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#Boycottautismspeaks: communicating a counternarrative through cyberactivism and connective action

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research is examining the role of cyberactivism in facilitating social movements. Yet, few have considered the interplay between cyberactivism and disability advocacy. Through a case study of the #boycottautismspeaks movement, this study finds that cyberactivism may provide platforms for self-advocates to connect through bridging and bonding in unique ways that draw together and give voice to individuals who otherwise may not have means for such dynamic engagement. Drawing on a sample of approximately 10,000 tweets that circulated with the #boycottautismspeaks hashtag, this research applies thematic analysis and the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects to reveal how counternarratives of disability are developed and circulated via cyberactivism. Findings reveal that #boycottautismspeaks contributors communicated to enhance bonding through (a) (dis)identification, (b) collaboration, and (c) creative resistance. In addition, they communicated to facilitate bridging by (a) demonstrating morality, (b) appealing to humanity, and (c) aligning with other causes. The #boycottautismspeaks movement melded the logic of collective and connective action, provided opportunities for both coordinated and self-directed activity, developing a network of networks through various stitching mechanisms, and cultivating an affective public. Implications for cyberactivism research and practice as well as disability advocacy are discussed.

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Dominant narratives operate in society to tell stories about people, cultures, and lived experiences (Nelson, 2001). Autism has often been viewed through a dominant narrative emerging from the biomedical model of disability, which depicts autism as a deficit in need of a cure (Sarrett, 2011; Yudell, Tabor, Dawson, Rossi, & Newschaffer, 2013). For some members of the autism community, the biomedical model does not capture the complexities of life on the autism spectrum. Instead, the biomedical focus on causes, symptoms, and the necessity for a cure is perceived as an oppressive framework that prevents autistic¹ people from developing a positive self-concept (Baines, 2012; Hart, 2014; Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, & Hutman, 2013). When the master narrative does not match up to the

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lived experiences of those involved, a counternarrative emerges (McDonald, Keys, & Balcazar, 2007; Nelson, 2001). The social model of disability focuses on celebrating variations in functioning instead of trying to 'fix' these differences. Through accepting differences in cognitive function as natural human variation (Armstrong, 2010; Bagatell, 2010), members of the autism community celebrate the notion of neurodiversity. Several self-advocacy organizations embrace neurodiversity and have emerged on the internet to advocate on behalf of autistic individuals. Members of these groups typically reject efforts to cure autism and to eliminate harmless autism 'symptoms' that enable those with autism to manage sensory stimuli (Kapp et al., 2013). From their perspective, autism is a cultural category, and being autistic is as valuable and acceptable as being 'neurotypical' (the community's term for non-autistic people).

Biomedical and social conceptions of autism exist in tension with each other, leading individuals and organizations to adopt competing goals (e.g., finding a cure versus gaining acceptance). The resulting conflict is strikingly illustrated by the ongoing hostility between autism self-advocacy groups and Autism Speaks. Founded in 2005, Autism Speaks is a neurotypically run organization founded by Bob and Suzanne Wright. The organization is a recognized leader in autism advocacy and fundraising efforts whose mission is, in part, 'to bring the autism community together as one strong voice' and to 'find the missing pieces of the puzzle' (Autism Speaks, n.d.). The organization's reliance on the biomedical model has drawn criticism from self-advocacy organizations like the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, especially when Autism Speaks released a 2009 video entitled 'I am Autism.' In the video, the narrator's menacing voice proclaims: 'I am autism. I have no interest in right or wrong. I derive great pleasure out of your loneliness. I will fight to take away your hope. I will plot to rob you of your children and your dreams' ('I am Autism,' 2014; Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2009). The particularly stigmatizing depictions of autism showcased in 'I am Autism' inspired a wave of protest from some members of the autism community, serving as the catalyst for an increasingly contentious relationship between Autism Speaks and self-advocacy organizations. These organizations have mobilized via the Twitter hashtag, #boycottautismspeaks.

While some scholars have examined how social media may empower self-advocates in the autism community (Saha & Agarwal, 2015), few have yet examined how self-advocates may be using social media to engage in cyberactivism that may at once condemn an organization and strengthen in-group bonding among those engaging in such criticism. Further, few researchers have examined how these self-advocates make use of tools offered by Twitter to initiate and sustain connection action. Against the backdrop of autism and #boycottautismspeaks, this study examines how cyberactivism may help self-advocates strengthen group identities and facilitate connections with other groups with similar interests and motivations. The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE model) and research addressing cyberactivism and connective action provide theoretical frameworks with which to examine the communication work achieved by those who participate in #boycottautismspeaks.

Literature review

Social movements have been defined as 'networks of informal relationships among individuals and/or organizations that share a distinctive collective identity and mobilize

resources on issues of conflict' (Lomicky & Hogg, 2010, p. 677). Several researchers (Brown et al., 2004; Keefe, Lane, & Swarts, 2006; Zoller, 2005) have theorized more specifically about health social movements (HSMs). Of particular interest are embodied health movements (EHMs), which focus on reasserting the importance of embodied knowledge of a condition, challenging existing medical practices, and potentially establishing partnerships with health professionals (Brown et al., 2004). Neurodiversity is one such movement, reflecting reformative and transformative political orientations supporting the partial or total overall broad-based social structures (i.e., countering institutionalized ableism) (Zoller, 2005). EHMs involve communicative activities inherent to health activism, which may include 'identity construction, the interpretation of illness [or disability] causation, the choice and articulation of solutions, the development of public appeals, and the implementation of methods and tactics, as well as forms of organizing' (Zoller, 2005, pp. 351–352). The terms EHM and health activism still invoke the biomedical model by referring to the term 'health.' However, in the context of disability movements, 'health' might be reframed as ontological health – the sense that a person's biological, psychological, and social experiences of their bodies are in alignment (Zook, 1994). Disabled activists who embrace the neurodiversity movement seek to alter social norms surrounding autism so that they reflect and support an empowered autistic identity.

Social movements, including EHMs, are facilitated by tools available via the internet. Most notably, social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter serve as accessible alternatives to government-controlled outlets and mainstream media, providing formerly suppressed voices with a platform from which to speak (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013; Saha & Agarwal, 2015). An array of Twitter hashtag movements, including #blacklivesmatter (Langford & Speight, 2015) and #bringbackourgirls (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015), have recently drawn global attention. Researchers who have studied these movements have suggested that the structure of traditional social movements has shifted, reflecting the unique character of *cyberactivism*.

Traditional activism typically draws on the logic of collective action, where collective action organizations provide a clear infrastructure for coordinating activities design to achieve a shared set of objectives (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006). These collective action organizations may be more or less hierarchically structured, and participants' relationships may range from knowing each other intimately to never directly interacting (Flanagin et al., 2006). Yet, collective action organizations tend to be consciously and strategically developed. While cyberactivism may result from a set of planned activities, it more often emerges as individuals simultaneously act online in relation to a particular topic. Media scholars have studied how cyberactivism produces, and is produced by, participatory movement organizations, defined as 'grassroots organizations that depend mainly on members' willingness to participate in activities adopting a *laissez-faire* modus operandi' (Soon & Cho, 2014, p. 539). These participatory movement organizations often lack centralized leadership, instead arising from a diffuse, horizontally structured network of weak ties characterized as a 'multitude form' (Penney & Dadas, 2014). When these participatory movement organizations produce highly coordinated activities, they can reflect the logic of collective action. However, cyberactivism tends to rely on the more loosely organized logic of *connective action*, where participants 'engage with issues largely on individual terms by finding common ground in easy-to-personalize action frames that allow for diverse

understandings of common problems to be shared broadly through digital media networks' (Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014, p. 233). The success of connective action depends on the processes of peer production in a culture of self-motivated sharing, where individuals are inspired to create, curate, and spread articles, images, comments, and other digital artifacts (Bennett et al., 2014). Similarly, cyberactivism provides a means to develop and spread counternarratives by creating 'intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes' (Howard, 2011, p. 145). Cyberactivism, then, thrives on social media platforms that facilitate the creation and spread of digital artifacts via their structural affordances.

Scholars have observed a variety of uses for social media related to cyberactivism, including the facilitation of face-to-face protests by connecting online and offline voices, e-mobilization, citizen journalism, developing and spreading information (e.g., second-hand circulation, editorial commentary, online deliberation), establishing connections with other activists to strengthen weak ties, and engaging in e-tactics such as lobbying (Agarwal et al., 2014; Khamis & Vaughn, 2013; Penney & Dadas, 2014). Each of these activities make use of stitching mechanisms – connective features, like hashtags, that allow cyberactivists to link across both media platforms and social groups to develop a network of networks (Bennett et al., 2014). These stitching mechanisms have been used to pursue EHMs' goal of challenging the dominance of biomedical knowledge, allowing patient advocacy organizations to develop a network of condition-related information created by lay people (Vicari & Cappai, 2016).

Beyond providing the stitching mechanisms that facilitate cyberactivist activities, social media platforms like Twitter help to develop a digital space in which affective publics can form. Papacharissi (2016, p. 320) defined affective publics as 'public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds.' By aggregating individuals' reactions to emotionally charged topics (like disability rights), stitching mechanisms like hashtags help to develop and sustain affective publics.

In some cases, these affective publics generate a unified, collective identity. By circulating the twin counternarratives of the social model and of neurodiversity online, activists have cultivated an alternative autistic identity; one that recognizes the autistic 'form of life' as a legitimate way of being (Davidson, 2008). This collective identity is reinforced by e-empowerment; the internet empowers individuals to act on their autistic identity by facilitating finding similar others, by encouraging group reinforcement through the development of norms, by enabling group members to have a voice in decision-making processes, and by facilitating e-leaders' ability to transmit their vision to potential group members through multi-media means (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, & Tal, 2008). Politicized by the perceived threat of Autism Speak's rhetoric, this collective autism identity mobilizes cyberactivism.

Yet, the autistic community is not monolithic; it has a tendency to fragment in ways that reflect the eclectic ways in which individuals experience autism. Indeed, some members of the autism community view their diagnosis as a burden and rally around efforts to prevent and cure the condition. Thus, EHMs like the #boycottautismspeaks movement reflect an in-group identity that may isolate some individuals with autism even as it empowers others.

Cyberactivism and #boycottautismspeaks

Through cyberactivism, members of the autism community have sought to unsettle the biomedical narrative of disability by positing the social model of disability as a counter-narrative. This was illustrated, at least in part, when Wright (2013) delivered a speech in which she (and Autism Speaks) called for a national plan to deal with the 'autism crisis.' Wright suggested that having autism is akin to going 'missing' or falling 'gravely ill,' and she implied that families who have a child with autism are 'not living.' To her, 'knowing autism' meant feeling mentally, physically, and emotionally depleted. Two days later, John Elder Robison, an author and respected member of the autism community, resigned from his position on the board of Autism Speaks. His resignation meant the loss of the sole autistic member of Autism Speaks' board. After explaining that he had repeatedly tried to help Autism Speaks board members understand the hurtfulness of its rhetoric, he justified his decision to resign: 'I cannot continue to stand up for the public actions of an organization that makes the same mistakes over and over again by failing to connect to the community it purports to represent' (Robison, 2013, para. 16).

The autism community responded by ramping up its use of its Twitter hashtag campaign, #boycottautismspeaks, which generated thousands of tweets in the following months and years. The Twitter campaign, along with other online tools such as a Facebook page and website, framed Autism Speaks as a hate group that dehumanized members of the autism community for self-gain. The hashtag provided the autism community with a tool to criticize additional Autism Speaks-sponsored events and to demand that neurotypical society acknowledge and accept the autistic perspective.

Cyberactivism and the SIDE model

#Boycottautismspeaks represents an opportunity to explore how a hashtag may unify the autism community even as it facilitates protest against Autism Speaks. The SIDE model provides a theoretical framework for such an examination. SIDE suggests that the partial and complete anonymity of computer-mediated communication causes group identities to become more salient. As a result, such communication reinforces social boundaries and encourages individual communicators to adhere to the situational norms tied to the social identity of the in-group (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & Ter Haar, 2002). This outcome is produced via deindividuation, 'a basic propensity for collective action (based on suggestibility and imitation) stimulated by anonymity in the crowd, resulting in a concomitant loss of awareness of individual identity' (Postmes et al., 1998, p. 694). While social media such as Twitter do not typically offer full anonymity, they separate individuals by geophysical distance, thus acting similarly.

This form of digital communication transforms the interpersonal communication between 'me and you' into intergroup communication between 'us and them.' Thus, although communication via social media may serve a 'bridging function' in that it can link culturally diverse and/or geographically dispersed populations, it simultaneously serves a 'bonding function' in its ability to 'reinforce close-knit networks among people sharing similar backgrounds and beliefs' (Norris, 2002, p. 3). Importantly for the process of cyberactivism, adherence to the situational norms of the group allows activists to adopt anti-normative behavior, creating a context in which anonymous individuals can resist

dominant narratives (Spears et al., 2002). Thus, the kind of group reinforcement produced via digital platforms and social media is a powerful aspect of e-empowerment for activists (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008), particularly when they advocate for perspectives and actions that challenge the dominant culture and/or risk physical, social, economic, or other sanctions. Applying concepts from the SIDE model and from research on connective action, we sought to investigate how members of the autism community made use of Twitter to engage in anti-normative behavior and resist the biomedical narrative perpetuated by Autism Speaks. To that end, we asked the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do #boycottautismspeaks tweets facilitate the development of in-group identification (bonding)?

RQ2: In what ways do #boycottautismspeaks tweets frame Autism Speaks as an out-group?

RQ3: How (if at all) is #boycottautismspeaks used as a bridge to connect with other groups?

Method

Data collection

Given that the #boycottautismspeaks hashtag responded soon after Suzanne Wright's speech on 11 November 2013 and has persisted since then, we sought to evaluate a sample that would reflect not only immediate reactions to Wright's speech, but that would also be reflective of less-ephemeral cyberactivism. Using Crimson Hexagon - a data analysis tool that allows for the collection of live and historical tweets² - we searched for all English language tweets containing the #boycottautismspeaks hashtag from 1 November 2013 through 31 January 2015. This produced more than 56,000 original tweets, from which our sample was drawn using constructed weeks.

Media scholars have used constructed week sampling as a means to scientifically explore larger data sets, particularly when temporal interests are involved. One to three constructed weeks has been shown to be more efficient than random sampling and consecutive day sampling in media studies (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). More recent studies have encouraged at least three weeks (Luke, Caburnay, & Cohen, 2011). Thus, this study drew tweets from 3 constructed weeks, or 21 days, resulting in 9872 tweets that used the hashtag #boycottautismspeaks.

Analysis

Applying a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006), we constructed a thematic analysis of #boycottautismspeaks tweets to examine how individuals engaged with the hashtag to develop and spread a counternarrative. In the initial phase of coding and category development, each of the two authors engaged in a process of open coding (Charmaz, 2006). Given the size of the data set, we focused our initial coding efforts on the first 10% of our data (approximately 1000 tweets, excluding retweets). In addition to coding the tweets themselves, the first author also coded the contents of tweeters' profiles to get a sense of the kinds of individuals who identify with the #boycottautismspeaks movement. The first author also looked at the content of the movement's Facebook page to gain a sense of how Twitter activities were linked to other social media tied to

#boycottautismspeaks. This Facebook page was the original source of the movement, and often continued to provide an organizing structure for the hashtag movement. In addition, we developed *in vivo* codes that captured specific hashtags used by #boycottautismspeaks tweeters (e.g., #actuallyautistic).

In a second stage of coding, we developed focused codes that merged the most significant open codes into broader categories (Charmaz, 2006). These codes were process-focused, including categories like ‘testifying to real-life consequences’ and ‘demonstrating commitment.’ Finally, we engaged in the process of axial coding, which highlights (1) the conditions that give rise to a particular phenomenon, (2) the actions or interactions people engage in as a response to these conditions, and (3) the consequences of particular actions or interactions (Charmaz, 2006). As part of this process, we situated focused codes under three broad categories: bridging, bonding, and tactics. The following results section focuses on how #boycottautismspeaks tweeters engaged in bridging and bonding practices to create, substantiate, and spread a counternarrative of autism.

Results

By engaging in various tactics for cyberactivism, leaders of the #boycottautismspeaks hashtag movement cultivated situational norms that allowed autistic activists to resist the dominant biomedical discourses circulated by Autism Speaks and to assert the counternarrative of neurodiversity. The hashtag movement functioned to cultivate a strong in-group of individuals opposed to Autism Speaks by facilitating bonding through (a) (dis)identification, (b) collaboration, and (c) resistance. In addition, the tweeters made use of several bridging strategies to appeal to a broader audience beyond the autistic community. These included bridging by (a) appealing to humanity, (b) appealing to morality, and (c) aligning with other causes.

Bonding through (dis)identification

Through identification, those using #boycottautismspeaks developed a collective voice capable of speaking out against Autism Speaks. They often referenced the group using an assumed or transcendent ‘we’ (Cheney, 1983), speaking as a collective. Tweeters referenced their ‘autism community,’ and described autism as ‘a people’ and a ‘lifeform.’ They also emphasized the unified nature of their efforts: ‘it seems we have something that #AutismSpeaks can only dream of ... Solidarity!’ In doing so, contributors transformed shared ‘symptoms’ into a source of collective strength: ‘@autismspeaks you seem to forget one “symptom”: we can get very hyper-focused which means we can outlast you.’ These tweets reinforced the desirability of identifying with the group, reflected in comments like ‘We have the BEST community.’ These kinds of affirming comments may be particularly important in facilitating identification with a group whose members have often been stigmatized because of their connection to autism.

Those using #boycottautismspeaks reinforced the desirability of belonging to the ‘autism community’ by encouraging disidentification with Autism Speaks. Elsbach and Bhat-tacharya (2001, p. 393) defined disidentification as ‘a self-perception based on (1) a cognitive separation between one’s identity and one’s perception of the identity of an organization, and (2) a negative relational categorization of oneself and the organization’.

For this community, Autism Speaks represents hatred, fear-mongering, eugenics, stigmatization, and oppression. Contributors to #boycottautismspeaks focused on how the perceived values and goals of Autism Speaks threatened their autistic identity, consequently distancing themselves from the organization.

Tweets containing #boycottautismspeaks illustrated how identification and disidentification functioned simultaneously to maximize in-group bonding. For instance, inclusive pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘us’ were often used in reference to the ‘they’ of Autism Speaks: ‘We’re tired of how they treat us. We want acceptance but they want us dead. This hate group needs to go.’ Disidentification with Autism Speaks helped to create a common enemy, facilitating identification through antithesis (Cheney, 1983). Additionally, #boycottautismspeaks contributors used #autistic to suggest the presence of unified collectivity, one that could protest the presence of an ‘anti-#autistic climate’ and argue for ‘#autistic rights.’ The hashtag #autistic was also used to highlight Autism Speaks’ illegitimacy: ‘When #AUTISTIC people tell you something is seriously wrong with an #autism organization #LISTEN!’ Thus, #autistic was used to both develop an autistic in-group and police its boundaries. As #boycottautismspeaks developed, tweeters adopted other hashtags (i.e., #actuallyautistic) to add rhetorical force to this marker of legitimation. These hashtags were often invoked as contributors collaborated with each other.

Bonding through collaboration

In addition to speaking collectively, #boycottautismspeaks contributors bonded by acting collaboratively. They achieved this through (a) developing structures to facilitate collaboration and (b) reinforcing others’ tweets.

In some ways, collaboration around #boycottautismspeaks was strategically structured by leading voices. These individuals developed a Twitter handle, Facebook page, and website from which they could orchestrate organized attacks on Autism Speaks. Through these platforms, coordinators developed and circulated digital fliers advertising several types of collaborative projects, including ‘Twitterbombs.’

During ‘Twitterbombs,’ #boycottautismspeaks tweeters were urged to inundate Twitter with tweets using #boycottautismspeaks to achieve trending status. In some cases, Twitterbombs were used to target supporters of Autism Speaks on Twitter and other platforms. A list of corporate sponsors’ Twitter handles was circulated along with encouragement to flood these companies’ Twitter feeds with specific reasons to boycott Autism Speaks.

Alternatively, Twitterbombs were used as ways to circulate counter-hashtags. Here, members of the #boycottautismspeaks campaign developed hashtags that allowed them to target and undermine specific Autism Speaks initiatives. For instance, in response to Autism Speaks’ sponsorship of Sesame Street’s autism workshop in July 2014, #boycottautismspeaks contributors used #educateSesame to make Sesame Street (and its viewers) aware of issues of misrepresentation. In other instances, Twitterbomb counter-hashtags emerged as direct responses to Autism Speaks’ own hashtags. In December 2014, Autism Speaks circulated the hashtag #mssng to suggest that autism suppresses an individual’s potential. In response, #boycottautismspeaks tweeters developed a counter-hashtag, #notmssng, ‘to tell Autism Speaks and the companies that sponsor them that Autistic people are whole.’ In April 2015, when Autism Speaks urged followers to Light It Up

Blue (#LIUB) for Autism Awareness Month, #boycottautismspeaks tweeters asked followers to #WalkinRed for autism *acceptance*. By pairing Autism Speaks' hashtags with their own counter-hashtags, #boycottautismspeaks tweeters ensured that their voices participated in a larger Twitter conversation.

More recently, #boycottautismspeaks organizers have increased this visibility by using Twitterbombs to occupy hashtags. Rather than developing a new hashtag, #boycottautismspeaks supporters appropriate Autism Speaks' existing hashtag initiatives. For example, in February 2015, #boycottautismspeaks co-opted the hashtag #autismspeaks10. Autism Speaks developed this hashtag to celebrate the organization's 10th anniversary. However, #autismspeaks10 became a site of discursive struggle when #boycottautismspeaks supporters used the hashtag to denounce a decade of silencing and misrepresentation. This effort was so successful that it garnered national media recognition in the United States. A BuzzFeed article titled *Autistic people spark Twitter fight against Autism Speaks* legitimated tweets like this one: 'AutismSpeaks10: where first-class #ActuallyAutistic are treated as second-class citizens' (Hughes, 2015). By occupying hashtags, #boycottautismspeaks members change the nature of the conversation associated with that hashtag.

Bonding through collaboration also occurred informally at the level of individual tweets. Here, #boycottautismspeaks tweeters reinforced each other's comments. In some cases, this involved expanding a persuasive argument targeted at an Autism Speaks' supporter. The following exchange illustrates this behavior:

Initial tweet: @ [Company]: Have you ever seen a charity get publicly shamed by the people it purports to serve? Autistics are speaking up: #BoycottAutismSpeaks

Reinforcing reply: @ [Company]: Autism Speaks 'serves' autistics only for values of 'serve' that are equal to 'eliminate from the gene pool.' #BoycottAutismSpeaks

Other times, reinforcing tweets meant coordinating criticism. Criticism was targeted at organizations or individuals who continued to support Autism Speaks, as illustrated by these tweets directed at a t-shirt company:

Initial tweet: 'Each shirt helps provide communication tools!' @ [Company]? 3% of Autism Speaks budget goes to services. False advertising #BoycottAutismSpeaks

Reinforcing reply: @ [company] um no on that. ethics in advertising are a thing. shame on you. #BoycottAutismSpeaks

The collaborative nature of these exchanges suggests that #boycottautismspeaks contributors are part of a collectivity whose members work together to achieve shared goals. In reinforcing each other's tweets, #boycottautismspeaks contributors also bonded as members of an in-group.

Bonding through creative resistance: sarcasm on the spectrum

The SIDE model suggests that members of online groups bond as they develop and adhere to situational norms. Marking tweets with #autistic and #actuallyautistic, participating in Twitterbombs, and tweeting to reinforce others' tweets all represent examples of situational norms developed and followed by #boycottautismspeaks tweeters. A final situational norm, the use of sarcasm as a form of creative resistance, reinforced bonding even further by lending the group a distinctive personality. Tweeters often shared sarcastic

tweets like this one: ‘Fun Fact: I have special burden powers to drain the joy out of everyone around me. I convert this into tragedy energy.’ These tweets often elicited gleeful participation from other #boycottautismspeaks contributors. The following tweets represent one such exchange:

Tweeter 1: I’m too busy today with the mom thing and the volunteering work thing to destroy families today. im such a failure.

Tweeter 2: Do you think you could make do with a little despair causing?

Tweeter 1: I tried to work despair into my schedule but cant. maybe friday?

Using sarcasm, these tweeters engage Autism Speaks’ rhetoric so that they can dismantle it. Additionally, sarcastic exchanges like this one develop tweeters’ sense of being on the ‘inside’ of an inside joke, reinforcing in-group bonding. Simultaneously, this and other tactics provided opportunities to bridge to non-autistic audiences.

Facilitating bridging

Developing a united in-group identity is vital to generating the impetus for social movement. Clearly, the #boycottautismspeaks movement inspires in-group bonding through enacting the situational norms identified in the previous sections. In doing so, it empowers its members to speak out against the dominant biomedical discourses that legitimate Autism Speaks’ vision. Without connecting to diverse groups outside of the autistic/activist in-group however, the #boycottautismspeaks movement cannot hope to achieve its goal of defunding its nonprofit nemesis. Indeed, ‘boycotting’ is only successful when large segments of society heed the call to cease doing business with the offending entity. To achieve this, members of #boycottautismspeaks engaged in bridging behaviors to align themselves with diverse others. The first step of bridging requires that members of the #boycottautismspeaks movement place themselves in conversation with potential allies. In doing so, #boycottautismspeaks supporters make use of the stitching mechanisms characteristic of Twitter to develop a matrix of networked publics through which the movement might spread more rapidly.

As discussed above, Twitterbombs that create, respond to, and occupy hashtags develop an opportunity for bridging to occur. Twitterbombs optimize Twitter’s primary stitching mechanism, the hashtag. In addition, contributors made use of the ‘@’ option to directly target individual Twitter accounts. By tweeting directly at businesses, nonprofits, the media, and celebrities, members of #boycottautismspeaks actively draw others into the conversation. Here, we focus on the broader ways in which members of #boycottautismspeaks frame their cause as a civil rights issue, effectively cultivating an affective public. Specifically, we discuss how #boycottautismspeaks members facilitate bridging by (a) demonstrating their humanity, (b) appealing to morality, and (c) aligning with other causes.

Bridging through demonstrating humanity

For members of #boycottautismspeaks, Autism Speaks’ use of biomedical discourses and fear-based rhetoric is particularly hurtful because it undermines their own sense

of humanity. The stigmatizing impact of fear appeals means being viewed as broken, abnormal, tragic, and undesirable. In response to this stigmatization, #boycottautismspeaks members took to Twitter to demonstrate their humanity. Once again, sarcasm was cleverly deployed to achieve this end. In some cases, tweeters used sarcasm to illustrate the value of their contributions to society, illustrated by the following tweets: ‘im not living. im ONLY a mother, daughter, sister, friend, neighbor, advocate, and community volunteer;’ ‘going to do a few hours of volunteer work tonight with a repeat performance on Thursday because I am a burden.’ In other cases, tweeters used sarcasm to emphasize the unremarkable nature of their everyday lives, i.e., ‘Just helped myself to a bowl of cereal in the kitchen- how long before my exhausted family gets ill?’ Through their sarcasm, these tweeters work to unsettle the perception that life on the spectrum is drastically (negatively) different from life as a Neurotypical. As one tweeter observed, ‘we are such failures at being failures. its almost like being NT. oops was that snark?’ By demonstrating their humanity in this way, #boycottautismspeaks tweeters remove the fear and mystery surrounding autism, emphasizing the common ground on which they can connect with those who are not autistic.

Bridging through appealing to morality

Establishing their own humanity allowed tweeters to frame the #boycottautismspeaks movement as a crusade for human and civil rights. They achieved this by appealing to generally accepted moral sentiments regarding the fair treatment of human beings. #Boycottautismspeaks tweets focused on emphasizing (a) helping versus hurting, (b) compassion, love, and acceptance versus fear and hate, and (c) empowerment and voice versus oppression and violence.

Many #boycottautismspeaks contributors appealed to humanity by invoking the general desire to help, not hurt. In particular, contributors described how Autism Speaks’ rhetoric caused them to experience stigmatizing reactions from specific others, i.e., ‘#BoycottAutismSpeaks Without their vitriol, maybe my colleagues wouldn’t tell me to be silent when I announce that I’m autistic.’ Additionally, they detailed how internalizing stigmatizing discourses harmed their self-concept, i.e., ‘The anti-#autistic climate in this society made me scared to be myself. @autismspeaks feeds that negativity around us.’ Eventually, Boycott Autism Speaks developed a website, where a ‘testimonials’ section provided a designated space for illustrating these ‘real life’ harms.

Contributors to #boycottautismspeaks also appealed to the moral imperative to promote love, compassion, and acceptance over fear and hate. Tweeters labeled Autism Speaks a ‘hate group’ and a supporter of eugenics. More radical contributors insinuated that Autism Speaks’ ‘cure agenda’ might lead to violence against members of the autism community: ‘@autismspeaks whats next on your cure agenda? death camps? systematic abortions? we want acceptance not your “cure.”’ In doing so, they emphasized the idea that opposing Autism Speaks is a morally virtuous act, i.e., ‘Promote love & #acceptance by not aiding those who promote fear & intolerance.’ By reinforcing a black-and-white, dichotomous distinction between Autism Speaks/hate and #boycottautismspeaks/love, tweeters built a powerful appeal to morality that framed supporting Autism Speaks as an impossibility.

Finally, #boycottautismspeaks contributors appealed to the moral imperative of facilitating empowerment and voice over oppressing and silencing. First, tweeters framed Autism Speaks as an oppressor. They recognized the lack of autistic representation on the organization's board, i.e., 'Negotiation at the round table only works when the assholes up top are willing to give you a chair to sit in.' Moving from there, they suggested that Autism Speaks actively silences autistic individuals: '@autismspeaks really? more like autistics muzzled!!' This argument was reinforced by references to Autism Speaks' lack of response to #boycottautismspeaks tweets; the organization's continued silence was used as evidence of its disregard for autistic voices. Having established the idea that Autism Speaks actively oppresses autistics, #boycottautismspeaks members then suggested that joining the #boycottautismspeaks movement represents a person's moral commitment to empowerment and respect.

Bridging through aligning with other causes

Establishing their own humanity and appealing to morality allowed #boycottautismspeaks members to engage a final bridging tactic: aligning with other causes. #Boycottautismspeaks tweeters reached out to celebrity supporters of other disability issues, including dyslexia and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Further, they linked themselves to minority groups in general. For instance, one tweeter shared a link to the transcript of Suzanne Wright's speech at Autism Speaks' 2013 national policy and action summit in Washington, DC, recommending that readers 'imagine this said of any other minority group ... It is just not okay.' In response to one person's refusal to support #boycottautismspeaks, a tweeter aligned the #boycottautismspeaks cause with that of African-American civil rights, writing 'So the msg to Rosa Parks would have been #notonmybus?' #Boycottautismspeaks tweeters were clearly aware that this decision to align with other causes helped them to develop a kind of collective agency more powerful than could be achieved by focusing solely on the autistic cause. As one individual tweeted, 'The only way we'll get freedom for ourselves is to identify ourselves w/ every oppressed people in the world. #MalcolmX.' These efforts toward bridging highlight social media's ability to support both collective and connective action for the purposes of disability-related cyberactivism.

Discussion

The recent proliferation of hashtag social movements has prompted communication scholars to investigate social media's potential to facilitate political participation through cyberactivism. In particular, scholars have turned their attention to collective and connective actions, wherein organizations and participants rally around shared interests or goals to develop a united voice that sometimes results in actionable change. Connective action specifically relies on individuals' engagement, often through digital and social media networks. In the absence of a single dominating voice or organizational direction, these individuals define and address problematic issues through a sharing of digital artifacts that closely mirrors counternarratives used in social movements (Bennett et al., 2014; Howard, 2011). Little research has addressed how disability activists make strategic use of social media to develop counternarratives that resist stigmatization and encourage empowering

disability discourse as well as connective action. Further, a limited body of research has addressed the communicative tactics that undergird bonding and bridging in such movements, facilitating collective and connective action, the latter of which has become a critical component of online-based social movements such as #boycottautismspeaks. As the results of this study suggest, the social model of disability, at least in the case of autism, may be gaining traction via social media, where voices that were once suppressed in offline settings are now amplified through digitally networked platforms.

The hashtag movement #boycottautismspeaks provided a case study through which to investigate how disability activists collectively mobilize online to shape disability-related discourses. Using the SIDE model as a theoretical lens, we sought to determine how individuals interacted with the hashtag in ways that (a) facilitated in-group bonding among members of the autism community, (b) framed Autism Speaks as an out-group, and (c) enabled bridging to other groups. While other instances of cyberactivism have centered on ephemeral or hot button issues that expediently move through media and mainstream discourse, conversations about disability and advocacy are less temporally bound, making them uniquely positioned to demonstrate the potential longevity of their reach in social media spaces. The findings from this study provide several useful insights into how cyberactivism facilitates both bonding and bridging for disability advocates, building on previous explications of the SIDE. Further, they speak to social media's ability to foster both collective and connective action.

First, our observations of #boycottautism speaks suggest that situational norms (Postmes et al., 1998) develop both as the result of organizers' strategic attempts to develop e-tactics and as a product of informal patterns of interaction that develop over time. Online social movement organizers, despite their somewhat loose connections, can enhance bonding by developing structured opportunities for collaboration, fostering situational norms that model how in-group members are expected to participate in the movement. For instance, some of the stronger voices behind #boycottautismspeaks created digital flyers to coordinate 'Twitterbombs' designed to amplify hashtag activity. By providing a list of targets, as well as examples of recommended tweets, organizers provided would-be tweeters with clear, simple ways to participate. In this way, #boycottautismspeaks mobilized the logic of collective action, actively providing its supports with specific tasks to achieve a clear set of objectives. Notably, organizers became increasingly strategic in using the stitching function of the hashtag to develop a matrix of networked publics. By developing counter-hashtags (e.g., #notmssg) and by occupying hashtags (i.e., taking over Autism Speaks' #autismspeaks10), organizers were able to remain responsive to specific Autism Speaks initiatives and continually re-establish their movements' relevance. Further, these auxiliary hashtags ensured that the counternarrative developed by those following the organization's activities would be seen both by Autism Speaks itself and #boycottautismspeaks supporters.

Bonding also occurred as #boycottautismspeaks tweeters spontaneously developed situational norms that fostered (dis)identification and reinforced collaborative efforts. For instance, they used inclusive language like 'we' and 'us' and used #autistic and #actuallyautistic to mark themselves as authentic members of the community. Finally, #boycottautismspeaks tweeters consistently reinforced each other's tweets by expanding persuasive arguments and coordinating criticism. These emergent norms reflect the

logic of connective action, tapping into participants' self-directed willingness to create, curate, and spread digital artifacts to sustain the movement.

Our findings also suggest that situational norms often served multiple functions as tactics for cyberactivism. Of particular interest is the way in which #boycottautismspeaks tweeters made use of sarcasm. Viewed through the lens of collective action, sarcasm is particularly important in that it encourages peer production; people continue to create and circulate sarcastic messages because they enjoy the collaborative process of joking. Indeed, trolling, creating memes, and generating lulz (a form of *schadenfreude* that melds irony and criticism; a corruption of the term phrase 'laughing out loud' or 'lol') are part of the cultural fabric of the internet (McDonald, 2015). The use of sarcasm achieved several types of communicative labor. Sarcastic tweets reinforced bonding by encouraging tweeters to engage with each other to develop an extended joke at Autism Speak's expense. In addition, sarcasm provided a tactic for creative resistance, whereby tweeters appropriated Autism Speaks' rhetoric and highlighted its absurdity by placing it in the context of their lived experiences of autism. Finally, sarcasm provided a means for bridging to other communities. Through the levity of sarcasm, tweeters were able to dismantle public perceptions that life with autism is best characterized as 'fearful' and 'tragic.'

Finally, #boycottautismspeaks contributors facilitated bridging by appealing to morality and aligning with other causes. In doing so, they cultivated the conditions necessary to develop an affective public that extended beyond the autistic community (Papacharissi, 2016). This finding highlights the emotional nature of social movements and cyberactivism. Not only did Twitter provide contributors with stitching mechanisms that would allow their messages to infiltrate other networks, it also provided a space where they could collaboratively tell a story of perceived oppression and injustice that would make their plight appear relevant to these other networks.

Altogether, these findings suggest that in order for cyberactivism movements like #boycottautismspeaks to be successful, they may need to combine the logics of collective and connective action. Indeed, Caraway (2016) proposes a hybrid network model, where a loose organization operates to consolidate and coordinate resource mobilization while empowering individuals to make use of personal action frameworks to express their own perspectives in the ways they deem necessary. This hybrid structure seemingly complements the SIDE model's attention to both bonding and bridging. Whereas bonding helps to produce the collective identity that unites individuals in collective action, bridging develops the matrix of networks that allows social movements to spread – particularly in digital spaces.

Recognizing the resilience of the hybrid network model goes some way toward explaining why some online social movements die out quickly, while others persist. #Boycottautismspeaks' longevity might be explained by the continual interplay of organized structure and individual agency made possible by social media. This case study of #boycottautismspeaks provides a useful model for how other cyberactivists might strategically integrate their use of multiple digital/social media platforms, combining capacities to both direct collective activities (i.e., circulating digital flyers for Twitterbombs via Facebook) and to allow participants to engage with the movement in their own idiosyncratic ways (i.e., spontaneously making use of hashtags). Actively developing and employing mechanisms to cultivate a network of networks can allow cyberactivists to generate, spread, and

maintain social movements. In general, these findings suggest that the theoretical tenets of SIDE, collective action, and connective action can usefully illuminate the dynamics of cyberactivism.

This study is not without limitations. While hashtags related to #boycottautismspeaks were examined and included in the analysis (i.e., many tweets often contained multiple hashtags in addition to #boycottautismspeaks), the networks built around them as standalone hashtags deserve deeper consideration. Notably, some forms of cyberactivism now occur in 'tweet chats,' or scheduled meetings on Twitter wherein users rely on a hashtag to build and engage in a conversation. The role of tweet chats in cyberactivism should be considered as researchers advance holistic considerations of movements. Such studies should also pay close attention to the leaders of movements as well as the key ingredients networked communities (i.e., Twitter groups employing the same hashtag) rely upon for growth and sustainability.

These and other limitations, along with the findings presented here, suggest several avenues for potential future research. First, future studies might attend to the specific tactics tweeters use to persuade companies and other supporters to comply with the suggestion to withdraw their support from Autism Speaks. Second, future research might consider how hashtag movements such as this one evolve. Finally, future studies should attend to the ways in which hashtag movements like #boycottautismspeaks are started and disseminated by key opinion leaders, paying particular attention to the relatively novel ways in which collective and connective actions are now being combined in digital and social media settings. This is a particularly useful avenue for studying how cyberactivism functions in the disability community, where a cadre of highly visible, interconnected activists often drive the public conversation.

In summary, this study has drawn on foundational cyberactivism scholarship to highlight how social media can be used to circulate counternarratives of disability and disability advocacy. By engaging in cyberactivism, autistic self-advocates examined in this study showed evidence of bonding in ways that facilitate the development of an empowered community. Additionally, cyberactivism via Twitter may allow disability activists to bridge to broader audiences, augmenting their efforts to protest perceived misrepresentations and to open new opportunities for re-shaping conversations about autism and other disabilities.

Notes

1. Many self-advocates and their supporters have similarly pushed for a move toward disability-first language (Armstrong, 2010; Harmon, 2004). Without engaging the debate between people-first and disability-first language, this study instead relies on the aforementioned and uses the latter as it stresses disabilities less as appendages and more as parts of individual being.
2. See <http://www.crimsonhexagon.com/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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