for the pursuit of social change as evidence of political solidarity.

While solidarity is a relational or social phenomenon (it is nonsensical to be in solidarity with oneself), it is fundamentally an orientation that leads individuals—in the case of social movements or individual activists—to adjust their behavior to pursue some end that they imagine or perceive as being shared with others. Solidarity is an expression of shared goals (Bayertz 1999; Scholz 2008). It involves committing oneself to a course of action aimed at supporting or furthering a particular interest or goal. The shared goal is often a shared opposition to some political actor or program. As Scholz puts it:

Political solidarity, unlike social solidarity and civic solidarity, arises in response to a situation of injustice or oppression. Individuals make a conscious commitment to join with others in struggle to challenge a perceived injustice. A collective forms but it is unified not by shared attributes, location, or even shared interests. The unity is based on shared commitment to a cause. There is, in other words, an inherently oppositional nature to political solidarity as well as a mutually shared vision. (Scholz 2008: 34)

In some sense, this shared goal or opposition defines a group or coalition, but it is important to note that the group defined by this cooperation need not share an identity or community of interests in any deep or connected sense (what Deana Rohlinger and Leslie Bunnage [2018] call “thick collective identity”). They just need to share a single common interest or goal, and the cooperative behavior may be fleeting. The coordinated action may last longer, possibly evolving into a thicker social connection (say, a form of social solidarity), or not:

The relationship formed by solidarity may be long lasting or relatively short-lived. In other words, the collective that forms in response to injustice may attain its ends quite rapidly and then cease to exist or change forms; the goals may change and a new collective form, or a cause may span decades while the solitary collective experiences quite fluid membership. (Scholz 2008: 34)

Last, it is important to note that, although solidarity must be relational, it is not necessarily reciprocal: one might decide to undertake

some action in solidarity with another group without interacting with that group. Again, citing Scholz:

Of course, reciprocal affection may also be found in political solidarity and perhaps even in civic solidarity, but for neither of those forms is reciprocal affection necessary to the bond of solidarity. (Scholz 2008: 34)

This understanding of political solidarity, which we adopt in the present study, is well established in the theoretical literature but less common in the empirical literature on social movements. In the latter, solidarity is typically predicated on a “thicker” set of commitments, often including a shared identity or common membership in a social group (Fantasia 1988; Fireman and Gamson 1979; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992). But solidarity covers a wide range of phenomena, and the tendency to conflate social and political solidarity obscures some important differences (Scholz 2008). For example, solidarity is often seen as arising out of a shared experience of oppression, requiring a shared identity, and lasting over a long term, and although these features may seem to characterize many prominent examples of social movements such as the Women’s movement (Beckwith 2000; Einwohner et al. 2021; Montoya 2021; Weldon 2006), they are not necessary for political solidarity in the sense defined by Scholz and in the way we use it here. A more robust application of the concept of political solidarity in the study of social movements, which we develop in this article, helps to reveal phenomena that conceptually should be included under the umbrella of solidarity but that might be less likely to be so identified without careful delineation of the conceptual distinctions between different types of solidarity (i.e., political and social).

Distinguishing political from social solidarity opens theoretical space to understand a wider range of forms of political cooperation that should be captured by the notion of solidarity. In particular, it allows us to capture forms of solidarity based on strategic, short-term, pragmatic considerations, forms that eschew claims about shared identities or a comprehensive set of shared interests. Therefore, the idea of political solidarity allows us to consider the possibility that “thinner,” more fleeting, unidirectional forms of cooperation, involving the voluntary expression of shared goals, is a form of solidarity of interest to social movement scholars. While the building of sustainable coalitions is a well-known long-term approach to creating solidarity across diverse groups (e.g., Davis 1998), we contend that solidarity can be expressed through spontaneous, shorter-term actions aimed at common ends, not

requiring the development of shared identities or even mutual consultation. Instead, two different groups can temporarily share a goal when a particular aspect of one group's political claims momentarily resonate or align with the other's (Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986).

We conceptualize drive-by solidarity as involving coordinated, short-term action with specific goals initiated by activists who have their own identity and motivation that is distinct from the group or movement with which the action is aligned. It is a campaign undertaken by "outsiders" to the movement, and, as such, a "drive-by" campaign is distinct from the multiple campaigns or waves of protest organized by those working within the movement. It may be unexpected or even uninvited. However, unlike charity (which is unidirectional) or friendship (which is supportive), advocacy for a political goal is distinct from benevolence or camaraderie (Louis et al. 2019; Rai 2018). These short-term campaigns involve cooperation across disparate movement identities, at least initially, though it is possible that common identities may evolve from action over the longer term (Scholz 2008).

In the sections below, we offer an analysis of how one group (Anonymous hacktivists) sought to coordinate their action with another group (the BLM movement) as a form of solidarity. As we conceptualize it, this requires us to show that movement actors in these two groups aimed (for a while at least) at a common goal, which was to enable and support the BLM activists' ability to assemble and protest freely even in the face of racial terrorism. We turn next to our cases, followed by our analysis of the interaction between these two movements, before considering the implications of this form of solidarity for the study of social movements more generally.

Coordination between Two Independent Groups: BLM and Anonymous

The movements of BLM and Anonymous share some distinct similarities and differences. First, BLM has become a highly visible social movement in the United States and around the world, reframing the way we talk about police violence and the oppression of people of color, both online and off (Freelon et al. 2016; Jackson et al. 2020; Tillery 2019). In this study, we conceptualize BLM as a movement based on the oppositional consciousness of a racialized group of historically oppressed people. This is evident in the name itself, which stands as a claim that the lives of Black people are not valued by society as equal to the lives

of others (Black Lives Matter 2017), although it has developed over time to represent multiple intersectional points of domination (Fraser 1992).

BLM had its origins in the digital realm as a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) created in July 2013 by three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who shot and killed an unarmed Black teenager named Trayvon Martin (McLaughlin 2016; Khan-Cullors and bandele 2018). But the hashtag did not gain widespread attention until August 2014, when an unarmed Black man named Michael Brown was killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson (Freelon et al. 2016). Video recordings of this incident spread quickly across the Internet, and the first BLM protests began in Ferguson soon after. The wave of BLM protests exploded in November 2014, when a grand jury decided not to charge Officer Wilson, and soon spread to New York when, in December 2014, another grand jury also failed to indict police officers for the choking death of Eric Garner.

Today, the BLM movement continues both in digital space as well as physical space, as participants engage in what has been called the “networked public sphere” (Tufekci 2017) or “networked counterpublics” (Jackson et al. 2020). While it is important not to conflate these two spaces, it is equally important to understand their synergistic relationship, or the “dialectic interplay” between digital and physical spaces in mobilization (Lim 2014: 53). Just as activists use the social meanings, opportunities, and limitations embedded in physical space to achieve their aims through protest (Harvey 2012; Lefebvre 1974), they also use the structures of online platforms to bring attention to their movement and achieve their aims (Costanza-Chock 2020; Tufekci 2017) while negotiating commonality across difference (Milan 2015b). Racial justice activists have been shown to extensively utilize social media, particularly for framing and generating solidarity through shared dialogue organized around specific hashtags (Anderson 2016; De Choudhury et al. 2016; Jackson et al. 2020; Papacharissi 2015; Stewart et al. 2017). For example, not only did BLM begin as a hashtag, but the online discourse around #BlackLivesMatter has helped disperse awareness of racial injustice throughout society (Dunivin et al. 2022; Freelon et al. 2016; Jackson et al. 2020; Mutz 2022; Tillery 2019). According to one scholar: “Twitter, Facebook and social media platforms are really ground zero for focusing attention . . . Social media was a tool to drive visibility [for Black Lives Matter]” (cf. McLaughlin 2016).

Like BLM, Anonymous also began online in digital space, but not as a hashtag. The idea of Anonymous originally emerged circa 2006

as a meme on the online platform 4chan (Beyer 2014; Coleman 2014). By 2009, Anonymous had become known popularly as a transnational online collective or movement of hacktivists who digitally disrupt those they perceive as threats to digital rights and freedom (Coleman 2014; Uitermark 2017). Though they are ideologically heterogeneous, and their participants are in constant flux, the most prominent campaigns generally share overarching cyber-Libertarian values including freedom of speech and freedom from censorship, both online and off (Fuchs 2013; Goode 2015; McDonald 2015; Wright 2022). Anons have engaged in multiple online campaigns on behalf of marginalized groups, such as during the Arab Spring uprisings (Emspak 2011), Occupy Gezi (Franceschi-Bicchierai 2013), and Black Lives Matter (Liebelson 2014). However, the movement has shown itself to be highly fractious, resulting in internal conflict, varied subgroups, and, at times, contradictory goals (Beraldo 2020; Uitermark 2017).

In contrast to BLM, Anonymous is a socially constructed collective identity based on shared space, ideas, and experiences (Coleman 2014; Firer-Blaess 2016; McDonald 2015), which can even be thought of as a type of *non-identity*. Their ideology embodies the idea of the erasure of individual identity, also described as “radical opacity” (Dibbell 2010), with the intended goal of fully separating the messenger from the message. Ideally, Anons shed personal characteristics and participate as equal members of a larger whole. According to E. Gabriella Coleman (2011), participants frequently remind each other not to seek personal media attention or behave like a leader. This anti-leader, anti-celebrity ethic is one of its most vibrant informal cultural norms. Marco Deseriis conceptualizes this type of anonymous identity as an “improper name,” which is a form of political technology that “provides a medium for obfuscation and mutual recognition to its users” and “allows those who do not have a voice of their own to acquire a symbolic power outside the boundaries of an institutional practice” (2013: 41). As one Anon put it, when everyone is invisible, all voices appear to speak from the center (Coleman 2011).

As this section has shown, BLM and Anonymous can each be seen as social movements that seek equality and inclusiveness by empowering oppressed and disenfranchised groups, albeit in different ways. While neither movement is hierarchical, centralized, or uniform in its constituency, both movements work toward creating their own “thick” collective identities (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2018) through active and vibrant networks online and off. Yet they each embody a very different ideology and approach to solidarity: the BLM movement represents the

manifestation of oppositional consciousness for historically oppressed identities (i.e., people of color), while Anonymous seeks to be a platform for equality and inclusion by erasing individual identity and instead elevating shared values as paramount. BLM seeks racial justice and intersectional solidarity, whereas Anonymous promotes a more Libertarian approach toward freedom of speech for all. Nevertheless, these two movements briefly aligned their actions in the #OpKKK campaign. In what follows, we examine Anonymous's #OpKKK campaign to explore the phenomenon we call *drive-by solidarity*. We then use our findings to outline several questions that can drive further research.

Data and Methods

Empirical studies of social movements vary widely, but all evidence-based studies seek data that illustrate the “traces” (McCarthy 2007) that protest leaves behind. Some traces are easily collectable from observations at in-person events, such as large marches and demonstrations. For protest activity that happens entirely online, however, the traces take different forms. This study began with an investigation of news sources and videos pertaining to Anonymous's #OpKKK campaigns and the BLM movement to construct a timeline of events and provide context for the primary analysis. The main data, or “traces,” for this study were drawn from a database of tweets purchased directly from Twitter, providing full access to all tweets in the periods meeting our search criteria. Specifically, we focused on tweets using key hashtags related to the BLM movement and the Anonymous Operation KKK campaign.¹

Hashtags, or the presence of a pound sign before a word or phrase, originated in efforts by activists to organize conversations and topics on Internet Relay Chat and TXTmob before the advent of social media (Costanza-Chock 2020). They allow conversations to be organized around keywords or key phrases that frame them as relevant to a particular issue or perspective. On Twitter, social movement networks take advantage of this existing affordance, the ability to link and search conversations through hashtags, to bring attention to their campaigns (Freelon et al. 2016; Jackson et al. 2020). Because activists often “live-tweet” events, analyzing tweets using hashtags of activist campaigns in a specific period can reveal insights into the movement dynamics occurring in both physical and virtual space (Earl et al. 2013; Tremayne 2014; Tucker et al. 2016; Tufekci 2017). Moreover, while they are not synonymous with movements, tweets and retweets of hashtags provide

the very traces of how activists are expressing their support for each other and for movements, thus it is possible to empirically investigate the association between hashtags. The tweets used in this article were isolated in two discrete time periods; Period 1 is 1 November through 31 December 2014, and Period 2 is 15 October through 31 December 2015.² Combined, these two periods contained approximately three million tweets related to the two campaigns in question.

To map out the data, we first used the Kibana software platform to graph the frequencies of the tweets in our time periods. Second, using a platform called GeeViz we wrote a program to generate social network graphs for the most active users for each group of hashtags. We began by identifying a list of hashtags for each of our two groups (BLM and Anonymous). An algorithm then searched our database and determined the top “K” most significant users for each group—that is, the users whose tweets most frequently employed those hashtags.³ This allowed us to focus our analysis on the most active voices in each of the respective online discursive spheres. We verified each of the accounts as real users who were primarily associated with the appropriate group by manually opening each account’s Twitter page and checking their identity against existing sources. For example, the BLM accounts consisted of well-known public figures (e.g., DeRay Mckesson) and organizations (e.g., True Black News), while Anonymous accounts were clearly identified as such and included long-standing established accounts (e.g., @YourAnonNews, @Operation_KKK).

Using that list of user accounts, the algorithm then generated directed network graphs to visually display the most frequently occurring ties those users have with other users, based on retweets and mentions.⁴ This form of communication was determined to represent an intentional and direct form of engagement. As David Bild and colleagues (2015:12) argue, “the retweet graph more closely models the real-world social and trust relationships among users, because it derives from a more forceful action—not just listening to others’ ideas, but actively forwarding them to one’s own friends.” The networks from each group (BLM and Anonymous) were then merged to show the ties (or lack thereof) both within and between the user accounts of these groups of users. The nodes represent Twitter user accounts, and ties represent a retweet or mention. The distance between nodes correlates with the frequency of the tweet relationship. The arrows on the ties show the direction of the retweet.⁵ In summary, the hashtags were used to identify the user accounts (nodes), while directed retweets/mentions (ties) represent the discursive engagement between them. The network graphs thus reveal

the quantity and directionality of engagement. This discursive engagement, within the context of our initial analysis of news articles and videos, is operationalized as evidence of solidaristic activity.⁶

We recognize that tweeting is not the same as solidarity, and we in no way mean to reduce movement solidarity to only online activity. However, as stated above, solidarity may be expressed through communication such as a tweet. While Twitter data can have some limitations in terms of broader representativeness (see Cihon and Yasseri 2016; Tufekci 2014), our study has the advantage of using a full dataset that was not filtered by the Twitter API. We chose to examine Twitter activity as one indicator or “trace” of the type of solidaristic expression that was taking place between these two activist groups at the times in question. Furthermore, for Anonymous hacktivists who act solely online and specialize in concealing their identities, traditional methods like observations and qualitative interviews may not be possible. Therefore, online data was one of the only ways to directly measure and visualize the engagement between Anonymous and BLM participants at these times.

Findings

Timeline of Events in #OpKKK

As described above, the first mass mobilizations that would ultimately come to be known as the BLM movement began in August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. The protests intensified over the ensuing months and erupted into riots on 24 November after the grand jury’s announcement. Earlier that month, a local subgroup of the white supremacist KKK called the Traditionalist American Knights, led by Frank Ancona, began distributing fliers around the greater St. Louis area claiming that they were prepared to use “lethal force” against the protesters as a form of “self-defense.” In a surprise move on 16 November, hacktivists in the Anonymous collective posted a video on YouTube declaring all out cyberwar on the KKK. Their online campaign, called “Operation KKK” (#OpKKK) (Figure 1), aimed to “de-hood” KKK members by hacking into their websites and social media profiles and publicly posting their true identities on public online platforms such as Twitter and Pastebin, a tactic known as “doxxing.” Anonymous also hacked into and took control of two main KKK Twitter accounts (@KuKluxKlanUSA and @YourKKKCentral) and began tweeting #OpKKK messages from these accounts.

The Anonymous video stated that the KKK “has been interfering with Anonymous,” and was being targeted because of their “threats



Figure 1. Screenshots and memes from the 2014 Anonymous #OpKKK campaign

to use lethal attacks against us at the Ferguson protests” (Official-AnonymousTV1 2014). This implies that Anons were already among the Ferguson protesters and viewed BLM as part of the same “us.” The video expressed further solidarity with BLM through statements such as “You messed with our family, now we will mess with yours.” But the video message stopped short of fully endorsing the goals of BLM, stating that “we are not attacking you [the KKK] for what you believe in, as we fight for freedom of speech.” It appears that the solidarity the Anonymous campaign expressed toward BLM was actually limited and one-sided. Nonetheless, Anons proceeded to take control of KKK websites and social media to reveal the identities of approximately 100 St.-Louis-area members, including in the Ferguson Police Department. While the KKK initially scoffed at Anonymous’s threats of cyberwarfare, on 23 November a second video was published online of an active Anon, Alex Poucher, sitting down for a face-to-face debate with KKK leader Frank Ancona. The interview showed Ancona stating that he knew little about Anonymous before this and had not taken them seriously, but now acknowledges them as a serious player. He also backpedaled on his earlier threats, claiming that his group only ever intended to defend their homes from damage and did not mean to threaten anyone.

A year later, another Anonymous subgroup called “Ghost Squad” revived #OpKKK once again, this time posting a list on Pastebin containing the identities of more than 350 alleged KKK members nationwide; however, many of the listed names turned out to be already in the public domain or lacking supporting documentation, calling into question the group’s credibility (Woolf 2015). Later, in April 2016 Anons

hacked a major KKK website, which disabled the site for several days. Soon after, though, the same subgroup launched cyberattacks against the main BLM website (Faife 2016). An Anonymous Twitter user called “se1ge” claimed responsibility, writing that they “started this operation after attacking the KKK [because] I realized the individuals in the Black Lives Matter movement were acting no better—some even promote genocide of the Caucasian race . . . This will not be tolerated. What angered me and the other members of Ghost Squad was that the leaders also do not speak on this topic. This was not the dream of Martin Luther King Jr. and should not be supported or promoted by any movement. All Lives Matter!”

From these sources, we can see that the Anonymous hacktivists initially presented themselves as allies of the BLM movement. They acted in defense of the BLM protesters by going to cyberwar with the KKK. The effects of the first #OpKKK campaign in 2014 are notable for bringing media attention to the KKK’s threats and leading many members of the Traditionalist American Knights to quit the KKK for fear of damage to their reputations or physical harm (AnonCopWatch 2015), as well as for outing local police officers and shutting down two of the most prominent national KKK Twitter accounts. Anonymous helped provide a protective buffer for BLM activists from white supremacists at a time when it was still strengthening its organization and working toward establishing its credibility as a movement. Helpful though this may have been, the solidarity was fleeting. In the second round of #OpKKK in 2015, the previously expressed solidarity toward BLM appeared to be largely absent, and the Ghost Squad subgroup eventually turned against BLM several months later, as the “All Lives Matter!” tweet quoted above exemplifies.

Analysis of Tweets

In what follows, we present visual representations of the Twitterverse related to the hashtag campaigns for BLM and OpKKK during the two periods we have identified (Figures 2–5). Specifically, we used these data to look for signs of coordinated action and engagement (i.e., retweeting and mentioning) between the most prominent Anonymous and BLM Twitter accounts as “trace” evidence of political solidarity between the two larger social movements. In the following network graphs, an arrow represents an account that mentioned or retweeted another account 10 times or more. We also examined the directionality of this engagement to see if it is mutual or unidirectional. Last, we assessed how this engagement changes over time by comparing the two periods.

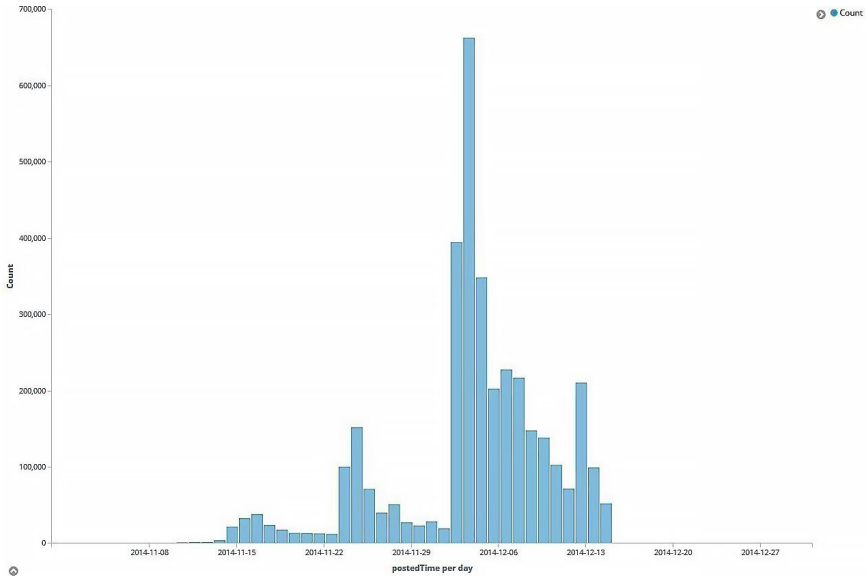


Figure 2. Frequency of tweets about Anonymous and BLM during Period 1

Figure 2 shows the frequency of tweets during Period 1 (1 November to 31 December 2014). As we can see, there is an initial peak in mid-November, which consists mostly of tweets about the #OpKKK campaign. This is followed by a much larger peak in late November through early December, which consists mostly of tweets about BLM. There was a total of 2,233,940 tweets using one or more of the BLM hashtags, and 188,291 tweets that used one or more of the Anonymous hashtags during this period. Further analysis revealed that 48,268 (25.63 percent) of these tweets used a combination of at least one Anonymous hashtag and one or more of the BLM hashtags. This “trading” of hashtags shows that there was, in fact, some amount of online discursive engagement between the two groups of users.

To better understand the nature and directionality of this engagement, we now turn to our network analysis of Period 1. Figure 3 shows the most significant Anonymous accounts in blue and the BLM accounts in purple. As the network graph shows, Anonymous and BLM accounts appear to be heavily engaged with one another with many ties connecting them. However, the most central region of the graph is clearly dominated by Anonymous accounts (blue). This is because they have the most ties connecting to them, meaning that they were the most highly active in engaging with other accounts. Furthermore, by looking at the directions of the ties between all the purple and blue nodes we

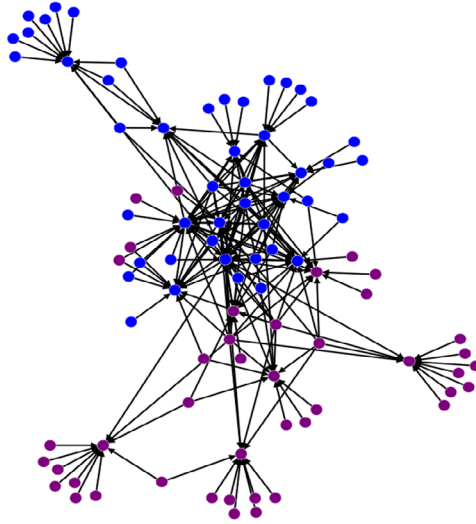


Figure 3. Engagement of significant Anonymous and BLM Twitter accounts from Period 1

can determine how much engagement was occurring between the two groups of users. In total, there is more than twice the number of arrows pointing from purple to blue than from blue to purple, meaning that Anonymous accounts were retweeting and mentioning BLM accounts much more than the other way around. Of the accounts in Figure 3, eight Anonymous accounts retweeted or mentioned BLM users at least 10 times, whereas only four of the BLM accounts did so of Anons. Therefore, while there was some measurable engagement, it was primarily one-sided, with Anons working to amplify the messages of BLM tweets.

Figure 4 shows the frequency of tweets from Anonymous and BLM during Period 2 (15 October to 31 December 2015). At first glance, this graph appears to have more activity overall, but the count scale on the y-axis is only one-tenth that of Period 1. The total number of tweets in Period 2 using BLM hashtags was 842,153, while the total number of tweets using Anonymous hashtags was 93,253. This period represents the second round of #OpKKK, and only resulted in about half as many total tweets as it did in 2014, signifying less attention online. Likewise, there was only a little more than one-third the number of tweets using BLM hashtags. Even more revealing, though, is the relationship between

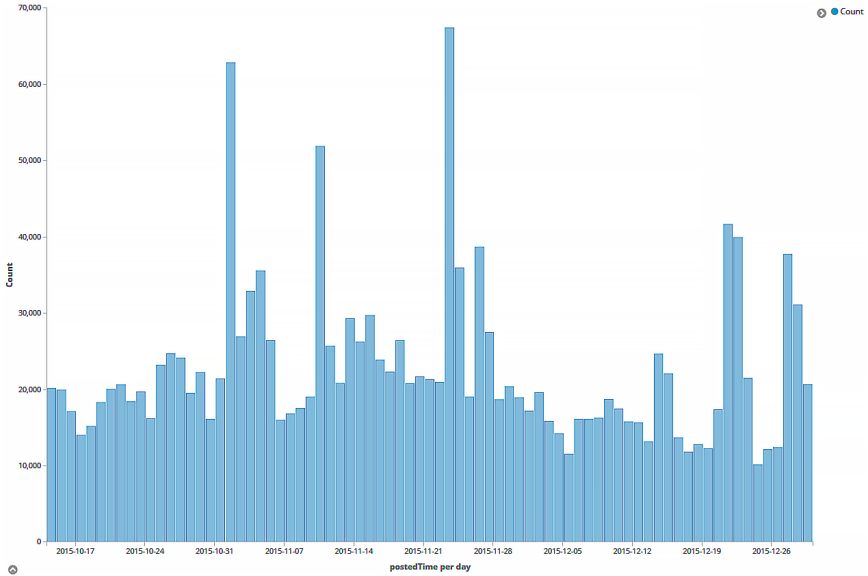


Figure 4. Frequency of tweets about Anonymous and BLM in Period 2

the two sets of users. In Period 2, only 2,301 (2.47 percent) of the tweets combine both Anonymous and BLM hashtags. Engagement dropped from more than a quarter of all tweets in 2014, to less than 3 percent in 2015. Figure 5 shows the engagement network of the two groups. As we can clearly see, the two discursive spheres have become completely separated and isolated from one another.

These findings allow us to empirically visualize a form of political cooperation that should be captured by the notion of solidarity. The evidence shows that in 2014 prominent Anonymous Twitter accounts displayed political solidarity with BLM by intentionally coordinating symbolic action with them online. They not only combined BLM's hashtags with their own, but also retweeted and tagged BLM accounts repeatedly. But it was only a strategic, short-term, and pragmatic display of solidarity based on a temporary alignment of goals (i.e., repelling the threat of oppression from the KKK), rather than one based on long-term shared identity or a comprehensive set of shared interests. Hence, in the 2015 #OpKKK campaign we find virtually no signs of solidarity with BLM at all. The implications of these findings are discussed in the following section.



Figure 5. Engagement network of significant Anonymous and BLM Twitter accounts from Period 2

Discussion

Based on our analysis, the initial 2014 Anonymous #OpKKK campaign exhibited a specific, “thin” form of solidarity toward BLM, which we conceptualize as drive-by solidarity. In such a case, solidarity arose unexpectedly from an outside group (Anonymous) that temporarily joined an existing conflict to support a different, previously unconnected group (BLM). As the network of tweets revealed (Figure 3), this unilaterally initiated action resulted in a temporary expression of solidarity, or coordination of symbolic action, aimed at achieving short-term goals. Anonymous gained visibility by joining a major social uprising at a peak moment of public attention as well as notoriety for taking on an infamous white supremacist group, forcing them to back down. The nascent BLM movement also benefited from the outside support, which allowed them to continue protesting unimpeded by a threatening and potentially violent countermovement and which also exposed the racist affiliations of certain members of the local police.

Though Anonymous’s expression of drive-by solidarity toward BLM showed highly impactful short-term effects, the longer-term effects are more volatile. Anons did not fully embrace all of BLM’s values of racial justice; as such, they only expressed solidarity insofar as they defended BLM’s right to protest. This can be seen in the Anonymous statement toward the KKK, which said that “we are not attacking you for what you believe, as we fight for freedom of speech.” In other words, they were not opposed to white supremacy in principle, only to the suppression of free speech. It is this cyber-Libertarian mindset that differentiates Anonymous from movements like BLM. They did not seek to build a

long-term coalition or include the voice of BLM actors in their decision-making. As a result, there was no lasting relationship between the two movements.

As the Twitter network revealed (Figure 5), when a different subgroup of Anons revived #OpKKK in November 2015, there was no expression of solidarity for BLM. They notably did not retweet or mention any BLM accounts or hashtags in their tweets. While the absence of public expressions on Twitter does not necessarily preclude the existence of solidarity, it is telling that the abundant “traces” of solidarity in 2014 were no longer present in 2015. Even the list released in 2015 was plagued with inaccuracies and contradictions. In this case, Ghost Squad’s motivation seems clear, as only a short time later they attacked BLM’s website, proclaiming that “All Lives Matter!” It is difficult to discern how other Anons felt about this dramatic shift in attitude. As one Anonymous expert described: “I could imagine hypothetically that a lot of people who use the Ghost Squad mantle might not be for [attacking BLM] but also might not be against it enough to speak out. You don’t know whether they all actively support it or just tolerate it” (Faife 2016). Indeed, many months later, on 15 July 2016, several other Anonymous subgroups declared “a day of action in solidarity” with the BLM movement (Lynch et al. 2016), revealing the fractured nature of Anonymous. The solidarity between Anonymous and BLM has thus been sporadic and unsteady, appearing only in isolated, unilateral bursts of drive-by solidarity for short-term, specific goals, which may actually obstruct lasting relationships and coalitions in the long term if the trustworthiness or reliability of solidaristic partners is undermined.

Contrary to what many scholars of social movements have argued, the case of #OpKKK shows us that coordinated political action is possible even in the absence of shared identities or the time-consuming and laborious efforts of building bonds of trust and overcoming social divides in contexts of diversity. However, it can occur without consent, exhibit power asymmetries, and be fundamentally risky for those on the receiving end. As these cases demonstrate, an online movement like Anonymous, given its highly fluid and structureless nature, may have a difficult time building lasting coalitions or alliances, as different individuals and subgroups may come and go at any time under its collective identity. Davide Beraldo (2020) similarly shows that, as a collective movement, Anons are not consistently dedicated to people or causes, certainly not in terms of deep knowledge or commitment. They are instead focused on being quick, adaptable, and impactful. While this may appear as unsteady ground on which to build solidarity, Anons have engaged in this type of action on many occasions, leaping into

existing contentious episodes to support other groups through focused, short-term hacktivist campaigns.

Furthermore, contrary to the common scholarly understanding of social movement success, which is often measured by the ability to impact policy or sustain long-term movements, our case illustrates a very different metric for success based on short-term, high-impact campaigns carried out through expressions of drive-by solidarity. Anonymous thus presents us with an alternative version of achieving solidarity between two unaffiliated groups or movements in brief, spontaneous moments. We believe that drive-by solidarity demonstrates an under-examined form of solidarity that merits further inquiry and study. Anons' fleeting solidarity with BLM is but one case among many.

Conclusion

This study analyzes the case of Anonymous's engagement with the BLM movement in its "Operation KKK" (#OpKKK) in late 2014 and again in late 2015, to examine the nature and implications of the solidarity they exhibited. Based on information compiled from news reports and videos, and our analysis of tweets, we argue that the #OpKKK campaign exhibits a form of drive-by solidarity. This case study offers an opportunity to explore the short- and long-term dynamics of this phenomenon, including how it manifests and its effect on the relationship between the two groups. Our development of this case and the concept of drive-by solidarity contributes to the larger literature on how social movements use online spaces and resources to achieve their goals, and offers new theoretical insights for the study of solidarity within social movements.

Frist, our study demonstrates one way in which online social movement actors may mobilize spontaneously in support of another group's aims. We believe this may also be applicable to other online collective actions, such as online armies of K-pop "stans" deciding to overwhelm popular white supremacist hashtags on Twitter (Griffin 2020), facilitated by digital spaces such as social media platforms and hashtags. Moreover, we suggest that drive-by solidarity is not only an online phenomenon. Existing work on face-to-face social movement organizing and protest indicates that some physical spatial arrangements may encourage or hinder the development of solidarity and alliances even in the absence of centralized coordination (Harvey 2012; Kelly-Thompson 2020; Nejad 2016; Schwedler 2013; Steinert-Threlkeld 2017; Sydiq 2020). For instance, when truck drivers on multi-lane highways purposely occupy all the lanes and drive at the speed limit in a construction zone, the

truck drivers act on behalf of the construction workers who might be harmed by speeding drivers. In such situations, construction workers do not necessarily request the truck drivers' help; instead, the truck drivers see a need (highway safety in a work zone) and spontaneously act to meet that need. The joint action lasts as long as the truck drivers are in the work zone, after which their coordinated actions end. Likewise, the concept of drive-by solidarity allows us to extend this idea and think about how such spontaneous coordination or "thin" alliances may emerge in and be shaped by online spaces as well.

Second, the approach to solidarity we develop here opens space to address the different forms that solidarity can take. Contemporary scholarship lays a conceptual groundwork in defining different forms of solidarity (Bayertz 1999; Einwohner et al. 2021; Rai 2018; Scholz 2008), and we seek to extend and apply these conceptual distinctions. Following Rohlinger and Bunnage's (2018) distinction between "thick" and "thin" collective identity, we argue that we ought to think of solidarity as a continuum of activities, ranging from thicker, long-term relationships to thinner, temporary alliances of convenience aimed at prompting action and political change. Whereas "thicker" solidarity might result from like-minded constituencies that share similar political positions (Einwohner et al. 2021), "thinner" solidarity can be created by joint actions of "frenemies" who have little in common other than a particular political stance (e.g., some feminists and conservative Christians coming together to oppose pornography; see Whittier 2018). The forms of solidarity at the thinner end can even be unidirectional, wherein some groups coordinate their activities with the stated aims and goals of other groups, seeking to support those other groups, without consulting with them or otherwise engaging them in active deliberation.

Importantly, we argue that thinner and thicker forms of solidarity share the basic components that make an action solidaristic. Solidarity is grounded in an understanding that the status quo is problematic in some way, that some groups require support or protection, and that change requires action to support or protect the groups that experience this injustice in pursuing their aims (Arendt [1965] 2006; Rai 2018; Scholz 2008). In this way, solidarity is distinct from pity and charity, which motivate the powerful to act on behalf of those less powerful than themselves without relinquishing any of the benefits of their current social position (Arendt [1965] 2006; Rai 2018). Even in the case of #OpKKK, while Anons were not acting with the permission of BLM, they viewed themselves as acting *with* BLM against what both groups perceived to be an injustice (i.e., threats to silence or repress BLM protest by white supremacists). Therefore, at the moment when #OpKKK began

Anonymous and BLM shared a similar vision of “the good life” (Rai 2018). Yet, unlike many contemporary conceptualizations of solidarity, this kind of action does not necessarily require the deep deliberation about and development of a shared vision of what the social world could be that are commonly associated with thicker forms of solidarity. Likewise, this shared vision may be fleeting and context-dependent, as demonstrated by the split between Anonymous and BLM in 2015. Furthermore, social movement actors may prefer a thinner form of solidarity when it meets their strategic needs to mobilize a broader coalition.

We contend that drive-by solidarity, as one of these thinner forms of solidarity, offers a different understanding of solidarity and campaign success that has not received much attention from scholars. We offer this concept not as an ideal or model in a normative sense for which activists should strive, but rather as an example of a form of organizing that we should seek to understand, assessing both its strengths and weaknesses. Our example is one of how short-term action succeeded in repudiating an attack. Still, it also shows that over the long run, in this case, the partnership proved sporadic and unreliable. Further research is needed to analyze precisely how applicable this type of solidarity is to other social movements and groups. Under what conditions will “thick” solidarity arise, and when is solidarity more likely to be “thin”? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type? How do we understand the role of consent and reciprocity in solidaristic relationships? How are these types shaped by online and physical spaces? Additional research should also work to identify other specific forms of solidarity and perhaps ultimately compile a typology. While the concept of solidarity has been in use for quite some time, empirical investigations into the specific ways in which it manifests are useful for the continued development of the concept.

Acknowledgments

This article is part of a larger project on diversity and inclusion in social movements. We would like to thank everyone who has supported our work. In addition, we would like to acknowledge Aviral Sandeep Mansingka and Ammar Husain for their assistance with the Twitter analysis. We also appreciate all the questions and feedback from the participants of the various conferences at which we have presented this work. We received funding for this article from the Incentive Grant, Office of the Vice President for Research, Purdue University, as part of the project Diversity and Inclusion: Implications for Science and Society.

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Notes

1. Key hashtags were identified from the secondary sources and Internet searches. Hashtags used for the BLM movement were #BlackLivesMatter, #BLM, #ICantBreathe, #ShutItDown, #AliveWhileBlack, #HandsUpDontShoot, #EricGarner, #MikeBrown, #MichaelBrown, #TamirRice, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #Justice4All, and #PoliceBrutality (capturing all uses without regard to case sensitivity). Hashtags used for the Operation KKK campaign were #Anonymous, #OpKKK, and #HoodsOff.
2. The time for Period 2 was extended approximately two weeks earlier than for Period 1 because we found that tweets about #OpKKK started earlier in 2015 than they did in 2014, so we wanted to make sure not to exclude those from our analysis. Even though Period 2 is longer than Period 1, it still contains a much smaller number of tweets overall.
3. For the purposes of this article, we chose to show networks in which the value of K is set to 10 to keep the networks small enough that we could manually identify each Twitter user account (node). This enabled us to verify the correct group attribution of each node and to ensure that no “fake” accounts or “bots” (Varol et al. 2017) were present in our networks. Other measures, such as follower count, were not used because we found that outliers, namely loosely affiliated celebrity figures with extremely numerous followers, tended to dominate the networks. The nodes are left unlabeled in this article to protect the identity of the participants.
4. This occurs anytime a specific user account name appears within the content of a tweet.
5. The node toward which the arrow points is doing the retweeting or mentioning of the other account.
6. We read through all the tweets captured in our networks and found no evidence of antagonistic or negative expressions between these accounts. All retweets and mentions were in the form of endorsements or statements of support.

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