

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND SAY HER NAME:

HOW INTERSECTIONAL SOLIDARITY STRENGTHENS MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Work-in-Progress

Prepared for Presentation at the MPSA Annual Meeting

Palmer House Hotel

Chicago, Illinois

April 2018

Comments and Suggestions Welcome

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Introduction: Solidarity and Difference in #BlackLivesMatter

Movements for social justice are often dogged by conflicts among activists that mirror broader social struggles for equality and liberation. Women's movements frequently face criticisms of emphasizing the concerns of white women, elite women, and straight women at the expense of women of color, working class women, undocumented, immigrant and refugee women, and sexual minorities (Roth 2004; hooks 2000; davis 1998). Movements for racial justice are accused of sexism and classism, and labor movements have been called out for racism and sexism as well (Simien 2004; 2005; Frymer 2011; Weldon 2011). In many cases, these criticisms are well-founded. How should activists in these broader movements respond to these concerns? How can movements for social justice maintain a united front while dealing with such "internal" conflict? Highlighting internal problems can seem like it weakens movements and undermines their legitimacy (Gitlin, 1995; Tarrow, 1998; Taylor and Whittier, 1999; Echols, 1989; Harvey, 1996). In the past, this has led some observers to argue that progressives become preoccupied with an impossible goal of inclusiveness while those less concerned with inclusion reap the benefits and grow stronger politically- the left is marching on the English Department while the Right "Takes the White House" (Gitlin 1995).

These old debates from the 1990s have new relevance today, as in the aftermath of the 2016 election, many observers have once again picked up the refrain that emphasizing the specific instances of group marginalization and oppression, or what is sometimes characterized as "identity politics," weakens social movements and political campaigns, and is a prime culprit for weakened solidarity on the left (e.g. Lilla 2017). The resurgence of this line of criticism- and its apparent enduring appeal- revives longstanding popular criticism of the emerging movements for the liberation of women and people of color (e.g. Gitlin 1995; for a discussion see Weldon 2006). Movements and campaigns for racial justice (like #BlackLivesMatter) and feminist movements are often explicitly or implicitly invoked as examples of so-called "identity politics." Politically, such language is sometimes used to diminish the claims of marginalized groups, falsely portraying them as primarily or only focused on symbolic characteristics, and as having selfish goals (Gutmann 2003).

Against this view, others have argued that campaigns highlighting the oppression and marginalization of specific groups and problems engages new groups politically, calls out to them in their identities, and broadens political engagement and participation. These scholars see difference as a political resource (Young 1990; 2002; Weldon 2006; 2011; Tormos 2017; Simien and Clawson 2005). We take up this line of argument in this paper, positing that a strategy of intersectional solidarity actually strengthens, rather than weakens, social movements. We explore this debate empirically by looking at feminist activism relating to the Black Lives Matter movement. We use an analysis of on-line relationships between activists in two on-line campaigns that are part of the movement contesting police violence against people of color- the #blacklivesmatter movement and the #sayhername campaign- to explore the impact of such identity-specific social justice claims-making on solidarity projects. We use an original tool (called GeeViz) that we developed to analyze twitter data to create graphs of the relationships between users of twitter who participated in the on-line campaigns for #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. We find that highlighting and seeking to counter internal relations of oppression – sometimes called intersectional marginalization- can strengthen social

movements. Moreover, our analysis suggests that failing to maintain attention to these concerns of marginalized groups is a missed opportunity for strengthening social movements and ensuring their persistence, and likely weakens movements of marginalized groups in the long-term. Indeed, intersectionally marginalized groups depend vitally on solidarity from broader publics.

How Intersectional Solidarity Can Strengthen Social Movements

Social movement scholars have long pointed to the challenges of diversity, noting the ways that diversity causes fragmentation or balkanization (Gitlin 1995; Tarrow 1996; McAdam). Though many scholars agree that diversity can be a challenge, there is less discussion of and less agreement about precisely how movements should respond to diversity.

Some have argued that the best strategy for social movements confronted with challenging internal divisions is to emphasize universal elements of actors' identity, or to avoid identity politics altogether (Lilla 2017). Social psychological research has shown that appeals to more universal identities can strengthen political support for social solidarity in the form of support for social programs (Huddy and Khatib 2007). Others have argued that a sort of strategic essentialism, a collective identity that emphasizes similarities over differences, may strengthen social movements and magnify political influence in certain circumstances (Rupp and Taylor 1999; Gitlin 1995; Spivak 1996).

However, democratic theorists and activists argue that if emphasizing universality requires repressing difference, it may backfire as a strategy of strengthening solidarity. Normatively, such an approach worsens relations of domination among groups, as the views of the privileged are asserted as universal perspectives that crowd out or silence the marginalized voices (Young 1990; 2000). Indeed, without formal measures to ensure their voices are heard, the issues confronting marginalized groups tend to fall through the cracks of social movement organizations as part of the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman 1972; Strolovitch 2007; Polletta 2004). When members of marginalized groups do not see themselves represented among movement leaders or spokespeople, and when their ideas and concerns repeatedly fail to attract the attention of the broader movement, members of marginalized groups may feel alienated and excluded (Davis 1998). They may exit the organization, rather than continue to exercise voice (Hirschman 1970). On this view, the problem of diversity is a problem of power differentials, and a failure to address them, not a problem of diversity in itself.

In addition, an emerging body of research suggests that diversity likely brings significant, perhaps underappreciated, resources to social movements. Some scholars argue that diversity is a political resource, providing a wider set of experiences on which to base political decisions and creating a broader set of groups who can potentially be drawn into political action (Chatelain and Asoka 2015; Young 1990; Simien and Clawson 2005; Tormos 2017; Weldon 2006). Diverse groups are better at problem-solving and are more innovative (Page 2008). Marginalized groups have distinctive perspectives and concerns, and these points of view are unlikely to be articulated in the absence of separate organizing by marginalized groups (Mansbridge 2001; Morris and Mansbridge 2001; Weldon 2011). The benefits of the diverse perspectives and greater legitimacy can only be enjoyed, however, if the organizational practices of the movement ensure that diverse groups feel included symbolically and

substantively, and are able to articulate their views as part of movement deliberations (Einwohner et al 2017; Weldon 2006; 2011; Young 1990; 2002).

The literature on the organizational benefits of diversity emphasizes that the benefits of diversity depend on the ways that organizations are structured. For example, Page (2008) shows that these benefits depend on group processes that allow diverse members to contribute to discussions and share their ideas. When some groups are silenced or excluded, or if collaboration is merely formal, with dominant people unilaterally making all the decisions, the benefits of diversity will not be realized. Going further, proponents of the idea of critical diversity emphasize that not all diversity matters equally from a political standpoint. The most important axes of social difference are those that systematically advantage some groups and disadvantage others; that empower some and disempower others (Herring and Henderson 2011).

Proponents of intersectional solidarity similarly emphasize the importance of “standing in solidarity” with the most marginalized. The arguments for such solidarity are primarily normative, or value-based, arguing that justice demands that activists claiming to fight for social justice must attend to those in their midst whose concerns would otherwise fall through the cracks (Cohen and Jackson 2017; Hancock 2011; Strolovitch 2007). But some scholars also argue that such an approach is beneficial in terms of political impact and organizational persistence: Movements that are more inclusive, that work hard to coordinate with and represent secondarily marginalized groups, will be more sustainable and impactful, because of the greater legitimacy and innovative political discourse and tactics that accompany inclusion (Tormos 2017; Weldon 2006; 2011).

In the case of social movements confronted with organized efforts to highlight secondary marginalization, then, what is the most effective strategy? The *intersectional solidarity* argument suggests that amplifying and seeking to remedy the exclusion and elision of secondarily marginalized groups should strengthen social movements, bringing new adherences and more intense engagement with their campaigns. Against this view, some theorists equate *universality with sameness*, expecting that highlighting similarities will bring greater engagement. We contend that ignoring or downplaying difference will do little to address these divisions or concerns, and may even weaken movements in the long run as activists seek more rewarding opportunities for political expression. We apply this argument below in an analysis of the relationship between Say Her Name, a campaign that raised the concerns of a secondarily marginalized group (Black Women) in the context of a movement for racial justice in matters of police violence (BLM).

Black Lives Matter and Say her Name: Background and Context

The BlackLivesMatter campaign is often dated from the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman.¹ Martin was killed on his way to buy some

¹ For timelines of the BlackLivesMatter movement see ABCNews, Black Lives Matter Timeline. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-14/black-lives-matter-timeline/7585856> and the timeline of the movement housed at the Georgetown University Library

candy. Initially, Zimmerman was not charged by police, but a public outcry led to his being charged with second degree murder and manslaughter. His acquittal sparked protests which are seen as marking the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, a campaign to protest the lack of attention or concern about lethal police violence against African Americans (Hooker . This campaign, begun by three African American women, has drawn attention to the killing and deaths of many African Americans in police custody, including the August 2014 Killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Activists took to the streets and to social media, using the hashtags #blacklivesmatter and #icantbreathe (after the lethal police choking of Eric Garner) to protest lethal police violence against African Americans and the impunity with which this violence seemed to be carried out. BlackLivesMatter is frequently categorized as a movement itself or as a campaign that is part of broader movements for racial justice, against police violence and intersectional feminism (BlackLivesMatter 2018; Stewart et al 2017; DeChoudry et al 2016; Hooker 2016).

#SayHerName is a campaign that dates from the July 16 2015 killing of Sandra Bland, who died in police custody. Bland was arrested July 10 for a traffic infraction, and was accused of assaulting an officer. She was found dead- hanged- in a jail a few days later. The phrase that defines the movement appears to have been first coined by the African American Policy Forum in a May 2015 report (predating Bland's death) entitled [Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women \(AAPF 2015\)](#). Nevertheless, in context of contestation of the BLM protest of police violence, #sayhername sought to remind Americans "that black women can also be victims of police violence." Concerned that the media tended to portray the victims of lethal police violence against African Americans as solely a problem afflicting Black Men, organizers aimed to raise awareness of the many African American women who had also died at the hands of the police. The used the hashtag #sayhername to highlight the many instances of such violence that involved African American women, from Renisha McBride to Mya Hall to Alexia Christian (AAPF 2015; Alter 2015).

Examining the relationship between these two campaigns affords us the opportunity examine the theses outlined above about identity politics and solidarity: Did highlighting violence against black women weaken and divide the BlackLivesMatter movement, or inspire new participants to join the on-line movement or strike a deeper commitment to the campaign? We can look at this question as it affects on-line activism by examining the relationships between those using the platform twitter to participate in the BlackLivesMatter movement before, during and after the emergence of SayHerName. Did calls to include Black Women in blacklivesmatter activism strengthen movement networks, inspiring closer engagement? Or did it divide and weaken the movement, as manifest in looser, less dense activist networks?

The *intersectional solidarity* hypothesis leads us to expect that #sayhername would strengthen #blacklivesmatter and contention against police violence. The *universality as sameness* argument predicts that campaigns like #sayhername undermine and weaken the BlackLivesMatter movement.

<https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/1040691/Black%20Lives%20Matter%20Timeline%20.pdf?sequence=1>

Social movement strength can be reflected in many phenomena or dimensions, but one might be that social movement networks become more dense- participants engage in more frequent interaction and interactions are more reciprocal. Greater density can be seen as an indication of greater strength and vitality. Declining density can be seen as weakening of strength and vitality.

Data and Results

We use a database of all the tweets using common BlackLivesMatter² and Sayhername³ hashtags over the period from May 2015 (before the emergence of the SayherName Campaign) to April 2016, a database of approximately 8 Million tweets. This time period includes the emergence of #Sayhername, which began as an on-line movement after the death in custody of Sandra Bland on July 16 2015. Our study period also includes a significant period (about nine months) after the emergence of sayhername.

Focus on Twitter

Why examine on-line activism? One advantage of on-line relationships is that they are public and observable in a way that interpersonal relationships are not. This allows us to go beyond self-reported perceptions of strength to get at actual relationships, something that is critical when asking about something as fraught as solidarity across lines of sex and race. In addition, prior work on BLM and Twitter has found that on-line relationships can be important for the development of collective identity (DeChoudhury et al 2016; Stewart et al 2017) and that on-line activism is linked to face-to-face political mobilization, and that hashtags can be used to “to mark participation, assert individual identity, promote group identity, and support or challenge a frame.”

Using a platform/tool called GeeViz, developed specifically for this purpose by computer scientists Aviral Mansingka, Amar Hussein and Dan Goldwasser, we generated graphs for the most active users for each hashtag (defined as the top K users) showing which users retweeted each other’s tweets (that is, sent the content along to their own users). Arrows show the direction of the retweet. These graphs represent a network of the on-line relationships between the most active participants in the on-line campaigns- that is, the users whose tweets most frequently employed the hashtags specified.

The results are displayed in the Figures 1-4 below. Figure 1 shows the tweets associated with BlackLivesMatter over the study period (excluding the tweets that only use sayhername hashtags). The two large spikes correspond to the shutting down of I-70 by BLM activists on

² Hashtags for BlackLivesMatter include Blacklivesmatter ICantBreathe Ferguson Handsupdontshoot Justice4EricGarner TamirRice MichaelBrown *Anombrarlas* (capturing all uses without regard to case sensitivity)

³ Hashtags for SayHerName include SayHerName SandraBland BlackWomenMatter

August 10, 2017 (about 25K tweets) and the decision not to indict the police officer who killed Tamir Rice (Dec 28, 2017, about 32K tweets).

Figure 1: BlackLivesMatter Tweets, 05/2015-05/2016

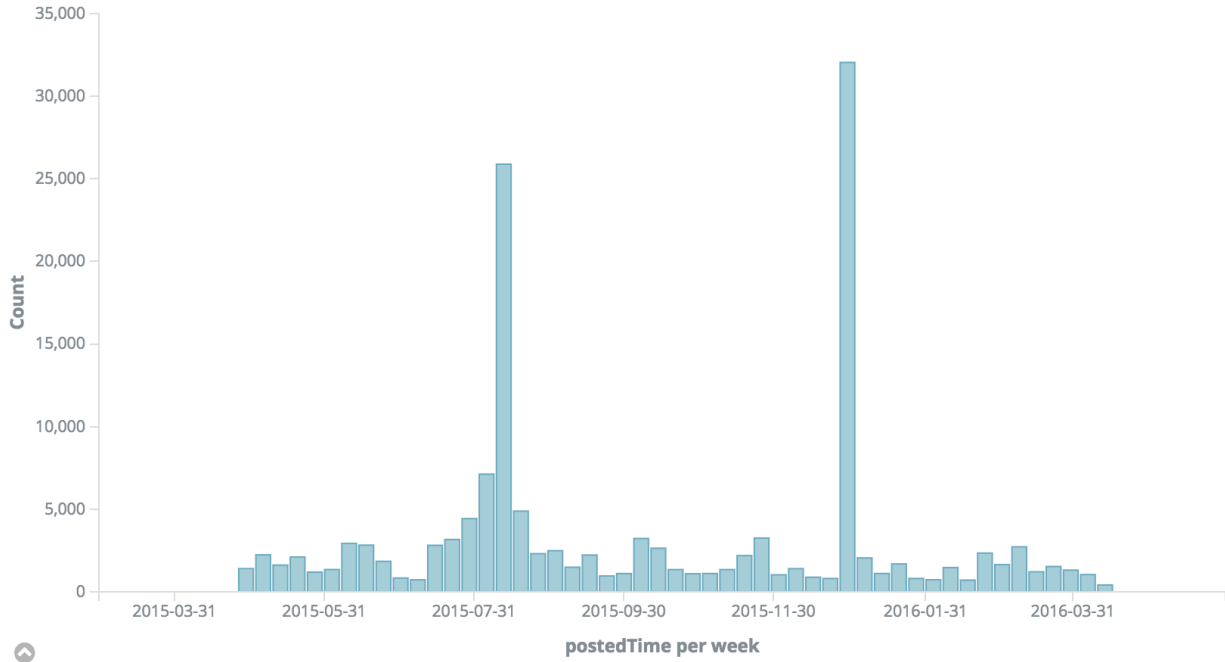
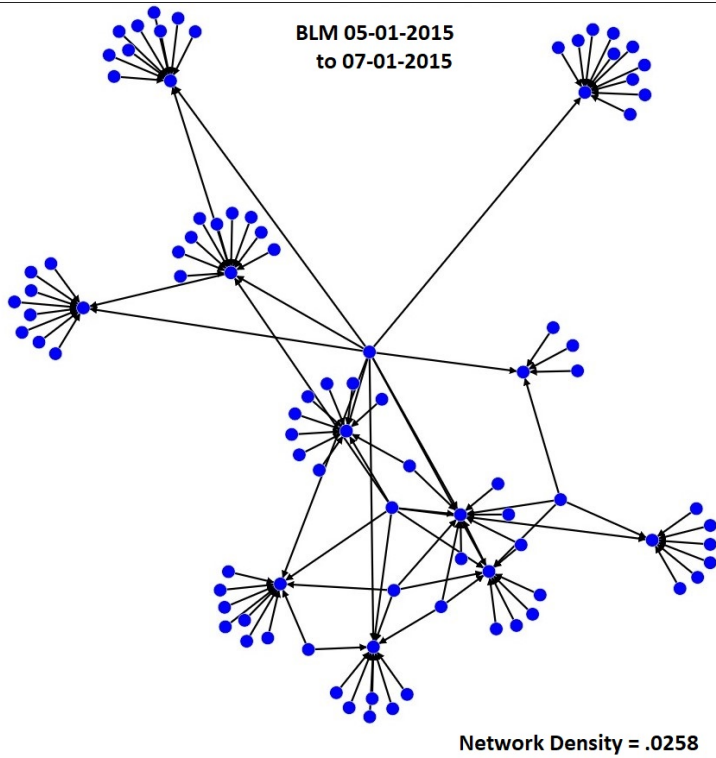
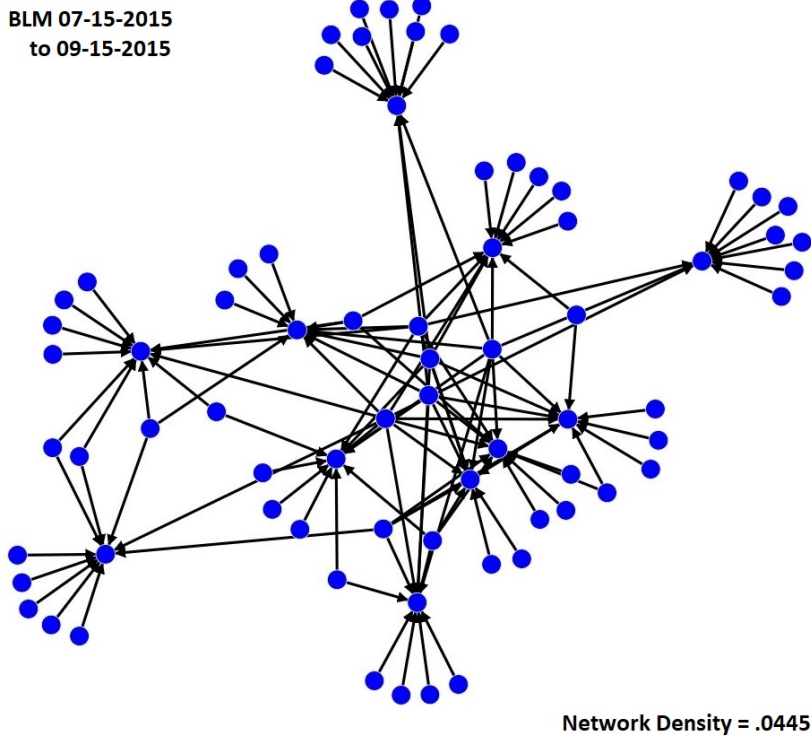


Figure 2 below shows the network linking the most active users of the BLM twitter hashtags in May and July of 2015. Before the emergence of SayHerName, the movement was of average density, with about nine hubs that are loosely connected to each other. Network density during this period was 0.0258. When SayHerName first emerged, however, one can see that the connections between activists became tighter and denser, reflecting more mutual interaction. Network density in this period increased to 0.445. This suggests that in the period when sayhername first emerged, the BLM network became much denser and more tightly connected. The activists in this second network are more deeply enmeshed in the movement, more engaged.

Figure 2: Network Graphs, Users of BLM Hashtags, May and July 2015
(Nodes=users, edges=retweets)
BLM Before SHN (May 1-July 1 2015)



BLM During SHN (July 15-Sept 15 2015)



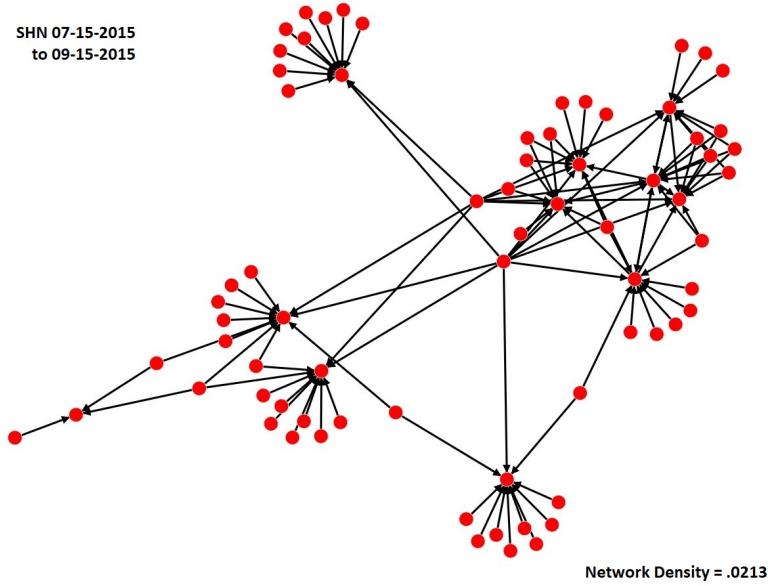
This suggests that the emergence of #SayHerName did not weaken participation or engagement in #blacklivesmatter, at least on-line. Indeed, the network seems to have become more active and tighter. SayHerName users became involved in BLM over the long term, becoming some of the most frequent users of the hashtag in later periods. This is more consistent with the approach seeing difference as a political resource than with the approach that expects the emphasis of difference to divide and weaken movements.

The effects on the Sayhername network, especially over the longer term, may be more mixed. Some sayhername activists, as noted, became absorbed (or reabsorbed) into the BlacklivesMatter campaign. But in general, as Figure 3 shows, in the nine months after the emergence of SayHerName, the on-line network declined in density and vitality, dissolving into a few isolated pockets.

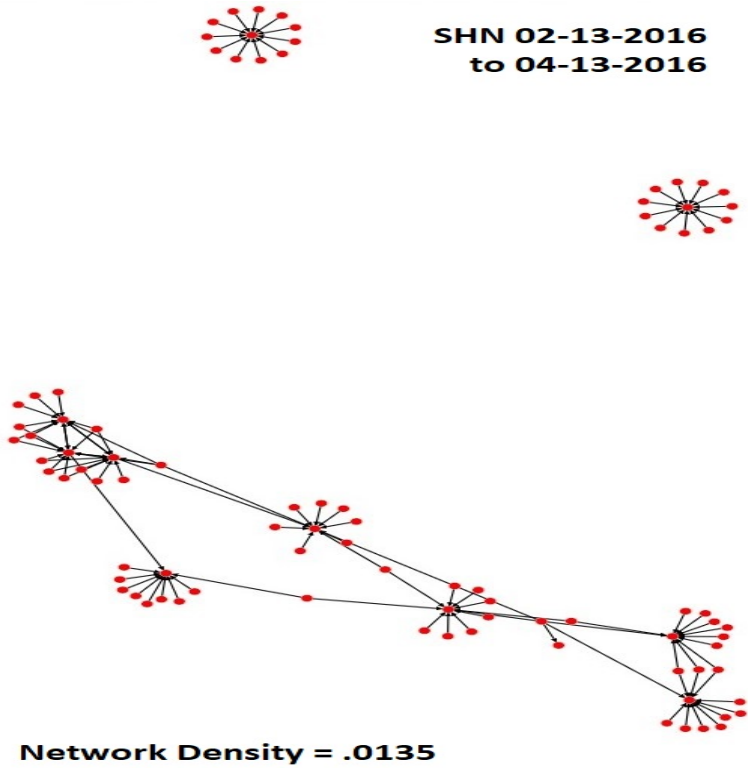
Figure 3: Network Graphs of Users of SayHerName Hashtags

(Nodes= Users, Edges=retweets)

SHN Hashtags, July-Sept 2015



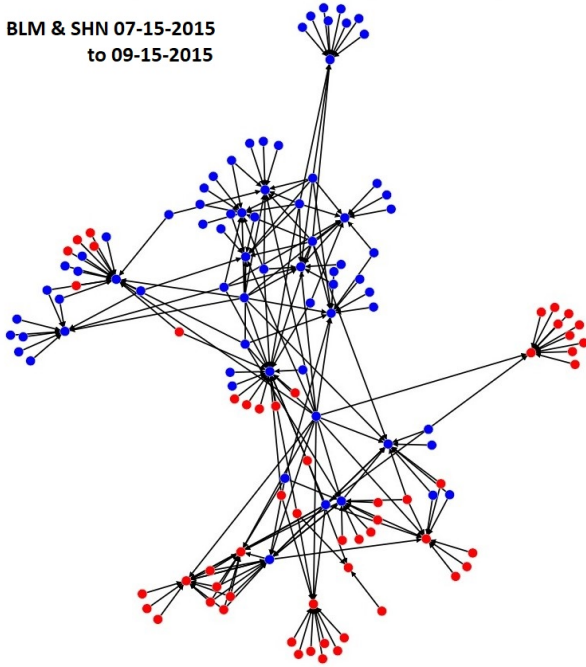
SHN Hashtags Feb-April 2016



Indeed, when we look at the users for both hashtags together, over the longer term, we see more balkanization and less mutual support in February 2016 compared to July 2015 (Figure 4). The network density in July-September is .02 and in February to April is .01 (.009 rounded). In the initial period surrounding the emergence of SayHerName, BLM activists took up and retweeted SHN tweets, and some SHN users became seemingly new, active participants in BLM. By February, however, BLM activists no longer were retweeting SHN tweets with the same frequency. Activists seemed mainly to retweet other users employing the same hashtags. The solidarity between these on-line groups of activists appears to have dropped off.

Figure 4: Networks of SayHerName and BLM Twitter Users
July-September 2015 (Blue =BLM, Red=SHN)

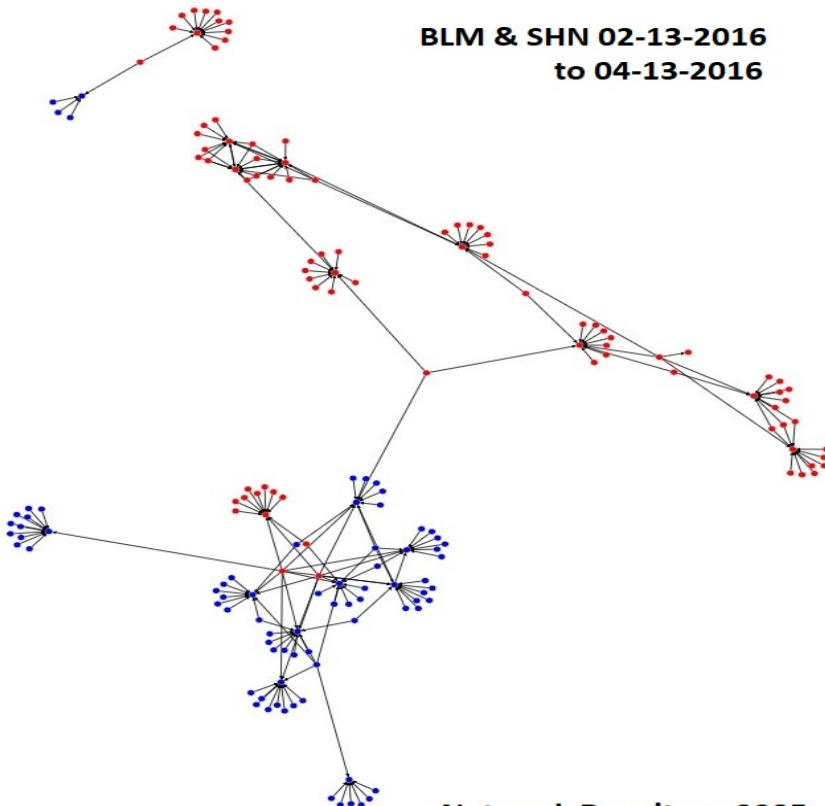
BLM & SHN 07-15-2015
to 09-15-2015



Network Density = .0224

February-April 2016 (Blue =BLM, Red=SHN)

BLM & SHN 02-13-2016
to 04-13-2016



Network Density = .0095

The dropping off of mutual support appears to have coincided with a drop-off in network density and participation in both hashtags. As noted, participation in SHN declined between July-Sept and Feb-April. The same is true for BLM, though the lower level of density is higher overall. This may suggest that the highest levels of network density and activity reflected the high degree of mutual support between these different groups of users, and lower levels of density and activity reflected less mutual support.

It is important to note that the drop-off of density for BLM merely returns it to the level of density before SHN. Both before and after SHN, the density level of the on-line network is about .02. There is no evidence from our analysis that SHN reduced density or weakened the movement, even if the benefits of mutual support were not sustained. SayHerName, however, may have been weakened by the interaction, though we cannot rule out the possibility that other factors triggered the declining density. We can say, though, that any apparent benefits were not sustained for SHN.

This suggests that campaigns to raise issues affecting secondarily marginalized groups, like Sayhername, likely strengthen movements by engaging users in these on-line campaigns, as prior research suggests (DeChoudhury et al 2016; Stewart et al 2017). In addition, a campaign like SayHerName offers new insight and understanding that enables movements to be more effective. Chatelain and Asoka (2015) argue that #sayhername strengthens movements against police violence by documenting black women's experience of police violence expanding our understanding of social and political world. In the absence of such movements, they contend "we fundamentally fail to grasp how the laws, policies, and the culture that underpin gender inequalities are reinforced by America's racial divide."

Conclusion and Implications

This study suggests that in the short term, emphasizing difference, and highlighting the particular problems of secondarily marginalized groups that would otherwise be overlooked, strengthens social movement campaigns and movements in the short term. It engages new users and encourages more active participation, as one would expect of one sees difference as a political resource. The patterns here are consistent with theoretical expectations derived from an approach that emphasizes intersectional (or "active") solidarity (Hancock 2011; Tormos 2017; Einwohner et al 2017).

The longer-term picture is more mixed. Nine months out, the two groups of users are more balkanized and the density has returned to normal for the BLM campaign. Long term benefits are less apparent, though this may reflect an erosion of a conscious effort to maintain mutual support. It might suggest that if BLM users continued to support #sayhername- for example, by retweeting SHN users with the same frequency that they did in July-september, *both campaigns could have maintained more vitality.*

Last, SayHerName as a campaign appears to have declined most significantly. This may suggest that concerns on the part of autonomous campaigns that engagement with broader campaign will divert resources from their specific issues to more general ones, and dilute their impact,

may be correct. In the shorter term, however, it is clear that the SHN users benefitted from the support of the BLM users. Further research could explore whether counterpublics are depleted by closer connection to dominant publics, or strengthened by such connection, overall (Young 1990; Fraser 1992). Prior research suggests that secondarily marginalized groups can benefit from coordination with broader movements but this finding may raise questions about long term impacts of coordination that undermines a group's ability to organize separately (Weldon 2011).

This discussion is based on an analysis of on-line activism, but it is clear that on-line activism may be driven by events outside the digital world and also that on-line activism shapes those real-world events. It is possible that the declines in network solidarity are unconnected to the relationship between SHN and BLM, reflecting instead some other developments. Still, the evidence presented here raises questions about the idea that "identity politics" divides and weakens movements, at least in the short term. It also raises questions about the expectation that collective identity only increases over time, and that on-line participation necessarily always deepens collective identity. More generally, this finding is consistent with evidence that affirming gender identity deepens racial solidarity in the form of linked fate (Clawson and Simien 2004; Dawson 2003) and supports an intersectional approach to building solidarity.

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