

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT ONLINE COMMUNITY: STORMFRONT AND THE WHITE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – We build on prior research of social movement communities (SMCs) to conceptualize a new form of cultural support for activism – the social movement online community (SMOC). We define SMOC as a sustained network of individuals who work to maintain an overlapping set of goals and identities tied to a social movement linked through quasi-public online discussions.

Method – This paper uses extensive data collected from Stormfront, the largest online community of white nationalists, for the period from September 2001 to August 2010 totaling 6,868,674 posts. We systematically analyzed the data to allow for a detailed depiction of SMOCs using keyword tags. We also used Stata 11 to analyze descriptive measures such as persistence of user presence and relation of first post to length of stay.

Findings – Our findings suggest that SMOCs provide a new forum for social movements that produces a unique set of characteristics.

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Nevertheless, many characteristics of SMOCs are also in line with conventional offline SMCs.

Originality of the paper – This research broadens our understanding of the differences between online and offline SMCs and presents the special case of the SMOC as a way for scholars to conceptualize and study social movements that use the Internet to form their collective identity.

Keywords: Identity; the Internet; social movement communities; social movement online communities; right-wing

On May 1, 2011 at 10:42 p.m., suepeace started a thread with the title, “Bin Laden Dead?” in the “Newlinks and Articles” section on the Internet forum (Stormfront, 2011). The post was short, including only the hyperlinked headline and two-sentence text of a BBC news alert. In the next hour, 97 posts by 45 other users were added to the thread. Within 24 hours, the thread swelled to 640 posts by 216 different users and was viewed over 40,000 times. While this reflects the larger trend in turning to social media for breaking news,¹ suepeace’s thread was distinctive in a number of ways. First, all of the posters in the thread were white nationalists (WN) – those who espouse white supremacist or white separatist ideologies, including many Ku Klux Klan (KKK), neo-Confederate, neo-Nazi, racist skinhead, and Christian Identity adherents (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011a). Second, the users were largely discussing the potential political reasons that led then President Obama to manufacture this event. While a small minority interpreted the event in a rather straightforward way, the majority of posters were interested in exploring why this event and why now. On this topic, there was no consensus, and theories offered in the first few hours ranged from a move against Republican presidential aspirant Donald Trump (e.g., “I find it VERY interesting they interrupted Celebrity Apprentice with this tidbit. Amazing coincidence?” (HailTheNewDawn, 2011)) to distracting the American public from perceived foreign policy failures in North Africa (e.g., “I guess they needed something ‘positive’ after murdering Qaddafi’s family.” (Mjodr, 2011)) to the humorous (e.g., “Let me guess. He had Obama’s birth certificate in his cave.” (WhiteRights, 2011)).

More broadly, these posts point to one major function of social movement Internet sites: they build and sustain a community of like-minded individuals. Even in a room full of conservatives, an implicit consensus that this event was being fundamentally misrepresented by the Obama

administration would not be assumed. The approach Stormfront members take in interpreting this event is far out of the mainstream. Finding others with similar views to discuss events while leaving your worldview unchallenged is unlikely to happen by chance.

However, very few of the posts on Stormfront exhort members to take some specific political action, either online or offline. Rather, the forum provides opportunities for many different kinds of conversations, from debating the value of burning crosses to sharing pictures of adorable kittens. Stormfront has been quite successful at fostering communication – there have been more than eight million posts to the site over the last decade (Stormfront.org, 2010).

Just as there are offline communities that provide important cultural support for social movements (Staggenborg, 1998), online communities can serve a similar function. In both cases, organizing specific political action is secondary to building and sustaining a network of like-minded individuals through such processes as the establishment and maintenance of a collective identity. Social movement communities (SMCs) are being reconstructed online by activists in ways that adapt to technological advances resulting in new forms of activist communities.

In this paper, we develop the concept of a *social movement online community* (SMOC) as distinct from other types of Internet activism to capture this adaptation. We begin by discussing the theoretical conceptualization of SMOCs as informed by social movement and communication scholarship, and the need for an expanded conceptualization that goes beyond current understandings of online social movement activity. We outline the elements of SMOCs and discuss the ways in which SMOCs resemble conventional social movement communities and the ways in which they differ. We use the case of the white nationalist SMOC Stormfront to exemplify important features of SMOCs. Based on a quantitative analysis of more than six millions posts by over 50,000 users, along with qualitative analysis of specific themes, we demonstrate that SMOCs are similar to offline SMCs in that they are broad-based and participatory, focus on the construction of collective identities, are free spaces, and allow for a diversity of participation forms. They differ from offline SMCs in their geographic diversity, capacity for rapid growth and decline, likelihood that they will be dominated by a single institution, and a tension between openness and anonymity. Finally, we discuss how the broader conceptualization of social movement online activity will capture more complex communities that are increasing in popularity and tend to be associated with right-wing or marginalized groups.

CYBERACTIVISM AND SMOCS

Prior research on online activism has focused on four major topics: the relationship between online and offline activism (Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, & Reynoso, 2010; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008); the mediating role of the Internet in bridging the public and private (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Boyd, 2010); and the role of cyberactivism in specific movements (Carty & Onyett, 2006; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003); as well as how it may change forms of collective action (Bimber et al., 2005; Postmes & Brunsting, 2001). These characterizations of online activist groups often draw on the role of electronic campaigns or online recruitment in supporting the work of activists. These depictions of online activity have pushed scholars to seek a definition of Internet activism that encapsulates the role of the Internet in changing the nature and definition of activism. For instance, Bimber et al. (2005) find that especially in the case of blogs, the Internet fills the role of “collective action functions in the absence of traditional organization and accumulated resources” (p. 377). These spaces have a high level of opportunity and responsibility in shaping collective action efforts despite their lack of face-to-face contact (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006).

Scholars studying online social movement activity have found that forms of online engagement are changing (Rohlinger & Brown, 2009) and that online activity can range from the simple distribution of materials through brochureware to e-movements focused on online organizing (Daniels, 2009; Earl et al., 2010). Some forms of activism such as e-petitions and the emergence of web resources intended to compete with the mainstream, like the Independent Media Center’s indymedia.org (Kidd, 2003), or web addresses intended to compete with existing institutions, like worldbunk.org (Vegh, 2003), exist solely online. Web sites for social movement organizations often have low levels of interaction and dialogue (Stein, 2009). These forms of activism are redefining the acceptable activities of social movement organizations and broadening the repertoire of possible movement tactics (Karpf, 2010). However, this new activism does not capture the entirety of online activists’ experiences.

In addition to using Internet technologies to disseminate information and coordinate online and offline protest events, political activists have used the Internet to build networks of geographically dispersed users who spend little time publicizing specific political actions or working toward other instrumental purposes. Instead, these sites are used to discuss ongoing political news, debate movement strategies, share narratives, discuss mundane life events, and, more generally, to create a “free space” (Polletta,

1999) or a social movement community (Staggenborg, 1998) where movement adherents and potential adherents can interact. Analogous to offline social movement communities, such as those established by women's movements (e.g., Buechler, 1990), we consider these sites as social movement online communities. Although Earl et al.'s (2010) typology of Internet activism has shed light on the types of activism that occur online, community building and other cultural work do not fit easily into either of Earl's categories of online participation or online organizing. It is this gap in the scholarship that we seek to fill with the concept of SMOCs.

We define SMOCs as a sustained network of individuals who work to maintain an overlapping set of goals and identities tied to a social movement linked through quasi-public online discussions. SMOCs are broad-based participatory spaces where participants focus on the building of community and identity within the virtual walls of the community. We do not see SMOCs as an either-or proposition, as other types of online movement activities may share some, but not all, characteristics of an SMOCs. The conceptual framework we present for SMOCs broadens our understandings of the online cultural support for movements by differentiating SMOCs from new forms of online movement participation, such as cyberactivism and other online activities that formal social movement organizations initiate. Rather than focusing on the ability of activists to use the Internet to foster specific political actions or distribute information, our conception of a SMOC focuses on the community aspect of these groups and the potentially unique utilization of the Internet. SMOCs use the Internet not only for activism, but more importantly to create an identity and a distinct community within their virtual space (Daniels, 2009; Simi & Futrell, 2010).

CONVENTIONAL ATTRIBUTES OF SMOCs

In many ways, SMOCs like Stormfront are similar to conventional social movement communities. Taylor and Whittier (1992) define social movement communities as "a network of individuals and groups loosely linked through an institutional base, multiple goals and actions, and a collective identity that affirms members' common interests in opposition to dominant groups" (p. 107). Although SMOCs are unique in a variety of ways, they are also quite similar to conventional SMCs in that both have multiple goals and utilize a variety of actions; perform boundary work and form collective identities; and are participatory and broad-based. In this way, these fundamental processes of engagement remain the same between online and

offline communities, but are accompanied by a change in the scale of activity. Earl et al. (2010) refer to the presence of this approach in the existing literature as the “super-sized” conceptualization whereby, “the food was the same but in larger quantities” (p. 427). On several key characteristics, SMOCs are the virtual version of conventional SMCs.

A large area of past research on SMCs has focused on the establishment and maintenance of collective identities in the organizational discourse. The foundational understanding of the collective identity within movements comes from Taylor and Whittier (1992) who focus on three elements of collective identity: boundaries between the self and external groups, consciousness of group interests, and negotiation of symbols and actions that serve the goals of the group. Work to expand this conceptualization of collective identity formation has led scholars to focus on the function of identities and the intersection between collective identity and individual identities (Bernstein, 2008): “‘identity movements’ were defined as much by the goals they seek and the strategies they use as by the fact that they are based on a shared characteristic” (p. 277). For instance, the collective identity for white nationalists is based on an imagined community of whites that becomes real through the enactment of this identity (Blee, 2002).

Scholars find that conventional SMC activities focus on the establishment of collective identity and the institutionalization of that identity (Daniels, 1997). The collective identity of similar groups, such as the white separatist movement, has been extremely resilient partly because the self-identification of these groups focuses on preserving the white race and the perceived difficulties the white race is facing, thereby offering a sense of belonging to individuals searching for personal identity (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997). The creation of an identity that is appealing socially and culturally, as well as politically, allows for the formation of a broader base of potential supporters (Blee, 2002). We recognize that the formation and importance of collective identity may be altered by the online context and may play a much smaller role for other forms of online social movement activities (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Meyrowitz, 1997), but it plays a central role in SMOCs.

Like SMCs, SMOCs function as “free spaces” for movements (Polletta, 1999). These “safe spaces” (Gamson, 1996) or “havens” (Hirsch, 1990) shelter participants who may be reticent to express their views and ideologies in other settings. Following Futrell and Simi (2004), who categorized the free spaces that white nationalists establish as transmovement spaces that also contained prefigurative and indigenous elements, we view these three dimensions not as mutually exclusive, but rather as attributes that movements may have in different degrees. SMCs and SMOCs also can vary in the extent

to which they prefigure the goals of the movement. For identity-based separatist movements, such as the WN movement, this happens to the extent that they create an online space that is restricted to those who have adopted the identity. Finally, SMOCs that are the online presence of preexisting local SMCs with dense ties among a small number of members score high along the indigenous dimensions. This accurately describes the early years of Stormfront, which was originally established to maintain and strengthen ties among David Duke's former campaign workers. It was not until the late 1990s that the site developed a more transmovement identity. Both online and offline, these free spaces provide opportunities for movements to gather and develop counter-hegemonic frames outside of the purview of the dominant group (Polletta, 1999).

In addition, SMOCs do not form for the purposes of one-way distribution of material or to organize around specific events, but instead focus on a form of online action that is participatory and broad-based in a similar way to conventional SMCs. Although scale may be different in a virtual setting, the goal of engaging individuals in deliberation and discussion is a foundational element of SMOCs. In contrast to propaganda-based online campaigns that attempt to publish official documentation or share existing publications, the format of SMOCs is centered on discussion boards, which are often thought to provide "more thoughtful analysis than is available in other media" (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 633). The nature of discussion boards involves one individual posting a comment followed by a thread of individuals responding to the initial post and to each other as they negotiate the issue at hand.

An additional point of overlap involves the diversity of participation forms and levels. Members of offline SMCs interact in a variety of ways and fluctuate in their levels of attachment to the community. They take part in activities such as attending meetings, setting the movement agenda, and recruiting new members to the group. SMC members may be highly involved in the community, attend a single meeting in order to support the SMC, or negotiate their own potential role in the community. Although SMOC members participate in virtual activities – and therefore can only launch cyber protests and virtual sit-ins from their computers – we argue that members of SMOCs also have diverse ways of interacting with other SMOC members, which are quite similar to the ways conventional SMC members interact. Additionally, given the variety of e-activism forms and the variety of potential topics for discussion combined with the ease with which a new Internet forum or page can be posted on an existing web site, a single SMOC can provide access to movement adherents with a variety of

interests. In the case of SMCs as well as SMOCs, members can engage in a variety of ways and through a diverse set of activities. While SMOCs may enable private communications between members or limit the ability of nonmembers to participate, they are usually accessible with few formal membership requirements. Since even private conversations happen online, they always have the potential to become public, blurring the public/private distinction (Bimber et al., 2005). Thus, online technology has generally broadened communication across movements and arguably increased its effectiveness (Garrett & Edwards, 2007). Discussions among members are central to the purpose of SMOCs, unlike traditional media where activists have little chance for interacting.

UNIQUE ATTRIBUTES OF SMOCs

Despite the similarities between SMOCs and conventional SMCs, we argue that SMOCs are different from SMCs along several dimensions. To begin, conventional SMCs are usually a set of local organizations loosely linked through national events, conferences, and media, whereas SMOCs more commonly involve geographically dispersed individuals. Taylor and Whittier (1992), for example, describe the alternative institutions set up by the radical feminists in the 1970s and 1980s as consisting of local organizations, such as rape crisis centers, bookstores, and poetry groups, and annual national events such as the Michigan Womyn's Musical Festival and national media, including journals, newsletters and magazines, such as *off our backs*. Participation in such a community is likely to be heavily tied to geography, where those living in areas with few other movement sympathizers are unlikely to have many encounters with like-minded individuals (Blee, 2002). Nonlocal ties are either mediated through their organizations or infrequent and costly, such as participation in a national gathering. Online movement communities do not rely on geographical proximity and, therefore, are able to draw in otherwise isolated movement participants. Member bases online are formed without concern for location, allowing SMOCs to transcend geographical boundaries. As such, "the Internet seems to hold a 'special attraction for those [Aryans] in search of 'virtual' community to compensate for the lack of critical mass in their own [locale]'" (Simi & Futrell, 2010, p. 97).

Because of the Internet's ability to reach a mass audience and the movement adherents' need to promote ideology broadly in order to recruit new members, SMOCs can be open to viewing by the public at large, even

without requiring registration or membership. SMOCs do not have to be this open, but this level of access is not an option for offline social movement communities. Search engines like Google radically alter the capacity of nonmembers to find out about a movement and track its developments. At the same time, this openness may also create tension because of the traceability of participants. SMOCs can, however, accommodate some level of anonymity, or at the very least instill in users a strong perception of anonymity (Rohlinger & Brown, 2009). Members can adopt movement-specific identities, while simultaneously maintaining a less stigmatized public identity for face-to-face interactions. As Earl and Kimport (2011) point out, this anonymity may have implications for collective identity. The conventional conceptualization of collective identity focuses on the importance of face-to-face interactions for bringing people together and simultaneously closer to the cause. However, the anonymity of online movements also reduces the costs of participation, lowering the necessary sense of identification with the cause required for mobilization (Earl & Kimport, 2011). The Internet also creates a forum for these movements to increase the level of extremism in participants' opinions, but research has not yet fully explored the impact of dense online communities such as Stormfront (Wojcieszak, 2010).

Networked public spaces – including certain online networking sites – have altered the exchange of information by increasing the capacity to rapidly spread information (Boyd, 2010) and create sustained networks of individuals (Shirky, 2008). While both on- and offline social movement communities can be thought of as networks of interactive relations between participants as well as between participants and observers, SMCs can be resource intensive and may rely on relationships between multiple formal organizations (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). This limits their capacity to grow and decline rapidly. In contrast, SMOCs have a far greater capacity to expand and contract because of the low cost of participation associated with Internet activities (Earl & Kimport, 2011) and the speed and breadth of information exchanges (Boyd, 2010). Establishing a new web site or Facebook page involves trivial costs and can happen rapidly – more than 400 Facebook pages with over 170,000 total active users appeared in the first month of the Occupy movement (Caren & Gaby, 2011). The cost of spreading information is much lower for members of SMOCs than for conventional SMCs (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Once the information has been passed along, individuals are able to keep it for themselves and continue to share what they have read, unlike sharing a newspaper clipping, and this can happen rapidly, allowing movements to scale up very quickly (Shirky, 2008).

Since participation exists across an online audience, the benefits of membership are greatest in active communities. Like owning a fax machine or joining Facebook, there is a network effect (Uzzi, 1996) in SMOCs where the value of participation increases with the number of other participants. The combination of low start-up costs with a network effect on participation means that the overall distribution of SMOCs within a movement is likely to follow a power-law, with one or two dominant SMOCs, a few medium-sized SMOCs, and many failed or failing SMOCs (Shirky, 2008). SMOCs are different from SMCs because there are benefits associated with joining larger SMOCs to the detriment of smaller SMOCs, and SMOCs within a movement are likely to follow a power-law distribution. This means that at any given time, there is likely to be one major SMOC within a movement.

In sum, SMOCs are similar in many ways to their offline counterparts. They focus on the establishment and maintenance of collective identity, including boundary work, emphasize broad-based and participatory discussion, and allow for diverse modes and levels of participation. Because of the unique nature of the Internet, they are likely to transcend geographic boundaries and have the capacity to rapidly expand and decline, and the potential for anonymity is particularly appealing to those who may feel stigmatized for their beliefs, while the relative permanence of Internet postings creates tensions due to potential surveillance by third parties.

THE CASE OF STORMFRONT

One SMOC that utilizes a tactical repertoire almost entirely centered on the web is Stormfront. Stormfront first came online in April 1995 (Levin, 2002), a period when less than one in five Americans had access to the Internet (ZDNet Research, 2006). It was established by Don Black, who had been associated with the American National Socialist party in his teens and David Duke's branch of the KKK in his 20s, where he eventually rose to the rank of Grand Wizard. In 1981, he was sent to federal prison for his involvement in a WN-sponsored failed coup attempt against the government of Dominica. Black remained active in the WN movement in the 1980s, particularly in electoral activities involving Duke, such as the Populist Party, on whose ticket Duke ran for President in 1988 (Zeskind, 2009). While the site's original base largely consisted of those who had supported Duke's various electoral campaigns (Zeskind, 2009), influential members of the site focused on recruiting new members through the creation

of an environment friendly to the various branches of white nationalism, including those who favor both the Leninist style of activism associated with William Pierce's National Alliance and the populist style of those supporting Willis Carto's Liberty Lobby.²

The current incarnation of Stormfront was established in September 2001. Earlier versions included "Stormfront Interactive," which "allow[ed] members to access message conferences and online chat" ([Stormfront.org, 1999](#)). Before 2001, the homepage was dominated by articles, which suggested more of a brochureware orientation ([Daniels, 2009](#); [Earl et al., 2010](#)) with its emphasis on one-way dissemination of information. Since 2001, the homepage has greeted visitors with a list of different sections or forums, where registered users can create new posts, threads, or post responses to existing threads. In May 2011, there were 55 active forums that one could choose from. Registration for Stormfront requires only an e-mail address, and also allows users to set up a profile page and receive private messages. Those who make financial contributions to the site are allowed to post in a special forum visible only to contributors. As we discuss further, we estimate that less than 2% of posts are in this forum. Nonregistered users are allowed to view the content, but not to contribute posts.

The worldviews expressed on Stormfront mirror those documented by [Blee \(2002\)](#) and [Dobratz and Shanks-Meile \(1997\)](#) in their studies of the broader WN movement. Members hold that races should live separately; that their goal is the preservation of the white race; that their movement should be considered a love rather than hate movement; that immigration and racial mixing are threats to the United States; that the Holocaust never happened; and that Jewish individuals control the political and economic system, and non-Jewish elites are either dupes, paid off, or scared that exposing the Jewish conspiracy will cost them their jobs. Like white nationalists more generally ([Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997](#)), Stormfront members are divided on the possibility of achieving their goals through electoral politics, with most pessimistic that any change is possible by working through the system. Most viewed the election of then President Obama and the Great Recession as opportunities for the movement, as both would awaken mainstream whites to the flaws in the system and therefore increase the pool of potential recruits.

Social movement scholars interested in the far right have frequently focused on Stormfront. [Levin \(2002\)](#) sees the web site as the earliest "web-based hate entity" that inspired many similar forums on the far right. [Reid and Chen \(2007\)](#) find Stormfront at the center of a cluster of "white supremacy/neo-Nazis" web sites with links to the Christian identity cluster

(p. 182). Simi and Futrell (2006) find that the web site helps provide a place for activists to tell their “movement narratives,” about the injustices they face as white people and the activism in which they are engaged (p. 131). Daniels (2009) offers an extensive treatment of the site as a successful web community.

There are also broader studies of white nationalist activity that, while not specifically about Stormfront, provide additional context and insight into our case choice. In a study of white nationalism online, Adams and Roscigno (2005) find that “nationalism, religion and definitions of responsible citizenship are interwoven with race to create a sense of collective identity for these groups, their members and potential recruits” (p. 759). The collective identity established by the KKK and similar groups, although strongly tied to racial ideology, is more broadly encompassing, allowing for individuals who do not identify beliefs as the motivation for joining to grasp onto other portions of the collective identity that speak to them (Blee, 2002). Since very little of Stormfront activity is aimed at any sort of activism, we view the site as primarily engaged in building a community, and we seek to establish the ways that this SMC, and SMOCs more generally, compares with traditional offline social movement communities. Here, we use community in the Staggborg (1998) sense focusing on “mutual support among people who are connected to one another in various ways” (p. 182).

DATA AND METHODS

We selected Stormfront as our case study because it is one of the most prominent examples of a “successful” online community. Our focus is on the characteristics of SMOCs, rather than the characteristics of movements that are likely to see active SMOCs. We use Stormfront also because it is more public than most online communities. Almost all of Stormfront’s content is publicly searchable, available on the Stormfront site, in Google’s cache and in locations such as the Internet Archives’ WaybackMachine (Internet Archive, n.d.).

Using a custom-built web spider program, we downloaded all publicly available posts on Stormfront from September 11, 2001, the earliest date available, to August 6, 2010. This includes 6,868,674 posts. Based on the sequential number of posts, we estimate that this makes up 92% of the activity on Stormfront during this period. Additional 176,820 posts, or 2% of the total, were in forums restricted to Stormfront financial supporters. Finally, 6% of the posts are no longer available, either because they were moved, renumbered

or because they were deleted by the forum moderators. We observed activity on the site for 18 months, and, during that time, saw no evidence that site members thought the removal of posts was unfair. Our estimate is that posts were most likely deleted for standard Internet trolling reasons, although some were also likely removed for violating the site's ban on certain racial epithets or advocating violence. As a result, we believe that our population of posts is quite representative of the major activities on Stormfront.

From each post, we collected the user name of the poster, the thread and forum it was posted in, the time and date of the post, and the text of the post. Aggregating this information to the user level allowed us to estimate when a user was observed first posting, how frequently they posted, and the duration of their activity. We were also able to aggregate information on the forum and site level, allowing us to estimate more generally usage statistics for the site. Based on the number of unique usernames active in 2001, we estimate that approximately 1,200 individuals were posting on Stormfront in 2001.³ This number quadrupled in 2002 to 4,865, and doubled again by 2004 to 8,165. After significant growth in 2005 and 2006 that increased the number of members to 14,007 active users, interest waned slightly in 2007 and the number of active users dropped down to 13,498. In 2009, the last year for which we had full data, 17,054 active users posted. Additionally, not all site visitors post. Comparing unique user estimates from independent sources (*Alexa, n.d.*) with our estimate of the number of unique posters, we estimate that approximately 1 in 20 visitors to the site are registered users, suggesting that the site's reach is much larger than just those active members. In 2010, the site averaged 400,000 visitors and four to five million page views per month by US visitors, which is comparable to the traffic on the netroots SMOC *dailykos.org*, which averaged approximately five million page views per month (*Quantcast, 2011a*).

In our analysis of Stormfront posting by users, as shown in *Fig. 1*, we found that more than 1,400 users contributed more than 1,000 posts each between 2001 and 2010, including 38 users with more than 10,000 posts. While several of these 38 users had official titles, such as forum moderator, most did not, and neither did the vast majority of the 1,000 plus posters.

Initially, we reviewed the postings and discussed the content, themes, and patterns at multiple meetings. Based on these discussions, we developed initial codes and identified certain keywords that allowed us to systematically analyze the data. In this manner, we were able to identify community-related concepts and discussions around identity and mobilization. For instance, initial analysis indicated that "white nationalist" was often the language members used to describe their identity, while "white

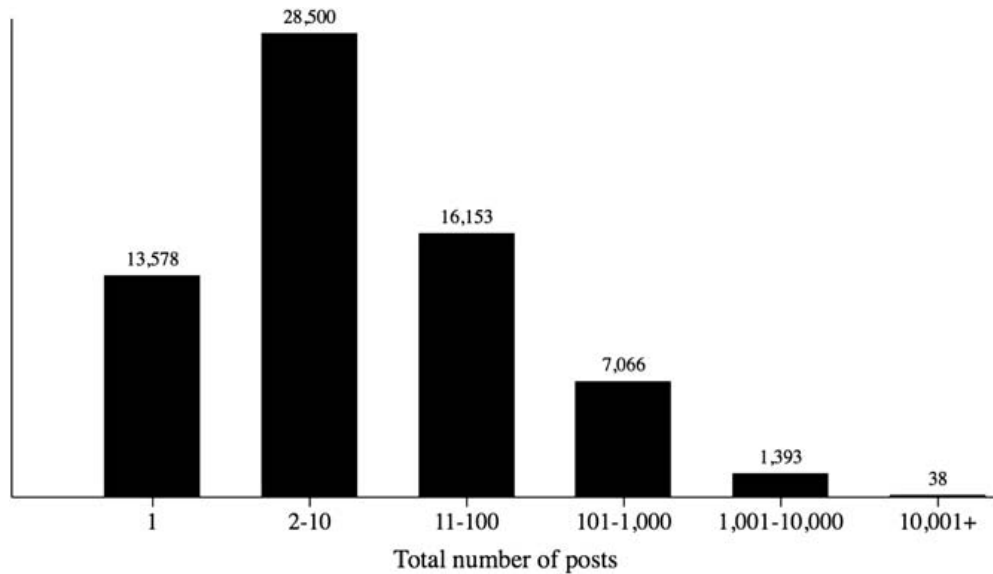


Fig. 1. Stormfront Users Grouped by Their Total Number of Posts. Data are Based on the Authors' Analysis of Site Usage, 2001–2010.

supremacist” was rarely used for self-identification. To analyze this identity formation, we searched for and read posts containing the term in the dataset, using a series of Stata and Unix procedures the authors developed to extract specific postings based on keyword searches. We also used Stata to analyze descriptive measures such as persistence of user presence and relation of first post to length of stay.

FINDINGS ON CONVENTIONAL ATTRIBUTES OF STORMFRONT

We outline in the following sections the three major ways that SMOCs overlap with SMCs. These include the extent to which SMOCs are broad-based and participatory; focus on constructing and maintaining a collective identity, including boundary making; and a diversity of participatory forms.

Diverse Activities and Participation Levels

Within the Stormfront community, members can either be persistent posters or be occasional users who enter the space in order to seek understanding or

challenge the views held by other members. The variety of interactions between members that occur on Stormfront also closely mimic those seen in SMCs. Stormfront members utilize the community for a large variety of purposes. Members post about current events such as local election results, ask for dating advice, attempt to define the stance of white nationalists on a particular issue, and exchange tactics for recruiting members both on- and offline. These sorts of SMOC behaviors are closely aligned with the activities and interactions of conventional SMCs, only contained within a virtual environment.

This diversity of activities is beneficial to the SMOC in that it allows members with a wide range of interests to engage and stay active in the SMOC. We list the most active forums and the number of first posts in each (those with more than 10,000 posts in our dataset) in [Table 1](#). While the largest of these in terms of engaging new recruits was the “Opposing Views Forum” with 6,646 first posts, the list also included the forums entitled, “Lounge”, “Ideology and Philosophy”, “Talk”, “Youth”, “Local and Regional”, “Music and Entertainment”, and “Self Defense, Martial Arts & Preparation.” This diversity of entryways into the SMOC enables people with different primary interests to become engaged through a variety of topics.

As one measure of the impact of having multiple venues for participation, we estimated how long members remain active as a function of which forum we first observe them posting in. While we find that the forum one first posts in is predictive of how long they will stay active in the community, the difference is generally not vast. While those who first post in either of the two forums open to non-WN views (“The Truth About Martin Luther King” and “Opposing Views Forum”) have only one in seven chances of still posting after a year, those who first posted in other forums had a 20–30% chance of still posting after a year. The top forums in terms of yield include a social forum (“Lounge”), a tactical forum (“Self Defense”), and a forum for discussing ongoing events (“Newlinks”). That such a diversity of topics is able to first engage people to become long-term members suggests that SMOCs accommodate a broad range of interests in the same manner as SMCs. While this diversity is similar to that of conventional SMCs, the limitlessness of the Internet means that creating new forums involves less cost than creating new outlets in conventional SMCs. While this may involve some failures (such as the small business forum established in 2007 which averages less than two new posts a day), the advantages of creating a new forum in terms of recruiting and sustaining membership outweigh the relatively small costs of failure.

Table 1. Duration of Participation in Stormfront by Forum of First Post, 2001–2009.

Forum	First Posts	1 day (%)	2–364 days (%)	365+ days (%)
Newslinks and Articles	2,976	29	40	30
Self-defense, martial arts and Preparedness	1,197	28	43	28
Lounge	4,274	29	43	28
Privacy, network security, and encryption	234	32	41	28
Revisionism	663	28	45	27
Science, technology, and race	587	28	45	27
Events	509	33	42	25
Homemaking	366	28	46	25
Music and entertainment	1,593	31	44	25
Culture and customs	1,316	33	43	24
Graphics	740	34	42	23
Dating advice	466	33	43	23
Local and regional	1,939	31	46	23
Ideology and philosophy	2,329	32	45	22
Health and fitness	632	33	45	22
Youth	2,461	27	51	21
Talk	3,066	34	45	21
For Stormfront ladies only	264	35	45	20
Questions about this board	1,955	41	38	20
General questions and comments	3,173	34	47	20
Politics and continuing crises	79	37	44	19
The truth about Martin Luther King	803	47	37	15
Opposing views Forum	6,646	38	49	14

Duration is Measured by the Date between the First Observed Post and the Last Observed Post.

Collective Identity

As noted earlier, the beliefs that are central to the collective identity of white nationalists expressed on Stormfront are consistent with the set of beliefs researchers have found among white nationalists offline: that they are “awaken” to the truth; that an objective analysis of the facts will show they are correct; use of jargon such as “sheeple” (for those whites who conform to dominant political ideology) and ZOG (“Zionist Occupied Government”); crime committed by African Americans, especially against whites, is underreported in the media; race is biological and that the races should be kept separate; the US government will collapse and you should prepare for a race war (e.g., Blee, 2002; Daniels, 1997, 2009; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile,

1997; Simi & Futrell, 2010). This collective identity is both distinct enough to capture white nationalists and broad enough to allow a more expansive audience to sympathize with the identity.

The collective identity is powerful because individuals can receive messages in a variety of ways and then interpret these messages to match their own agendas (Blee, 2002). For example, in a thread with over 30 posts, members of Stormfront seek to define the difference between white supremacists and white nationalists. One user comments, “Supremacy denotes domination over others. Nationalism advocates separation from others. Most here are WNs. White nationalists don’t want to rule others. We want a nation inhabited and run by whites only! No outside influence” (UnregisteredH, 2007). Another member adds to the discussion by claiming that:

We are fathers and brothers, mothers and sisters. We are philosophers and mathematicians. We are carpenters and inventors. We are singers and song writers. We are men of science and men of faith. We love our people, and want a future where our traditions and way of life will live on and grow. We want our children to grow up safe, and educated. We want the line of our people to continue. And yet we are still labeled “White Supremacist.”

I am what I am, if I am labeled “White Supremacist” by my enemies. Then I guess I am a White Supremacist. (nordblut, 2007)

These discussions of identity remain perpetually public through their searchability and accessibility.

Collective identity formation is heavily focused on the establishment of boundaries between the group and others (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). We observed that one key component in constructing the boundary between white nationalists and mainstream conservatives was based on whether or not an individual was willing to “name the Jew.” A central element of the WN master frame is that Jews, individually and collectively, control politics and the economy, both globally and within the United States. As Stormfront Editor Jack Boot wrote, “We’re actually here to point out that threat, the threat of the Jewish interest as opposed to our own, and the dangers and consequences of Jewish power. That is our *raison d’être*” (Boot, 2009).

In response to comments by members leaving Stormfront because of the way Jewish people are portrayed, suepeace posted the following, “If people left because they thought Stormfront members were too hard on the Jews, they were in the wrong place to begin with. Stormfront EXISTS to name the Jew as the number one threat to White survival” (2011).

Making sense of major political events also involves identifying the Jewish people who benefit from them. Any causal story that does not “name the Jew” is therefore incomplete. For example, in discussing the theories of who was behind the September 11 attacks, member [SaintLouis \(2010\)](#) wrote, “Any ‘conspiracy theory’ that doesn’t name the Jew serves the Jew.” More generally, [White Wolf \(2011\)](#), a forum member with more than 10,000 posts, wrote, “Naming the Jew is our full time job.” Defining what it means to be a white nationalist is strongly tied to defining the other, and the definition of the excluded group matters more for the formation of the identity than finding commonalities ([Blee, 2002](#)).

Participatory and Broad-Based

Another way that SMOCs are similar to conventional SMCs is that they are broad-based and participatory. Members have a diverse set of goals and means for achieving those goals. The objectives of SMOC member’s goals can range from seeking radical social and structural changes (e.g., race-based nationalism and revolution) to promoting less radical reforms (e.g., representing members’ interests in debates or promoting awareness of the group’s views), or resisting change (e.g., maintaining the status quo in certain areas). The members embrace these differences in part because they see themselves as “too few to stand against each other” ([Old Hat, 2005](#)). Stormfront’s members are affiliated with the WN movement, the KKK, Christian Identity, and neo-Nazi organizations. Each of these organizations may pursue different tactics for recruitment and achieving the overall goals of the white nationalist movement. In the “Strategy and Tactics” forum that is dedicated to promoting “white rights through local organization,” members discuss a variety of strategies to promote WN movement goals ([Stormfront.org, n.d.a](#)). Members affiliated with the KKK discuss burning crosses as a way to promote unity in the face of criticisms that it offends potential supporters.

There’s nothing wrong with burning the cross. Burning the cross is a sign that were lighting the way for the white race and leading them out of the darkness. ... If someone dislikes cross burnings then they shouldn’t look a [*sic*] it if it offends them and they should just shut up. ([Leahy, 2010](#))

While others advocate for less provocative means such as simply suggesting that like-minded individuals join Stormfront as an outlet to discuss their concerns, one Stormfront member posts, “You know, this

illegal invasion is the perfect subject to recruit non-WN Whites to check out Stormfront. It's a wonderful segue from their exasperation with these vermin to learning what we already know as WN" (DrivenSno, 2007). Moreover, a recent Stormfront post on trying to recruit Tea Party members to the WN movement received several responses about the similarities between the two groups and the means for leveraging these shared beliefs.

In general, Stormfront posts are quite participatory, receiving on average 12 responses per post. The ability of SMOC members to engage with one another in a highly participatory way may exist within a redefined structure, but retains the broad-based and deliberative nature of conventional SMCs. Stormfront members often post comments or questions as they search to understand and adopt a white nationalist identity, and participate in identity-forming conversations that exhibit characteristics of intimate and long-lasting relationships (Cerulo, Ruane, & Chayko, 1997). We find that members of Stormfront, especially frequent visitors, are connected through regular interactions and common symbols and references that foster a sense of identity (Cerulo, 1992).

Free Space

Joining a SMOC does not require a member to be completely open with family, friends, neighbors, and work colleagues. Members can enter and exit the community without repercussions to relationships and reputations offline. Members of Stormfront understand that their point of view is marginalized. In an online survey about how Stormfront users interact with their families, one user posted, and the majority agreed, "[My family and I] get along just fine as long as we don't talk politics & the survival of our race" (Advance Scout, 2004). A reoccurring theme in recruitment threads is the importance of going slow, so as not to alienate people. As hahajohnnyb (2008) put it, "I have tried to lay out the full conspiracy to people and they blow me off every time." The repeated expression of the importance of Stormfront as the only place one can be a WN without being harassed further demonstrates the special role SMOCs can play for organizing the stigmatized. Users specifically highlight the importance of the site as a free space for expressing their radical views. As one new poster put it, "I can't believe I've finally found a place where I don't have to be ashamed of being white. I look forward to becoming part of this community" (Nordic Superman, 2006). Similarly, another user wrote, "I'm really glad to have found this site. I feel like a loner as of late" (StarKiller85, 2007). After a

racist rant, a third new user wrote, “Sorry if you’ve already heard this rant a million times, I was just looking for someplace on the Internet that doesn’t jump down my throat for being a bigot” (mrmrk0673, 2011). In this manner, Stormfront creates a prefigurative free space by forming an “autonomous zone” (Polletta, 1999, p. 11).

Findings on Unique Attributes of SMOCs

As noted above, SMOCs differ substantially from SMCs on four major characteristics resulting from the unique nature of Internet-enabled communication. SMOCs can be geographically diverse; they can rapidly expand; they provide opportunities for both more surveillance and more anonymous participation; and there is likely to be one major institution where activity is focused.

Rapid Expansion

One way the Internet is a unique location for social movement communities is that communities can expand rapidly given the viral nature of the Internet and the ease of accommodating a large number of new users. For example, restore the Republic, a Facebook-style SMOC for Patriot and Militia supporters, recruited 30,000 members within a month of starting (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011b). The membership of SMOCs can also rapidly expand once established. In the case of Stormfront, new US users per month from 2002 to 2010 were relatively stable between 300 and 700. However, after the election of Barack Obama, unprecedented growth resulted in the single monthly increase in new users of around 1,400 causing total membership to reach a peak of 4,000; the highest user rate in the history of the community, as shown in Fig. 2(a) and (b). The opportunity to reach and house an infinite population of users allows SMOCs to expand more rapidly than conventional SMCs.

Disillusioned members can also leave the space with few repercussions. For instance, in 2009, a Stormfront member became concerned about Stormfront “benefactors” whom she felt were pursuing policies that would blur the line between race-based nationalism and other white supremacist goals. Although this was an isolated incident, it is likely that similar discourse could result in a mass exodus of SMOC members, who may incidentally start a new SMOC. This was the experience of Charles Johnson,

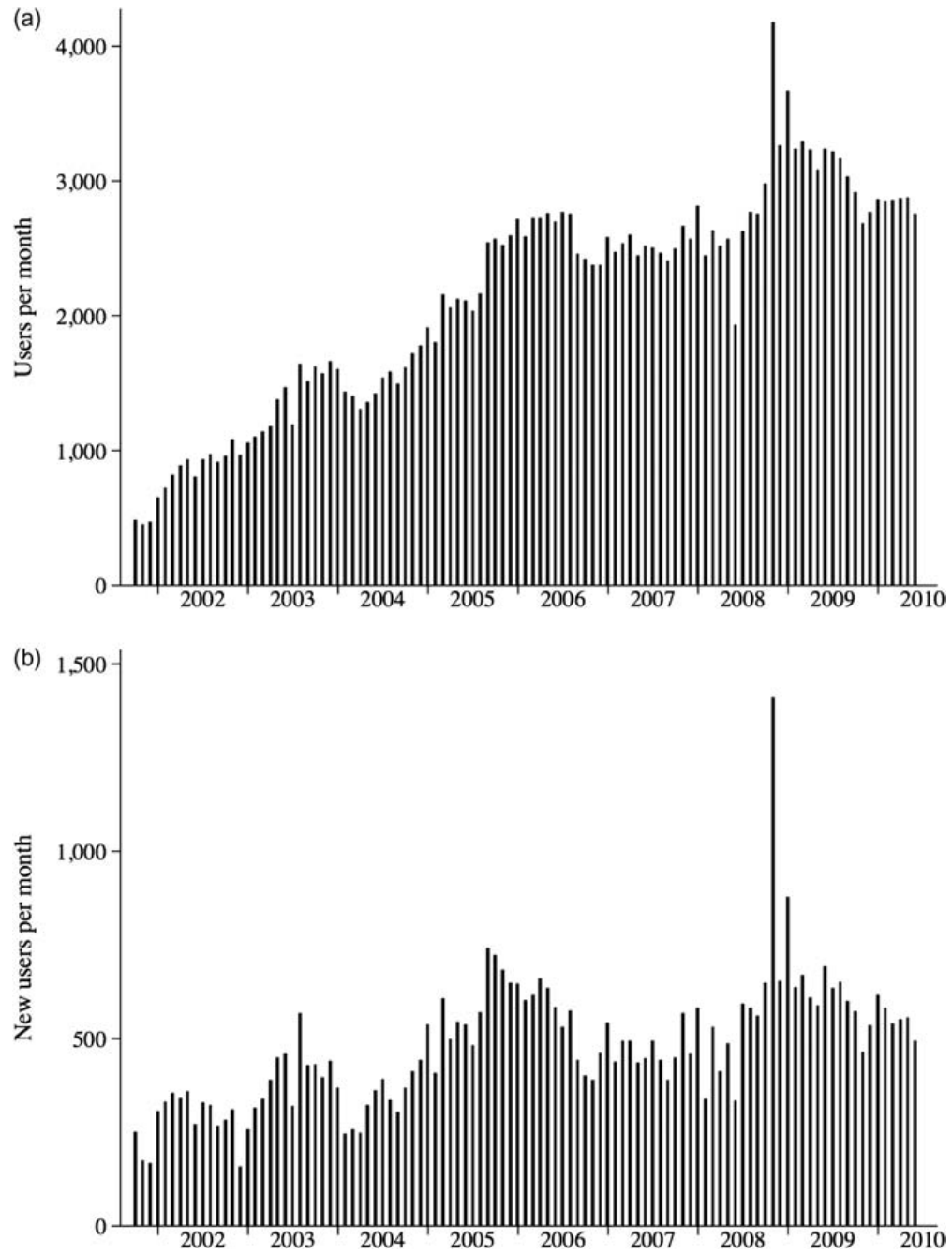


Fig. 2. Total Number of Users (a) and New Users (b) Who Posted to Stormfront by Month, 2001–2010. Data are Based on the Authors' Analysis of Site Usage.

who created the right-wing blog Little Green Footballs. Johnson's blog had a following of 34,000 registered users and a lively community of participants until he shifted his views on the activities of more extreme factions of the movement and most of the community members left (Dee, 2010).

Geographic Diversity

SMOC members are likely to directly encounter other members from around the country and globe online. Additionally, these experiences are not mediated by national institutions in the way that national movement magazine editors or conference organizers shape the messages participants receive at nonlocal events. Instead, members participate directly and regularly with others regardless of spatial distance.

In the case of Stormfront, members come from across the country and globe. As part of their profile, potential Stormfront users are provided the opportunity to state their location. While some leave the answer blank, most provide an answer. The answer that many provide is often not a currently recognized place, but rather an additional opportunity to display identification with the movement, by providing answers such as "White Nation" or "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!" Others provide a blended response, such as "Mexifornia" or "Jew York City" or "CSA," shorthand for Confederate States of America. From our analysis of straightforward and blended responses, we were able to classify 11,068 Stormfront members whose location could be identified at the state level. Membership is dispersed across the country, with some presence in all 50 continental states, as shown in Fig. 3.

Stormfront creates opportunities for its US members to connect with those nearby through its "Local and Regional" and "Events" forums. Posts in the local and regional forums largely consist of descriptions of where a person lives and an expression of happiness that they have found other "like-minded people" from their area. While these occasionally involve announcements of local events, such as a "family-friendly" spaghetti night in Phoenix sponsored by the local chapter of the neo-Nazi Nationalist Coalition or invitations to join local organizations, its main function appears to be creating a sense that you are not the only white nationalist in your area, rather than converting online participation offline. We found only a small fraction of the participants in the "Local and Regional" forums posted exclusively in those forums, and the vast majority posted in the forum only a few times. Further, less than 1% of posts occurred in the

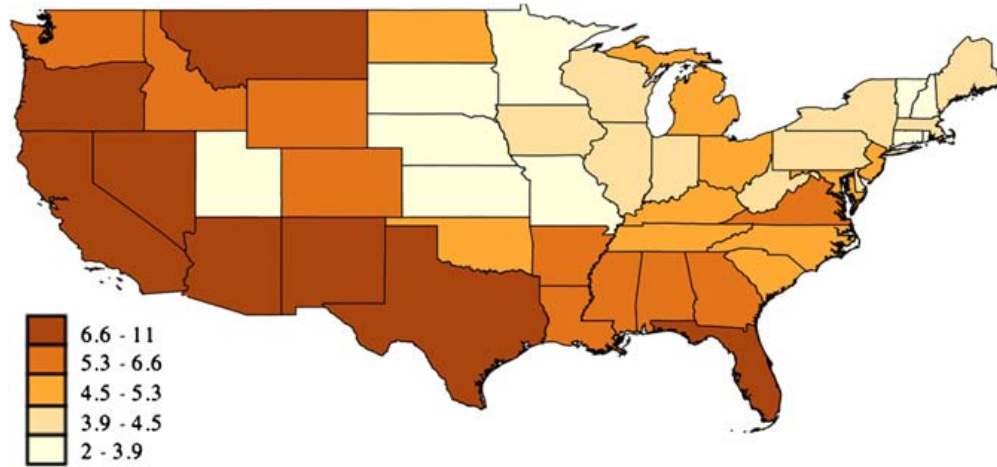


Fig. 3. Number of Stormfront Users by State, per 100,000 White NonHispanic Residents. Geographic location is based on self-reports, as described in the text.

“Events” forum, confirming that the majority of Stormfront members participate only in online activities.

Approximately 25% of posts on Stormfront happen in forums devoted to “International” issues. The largest of these are focused on issues in the United Kingdom (697,184 posts), followed by Flanders and the Netherlands (294,263 posts in Dutch), Australia and New Zealand (158,432 posts), and Serbia (107,762 posts in Serbian). We found that in 24% of cases where users posted in forums focused on non-US issues, the subsequent post was in a US-focused forum. The reverse, a US post followed by a non-US post, happened less often – only 8% of the time. Combined, this suggests that there is a fair amount of transnational contact, but that this is primarily non-US users who are exporting American notions of WN, rather than US users looking to import tactics and frames from abroad.

Openness and Anonymity

The online nature of SMOCs makes them open to not only audiences that include adherents and converts but also the broader public, including opponents of the SMOC’s goals. In contrast, offline SMCs are generally internally focused and closed to view (Rohlinger & Brown, 2009). In the case of Stormfront, the public accessibility has resulted in the group relying on a “cloaked site” (Daniels, 2009) to recruit potential members. Stormfront

links from a site that appears at first glance to be a history of the civil rights movement and the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., but is characterized as a “true historical examination” ([Stormfront.org](#), n.d.b). The use of this sort of site also means that individuals searching for information about the civil rights movement might find Stormfront. The openness of SMOCs is necessary for recruitment, and also leaves them vulnerable to surveillance. For adherents and potential opponents purposefully searching for the term “white nationalists,” Stormfront is the second result returned.

In making the community so open to the public, opponents of the movement are able to access Stormfront and authorities are able to conduct surveillance of the group’s activities ([Levin, 2002](#)). Members warn each other that undercover investigators are monitoring postings to the community and discuss when they should be concerned about the monitoring and when a member is “safe” (e.g., when illegal tactics are not being used). In certain instances, the media have exposed members of the Stormfront community who have sought or were serving in public offices. In 2005, Doug Hanks was forced to abandon his candidacy for city council in Charlotte, North Carolina, when the media revealed that he was a Stormfront member with approximately 4,000 posts ([Associated Press, 2005](#)). Hanks was largely vilified on Stormfront for both the idiocy of posting under his own name and treating white nationalism as a stigmatized identity.

The nature of the SMOC as a quasi-public entity presents unique challenges for negotiating the tensions presented by a diverse audience. Nevertheless, SMOCs do have some tools at their disposal for negotiating this difficult relationship – at least with their opponents in the audience. One of the techniques Stormfront uses for navigating hostile groups is its Opposing Views Forum, which provides a space for opponents of the WN movement to engage with Stormfront’s members. In addition to providing open forums to opponents, SMOCs like Stormfront allow users to participate with anonymous user profiles and pseudonyms that protect them from any associated stigma.

Central Institution

We find evidence for a power-law-type distribution of SMOCs within the WN movement. In May 2011, Stormfront listed that it had about 8,100,000 posts ([Stormfront.org, 2011](#)). The second largest site, [Vanguard News Network \(2011\)](#), associated with National Socialists, had nearly 1,100,000 posts. The third largest NSM88 had approximately 110,000 posts ([National](#)

Socialist Movement, 2011). The American Nationalist Union (2010) had about 18,000 posts, the American Third Position (2011) had about 6,500, and there were many forums that were on low-activity sites that are currently offline or dormant, such as the American White Pride Network (2011) with 19 posts. In each case, SMOCs were several times larger than the next highest rank SMOC, which is consistent with a power-law distribution and offers strong evidence of a network effect (Biggs, 2003).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explained that an extension of the cyberactivism of social movements actually represents the creation of a new form of social movement community. Our conceptualization of SMOCs is useful as it describes a new mode of social movement participation and organization that has emerged due to relatively recent technological advances and allows social movements to develop new strategies and tactics (Karpf, 2010). By ignoring the existence of SMOCs, scholars may miss important ways that activists are using the Internet.

We have outlined multiple ways that SMOCs are distinct from their offline counterparts. We note several differences between SMOCs and SMCs in terms of their geographic diversity, capacity for rapid growth and decline, likelihood that they will be dominated by a single institution, and the tension that exists between openness and anonymity. Despite these differences, we find that they are similar to offline SMCs in that they are broad-based and participatory, focus on the construction of collective identities, are free spaces, and allow for a diversity of participation forms. Overall, these similarities lead SMOCs to be closer to their offline counterparts than they are to other forms of online activism.

Our conception of SMOCs also leads us to hypothesize that SMOCs are a particularly important form of engagement for movement emergence as well as for marginal and extremist movements (Van Stekelenburg, Oegema, & Klandermans, 2010). Movements in abeyance (Taylor, 1989) can utilize SMOCs because of the low cost of participation in online activities (Earl & Kimport, 2011) and the removal of geographical boundaries that allow for the involvement of isolated individuals who can use an online environment to network. Extremist organizations can capitalize on the structure of SMOCs to move their activity out of an environment of open and identifiable space to an online, semi-anonymous sphere. For similar reasons, SMOCs will become an increasingly important tool for movement emergence as they have the

capacity to quickly connect and organize a member base as well as allowing for easier recruitment of new members.

Stormfront is potentially unique in its degree of success, its age, its openness to the public, and the stigmatization of its views. As we noted above, activists with less stigmatized views are less likely to be engaged in online communities. Similarly, online activism in less stigmatized issues is less likely to be walled off from other parts of online identity. For example, expressing more mainstream political views and liking, joining, or friending a more conventional political cause are routine Facebook activities. In contrast, Stormfront exists separately from other online personas, which likely increases the collective identity of members. Likewise, because of the network benefits of following the social media site that other people are using, activists might rely on popular sites such as Twitter or Facebook to communicate with each other and with potential adherents. Once there, it might be difficult to transition to another site. As a site that predates current social networks, Stormfront had the advantage of not having to compete with these other sites in order to become established. Movement entrepreneurs today may not be as lucky. Additionally, given the mass media attention to the role of social media in large-scale mobilization such as the Arab Spring (e.g., [Friedman, 2011](#)), activists may be likely to imitate the strategy of using preexisting nonpolitical Internet sites for political purposes rather than establishing an independent SMOC.

That said, we believe SMOCs will remain a persistent feature of social movements. For example, [patriotactionnetwork.com](#), which is on the first page of Google results for “tea party” averaged nearly 300,000 visitors in 2011 ([Quantcast, 2011b](#)). This SMOC established by the Patriot Action Network resembles Facebook and was established to facilitate community building among Tea Party activists. The success of this site, and other recent entries, suggests that new SMOCs are still a viable option for movement entrepreneurs. Part of the reason for this, we believe, is financial. SMOCs and independent entrepreneurs cannot easily profit financially from Facebook groups and Twitter. In contrast, sites like Stormfront or the Patriot Action Network can easily sell advertising and merchandise to support them. The possibility that a site could be revenue neutral or even profitable creates a strong incentive for individuals or organizations to attempt to establish independent SMOCs. Future research might identify the specific benefits to users for joining an SMOC as opposed to engaging in politics through normally apolitical social media sites.

While Stormfront users’ views might be extreme, sites that engage in illegal activities are unlikely to establish public or long-lasting SMOCs.

Stormfront specifically warns users against promoting illegal activities and moderators often quickly delete threads that mention future violence. While Stormfront users are very willing to discuss challenges to the power structure, the site's owners are likely not willing to accept the legal liability associated with promoting illegal activities. In contrast, the online activist group Anonymous had both an active online community that promoted criminal protest acts, including hacking corporate computers, and organized distributed denial of service attacks against corporate and government web sites (Sengupta, 2011). This community relied on hiding their online activities and communicated internally through more short-lived means of communication, such as IRC, in order to avoid government repression. While these sorts of groups enjoy some of the benefits of SMOCs, their ability to interact directly with large numbers of people is quite limited. While they may be able to Tweet the name of their latest target directly, secrecy requires that only a select few regularly communicate (Cook & Chen, 2011), which makes the community closer to an offline SMC in terms of limited scope of interactions. Large-scale SMOCs are unlikely to be sustained when the state has an interest and the capacity to repress the group.

NOTES

1. Twitter reported breaking all usage records during this period (Jones, 2011).
2. See Zeskind (2009) for an impressive history of the WN movement from 1974 to 2004.
3. It is likely that the true number of users is less than the number of unique user names, as users may establish multiple accounts. We believe that this inflates our count by only a small amount as large numbers of users are unlikely to establish multiple pseudonymous accounts given the time costs associated with creating an identity. Additionally, we noted only two discussions about possible fake accounts, or sockpuppets, which suggests that users did not think the practice was widespread.

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