

ABSTRACT

ADAMS, MELISSA BETH. Mapping Virality from a Dialogic Public Relations Perspective: Understanding Network Gatekeeping through the Saturday Chores Viral Event. (Under the direction of Dr. Melissa A. Johnson.)

This project presents a case study of a viral social media event from public relations disciplinary perspective. Drawing from a blended theoretical framework based in social and digital network theories (Roger's diffusion of innovations, 2003; Barzilai-Nahon's network gatekeeping, 2008) and the dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002), this study examined the 2014 Saturday Chores (#saturdaychores) counter-protest group viral media event to determine the underlying social and digital processes that supported virality. Findings illustrate that perceived innovation, opinion leadership, and both social and digital instances of network gatekeeping supported widespread diffusion of Saturday Chores content during the initial viral period, allowing it to bypass traditional media gatekeeping functions. Interview and descriptive social network analysis findings confirmed that Saturday Chores founders were perceived as both opinion leaders and innovators, and that they were connected via personal digital social networks to other opinion leaders. Additionally, results from a three-part content analysis show that the event met the four bases of virality defined by Nahon and Hemsley (2013) through human social sharing, speed, and its reach by both number of people and number of networks. Finally, results illustrate that digital network syndication of content through affiliated networks, and between social media, blogs, and digital publications, contributed to the diffusion of content at the time. These digital effects persist as search results in the "viral aftermath" years later. The dissertation concludes with recommendations with both practical public relations and activist public relations and addresses dialogic public relations responses to viral media events. Opportunities resulting from viral events are also discussed in the study's conclusion.

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Mapping Virality from a Dialogic Public Relations Perspective: Understanding Network Gatekeeping through the Saturday Chores Viral Event.

by
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DEDICATION

In addition to my wonderful doctoral committee, this dissertation is dedicated to my friends and family members who listened to all of my doubts over the last four years while I pursued this degree. Thank you.

BIOGRAPHY

Melissa Adams was born and raised in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1992 with a Bachelor of Arts in English. She worked in music and books retail, as a freelance journalist, and as a marketing communications and public relations professional before moving into account management. She pursued her Masters of Science in Communication at North Carolina State University as a part-time student while working full-time as a senior account executive at an interactive advertising agency. Following completion of that degree, Adams worked as a Senior Account Manager and Instructional Designer at a Raleigh eLearning agency supporting Dell Software and Hewlett-Packard training initiatives. She returned to North Carolina State University in 2014, this time enrolled as a full-time student in the Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media doctoral program. Her research draws from her professional experience in digital communication and focuses on public relations, intercultural communication, and digital media—specifically issues of credibility, culture, identity, and the communication opportunities and challenges arising from increasingly networked digital publics. She is published in *The Journal of Public Relations Education* and has presented her work at several regional and national conferences including those hosted by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the National Communication Association, the Southern States Communication Association, and the Visual Communication Conference (aka Viscom).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In July 2014, the Tumblr blog of a young Raleigh, North Carolina, couple I know professionally “went viral” on social media and gained mainstream news coverage around the globe. Having spent the last decade working in digital marketing and communications, I had previously witnessed the effects of other viral events and their lasting impacts on my clients’ campaigns and web presence. But this was the first time I had the opportunity to watch a viral event occur in real time, as it spread through shared social networks to mainstream media outlets. Of course this was a fascinating event to watch, but it was also alarming due to its speed and scope. Through their social media updates, I observed the event change from being a fun accident into an overwhelming frenzy as the couple scrambled to manage misinformation and juggle multiple interview requests during the next two weeks. The wide-scale visibility of the viral event grew the number of their Tumblr followers from one dozen to more than 50,000 overnight. The couple’s personal Facebook and Twitter accounts also gained thousands of new friend requests and followers as a direct result. As the Tumblr blog chronicled the couple’s counter-protest of an ongoing local anti-abortion protest at a women’s health clinic (known as the “Saturday Chores” protest), one of the unexpected results after the viral spread and media coverage grew to an international scale was death threats from some pro-life groups and individuals. Following this, I observed as the couple rushed to protect themselves and their social media accounts while a local supporter launched a closed Facebook group to manage organization of the counter-protest out of public view.

Despite its negative aspects, the attention that “going viral” brought to the Saturday Chores counter-protest created an interest network of supporters who followed and supported

their actions. The group was also able to leverage these new and expanded social media networks to raise over eight thousand dollars. This funded the installation of a privacy fence at the site—a permanent barrier that would physically and visually separate clinic visitors from anti-abortion protestors, protecting anyone entering the clinic from its parking lot.

Ultimately, the viral event resulted in both positive and negative outcomes for the couple's counter-protest as well as their personal lives. It also demonstrated that despite some claims to the contrary, such events cannot be systematically engineered, planned, or “managed” in a traditional sense. They are in fact, a social sharing phenomenon, characterized by the rapid diffusion of information in “social information flows” described by sociologists and social network theory scientists (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rogers, 2003).

As a public relations scholar, for me the viral event underscored the importance of understanding the core difference between traditional media and new media information diffusion—rapid digital network-to-network information flows and “supersizing” media effects that help shape message meaning and outcomes (Hon, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). In addition, the event illustrated the potential for small groups (such as community activists or organizations) to leverage digital media networks to access needed resources and for global coalition building (Wood & Moore, 2002).

Public relations professionals and scholars are primarily concerned with fostering mutually beneficial relationships through messaging and ensuring campaign efficacy based on message, channel, and strategy. So why should public relations professionals care about how Saturday Chores went viral? Because digital communication presents other mitigating factors for public relations to consider during campaign planning and issues management, as recently noted by Hon (2015) and Jin and Liu (2010). Material affordances of digital networks such as speed,

scale, and the interplay of different types of media (news, social media, etc.), coupled with social aspects such as low transaction costs (participation requires no long-term commitment) should be considered as variables that may impact audience perceptions and public relations campaign outcomes, just as they help fuel instances of digital activism (Demetriou, 2013; Guo & McCombs, 2016; Hon, 2015; Theocharis, 2015). Additionally, viral events have an “afterlife” due to the saturation of content shared during the viral diffusion, resulting in numerous hyperlinks back to content or organizational media that can pop up in future search results or when a similar viral topic emerges (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

These affordances of digital media certainly present challenges for professional communicators, but they also represent opportunities as well. Therefore, it is important for public relations practitioners to consider these factors in addition to norms of digital sociality (such as cross-platform message sharing) in order to create campaigns optimized for information flows where format, related information, and embedded hyperlinks may help shape outcomes (Hon, 2015; Jin & Liu, 2010).

To date, scholars have studied numerous aspects of social media in strategic communication practice, but not virality. The literature includes discussions of ethical practice and examinations of issues such as ghost blogging, transparency, crisis communication, digital activism, blog or blogger influence, and social capital (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Theocharis, 2015; Coombs, 2014; DiStaso & Seveck Bortree, 2014; Jin & Liu, 2010). In particular, the concept of personal and “collectivist” action frames used by activist groups and social movements to rally support around a single issue from loosely connected online individuals and groups seems to provide an opportunity for public relations research on coalition building through personal networks and online influence (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Studying the use

of memes or hashtags such as “We are the 99%” as collectivist action frames is particularly beneficial for public relations practitioners on strategic reframing of issues and generating support across platforms and diverse networks (Baym, 2010; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Other phenomena specific to digital networks (such as virality) and examinations of how material digital structures may impact campaigns have thus far largely fallen outside of public relations research, yet these topics figure prominently in studies of online sociality and engagement (Baym & boyd, 2012; Baym, 2010; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013), globalization (Castells, 2015, 2011), and network society (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). One notable exception to this was Kent and Taylor’s (1998) argument for a dialogic approach to website design, which proposed that digital structures such as web buttons for “contact us” and links to resources should be made available to support interactivity and mutually beneficial communication between organizations and their audiences. Unfortunately, this thinking hasn’t progressed very far within the discipline to consider other types of digital objects except in recent scholarship examining online influence and social capital from a network science approach (Himmelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014; Himmelboim, Smith, & Shneiderman, 2013; Saffer, Somerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2015).

Just as the interactive elements of websites change the way audiences perceive and communicate with organizations (Searson & Johnson, 2010), viral events can also change the way that audiences perceive organizations and how they may communicate with them. Through the addition of numerous new linkages from news, blogs, and social media discussions and shares of content, viral events reconfigure shared digital connections between organization websites (Yang & Taylor, 2015). Viral events can radically reconfigure these networks, as the rapid addition of new linkages may ease or complicate access to resources and online social

capital (such as strategic partnerships), engage new active publics or interest-based networks (coalition-building), or even change audience impressions through changes to search engine results (Hon, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2015). For example, someone researching a product or organization might “Google” it only to find that the top search results are links to negative press coverage prompted by an embarrassing viral video on a YouTube link. Certainly these link structures as digital effects of virality should be examined in public relations scholarship, as they present factors that may impact desired campaign outcomes as well as organizational reputation.

Considering this further, are there other reasons why a better understanding of viral media would benefit public relations? Yes—especially in regard to the issues of digital scale and the viral afterlife (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). By better understanding how media networks “work” at a larger scale (rather than a message-level scale), public relations and strategic communication scholars and practitioners will be able to interrogate these effects and identify resulting opportunities and risks. As network gatekeepers bridging organization-public online communication, public relations practitioners are in an advantaged position to monitor and understand the material changes that occur in digital network ecologies during and following a viral event (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Understanding the significance of these events will help practitioners better plan for ongoing ethical response management both during and following a viral event.

Additionally, through the use of mixed methods and relationship-focused network science methods rather than a single attribute-based quantitative method, study of digital virality contributes to the expansion of public relations research methodologies, as scholars have recently advocated (Curtin, 2016; Himelboim et al., 2014; Himelboim et al., 2013; Jin & Liu, 2010;

Saffer, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2015). Such research also poses a response to Dozier and Lauzen's call for public relations scholarship to move beyond its organization-centric focus and become a focal variable field less shaped by client interests (2000). My study does this by contributing a new research area of macro-level focus—viral media studies—to the discipline. This dissertation project also makes a new connection to research on the topic in the larger discipline of communication and activism such as those noted previously in this introduction.

This research project focuses on the social and digital network processes that initiated and supported viral information flows during a specific viral event. Although the event was triggered by actions relating to the Saturday Chores counter-protest, this is **not** a case study of an activist group—it is a case study of a viral media event. However, I do look at how digital activist tactics as public relations figured into the viral event and also consider the social processes contributing to their success.

A final benefit of this dissertation is that it identifies specific tactics and new best practices of social media communication. As public relations professionals (like marketing professionals) have often tried to make “sharable” content (photos and messages that are easily shared online), an analysis of the media coverage and message themes used by various outlets yielded some lessons about particular types of user content, digital tactics, and applications that facilitated rapid diffusion through multiple networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

The theory of dialogic public relations, activist public relations, digital activism research, and network theories of diffusion and gatekeeping form the theoretical foundations for this endeavor. (Refer to Figure 2.1 in for an illustration of the project's theoretical framework.)

Theoretical Framework

To conduct this mixed method research study, I look to recent extensions of gatekeeping theory to help identify and examine the various social and network processes of the event. Like other case studies, this multistage dissertation research is based on a theoretical framework that blends the previously mentioned network theories with diffusion theory as applied in social media and virality research and Kent and Taylor's theory of dialogic public relations (Demetrious, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rogers, 2003). Research on activist public relations also greatly informs this this work (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Derville, 2005; Hon, 2015; Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

Diffusion and Networked Social Systems

Diffusion theory has been used to explain how innovative ideas or products gain adoption through social information flows of networks and communication media channels (Rogers, 2003). In diffusion, recognized opinion leaders and individuals at key positions within social systems may positively or negatively influence information flows (and thus adoption), as can change agents, individuals who work within social systems to influence the innovation adoption or rejection process. Based on basic social network analysis concepts, diffusion theory has been applied in social media research and social network analysis, as well as in recent studies of viral media (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and digital activism (Demetrious, 2008; 2013).

Social Media and Virality.

Much research and theory building has been performed in the area of participatory media and online sociality since the advent of social media in the mid-2000s. Viral media and “sharable” media have been topics of interest for researchers who seek to tap the power of

virality to recreate such content, understand social sharing motives, and explain online social movement dynamics of power and scale (Castells, 2011; Contractor & DeChurch, 2014; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Key to social media engagement and virality are the social/private nature of the medium and its ability to rapidly scale message exposure. Research on social media and online sociality have pointed to these qualities of digital media and further argue that individuality and identity are expressed through one's connections and interactions within personal social networks on largely public platforms (Baym & boyd, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

This blurring between personal and public communication as well as an awareness of the broadcast nature of digital media indicates the inherently social nature of viral media events, as recently noted by Nahon and Hemsley (2013). The authors explain that just because a video, photo, tweet, or meme is popular, it doesn't mean that it is viral. They argue that virality is a specific type of scalable information flow and that viral events have measurable "amplification" effects. Following this thinking, I ground my study of virality in Nahon and Hemsley's definition proposed in *Going Viral* (2013):

Virality is a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message.
(p. 26)

This definition recognizes the work of network theorists from a variety of perspectives (including diffusion theory, information science, and globalization studies) and emphasizes the social aspects of the phenomenon. In fact, Nahon and Hemsley's definition works to reclaim the concept of virality from recent marketing and management scholarship to position the

phenomenon as a form of online sociality and culture made possible by digital networks—i.e. viral events do not just “happen” on their own; people make them happen. This thinking echoes James Carey in one of his latter discussions of communication as ritual: “Technology is part of culture rather than an independent force of nature” (Munson & Warren, 1997, p. 319). In short, viral media are part of digital culture and online sociality.

Nahon and Hemsley’s (2013) definition also helps to operationalize four bases defining virality that may be measured using a mixed methods approach: human and social aspects of information sharing (identifying the social diffusion processes), speed of spread, reach by number (number of people exposed to the content), and the reach by networks (distance the information travels between networks and geographic reach). For my dissertation case study, I will consider these factors in conjunction with the Saturday Chores event to determine if it meets Nahon and Hemsley’s definition of virality.

Digital Activism and Activist Public Relations.

For this project, I also draw from recent work on digital activism to explain how and why online activist tactics and strategies are helping shape new norms of both public relations and online sociality. Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) research on “connective action” and Theocharis’s (2015) concept of “digitally networked participation” build upon Baym and boyd (2012), Rainie and Wellman (2012), and other recent social media theorists to present their studies of digital activism and argue for its legitimacy.

Public relations scholars have argued for the study of activist tactics because it offers strategic insights as well as valuable access to the joint history of interactions between activist groups and practitioners (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Derville, 2005; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Smith and Ferguson (2010) have pointed out that activism in itself is a form of public relations,

as active publics are creating strategic communication campaigns and tactics as a way to attain specific goals; therefore, they are practicing public relations. There is an interdependency between public relations and activists that co-creates messages and meaning within the larger social context; therefore, activists are practicing public relations (Demetrious, 2013; Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

As this case study focuses on viral media content produced by digital activism, I will look to this area of research to examine Saturday Chores' tactics and use of social media to gain support and funding as public relations activities.

Activist Public Relations and Dialogic Communication.

Noting issues with organization-centric models of public relations in web-based communication, Kent and Taylor have called for a new orientation for online public relations communication, one that moves away from Grunig's two-way symmetrical model and Excellence Theory toward a publics-perspective that accommodates many levels of digital interactivity and dialogic principals of mutuality, openness, and relationship-building (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Although both dialogic and two-way symmetrical communication models focus on relationship-building, Taylor and Kent (2014) have argued that unlike other communication models that operate from a managerial perspective, dialogic communication is **the product** of organization-public interactions, and **not a process**. Specifically noting the value of considering how activism has influenced changes in public relations practice and driven theory building, Coombs and Holladay, Demetrious, and Smith and Ferguson (among others) have similarly called for a publics-centered dialogic model that recognizes the impact of public relations activities on society and acknowledges practitioners' role as boundary-spanners or gatekeepers who manage access to information, knowledge, and

social capital (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Demetrious, 2008; 2013; Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1973; Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Activism, especially in the context of digital public relations, has been one of the most popular topics in recent research due to effective activist campaigns on social media. Social movements have been successful with issue-oriented public relations campaigns despite lack of formal organizational structures (at least, at their inception), largely due to their creative leveraging of digital media interactivity to frame or reframe issues through affordances such as hashtags, to build loose coalitions around central issues, and to tap mutual influence through these relationships (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Hon, 2015; Theocharis, 2015; Toledano, 2016).

By viewing Saturday Chores activism as public relations, and by conducting my research from the theoretical perspective of activist public relations, I hope to better illustrate the social processes and dynamics of the group and viral event.

Recognizing that some actions of the Saturday Chores group were, in essence, public relations activities, I will analyze these tactics as strategic communications to understand how the group's content bypassed traditional and network gatekeepers (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). In contrast, I will analyze the event as a learning opportunity for practitioners by viewing it through the lens of dialogic public relations as proposed by Taylor and Kent (2014). Specifically, I will consider group and related communication in terms of dialogic engagement to propose ethical practitioner responses to such an event, and to identify possible opportunities for establishing ongoing dialogue with interest networks resulting from the viral event.

The adoption of both perspectives of public relations will afford a publics-based, interactive, and holistic view of the phenomenon. Unlike an organization-centric perspective, this blended theoretical approach will illuminate the social processes involved in viral events,

highlight opportunities that may be unobserved from an organization-centered approach, and help ground findings within the framework of an ethical, open, and dialogic communication practice that recognizes power differentials between participants (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Castells, 2011; Demetrious, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Also, as Moody and Paxton have argued, to fully explore and understand complex phenomena such as viral media sharing, one must bridge an examination of network structures with an understanding of social processes to better understand the reality of the situation (2009, p. 1500). Therefore, this blended approach focused on social and network dynamics should provide a sound research design for theory building of viral media as a social information flow (Moody & Paxton, 2009).

Finally, through this project, I hope to be able to extend the boundaries of Kent and Taylor's dialogic theory of public relations to consider network-to-network communication in a polymedia environment, work recently begun by Yang and Taylor in their analysis of organizational network ecologies and noted in research on personal social networks and influence (Baym, 2010; Baym & boyd, 2012; Yang & Taylor, 2015).

Background – The “Saturday Chores” Counter-protest

Nowhere are the affordances of digital communication networks more evident than in the phenomenon of viral media diffusion, and the July 2014 Saturday Chores anti-abortion counter-protest event is no exception. However, the Saturday Chores event is unique in that awareness and support for the counter-protest was radically expanded from local to global by the viral event. Saturday Chores began as localized pranksterism performed by two digitally fluent and media-savvy “netizens” who, following norms of online sociality, shared photos of their humorous counter-protest signs on social media (Baym, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). These photographs triggered a viral sensation that garnered international media coverage and inspired

copycat “Saturday Chores-type” anti-abortion protests around the world. Saturday Chores founders and content originators use of visual humor exhibited a creative response to the anti-abortion protest messages, and through widespread social sharing, leveraged the power of social media to grow awareness and support. Their approach and subsequent viral event has resulted in featured speaking engagements at marketing and advertising forums for the Saturday Chores founders in recognition of their innovation.

According to its founders, Tina and Grayson Haver Currin, the Raleigh, North Carolina-based Saturday Chores counter-protest ([#saturdaychores](https://twitter.com/saturdaychores) and <http://saturdaychores.tumblr.com>) began on March 8, 2014, following a moment of inspiration during a regular Saturday morning trip to the local “big box” home improvement store. As newlyweds and new homeowners in early 2014, the couple found themselves making repeated trips to a home improvement store to pick up materials to renovate their new house. Each Saturday morning on the way to the store, the couple passed A Preferred Women’s Health Clinic, where they observed the same pro-life group protesting at the entrance. Carrying signs proclaiming messages such as “Babies Murdered Here,” the protestors positioned themselves at the clinic parking entrance and used megaphones to verbally accost visitors as they arrived. The Haver Currins were appalled at the nature of the protests they repeatedly observed. This compelled them to stage action in the same location the next time they passed by the clinic. While at the home improvement store on that Saturday in March, the couple bought a prefabricated sign and scrawled an arrow with the words “Weird Hobby” on the blank back in a moment of inspiration. On their way home, they stopped by the clinic and staged a silent counter-protest by taking turns holding the “Weird Hobby” sign side-by-side with pro-life protestors (with the arrow pointed toward the protestor(s)). The couple took photos with this staging and posted them on Facebook and Twitter using the Instagram

application on their smart phones. The couple dubbed these weekly counter protests their “Saturday Chores” (or #saturdaychores) when they posted photos simultaneously on Facebook and Instagram. Friends and followers shared and commented on the photos. After the first counter-protest, awareness of the ongoing action at the site and the Pro Lifers’ harsh tactics were discussed online and the Haver Currins were generally applauded for their attempt to disrupt them.

On subsequent Saturday mornings, the couple repeated the counter protest with other signs, always humorous or “snarky” in the sense that they were designed to make the actions of the Pro Life protestors seem ridiculous. Whether the Haver Currins’ signs said “Bring Back Crystal Pepsi,” “Honk If You’re Horny” or “I Like Turtles”, when juxtaposed with “Babies Murdered Here” signs, they forced onlookers to consider the actions of Pro Life protestors who chose to stand outside the clinic and verbally harass the women and families coming for appointments.

The Haver Currins argued that the Saturday morning counter-protests were like work they must do—part of a larger civic responsibility they felt was more important than many of the other “chores” that took up the rest of their weekend morning. This notion of civic responsibility again contrasted that of the Pro Life protest strategy whose tactics seemed designed to intimidate and verbally harass clinic visitors. Compared to the witty signs and silence displayed by Saturday Chores, the megaphone wielding, Pro Life protestors with their signs accusing the clinic of murder, presented an example of undesirable, aberrant uncivil behavior. This tactic essentially “turned the table” on the anti-abortion protestors whose “Babies Murdered Here” messages frame the women’s clinic medical staff and their patients as murderers and social undesirables. This message strategy has been used by sensationalist journalists and anti-abortion

activists (including the American Medical Association) since the early 20th century as a way to both sell newspapers and to shift blame from women seeking abortions to the providers themselves (Reagan, 1997). However, confronted by signs such as “Weird Hobby” and “Women’s Rights Expert” the anti-abortion protesters themselves were framed as uneducated undesirables violating the norms of appropriate social behavior.

Also, by the looks on the faces of the anti-abortion protestors depicted in the photos, Saturday Chores messages and policy of no verbal engagement at the site both disarmed and infuriated them as they lacked any effective counter-tactics. Their responses often added to the humor of the photos and escalated tensions at the site, which had the effect of further growing support for Saturday Chores who were usually outnumbered by anti-abortion protestors.

Although innovative, especially in the context of the United States abortion debate, Saturday Chores issues were not “new” as other groups have used similarly funny, theatrical and disruptive activist tactics to gain attention. For example, the activist group Act Up famously disrupted the start of the CBS Evening News and PBS’s McNeil/Lehrer News Hour at the beginning of the first Iraq war by protestors shouting “Fight Aids! Not Arabs!” to protest lack of HIV/AIDS research and public health support (Treichler, 1999). Act Up was widely known at that time for their highly theatrical and disruptive protest tactics that were designed to force news media attention (such as “condomizing” North Carolina Senator Jesse Helm’s Washington DC home because of his stance on HIV/AIDS research funding). Other activists have since followed Act Up’s lead using similar tactics, including irony. Protestors costumed as loan sharks and sea turtles roamed the streets of Seattle during the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in 1999 to draw attention to trade policies supporting global economic inequity and causing environmental harm. Costumed protestors dressed as “Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)” called for

a fair economy during the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia (Boyd, 2002). These do-it-yourself (DIY) costumes and creative messages tap into both humor and irony, allowing protestors to express their creativity as well as gain attention for their causes. Such visual tactics became more common as the Internet expanded. Internet “meme warfare” became part of this last protest campaign as its title (Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) encapsulated the protestors’ two core messages (big money owns both candidates who are largely the same) and therefore, could be easily spread online via photos, posters, fake radio ads and more (Boyd, 2002). Such “meme viruses” could be “injected” into mainstream media networks via news stories as even the briefest would featured the group’s core message – its name (Boyd, 2002, p. 253).

Perhaps Saturday Chores’ signs represent the next generation of this DIY creative and disruptive protest strategy. With their innovative messages, the couple developed an engaging, humor-based strategic response to a specific, ongoing anti-abortion protest. Similar to these other protests using theatrical tactics, Saturday Chores use of humor and irony draw attention to alternate narratives of a social issue in order to raise it to a higher conceptual level and make engagement more appealing to diverse audiences (Boyd, 2002; Duncombe, 2002; Grote, 2002; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Treichler, 1999). Saturday Chores successfully disrupted the anti-abortion protest both at the physical site and on social media by generating support from casual passers-by and the local community. Through Facebook and Instagram shares, “likes,” and reposting, Saturday Chores social media networks spread scenes from the counter-protest to extended local networks and well beyond. These streams of shared, reposted and reblogged images reached people far outside the group’s immediate networks resulting in international media attention, the proliferation of Saturday Chores-type counter-protests at other women’s

clinic sites, and ultimately, to a successful fundraiser that erected a privacy fence to permanently shield clinic visitors from anti-abortion protestors at the site.¹

Project Goals

Social media engagement, issues management, and stakeholder relations are central to modern public relations practice. However, strategic communication research and theory remain rooted in notions of symmetrical two-way and quantitative methodology rather than in a network perspective where the affordances of media platforms, new norms of online sociality, the social impacts of public relations activities, and effects of networked interactions are taken into account (Demetrious, 2013; Hon, 2015; Curtin, 2016).

Considering public relations scholarship on social media and these recent calls for a dialogic, publics-focused communication model for the discipline, my dissertation will extend both areas through the application of the concepts and attempt to address the issue of media “virality.” This topic has not been addressed thus far in public relations research of social media; however, it has been one that communication as a social science discipline has often explored through globalization, digital media studies, and interpersonal computer-mediated communication (Baym, 2010; Castells, 2011; Jenkins, et al., 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Furthermore, as the impacts of viral media events linger well after the initial viral period is over, considering the long-term impacts of one incidence of this phenomenon will aid practitioners to better plan for follow-up content strategies.

¹ In full disclosure, I must note my connections and participation with Saturday Chores. I was a Facebook friend of Grayson Haver Currin. We both shared music industry connections (mine from my work as a music publicist where I first became acquainted with Grayson as a writer for his college newspaper). I participated in one Saturday Chores following the viral media event before I decided to conduct formal research on the group and seek IRB approval.

Summary

Viral media events can have both positive and negative impacts on organizations and individuals. As social media content “going viral” is increasingly commonplace in digital society, public relations scholars and practitioners need to understand the social and technical processes that propel this phenomenon in order to better manage negative after-effects as well as to identify opportunities to leverage post-viral visibility. This dissertation project seeks to fill a gap in public relations literature by examining the social and network processes that supported the Saturday Chores viral event. Thanks in part to available trace data from multiple digital platforms; I have been able to develop a rich case history of this unique event, which helps to expand the discipline as an intellectual domain (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). This case study provides scholars and practitioners with an in-depth tour of a viral event and fosters understanding of how such digital phenomenon “works”. Undertaking this study from the perspective of dialogic public relations has allowed me to focus on the relationships and context of the event, and informed my recommendations for ethical responses and issues management during and following viral diffusion.

My dissertation contributes a unique research design to digital public relations research through use of mixed methodology and grounding in the theory of network gatekeeping (Benoit & Holbert, 2008; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). In short, this project, through its use of creative mixed methods and blended theoretical frameworks, offers multiple benefits to both communication and public relations scholarship and practice.

In the following chapter, I provide a more detailed overview of the literature that supports my dissertation project. The first section discusses social media and new norms of its use in online sociality. Then I discuss research and theories of networked social systems and the

diffusion of information through communications networks as a social process. Next, I discuss how this work has been expanded theoretically to include the inherently digital processes of network gatekeeping and virality. Finally, I review scholarship on activist public relations and discuss how that work is informed by recent calls for a reorientation toward a dialogic and publics-focused communication perspective in digital public relations via the theory of dialogic public relations. I conclude with a discussion of how this theoretical framework provides the analytical lens for this project and my recommendation for public relations practice and theory building.

CHAPTER 2

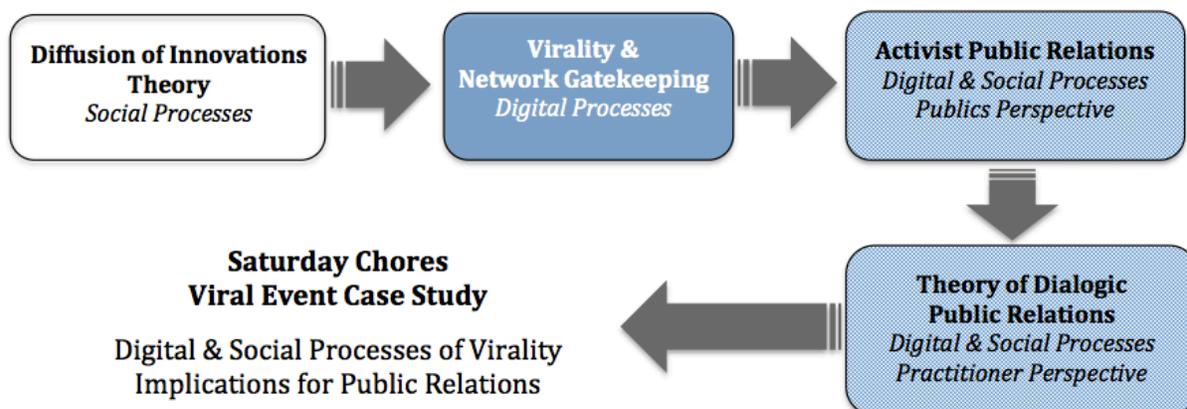


Figure 2.1 - Theoretical framework.

Literature Review

This chapter presents an overview of the literature that informs this research project. As depicted in the illustration above, this case study project is guided by a theoretical framework based in Everett Rogers's pioneering work on social diffusion and information sharing of innovations as it has been extended through research examining how these processes work as new norms of online sociality and networked participation in social media and viral events (Baym & boyd, 2012; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rogers, 2003). Following from this theoretical foundation, I will then turn to public relations theory to describe how social media has changed public relations and describe dialogic interactive communication as an emergent norm for practitioners (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Coombs, 2014; Hon, 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Finally, I discuss research in activist public relations to consider possible lessons viral events might hold for practitioners who both engage with activists and act as ethical

boundary spanners between such groups and their organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Hon, 2015; Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

Diffusion Theory and Networked Social Systems

Theories of diffusion and networked social systems consider how information and innovations (as products or novel ideas) are shared socially – i.e. how this information diffuses through communities or even society. Viral media events are a digital phenomenon, however, rumors, news, and word-of-mouth information about innovations are analogues of virality though they lack the speed and scale of online communication. Certainly, Saturday Chores' novel signs presented an innovation in women's reproductive rights protest messages, and it was socially shared photos of these signs that lead to the viral event.

A seminal theory of communication considering these social processes is Everett Rogers's *Diffusion of Innovations*. Rogers explained how innovations (innovative products or new ideas as information) spread through social systems and are adopted or rejected by individuals or organizations (2003). By looking at diffusion and adoption decisions as social processes rather than just isolated individual choices based solely on demographic attributes, Roger's view of social systems, opinion leadership, and communication network structures has influenced researchers seeking to explain message diffusion and influence in digital social networks, including Nahon and Hemsley. As viral media events are in essence social information flows of novel content such as memes, photos, or text artifacts, they can be described as elements of diffusions of innovation when they also involve attitude change, social action, or the creation/reconfiguration of social systems, as in the case of Saturday Chores. Diffusion includes both planned and unplanned spread of information and novel ideas (Rogers, 2003) therefore it is applicable to spontaneous viral media events.

Diffusion theory explains that innovative ideas gain adoption through social information flows, the influence of certain individuals, and through various communication media channels (Rogers, 2003). During diffusion, recognized opinion leaders and individuals at positions within social systems may positively or negatively influence information flows (and thus adoption of the innovation), as can change agents (individuals who work within social systems to influence the adoption process). Rooted in basic social network analysis concepts, diffusion theory has been applied in social media research (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), in mass media research, and in recent studies of viral media (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013) and digital activism (Demetrious, 2013).

Rogers described a social system as a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal (2003, p. 24). Social systems have structure and establish norms in order to provide stability. Norms are established behavior patterns for the members of a social system - they provide structure for the units in a system (Rogers, 2003). Structure can support or hinder the social information flows of a social system, thereby helping or impeding the diffusion of innovations and information (Rogers, 2003). Similarly, communication structures (patterned communications) can help or hinder social information flows. For example, communication media that helps like-minded groups of individuals reach out to dissimilar groups to exchange information from outside their immediate networks could help the spread of an innovation.

When individuals are positioned in their social system in such a way that allows them to regularly access outside information, this is a cosmopolite orientation, according to Rogers. These individuals also often function as opinion leaders in their social system if they bring this new information to their systems in a socially accessible and acceptable way. Opinion leaders are influencers in social systems and are key to the spread of innovations. These individuals are

generally more cosmopolite than others in their system and also tend to have higher socioeconomic status and levels of social participation. Although socioeconomic status and other demographics may play less of a role in digital social networks, network position and social influence are still important to opinion leadership. Rogers described opinion leaders as being at the center of their communication networks (2003, p. 27). This study contributes to Rogers' research by extending the factors of opinion leadership beyond demographics through application to digital media where influence and information sharing practices are facilitated by loosely connected social networks.

Considering this, in order to foster adoption of an innovation, one should get opinion leaders involved. Rogers noted that change agents (individuals who influence clients' innovation-decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency) often target opinion leaders to make changes in a social system. This is because most social systems are made up of like-minded individuals (homophilous networks) and the respected opinion leader position at the core is able to influence people to change their minds or their behaviors. Although change agents are able to control the form and function of the innovation they wish to spread, they cannot control meaning, which is subject to individual and system-shared perceptions (Rogers, 2003, p. 31). Therefore, the adoption of new technologies, products, and innovative ideas is contingent upon the social information flows of human networks, the opinion leaders or influencers embedded within networks, and the communication structures they employ. Rogers explained, "The heart of the diffusion process consists of interpersonal network exchanges and social modeling by those individuals who have already adopted an innovation to those individuals who are influenced to follow their lead. Diffusion is essentially a social process" (2003, p. 35).

Using diffusion as a springboard to understanding social networks, Kadushin has noted that networks are conduits to both wanted and unwanted flows (2012, p. 8). This is especially true for social information flows in digital media such as virality. Kadushin argued that the two major propositions of diffusion theory and social networks are also replicated in digital social networks: homophily (people with like characteristics tend to be connected) and influence (connected people have an effect on one another) (2012, p. 9). Therefore, considering network structures can help explain and predict behavior—including how groups and individuals may respond to certain messages or new ideas (Kadushin, 2012).

Digital social networks are also characterized by multiplexity, or simultaneous membership in multiple networks (Kadushin, 2012). Digital multiplexity allows both wanted and unwanted information to be shared at scale and also presents increased possibilities for heterophilous communication to occur as dissimilar individuals are connected through shared group or network membership (Kadushin, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Rogers also noted that heterophilous communication has special potential to spread innovations because of this capacity to connect socially dissimilar individuals in a system. These heterophilous interpersonal links in a system called “bridges” are especially important in conveying information about innovations and are often represented by “weak ties” or acquaintance-type relationships (Granovetter, 1983; Rogers, 2003, p. 306).

To get around the problem of homophily, Rogers suggested that change agents (such as public relations practitioners) use several different sets of opinion leaders in order to reach outside the immediate subgroup or cluster of individuals to spread innovations to various group members (2003, p. 307). He also observed that online interpersonal interactions have become important for the spread of innovations in recent decades (2003, p. 18).

Online Sociality, Networked Participation and Activism

Sharing information, ideas, status updates and photos such as the Saturday Chores group did typify new norms of online sociality and networked participation. To paraphrase the Haver Currins on this topic, if you don't post an event photo on social media, then to friends it is like it didn't really "happen" - so you naturally want to share them. Sharing photos has been made much easier by the ubiquity of smartphones and social media applications such as Instagram.

Digital media scholars such as danah boyd have argued that social media platform user interfaces (such as apps) help shape online interactions and therefore, online sociality (d. boyd, 2011). According to boyd, such "networked publics" are different than other notions of publics in that they are shaped by the architecture of the network environment. Network publics interact in spaces where public/private boundaries are blurred, and where features such as profiles, friend lists, public commenting, and streaming (as in status updates) have significant impacts on the construction and meaning of social issues and action (boyd, 2011). Some digital affordances have particularly important impact on networked publics: persistence (of information online), replicability (of content), scalability (intended or not), and searchability (most online content is searchable and public) (boyd, 2011). These same digital affordances also fuel viral media flows (Baym & boyd, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Social media and digital media networks therefore support the rapid sharing of personalized content in ways that shape the content itself as well as new norms that arise from the act of sharing. Additionally, as much of this sharing and interaction happens in public spaces, it represents a new kind of personal yet mass model of communication. Castells has called this personal, yet public online communication "mass-self communication," recognizing that the blended nature of personal or one-to-one directed messages is often, in fact, viewable as one-to-

many messages on social media (Castells, 2015). This ability for individuals to broadcast public messages through global digital media networks represents a fundamental change in human communication made possible through the multitudes of horizontal connections between digital platforms. Not only does this enable an individual to reach mass audiences, it also provides both individuals and social movements the power to engage publics for support and to use these networks to bypass institutional gatekeepers (Castells, 2015).

Rainie and Wellman have described this new type of online “publicness” as a new form of sociality: networked individualism (2012). They explain that networked individuals tap into loosely connected online social networks for social and emotional support, as well as other resources on an as-needed basis, rather than relying solely on a “home” community of family and close friends. Within online social spaces, networked individuals move fluidly between multiple networks largely composed of weak ties that help them connected to “the broader fabric of society” through these numerous connections (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 15–16).

However, information and innovations do not spread evenly online (just as in offline networks), as heterogeneous networks slow things down—having many different types of people in networks means that they do not mix or share information as readily as in homophilous networks (Rogers, 2003; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Echoing Rogers’s discussion of opinion leaders, Rainie and Wellman explain that certain individuals who bridge networks act as social information hubs or superconnectors. These bridging ties are great at getting information in and out of networks (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Sometimes these superconnectors link organizations that have shared membership in networks—like a network of networks—but they also aid information exchange between specific clusters of people within a

single network. Castells argued that the power of these personal digital networks, bridging ties, and our ability to leverage them, is why governments are afraid of the Internet (Castells, 2015).

Just like Saturday Chores' use of photos to share their counter-protest messages, activist tactics have changed in order to use the power of digital networks and social media to maximize coalition building (Wood & Moore, 2002) and develop strategies to mobilize support and activate counterpublics (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015).

Before social media, activists previously used broadcast communication networks to draw on innovative theatrical protest tactics such as those used in the past by Act Up! and their disruption of Dan Rather's CBS News broadcast (Treichler, 1999). Act Up! and other groups have used "DIY"-style protests and humor to show an alternative reality to audiences (boyd, 2002; Duncombe, 2002; Treichler, 1999). Such tactics were used to both draw attention to non-mainstream narratives of social issues through creative disruption, and to reframe them so that mass audiences might be more open to considering them from the activists' perspective, much in the way that newspapers have reframed issues in the past (Reagan, 1997; Shepard, 2002; Treichler, 1999). Drawing on this history, digital age activists have used similar tactics to gain attention such as in the "Billionaires for Bush" 2001 Inauguration protest (#billionairesforbush) meme and ironic hashtag as an easy-to-share collectivist action frame designed to mobilize support (Baym, 2012; Svensson, Neumayer, Banfield-Mumb, & Schossböck, 2014).

As these changes have occurred, scholars have examined instances of digital activism to understand what social media networks make possible (or inhibit) and to consider what counts as "real" activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2015; Theocharis, 2015).

In particular, Castells noted that social movements "spread by contagion in a world networked by the wireless Internet and marked by fast, viral diffusion of images and ideas"

(2015, p. 12). In contrast to mass media, which are largely controlled by governments and media corporations, the Internet is the perfect conduit through which activists can spread information about social movements; its horizontal, decentralized nature makes it hard to shut down (Castells, 2015).

Castells argued that digital networks have caused a change in communication as now, when we communicate online (especially through social media), we are able to rapidly reach many people around the world through connected networks with self-determined messages. Reflective of Nahon and Hemsley's notion of viral amplification, he has also argued that "social networks on the Internet allowed the experience to be communicated and amplified, bringing the entire world into the movement and creating a permanent forum of solidarity, debate and strategic planning" (2015, p. 129). Echoing Roger's diffusion theory and Barzilai-Nahon, Castells also argues that when social movements reach critical mass (saturation of number of people involved, aware and/or in support of the mobilization), network gatekeeping loses control. He equates this ability with viral media and asserts that networked social movements themselves are viral.

Other scholars of online activism and social movements have also discussed how new social media norms and digital network structures foster and support widespread networked participation. Bennett and Segerberg's concept of "connective action" draws from boyd and Baym's notion of socially mediated publicness (Baym & boyd, 2012), to describe how personal action frames allow otherwise un-connected individuals to identify with social movements or issue-specific protests. They explain that individual identity is embedded in online activism and that social movements should take care to develop resonant personal action frames to effectively gain support and spread messages. The concept of connective action illustrates that online

activism is different—especially for digital natives—where action is more personal, yet may be only part of the public identity of individuals, a concept recently echoed by public relations scholars Coombs and Holladay (2016).

Finally, one of the most important concepts of networked activism recently discussed is Theocharis's digitally networked participation (2015). Theocharis argued that digitally networked participation with a social issue *is* political action, and that even nonpolitical actions can be more impactful than commonly accepted forms of political participation. According to Theocharis, actions such as posting photos of a protest, retweeting a video of a policeman pepper-spraying students, or sharing a petition on your Facebook page do count as legitimate forms of digital activism, as these actions may influence the actions of others who witness them to follow suit or to investigate the issue for themselves (2015). He defines this “networked participation” as:

A networked media-based personalized action that is carried out by individual citizens with the intent to display their own mobilization and activate their social networks in order to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of, a social or political problem. (2015, p. 6)

Theocharis noted that digitally networked participation is a new form of activism that includes the activation of multiple personal digital social networks and that this has led to successful recent mobilizations (such as Occupy Wall Street) and online protests (such as Stop SOPA) (Theocharis, 2015).

Understanding why (and how) the Saturday Chores group founders and followers shared content on social media as well as the role of opinion leadership in the viral event was an important facet of my dissertation research project. Was the Haver Currins use of social media

strategic – purposefully activating their digital networks to mobilize a formal counter action - or were they just following the norms of online sociality and networked participation? Were the founders acting as opinion leaders and if so, were others acting in a similar role, or were change agents involved? In short, what social and diffusion processes and roles were involved in the event?

Viral Media as a Social Information Flow

Viral media and “spreadable” media have also been popular topics of researchers who appeal to those hoping to tap the power of virality, understand social sharing motives, or explain online activism’s dynamics of power and scale (Castells, 2011; Contractor & DeChurch, 2014; Jenkins, et al., 2013). Key to social media engagement and virality are the social/private nature of the medium and its ability to rapidly scale message exposure by moving from private or individual social networks to public networks and mass media (Hon, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). And as noted in the previous section, the blurring between personal and public communication, along with an awareness of the broadcast nature of digital media, also contributes to the social nature of viral media events as recently noted by Nahon and Hemsley (2013). The authors explain that just because a video, photo, tweet, or meme is popular (widely shared and viewed), it doesn’t mean that it is viral. Instead, virality is a specific type of scalable information flow and that has measurable “amplification effects,” as content moves between networks and often impacts social norms and ideas (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

Nahon and Hemsley (2013) described virality as not just a media event, but rather a social information flow that causes new ideas to spread and information to saturate global networks of diverse individuals. It may lead to social change as the diffusion of new ideas often generates new demands from previously latent publics. Viral events frequently result in the

formation of interest networks—loose collectives that are formed through linkages created during the diffusion period. They form through both physical digital (hyperlinks, etc.), and social connections (shared ideas, values, or actions) as well as through emotions. One example of the latter was the viral spread of the University of California at Berkeley “pepper spray” incident video that showed a campus police officer pepper-spraying student protestors. Shared between networks, this viral video helped grow support for the removal of the officer by the University’s Board of Governors and led to calls for resignation of the chancellor and a new policy prohibiting armed force removal of students (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). The authors argued that such “viral content can facilitate conversations, which, over time, can form more durable connections. The reach of viral events—their ability to hop from one network to another—means that people may be randomly exposed to ideas, information, and other content that otherwise might never have reached them” (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 71).

In this manner, viral events (depending upon the topic and content) often facilitate social change, as they often reflect culturally shared values, passions, or new ideas that resonate with audiences due to the topic or even due to the way they creatively address a difficult issue. Salience is key, and according to the authors, the use of humor can add value, helping a video or photo go viral by creating novel “hot” content that people are often eager to share (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 65).

Viral media challenges and transforms structures and institutions (generates new demands from publics and interest networks) and increases demands for transparency, accountability, and participation (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Due to its social nature, viral media events are spontaneous, and even the most obscure people may find themselves in opinion

leadership roles following an event. (For example, families of recent police shooting victims have been forced into national attention due to viral videos of these incidents.)

Similar to Bennett and Segerberg, Svensson et al. researched networked activism, identity, and activist social media to conclude that action frames are important to the growth of movements (2014). Through their work looking at three single-issue actions that they described as “saturated” with social media activity, they described how disparate groups came together using social media to form loose collectivist networks that existed as long as their specific were salient. Images of messages or hashtag slogans (as collectivist action frames) such as “We are the 99%” of Occupy Wall Street can be used very effectively online in posts, hashtags, and image memes. Such social media activism allowed individuals who might not be able to take part in a local action (due to geography, etc.) to participate. “Social media platforms played an important role in the identification processes to form these vague unities and thus sustain the activist demands, affording a range of different possibilities for collective actions” (Svensson et al., 2014, p. 14).

Like Jenkins et al.’s notion of “sharable media”, these digital collectivist action frames take structural forms such as hashtags, group names, or images depicting messages or memes that are easy to share both in, and between, social media platforms. Therefore, #OccupyWallStreet, #SaturdayChores, and Saturday Chores photos of their signs, allow users to link content shared on Instagram to Twitter, Facebook and a blog – essentially “jumping” content across platforms and bypassing any native application’s gatekeeping as long as the hashtag is recognized.

Network Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is a “macro” theory adopted by communication scholars that is most often used in mass communication, journalism, and public relations research. The original concept came from German social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the early part of the twentieth century. Gatekeeping is the act of collecting information and deciding what information to distribute or not to distribute —i.e., someone or something acts as an information gatekeeper (Deluliis, 2015). In mass media research, news editors and journalists have primarily been considered gatekeepers, as their job is to sift through various bits of information to decide what to publish (and how they want to publish it). These individuals are responsible for controlling flows of information to the general public. In public relations scholarship, professionals and organizations have also been described as performing gatekeeping functions, as they have the power to restrict or support flows of information to publics and stakeholders through information subsidies and media relations. Public relations gatekeeping activities have been implicated as a form of knowledge control performed by organizations and the mass media elite (Demetrious, 2008; Donohue, et al., 1973).

Recently, gatekeeping has been reconsidered by network theorists such as Nahon and Castells (2015), and expanded to address issues in digital media network research and activism. Nahon and Hemsley described two distinct gatekeeping functions of social media networks: network gatekeeping and algorithmic gatekeeping.

Nahon and Hemsley defined network gatekeepers as people, collectives, companies, or governments that, as a result of their location in a network, can promote or suppress the movement of information from one part of a network to another (2013, p. 7). They explained that for social media content to go viral, it must “jump” networks to spread; therefore gatekeeping is

a necessary function in such events. This could be a network actor² reposting a link to a piece of content from one social platform on another platform with different networks, or it could just be a simple retweet from someone with a large number of followers. Either way, the content is shared between networks through a bridging node or by an actor in an advantageous position who can bypass network gatekeepers. Nahon and Hemsley concluded,

Network gatekeepers and their non-traditional information flows challenge traditional gatekeepers, like the media, by introducing competition and alternatives to choose other sources of information that flow on different paths. These alternatives limit any gatekeepers from having absolute control over the flow of information (2013, p. 55).

As a construct, network gatekeeping theory allows researchers to describe how both human and non-human actors may act as gatekeepers, and how viral events are defined by their ability to bypass or leverage those gatekeepers to spread through many networks. Power and control of information is at the core of network gatekeeping, making the theory applicable to specific events as well as larger systems-level processes of digital networks.

Central to the theory of network gatekeeping is the concept of “the gated” —the entities subjected to gatekeeping (i.e., information control). Those for whom information has been restricted by gatekeepers (those controlling the access points to and between network “gates”) may be similarly restricted by gatekeeping mechanisms (a tool, technology or methodology used to implement gatekeeping) (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). The gated are therefore potential audiences

² For the purposes of this dissertation, terms from social network methodology will be used: the term *node* refers to an individual or network node, and *actor* is synonymous with *node*. *Key actor* refers to an individual who is in an important position within the network that allows them to have influence on others or on the flows of information, such as a “bridging node” or *bridge* that connects two parts of a network or two networks. Network terminology is based on common usage represented in Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; and definitions drawn from Hanneman & Riddle, 2005), and Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). Other definitions are included within the text.

or activist publics who, through social or network processes of information control, are not able to access the same information as others. This concept also points to the network-jumping ability of viral media events as they characteristically are able to bypass network gatekeepers and mechanisms to reach previously gated audiences. Attributes such as political power, relation to the gatekeeper, information production abilities, and their alternatives (alternative courses in relationship to the gatekeeper) figure into gated groups' ability to become active and/or bypass network gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Deluliis, 2015). In his meta-analysis of gatekeeping theory scholarship, Deluliis noted that the concept of "the gated" reflects Barzilai-Nahon's insistence for more focus on the audience in future gatekeeping research of social media (2015). (It is interesting to note that this call to refocus attention on audience echoes the argument for a more publics-centered theoretical focus in public relations.)

The construct of network gatekeeping was developed in response to the need for a more robust theory of gatekeeping that considers power in digital networks and social systems (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Deluliis, 2015). For example, globalization scholar Manuel Castells has referenced Nahon's network gatekeeping theory to formulate and apply his network theory of power to explain how power is distributed through global media networks and information control in regard to social movements (2011, 2015).

Nahon and Hemsley have expanded the original concept of network gatekeeping to discuss another form unique to digital media networks: algorithmic gatekeeping. This gatekeeping function is performed by network actors such as search engines and social media algorithms, which are programmed to rank content based on platform variables such as number of followers, shares, likes, or retweets. Algorithmic gatekeepers therefore influence viral

information flows by making specific content and specific actors more visible within social networks, including sponsored content.

In regard to viral media flows, network gatekeeping is the essential digital, or rather, “digitized” process underlying virality. To quote the authors at length:

The power of network gatekeepers does not necessarily reside in the ability to stop information from getting to people or by filtering it. On the contrary, it is hidden in the ability to link networks together, allowing information to travel far and fast and to connect to people to information and ideas. This is the key to social transformation in network societies (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 48)

Therefore, somewhat reflexive to Castell’s argument that social movements are themselves viral, according to Nahon and Hemsley, viral media is itself a social process of information diffusion that transforms societies, made possible through the power of network gatekeeping.

Considering this, what digital network processes and gatekeeping actions helped support the Saturday Chores viral event? What digital structures helped their messages and content to jump networks?

Public Relations and Social Media

Exemplified by the advent of digital activism, it is not surprising that over the last decade, the fastest growing area of public relations research has been social media and the challenges presented by digitally mediated interactions with stakeholders (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014). According to McCorkindale and DiStaso, “social media has changed what theories are applicable and some that have stood the test of time are now being considered in different ways” (2014, p. 5). Some of the most prevalent topics of this research include the expansion of existing theory or

the proposal of new theories that address social media communication and the need for ethical approaches and guidelines to address transparency, authenticity and digital activist demands (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; DiStaso & Sevick Bortree, 2014; Duhé, 2015; McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014). To put it succinctly, social media changed the speed and the scale of public relations communication and scholars are revisiting prior research and developing new perspectives to address new communication challenges.

One of the largest areas of recent scholarship on social media in public relations has been driven by the need for updated ethical guidelines that specifically address digital communication. The Public Relations Society of American recently revised its Member Code of Ethics to include new criteria addressing digital public relations such as the “free flow of information” (PRSA.org, 2017). The speed and transparency of social media interactivity has brought the need for ethical and effective public relations responses to the forefront of the discipline and practice. Several of these issues are addressed in a collection of articles collected by DiStaso and Sevick Bortree in 2014. According to the authors,

Success in social media requires dialogue and engagement along with a commitment to transparency and authenticity by the organization. As with audiences of other channels, perception is reality, so how an organization chooses to use social media is a direct reflection of its identity. (p. xxvi)

This quote points to the heart of the matter—the real change that social media has brought to public relations practice and scholarship—visibility and interactivity. As never before, the actions of organizations and the communicators who represent them are publicly visible, open for scrutiny and public comment. The advent of networked communication isn’t something Grunig and his collaborators could have considered when theorizing the model of two-way

symmetrical communication and the Excellence Theory, but scholars like those just mentioned have attempted to adapt and expand those theories to meet current needs (Grunig, 2006). As Sevick Bortree and DiStaso noted in the contemporary digital communication environment, engaging in deceptive or misleading information practices is not only unethical, it can lead to an organizational crisis or irrevocably damage an organization's relationships with its publics and stakeholders (2014). According to the authors,

Ulterior motives in social media are easily discovered and organizations have a responsibility to be open with their social media stakeholders. Social media should be managed with the ethic of care in mind to ensure that actions reflect a concern for others and value for the relationship. (p. xxvi)

Coombs and Holladay (2007) originally advocated for an “ethic of care” framework for public relations engagements with activists. The “ethic of care” is a practice in which organizations recognize their mutual interdependence with stakeholders and therefore, an obligation for ethical practices that include active listening to all voices—including those of activists or others outside the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). These authors also advocated for a move away from a “corporate-centric” public relations to one with a publics perspective where mutual influence (between organizations and stakeholders) is recognized (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). In this ethic of care model of public relations, social capital is defined as resources that can be accessed by public relations through these mutually influential relationships, including those with stakeholders such as activists (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). These updated concepts of stakeholders, organization-publics relationships, and ethical communication reflect an awareness of the heightened visibility and speed of digital communication in network society.

A host of ethical challenges for public relations has arisen as a result of these changes. For example, *radical transparency* is a term that often appears in contemporary public relations research and management literature. The argument is that niche publics and social media visibility require public relations professionals and the organizations they represent to practice a radical level of transparency in their communications, corporate practices, and social responsibility and civic activities. In other words, public relations needs to “open up” and move away from its organization-centric perspective, to view its activities from a publics perspective where dialogic ethical communication and recognition of public relations social responsibility is the norm (Botan, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Demetrious, 2008, 2013).

As I have noted, since the early 2000s, public relations scholars have begun to consider how ever-evolving online social norms and emerging technical platforms are shaping (ethical) practice as well as public communication. However, as Duhé has argued, more research needs to consider how increasingly mobile publics who function as members of shifting online communities might best be engaged through emotional “connectedness” as well as rational strategic messaging (Duhé, 2015). The fleeting nature of online connections and community identifications only underscores the need for an evolution away from corporate and client-centered public relations to a practice of “Cyber-PR” that “sees subjects as communicative, symbolic beings in a chaotic high tech world in which dynamic communicative touch is able to reach them, even if fleetingly, in ways that help construct a reality desired by the practitioner” (p. 575). In other words, the ways that public relations practitioners reach out and interact with online publics—the “touch” of tone, emotional support exchanges, etc.—are all part of digital or “Cyber-PR” and should be considered as important as campaign message content. Like Coombs and Holladay’s “ethic of care,” “Cyber-PR” as described by both Duhé (2015) and Galloway

(2005) is rooted in publics' perspective of public communication where the public relations practitioner is in a role that bridges the interests and various engagements of the organization in day-to-day activities. This publics perspective of public relations (rooted in a dialogic communication practice) accounts for the boundary-spanning role of the practitioner and the impact of public relations activities in a connected society (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Although calls for this change have been increasing since Botan's argument for a dialogic approach as an ethical necessity, as it stands currently, much of the scholarship remains rooted in organization-centric modes of public engagement (Botan, 1997; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Following Botan (1997), Dozier and Lauzen (2000) argued that public relations (as a discipline) has been too focused on practical application and as a result, suffers from a disciplinary shortsightedness. In order to grow as a maturing discipline, Dozier and Lauzen contended that public relations must uncouple itself from its organization-centric focus in order to recreate itself as a scholarly pursuit. One way to do this is by moving away from ever-present "invisible clients" of the organizational level-focus, and considering voices outside corporate power structures, such as activists (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). The authors argue that this reorientation is necessary to consider the impacts of its public relations activities at other levels of engagement, especially those at the micro (individual) and macro (societal) levels (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

Although Botan and Dozier and Lauzen were not writing to specifically address social media, many of their concerns and arguments for an expansion of the "lens" of public relations have informed a new generation of scholars who have extended their thinking to the topics of a dialogic or publics reorientation and activism or activist public relations. Researchers such as Demetrious (2008, 2013) and Derville (2005) have similarly noted that activism fosters a public

relations understanding of radical tactics that can successfully bypass gatekeeping and that considers other voices as part of ethical public communication.

Taking this argument further, Demetrious developed a theory of “public communication,” a sustainable form of ethical public relations that works to serve the greater good in a society characterized by global information networks (2013). Her argument is centered on the fact that social media allows less powerful actors a voice and platform to organize. She insists that practitioners must recognize their social role and their power as gatekeepers to open up opportunities for dialogue with active publics and activists (Demetrious, 2013; 2011). Similar to Demetrious, Coombs and Holladay have noted that research within the dominant paradigm of public relations is now beginning to incorporate “fringe public relations” (aka critical public relations) theory as a way to consider activist challenges and recognize the co-orientation between the history of activism and public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). These scholars have also noted that activists have increasing power to impact organizational reputations through corporate social responsibility linkages. This makes understanding their successful attention-grabbing tactics more relevant to those who must formulate an appropriate issues management response (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). As a result, critical public relations scholarship and publics-focused perspectives will increasingly become more pertinent within the discipline as they are able to interrogate and discuss the power issues of activist demands (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Activist Public Relations

Echoing Coombs and Holladay’s arguments for public relations to reconsider activism, Smith and Ferguson argued that public relations has much to learn from the history of activism, and that activism should be seen as public relations as both have similar goals: both seek to

influence others, bring about social or policy changes, and act as co-creators of relationships between themselves and their organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2016). Since Smith and Ferguson first addressed activist public relations, there has been an increase of research on the topic (2010). The authors recognized this and reiterated their call, arguing for continued research as it affords a different perspective of issues, stakeholder relations and interactions, and successful activist tactics (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). They also argued that activism research would provide an opportunity for public relations theory building (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Research of activist public relations should not be conducted in a misguided effort to “know thy enemy” (as has been the case in the past), but from a perspective valuing the role of activism in making positive social change happen. They argue that such activist public relations study allows scholars to explore how practitioners and activist publics might better work together to resolve issues for the greater societal good (Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

In consideration of this reflexive relationship between activism and public relations, scholars have called for the formal recognition of “Activist Public Relations”—the acknowledgement that activists (performing goals-oriented communicative strategic tasks) are through their actions practicing public relations—just as formally trained practitioners do (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). In return, through their public relations activities and ability to bring information into their organizations (such as activist demands), practitioners in turn are also activists insofar as they represent their interests to the organizations they represent (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Some scholars have also argued that public relations perform activist functions in society through their activities (Demetrius, 2008). Recognition of activist public relations also implies that public relations practitioners do not view activists as

“others” or as having less legitimacy than other stakeholders, and that they should not be perceived just as organizational threats (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

Expanding on this thinking, in a recent article examining news coverage and social media messages of the Justice for Trayvon Martin campaign, Linda Hon proposed a model of digital social advocacy for public relations (2015). Arguing that digital media ecosystems allow publics to mobilize at an unprecedented speed and scale based on power law dynamics, Hon pointed out that small groups using social media can be just as, if not more, effective at organizing social action. She explained that given the low transaction costs of digital activism (no ongoing commitment from participants) and the affordances of networked digital technologies, social media activism can be extremely effective in the “micromobilization” of individuals and the activation of latent publics (Hon, 2015). Hon argued that these affordances of digital media activism cannot be fully explored or explained with pre-Internet traditional theories of collective behavior. In fact, certain affordances such as virality and the spread of viral content, the flat nature of web connections that allows social media users to bypass media gatekeepers, and the “supersizing” effects of rapid diffusion that support action to scale without requiring collectivist identity formation are unique to digital media (Hon, 2015). Hon’s Model of Public Relations and Digital Social Advocacy considers four variables that contribute to the outcomes of digital activist campaigns. In addition to antecedents (social and macro-level factors) and processes (strategy, tactics), the model takes into account the effects and affordances of digital media ecosystems (news, Internet, web, social, and mobile) as a set of variables contributing to campaign outcomes (Hon, 2015). Hon has been careful to note that the affordances of digital technologies alone do not determine public relations behavior or campaign outcomes, but that these variables and supersizing effects (such as speed, reach, and low transaction costs) are

crucial to understanding how resource-poor or small activist publics are effectively leveraging social media to gain support and make their voices heard (Hon, 2015, p. 302).

What does a publics orientation and recognition of digital activist public relations ultimately do for public relations as a discipline? First, social media networks and digital activism present new challenges as well as the opportunity for public relations to reconsider its traditional focus on dyadic relationship-building from an organization-publics perspective in order to account for networked publics and an ethical practice based on an awareness of those publics. This publics perspective is simply that, a public relations focused on the good of the people, where the practitioner's role as a social agent is recognized and public relations activities are not limited to those working from centralized and formal organizational power structures (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Demetrious, 2013; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001).

Second, a publics-focused dialogic approach to public relations will position the discipline to be more inclusive of activist voices and thus expand beyond a binary view of networked stakeholders and publics (Demetrious, 2013). Moving to this publics perspective will open up opportunities for new scholarship by shifting focus from client-driven applied measurement and message efficacy research to macro- and meso-level views of organization-publics relationships, and public relations roles in society (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Demetrious, 2013). This shift would enable scholars to identify and consider different types of research questions and topics, such as public relations social advocacy, digital activism, and the impacts of digital phenomena such as virality on organizational communication and reputation (Curtin, 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Hon, 2015).

Finally, activist public relations and advocacy is emerging as a field of future research, just as emerging technologies are requiring practitioners to identify digital best practices and ask

questions about they will change communication in the near future (Johnson, 1997; Kent & Saffer, 2014).

The Dialogic Theory of Public Relations

Although two-way symmetrical communication was designed with the same balanced communication and ethical stance as other models of public relations, in a networked society where management functions (and power and influence) are increasingly decentralized and where legitimacy is not fixed to organizational identities or experts, a publics or dialogic perspective rather than an organization-centric or management perspective makes sense (Baym & boyd, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2016; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). However, this reorientation does not mean that organizations will not benefit from public relations in the same ways or be able to effectively measure campaign outcomes. The dialogic model of public relations represents an opportunity for a reorientation to a publics perspective in digital communication.

Kent and Taylor first called for a dialogic approach to web communication in 1998 in recognition of the importance of website interactivity and opportunities for digital communication in public relations. Following widespread social media adoption, they later developed and presented their theory of public relations based on classical dialogue theory. This model focuses on dialogue as a product of mutually beneficial communication between publics and organizations—not communication as a process. The authors put forth a model of dialogic communication characterized by five key features: mutuality (recognition of and value for open relationships); propinquity (timeliness and spontaneity of interaction); empathy (support and recognition of others); risk (recognition that participation in open dialogue is risky) and long-term commitment to developing a lasting relationship between organizations and publics (Kent

& Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014, pp. 24–25). This view of public relations draws from both rhetorical communication models and critical interpretations of the discipline that consider its social and ethical responsibilities as well as its need to move beyond organization-centric foundations to incorporate activist voices and the impact of public relations activities on society (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). Paraphrasing the authors, dialogic communicators care about others' values and beliefs, feel obliged to risk engagement in open dialogue to allow for discovery, embrace co-creation of reality, and “are dedicated to truth and mutual understanding—participants are committed to each other” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 389). The authors define engagement as a “give and take . . . with the intended goal of improving understanding, that benefits all parties involved . . . fostering a fully functioning society where decisions are made based on participative interactions that involve stakeholders” (p. 391). Risk is a necessary part of dialogic communication as is engagement. Dialogic public relations practice requires organizations to maintain openness—even if doing so is risky. The authors noted that while this may not be easy to achieve in practice, dialogic public relations offers benefits for both organizations and stakeholders “in a globalized, highly connected diverse world” where radical transparency and reflexivity are often rewarded by access to additional social capital (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Because social media communication is a risky enterprise that requires greater transparency, and is generally conducted before a global audience, the public's perspective of dialogic communication presents an opportunity for digital public relations as it situates actions taken on behalf of organizations within the larger social setting—as part of an ecology of stakeholders, publics, and other organizations (Yang & Taylor, 2015). Scholars advocating for a public's perspective have noted that doing so would address some of the challenges discussed in

the social media research literature and practice, as many issues (such as negative social comments) would not be considered as organizational threats or even “issues” at all—they would just be part of day-to-day interactions.

In addition, social media and digital networks provide an opportunity for publics perspective of public relations and the expansion of Taylor and Kent’s original dialogic communication model to consider networked aspects of online and social media conversation (2014). Due to its transparency and nonhierarchical “flat” design (anyone with access can participate equally), social media research based in dialogic communication may help advance corporate and governmental social responsibility (Hon, 2015).

Considering the opportunities that a dialogic public relations presents to researchers, it is reasonable to apply it to a viral media case to propose best practices for an ethical response. From this theoretical foundation, how might an organization best respond to activist public relations or ethically leverage the visibility of a viral event or engage dialogically with the resulting interest network(s)? What lessons about activist public relations and virality does the Saturday Chores event present for practitioners?

Literature Summary

As I have discussed, in the last twenty years, public relations scholars have increasingly called for a disciplinary realignment toward a publics-centered perspective and socially ethical dialogic model of digital public relations (Demetrious, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). This thinking is somewhat synthesized by those who advocate for an “ethic of care” orientation that views public relations as an organization-stakeholder gatekeeper, central to power dynamics in society, and having a special obligation to listen to all voices and convey public issues to management through the boundary-spanning function (Coombs & Holladay,

2007; Demetrious, 2013). Finally, as scholars have noted, activism and public relations are both goal-oriented social activities that have influenced each other's development and are increasingly interconnected in digital communication in the network society as the use of digital and radical activist tactics influence public opinion (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2016; Derville, 2005; Smith & Ferguson, 2001, 2010). By moving away from an organization-centric view, and by recognizing that activists practice public relations, public relations may better positioned to respond to the challenges of communicating ethically and effectively with decentralized networked publics during viral events (Botan, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Smith & Ferguson, 2010). In addition, non-activist organizations may learn from their approach. As digital public relations and digital activism may use similar tactics, understanding the network affordances and social processes of a viral event spawned from online activism might benefit both practitioners and scholars. Drawn from this literature and working from this perspective, the following research questions directed my research:

Research Questions

RQ 1: How and why did the Saturday Chores group use social media?

RQ 2: What social processes were involved in their group and (how) did they contribute to the event?

RQ 3: What network processes were involved and how did they contribute to the event?

3a. Does the Saturday Chores event meet Nahon and Hemsley's definition of virality?

RQ 4: What challenges and opportunities does virality present for public relations?

4a. How can practitioners respond both effectively and ethically to these challenges and opportunities as network gatekeepers?

To create my dissertation case study, I worked from a publics perspective by viewing the event and Saturday Chores group activity as both observer and a practitioner of activist public relations. This approach worked to situate this case within a relational perspective that also recognizes digital processes such as network gatekeeping. It enabled me to identify specific tactics and messages that helped spread Saturday Chores' most "sharable" content across multiple platforms and networks, measure the four bases of virality, and identify opinion leaders and change agents involved in the event (Jenkins, et al., 2013; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). In the following chapter, I describe the mixed method research design of this dissertation project and provide a rationale for this approach and an illustration of my mixed-method research design.

CHAPTER 3

Method

This chapter provides an overview of the mixed method research design. During the five stages of this research project, I used in-depth interviews, content analysis, and social network analysis methodology to construct a case study of the Saturday Chores viral event (see Figure 3.1 for an illustration of this research design). The goal of this dissertation project is to map out the digital and social processes that helped support and drive this viral information diffusion. As noted previously, although I will discuss some of the tactics used by the activist group in relation to how they might inform future public relations best practices and scholarship; the activist group itself is not the subject of the case study—the viral event is the focus.

Mixed Method Research Designs

This project is an explanatory mixed methods case study examining the social and digital network processes involved in the 2014 Saturday Chores viral media event. As a case study, its findings are not generalizable. However, they will help expand public relations scholarship of social media and digital networks as well as offer practitioners insight into responses and management strategies during and following viral events.

As scholars using network methods to research digital virality have recently noted, there is no one discernable pattern to these events; whether they are triggered by an individual action or by broadcasted mass media actions, each one is unique (Goel, Anderson, Hofman, & Watts, 2015). Multiple method research approaches are required to investigate such complex events where many important factors may not be manifest and where a single method might only be able to describe one facet (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Data quality is often a challenge for social media researchers, as their methods must also account for the fact

that some data may be missing or unavailable due to the impermanent nature of Internet content and privacy restrictions (Rogers, 2015). And although digital media platforms provide researchers with wonderful opportunities to collect highly valid unobtrusive or passive behavioral data (data not collected by self-report or observational methods), to do so one must rely on tools and extraction methods that may not always work reliably or collect the entirety of desired data (Rogers, 2015; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). Therefore, researchers studying viral phenomena must attempt to reconstruct the information diffusion by looking at interactions and social ties, conducting interviews, and using social network analysis methodologies as part of a mixed method (Goel, et al., 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

Considering this and following Nahon & Hemsley's (2013) definition of virality as a social information flow, this case study will focus on the actions and interactions supporting the Saturday Chores viral event and trace the movement of the group's content through digital networks and various media platforms. The primary goal is to illustrate the social processes involved, explore the interplay of digital media networks, and identify specific factors or affordances that shaped these information flows. Additionally, this study will identify the specific type(s) of content that prompted such widespread diffusion. This study is not a test of theory or any theoretical hypotheses, as it is exploratory and explanatory in nature.

In the following sections I discuss the value of a mixed method research design as well as each approach I will use, including their individual advantages and limitations. I also detail the sampling, units of analysis, and data analysis procedures used in each stage of this study. I conclude this chapter with an illustration of my case study research design (Figure 3.1).

In research where both exploration and explanation of specific communication phenomena are goals, a mixed quantitative/qualitative research program is warranted in order to

investigate and confirm observations and findings through multistage studies or data triangulation. As Benoit & Holbert have stated:

Results that point in the same direction and obtained across the quantitative-qualitative divide offer greater merit because those findings were obtained regardless of the assumption of a particular method. . . . A combination of qualitative-quantitative insights can lead to a richer understanding of a given phenomenon because each method provides unique insights that cannot be obtained by the other method.” (2008, p. 622)

Although single method approaches are appropriate for answering most research questions, for studies where access to data may present an obstacle, or where both quantitative and qualitative data will be necessary to fully answer the research questions, a mixed method design is a better solution (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). According to Creswell and Clark (2007), researchers should think about fitting methods to different kinds of research problems rather than trying to fit methods to topics. The authors argued that mixed method research designs are also necessary when research questions must be addressed in multiple stages or with different types of data in order to be answered. They explained that one data source may not be sufficient to answer some types of research questions—especially when one method is used to inform or complement the results of another (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The strength of mixed method research design is that it leverages both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide different perspectives, or address discrete parts of research questions, such as those often required in content analysis (Rose, 2012). In addition, the limitations of one method may be offset by the strengths of the other method, and thus combined methods usually provide a more complete response to the research problem than single method

research designs can (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Creswell and Clark noted that while qualitative research may be seen as weak due to its interpretative approach (ensures bias) and its lack of generalizability, quantitative research puts researchers in the background (and ignores their own bias), echoing Krippendorff's concerns (2013). However, mixed method designs mitigate these limitations by providing data and evidence from both research paradigms to test hypotheses or answer programmatic research questions holistically using different units of analysis to do so (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Benoit and Holbert (2008) similarly argued for the use of multiple rather than single method research in social science based on the strength of this mixed qualitative/quantitative approach. The authors explained that mixed methodology and programmatic research is important to the development of communication as a discipline, as one study (or stage of a study) can reinforce or extend the findings of another. They added that programmatic research is necessary for theory building and that it is particularly beneficial for understanding communication, a central process that touches on all social science research (2008).

Social movement scholars have also noted that single methodologies limit researchers looking at complex phenomena such as activism, mobilization, and their spread (Diani & McAdam 2003). McAdam explained that single quantitative and qualitative methodologies focus on micro- and macro-levels of social movements only and that the relational meso-level (the level of social organization and relationships, friends, families, groups) is missing (2003). This presents an issue, as meso-level dynamics shape movements over time, and the best way to examine this development is through a mixed methods approach using social network analysis and qualitative methods (Diani & McAdam, 2003). With this research design, each approach can be used to further investigate the results of the other and build theory while testing hypotheses.

For example, researchers would use quantitative social network analysis to uncover empirical relationships that can be uniquely “interrogated using systematic qualitative methods” (Diani & McAdam, 2003, p. 285).

Similarly, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) said that the major advantage of mixed methodology is that it enables the researcher to simultaneously ask confirmatory and exploratory questions and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study. They also pointed out that the use of multiple research perspectives encourages the use of multiple worldviews in research. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori, practicality may be largest advantage of mixed method research (2009). Mixed method research is not aligned with either the qualitative or quantitative paradigms; instead it establishes a third paradigm of pragmatism that allows researchers to develop research designs that address all facets of a complex research problem by looking at the same problem in different ways (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 13).

Mixed Methods and Viral Media Research

As noted previously, Nahon and Hemsley’s definition of virality grounds this dissertation research project and therefore their work on the topic also informs my methodology. Nahon and Hemsley (2013) argued that mixed methods are needed to examine viral media events, as virality is a complex process including both social and empirical data, and therefore, different data collection and analytic methods are required. Based on their research, these authors posited that virality is a “specific type of information flow. . . that because of the process by which it flows . . . is influential both at the individual and societal level” (p. 15). Therefore, to measure (and map) a viral flow, one must use different levels of measurement. This reasoning aligns with that of the mixed methods scholars cited previously and Yin’s advice in regard to case study researchers’ use of multiple levels of analysis (2014). Taking all of this into account and following Benoit

and Holbert, Creswell and Clark, and Teddlie and Tashakkori, my research design for this project includes using quantitative social network analysis to explain the network structures and information-sharing dynamics of the Saturday Chores Facebook group, qualitative interviews to triangulate this data, and content analysis to research and develop the viral media event timeline and to examine the themes of resulting news coverage.

Additionally, Nahon and Hemsley (2013) identified four bases for determining the virality of an information flow: human and social aspects of information sharing, speed of spread, reach by number of people, and the reach by networks (p. 16). Although the authors argued that virality is inherently scalable (a viral event can reach thousands of people or it can reach millions), there is no “magic number” that signifies it as viral. Rather virality is a phenomenon defined by speed and reach (diffusion) in social networks, and like other types of information diffusion, it tends to follow an S-shaped curve (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rogers, 2003). Each of these base conditions can be determined by distinct measurements; and therefore, I will use the methodologies I just described to ascertain if the Saturday Chores viral event meets Nahon and Hemsley’s definition of virality (2013). (See Table 5.3 in Appendix B for these measures.)

Case Studies

According to Yin (2014), the case study is the preferred method when the main research questions are “how” or “why” questions, the researcher has little or no control over behavioral events, and the focus of study is contemporary (not historical). The purpose of case study research is to examine a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2014). One hallmark of case study research is its use of use data triangulation, which can occur in the analysis of single or multiple cases.

Per Yin, case study methodology is most applicable when you seek to explain some phenomenon or event that requires extensive, in-depth description, analysis, and understanding of your subject(s) (2014). Case studies are therefore suited to projects and research questions designed to uncover the circumstances of how an event happened in just the way that it did.

However, Yin was careful to note that although many case studies use mixed methods to answer these types of questions, researchers should not hold a hierarchical view of methodologies, as they are not mutually exclusive especially in the context of this type of research (2014, p. 10). Depending upon the subject, the predominant method used will shape the case study time and length of research as well as the sample (Yin, 2014). Yin also urged mixed method researchers to report case study data separately from other methods; however, all methods should work to answer the same research questions (2014).

Due to their inclusion of multiple sources of data that are triangulated in findings or concluding inferences, case studies tend to have high validity compared to other methods. By nature, case studies provide an in-depth, data-driven analysis of a specific event; therefore they may also function as theory-building devices (Yin, 2014). This research method is particularly valuable in illustrating individual experiences, attitudes, and understandings of the significance of an event. Therefore, case studies help illuminate otherwise unseen elements of a process or event that other methods might have not revealed (Yin, 2014).

However, there are limitations and general concerns regarding case studies in social science in particular. Case study researchers are rather limited in the types of claims that can be made based on their conclusions. As Yin has described, case studies are designed for developing in-depth analysis, rich detail, and contextual understanding of specific phenomena as analyzed through the researcher(s)' theoretical framework. Case study results cannot be used to make

generalized claims about that event, or about similar phenomena and general populations (2014). As this study does not seek to produce generalizable findings, this is not an issue of concern.

My dissertation research design most closely fits Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2009) multilevel mixed design that includes data for different levels of analysis, and where both these qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed to answer the same or related research questions. I used traditional case study methodology to develop an in-depth understanding of the events and key individuals involved in both the viral event and the social network that spawned it.

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, structured qualitative interviews were conducted with key actors as part of this stage of my research to provide rich detail and thick descriptions of the event including group interactions and information sharing practices. My research questions largely focus on the "how," "what," and "why" of the event, the social process and network process that enabled it, and the motivations of key actors; therefore a case study approach is an appropriate method to address such exploratory and explanatory questions (Yin, 2014). I also used social network analysis methods to examine the social sharing processes of the Saturday Chores Facebook group. As this method focuses on relationships rather than individuals, it helped illustrate the interactions of the closed group (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013; Hanneman & Riddle, 2005).

To examine the digital processes of the event and coverage, a content analysis was conducted to map the media flows during the event. The goal of this analysis was to create a comprehensive timeline and identify and categorize any message themes that were replicated as content moved between media platforms or through syndicated content networks. This process included a traffic analysis of the Saturday Chores Tumblr site (as it was the source of the content diffused during the event). One goal of this analysis was to depict the impact of viral referral

traffic from both social and news media. It also provided data for the measures of Nahon & Hemsley's four bases of virality (2013). In addition, the content analysis allowed me to identify the specific piece of Saturday Chores content that went viral in July 2014.

Social Network Analysis

The Saturday Chores counter-protest, although founded by one couple as previously mentioned, grew to include hundreds of local supporters and participants. Much of the ongoing action was organized through Facebook, originally via personal accounts, but more so through a closed Facebook group.³ To understand the social dynamics and information sharing practices of this group, I used social network analysis (SNA) methodology to examine the connections within the group and identify those in key network positions and those engaged in diffusion roles (opinion leadership, etc.). Although Facebook group data is depersonalized upon extraction, qualitative interviews with group founders and principal actors helped corroborate these data and the results of my descriptive analysis.

Social network analysis has been used in social science research since the middle part of the last century. Basic social network analysis concepts and methodology were popularized in communication and marketing research by Everett Rogers's book *Diffusion of Innovations* (2003, 5th ed.). Rogers used a social network approach to understand how innovations (in Rogers's definition, innovation equals an idea or unique bit of information) are adopted in social systems. According to the Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis, the guiding principles of the approach are: focus on relations, not attributes, as the primary unit of analysis; emphasize networks, not isolated groups, in order to understand the specific dynamics of the network (key

³ Disclosure: I was a member of the closed group, added by the founders shortly after it was formed. This was how I was able to extract group data via Netvizz and Facebook's API for this IRB approved research.

actors/nodes, important subgroups, etc.); identify the boundaries of the network; and use this information to examine macro-level social patterns (Scott & Carrington, 2011). As Borgatti, et al. explained, “networks are a way of thinking about social systems that focus our attention on the relationships among the entities that make up the system” (2013, p. 2). Therefore, relational data and dependent variables are the focus in social network analysis, not independent attributes or effects; dependency is the core concept of the approach. Borgatti et al. argue that although SNA is often misunderstood by some social scientists as a methodology “due to its focus on relations as a way to examine and predict social phenomena, its theoretical constructs of centrality and structure are just part of the approach to explaining the social world” (p. 10).

Simply stated, social network analysis helps explain social phenomena by examining relationships between individuals and groups (or clusters) who are connected. Since the advent of digital media, social network analysis methodology has been expanded to examine other types of relationships such as social network groups and “friend” connections, political affiliations and Twitter clusters, and organizational network ecologies, as well as to examine topics of influence and social capital in these environments (Ackland, 2011; Himelboim et al., 2014; Himelboim Smith, M., & Shneiderman, B., 2013; Saffer, Taylor, & Yang, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2015).

Kadushin (2012) used a particularly striking analogy to describe social network analysis as the creation of “information maps” and diffusion theory as “the master idea at the heart of social networks.” He argued that network analysis is the illustration of “flows from one unit to the other: for example, friendship, love, money, ideas, opinions, and disease” (p. 209). Kadushin (2012), Borgatti et al. (2013), and numerous other scholars have described the value of considering network relationship dynamics to answer questions about social influence and

opinion leadership, and to identify “elites” whose ideas may trickle down or shape others opinions.

Social network analysis methodology has also been used to research social movements in regard to their formation, development, and ability to enact social change. Earlier studies focused primarily on measurement of these movements themselves; however, more recent research has considered how they influence attitudes and cultural norms. According to social movement scholars Diani and McAdam, this evolving vision of social network analysis as a methodology has allowed social movement researchers to highlight and understand important linkages between social movements and culture, and to illuminate “different dynamics” such as individual participation in coalitions and structural influences on mobilization efforts (2003, p. 7).

The primary methods of performing social network analysis in regard to social media vary depending on the research questions and the specific network being studied. However, some common procedures include the identification of key actors (or nodes) through measures of centrality (indicating such functions as an actor’s ability to efficiently share information within the network), embeddedness and reciprocity (looking at the number of inbound and outbound relationship ties to ascertain if an actor is popular or sought after for information), and an examination of boundary spanners (actors who bridge structural holes in the network) that help share information or bring in information from outside the network (Borgatti et al., 2013; Granovetter, 1983; Haythornwaite, 2005; Scott & Carrington, 2011).

This ability to draw insights from relational data has made social network analysis increasingly useful to communication researchers in recent years, especially in studies of social media and strategic communication. Fueling this growth, social network or relationship data (traditionally collected through surveys or interviews) can now be obtained by scraping trace

data from social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Using this behavioral trace data—created from actual human behavior and online interactions—like other types of unobtrusive measures, ensures a higher level of validity compared to self-reported data or data collected via researcher interactions, as selective memory and researcher bias are not an issue (Krippendorff, 2013; Webb et al., 1966).

Additionally, many digital media researchers are turning to social network analysis as a method to understand the complex relationships we have online as both individuals and organizations. As part of their description of the shift from a group society to one of networked individualism, Rainie and Wellman (2012) noted that this is actually a shift to a new way of thinking about how people behave socially; therefore, social network analysis is the best research approach to help look at the larger patterns of how people and organizations are positioned and connected within network society (p. 43).

Unfortunately, there are also limitations to this research approach. For instance, social network analysis does not provide an understanding of individual perceptions or of interactions at that level, and therefore, it does not help uncover the underlying behavior, reasoning, or specific motivations of the actors. Additionally, use of self-report data can present validity issues, as informants must rely on memories of those interactions to form a response, and human memory is not always reliable, especially if a good deal of time has passed (Rogers, 2003; Benoit & Holbert, 2008).

Social network analysis also presents an ethical issue in that researchers may inadvertently expose individuals who are not the primary informants. Kadushin in particular has noted that social media research is especially concerning, as researchers may need to “friend” someone for research and data gathered might include the personal information of those who

have no idea the respondent is naming them (Kadsuhin, 2012). Therefore, social media researchers must always be mindful of the need to protect individuals' digital data and identities—something I took into account while conducting my dissertation project interviews and analysis.

Sampling and Procedures.

To perform the social network analysis of the Saturday Chores Facebook group, a census of member data from April 2015 was extracted from the platform via Netvizz, an application designed specifically for this purpose (Rieder, 2013). Netvizz extracts a monopartite graph file (gdf) that shows interactions between users. Connections are made through posting, sharing, liking or commenting on a post. Next, the census of the Facebook group data was imported into UCINET (a social network analysis software tool), and the resulting network of 346 actors was analyzed to determine network statistics, structures, and measures of centrality and cohesion. This data was analyzed to ascertain group interactions and information sharing as well as key members (nodes) through these activities. All measures were recorded.

Data taken from social networks such as Facebook and other digital platforms has been noted to possess a built-in limitation. The user interface and extraction interface often contain “holes” that must be addressed during research and analysis (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Therefore, researchers should use additional data collection methods to offset this validity issue and avoid aggregated data sets from digital platforms, which often amplify the problem (boyd & Crawford, 2012).

Archival data from the period of August 5, 2014 through April 2015 was used to perform the descriptive social network analysis of the Saturday Chores Facebook group. The time period for this data was chosen as it covered the creation of the formal Facebook group during the

previous summer (August 7) until the end of regular counter-protest activity and organizing. The time period for this data covered one full year of ongoing involvement at the protest site before the erection of the privacy fence eliminated the need for weekly counter-protests. Therefore, the sample represents the period of the highest level of Saturday Chores group organizing and information sharing activity on Facebook as a formal group, including active protestors.

Following extraction, the native data files are converted to a UCINET format using Gephi, a network visualization tool. As mentioned previously, all identifying Facebook data was automatically depersonalized by the API feed to Netvizz therefore, numbers were assigned to identify each node (1 – 346). After a statistical analysis of the whole network was completed, non-active members (or isolates) were removed from the dataset and the remaining network of 208 active actors was further analyzed to identify any significant subgroups and key actor ego networks and measures were recorded.

Measures.

In order to determine the basic characteristics of the Facebook group (Who are the key actors? How many ties/arcs are there in the network? How “tight” is the group? Are there any “lurkers” in the group?), the primary researcher examined distance between actors (geodesics), the density, connectedness, and cohesion of the network through whole network by analysis of univariate statistics, centrality and cohesion measures such as transitivity.

To identify the key actors or nodes of the group, a visual analysis of the network structure was performed and in-degree and out-degree measures as well as centrality measures were used to identify the most prominent actors and determine how they are interacting with other nodes (the volume of their sending and receiving information aka interactions).

A number of network measures were used to develop an overall picture of the importance of the two most prominent nodes (#343 and #344, possibly the Saturday Chores founders) in regard to the connectivity, interactions and information exchange within the Facebook group. Centrality measures were used to determine how central these individuals were to the group in regard to relationships and information sharing. In addition, Ego network (a measure of the network of an individual node) measures and graphs were generated to examine the size of their own local networks (especially in regard to the size of the active network of 208 nodes) and their reach within these neighborhoods.

Finally, to look for any significant subgroups in the network, measures of subgroup analysis were used to identify subgroup structures. Clique analysis was used to see if there was a marked pattern to the number of actors in the network who were closely tied, K-Cores, a more relaxed measure of subgroup analysis was used to determine if larger subgroups (at least five in membership) were present, and an analysis of group Lambda Sets looked at what groups were most important to graph network structure.

In-depth Interviews

Considering this limitation and following Institutional Review Board approval, in-depth interviews were conducted with Saturday Chores founders and those individuals they identified as being key to the counter-protest or to the viral event diffusion. This constituted a purposive sample of the Facebook group, an appropriate sampling strategy in case study research, as such studies focus on a specific event and are not generalizable to other populations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Yin, 2014). Qualitative interviews are valuable to both case studies and other types of research such as social network analysis because they can help researchers understand social actors' perspectives and uncover information about actions and processes that are not otherwise

observable (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Qualitative interviews also help researchers learn about past events from the stakeholder's perspective, and verify facts and data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Rogers's notes that retrospective interviews are a primary research methodology in diffusion studies, therefore it is an appropriate methodology for this research project as it informs where and how Saturday Chores was shared and their messages adopted.

The Ryan and Gross study established the customary research methodology to be used by most diffusion investigators: retrospective survey interviews in which adopters of an innovation are asked when they adopted, where or from who they obtained information about the innovation, and the consequences of adoption. (Rogers, 2003, p. 33)

Considering this, interview questions asked participants about general information about social media habits, their recall of the sequence of events during the viral event, and information about their participation in the group and viral event. (The complete IRB-approved interview questionnaire can be referenced in Appendix A of this dissertation.)

Sampling and Procedures.

Two initial in-depth interviews were conducted in person with the Saturday Chores founders in April 2015 and August 2016. During the second interview, the Haver Currins identified fifteen supporters whom they felt were instrumental to the sharing of information and Saturday Chores in general. After solicitation via e-mail and Facebook messages, eleven of the individuals were interviewed between August 2017 and February 2018. Eight interviews were conducted in person at a mutually convenient public location, two were conducted as phone interviews, and the last was done using Google's Hangout video chat function. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and totaled almost seven hours of material. Interviews were later transcribed for analysis and member checks of transcribed interviews totaling 76 pages were

performed with the Haver Currins and five participants to ensure data validity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Using the constant comparative method to check for theoretical saturation, following the eleventh group member interview and the second interview with the Haver Currins as the primary researcher determined that no new information would be revealed about the viral event processes or timing if new cases were added (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Because they are public record due to the media coverage, the Haver Currins are named in the analysis, however all other 11 interview participants are quoted anonymously to protect their privacy.

Data Analysis.

Interview data was used to corroborate dates, facts, social media behavior such as sharing, and viral event timeline information gathered from other sources. The constant comparative method was used to confirm reports of specific events and social processes of the group during the viral event (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) and dates, social media metrics, and shares were compared to available digital data on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the Saturday Chores Tumblr blog as often as possible. Following tabulation, the primary research double-checked coding against interview transcripts of the Haver Currins initial report and the media timeline to verify accuracy.

After several sessions of close reading of the interview data, the primary researcher developed categories based on these definitions and on the manifest information relayed in the interviews. This follows Lindlof and Taylor's assertion that categories are formed after repeated readings and when the analyst has discovered a meaningful way to configure the data (2011, p. 215). The diffusion theory social role concepts of opinion leadership and change agent were operationalized based on identification of tasks and reported influence, as well as metrics such as

the number of social ties (friends, followers) and types of personal networks (homophilous or heterophilous) informants reported or were evident on Facebook and Twitter. Network gatekeeping was also noted (operationalized as cross-posting Saturday Chores content from Facebook to other platforms) for the digital network processes analysis discussed in Chapter 5.

Categories were operationalized following previous diffusion research studies and the author's definitions of the concepts. Mustonen-Ollila and Lyytinen (2003) operationalized diffusion of innovations theoretical concepts per Rogers' definitions of the five stages of the adoption decision and created categories to analyze data from semi-structured interviews to understand the information systems adoption process in three companies. The theory concept of opinion leadership was also operationalized based on tasks and reported influence in recent studies of social media to understand factors and trends leading to the adoption of Twitter hashtags (Chang, 2010), and to understand how subject matter experts promote economic development activities in their organizations (Ceci & Iubatti, 2012). Similar to my project, the latter study also operationalized innovation as a new idea or practice and then triangulated results from in-depth interviews and content analysis to follow the information flows leading to adoption.

Additionally, interview data was coded per categories related concepts defined in Roger's diffusion of innovations theory (homophily, heterophily, opinion leadership, change agent or aide role), social network measures (cohesion or number of friends and followers) and Nahon's concept of network gatekeeping.

The goal of this part of the data analysis was to identify the social processes of diffusion and opinion leadership that supported the viral event and activist group information sharing practices. Therefore, these categories used multiple measures falling under two large categories –

social and network structural factors and diffusion theory concepts. Following data analysis, the primary researcher compared the coded data with that of prior studies' operationalizations and concluded that the categorizations both face and content validity as they measured the concepts fully in the manner intended. (A copy of the interview coding protocol with a full list of categories and their measures can be referenced in Appendix A.)

Quantitative Content Analysis

To research and map the viral spread of content from the Saturday Chores Tumblr account to blogs and online publications that covered the counter-protest, I conducted a three-part content analysis using both qualitative and quantitative approaches during separate stages or facets of the project. Content analysis has been used to examine print, news media, advertising, and television programming in mass media research and is now commonly used as a research tool for examining digital publications, video, content, and social media. However, quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis differ in both their methodology and their basic premises. I briefly describe quantitative content analysis in the next section by starting with the dominant definition. Then, I discuss the method's advantages and limitations as well as its use in this mixed-method study.

Riffe et al. (2014) define quantitative content analysis as:

The systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption. (p. 19)

Like other forms of quantitative research approaches, the goal in quantitative content analysis is to produce replicable and possibly generalizable results (depending on the subject). In quantitative content analysis, researchers must create clear classification systems for very specific units of analysis so that results can be replicated and measures validated. Levels of analysis should not be mixed. This approach to content analysis focuses on manifest content—content that is visible, apparent to both researchers and audiences. Manifest content should not require interpretation; meaning is shared and not inferred from texts or visuals being studied. Data for this type of content analysis is often derived from archival resources; therefore, it is simple to collect, even on a large scale, and longitudinal studies are possible. In addition, the units of analysis are defined and often removed apart from the rest of the media object (such as advertisements being studied as singular documents, not as part of a newspaper layout or in the context of a commercial break in a television program).

In addition, Riffe et al. have argued that computer analysis of material should only be done when it is absolutely necessary, such as when a large amount of data is being analyzed (2014).

As this type of content analysis generally uses unobtrusive, nonreactive measurement techniques and data from static or archival sources, validity is less of an issue (Riffe et al., 2014). And as mentioned previously, through the use of various new computer software programs, researchers can analyze large amounts of data. Both of these advantages make this approach appealing to digital media researchers who often work with large datasets of social media, video, and online publication content.

However, there are two limitations of this approach that should be noted in regard to such research. Quantitative content analysis removes the researcher from the analytic process by

“backgrounding” analysis; therefore minimizing any impact that analyst perceptions or bias might have on the results (Krippendorff, 2013). This limitation may introduce issues of reliability if content categories aren’t clearly defined. In addition, this focus on specific objects as units of analysis often removes them from the context of their original media forms or channels, essentially decontextualizing them for analysis and possibly introducing validity issues. This limitation might change meaning in certain studies, especially those of visual content where cultural significance of the object within its context is key to meaning (Rose, 2012). To avoid this issue, quantitative content analysts ensure that coders interpret the categories and the theoretical constructs they represent as planned by performing more than one test of reliability on coded data such as calculations of simple agreement and Krippendorff’s Alpha (Lacy, et al., 2015).

To fully explore the viral event and consider the context (social) as well as digital processes and measures involved, my dissertation project required a three-part quantitative content analysis to examine the media coverage during the viral event. This analysis focused on the manifest messages of the articles, the identities of individuals interviewed for them, and the digital linkages present in their content. During this research stage, I identified and categorized the publications, news articles, blog posts, and the Saturday Chores Tumblr content “media flows” between them during the event. I also used various metrics to calculate measures for each of Nahon and Hemsley’s four bases of a viral event in response to RQ 3a (Does the Saturday Chores viral event meet Nahon and Hemsley’s definition of virality?).

Although this content analysis is quantitative in nature, it does not follow Riffe et al.’s strict definition of content analysis in that no statistical tests were performed. Instead, measures were calculated to determine the overall reach (per Nahon and Hemsley’s four bases of virality)

and the scope and speed of diffusion across networks, as well as tabulate frequencies of content categories. The data analysis was not interpretative in nature; therefore it is still considered quantitative, although not generalizable. In short, to better understand the context of the event in relation to how and why it was able to garner so much media attention, I needed to analyze the media coverage associated with the event in regard to opinion leadership, innovation, and social advocacy/activist action frames as well as the digital structures included in their content (such as photos and hyperlinks) that made them so easy to spread to “jump” networks (Hon, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013), Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rogers, 2003).

Sampling and Procedures.

The primary researcher collected screenshots of the census of images and social media message content shared on Saturday Chores’ primary public social media account on Tumblr during the period of March 8, 2014 (the documented beginning of the counter-protest) through August 4, 2014. Data collected in this manner also contained cross-posted content from Facebook and Instagram, but metrics for this analysis were taken from the native platforms when possible and metrics for each post or share were included once in the analysis. Additionally, links and posts of media coverage were collected as screenshots, or when more applicable, as PDF or HTML Word files. Dates and social metrics (likes, shares, etc.) were also collected.

Media coverage of Saturday Chores was collected via QSnap Software by the primary researcher using a list of media provided by the Haver Currins and supplemented by Google searches for keywords “Saturday Chores protest,” “#saturdaychores,” the Tumblr URL and the founder’s names. The articles and blog posts represented the period of July 23 through August 6 of 2014 (a two-week period) covering the initial viral event of Saturday Chores content sharing. After numerous Google searches, no new content was identified for that period and therefore a

census of 23 articles/blog posts were collected for analysis. Articles published after the initial viral period were also collected as data, but were not included in this particular analysis. Video coverage was not included and one duplicate article (Huffington Post) was excluded from the analysis resulting in a total sample of 20 articles/blog posts (N = 20).

Additional data was collected from a Google Analytics tracking report created for the Saturday Chores Tumblr that covered a one-year period from the launch of the counter-protest to the following April of 2016. These dates represented the start of the Tumblr account to the date of the second interviews with the Haver Currins where they presented me with the report per my request. This period covers the entirety of web traffic to Saturday Chores Tumblr from its inception to a one year period following the end of the physical protest and includes media coverage traffic that occurred during that timeframe. Therefore, this report presents a holistic perspective of the traffic resulting from the initial event, as well as continued traffic from viral media coverage and social media posts still in place that figures into its “aftermath” and ongoing impact on organic search results.

Data Analysis.

The content analysis to produce the media timeline was conducted using interview data and a log of Saturday Chores press coverage compiled by the Haver Currins from the period of July 2014 through April 2015. Additional media coverage was gathered for the same period by the primary researcher starting in April 2015 and ending July 2017. The unit of analysis was the individual article as captured via screenshot or PDF. Publication dates, hyperlinks, and social media metrics were collected as were publication titles, any publication information in the “header” section of the article, and where possible, any photos. If the publication was a reprint or otherwise connected to a conglomerate media network (such as a publication group), that

information was noted and readership figures were tabulated when available (presented on each article). Key public social media posts that were “shares” of publication articles were also included in this analysis and were captured as screenshots by the primary researcher during the period of March 2015 – May 2017. This timeline depicts a holistic representation of the viral media flow of Saturday Chores content and coverage (see Table 5.2 in Appendix B of this dissertation). The two primary informants reviewed a drafted media timeline to ensure credibility of both sequence and data.

Categories.

In addition, these data were analyzed to identify network gatekeeping functions of the individual publications and blogs and provided metrics used to determine whether the event met the four bases of virality described by Nahon and Hemsley (2013), or network gatekeeping functions (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Castells, 2011; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). The content of articles and blog posts were also coded for evidence of Roger’s notion of opinion leadership and activist public relations expertise by noting who was quoted or interviewed in each one.

Categories were operationalized per the author’s definitions of these concepts as informed by similar research designs and studies of social media influence (Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie, 2013; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012) and viral network gatekeeping (Nahon, Hemsley, Mason, Walker, & Eckert, 2013; Sisovsky, 2015; Xu & Feng, (2014).

Content data (publication screenshots, PDFs of articles) were further examined to look for any reoccurring message themes represented in the media coverage as well as themes of innovation and emergent social advocacy themes (Hon, 2015; Rogers, 2003). Category development for this stage was informed by the descriptions of the use of social advocacy action frames as discussed by Hon (2015) and innovation as a novel ideal (Rogers, 2003). This

quantitative thematic message analysis sought to identify the primary and secondary message themes present in the media coverage from the viral period to better understand social sharing practices – what types of messages are readily shared.

This content analysis was informed by the approach described by Riffe et al. wherein discrete categories are determined through reading of the text and photo content for manifest meaning and are tabulated as numerical expressions (Riffe et al., 2014). This examination focused on manifest meaning of headlines, body content, and the photos used to illustrate each article (the unit of analysis) including keywords used to describe Saturday Chores tactics and the social issue at the heart of the protest/counter-protest.

Following this study's theoretical operationalization of innovation as a social information flow and activism as social advocacy (around a single issue), two categories were developed to code the content. The first category was innovation (as an activist tactic) and the second was women's reproductive health rights/abortion as a social issue (Hon 2015; Rogers, 2003). A third category of "other" was used to categorize content not fitting either of these themes and descriptive details for it were recorded.

The goal of this part of the content analysis was to determine if certain themes or action frames received more widespread diffusion through syndication or social media (shares or reblogs) than others, and if these themes were replicated between publications and platforms. To provide additional evidence for network gatekeeping and opinion leadership and innovation processes, these articles/blog posts were also examined for the presence of hyperlinks to Saturday Chores content, other media platforms, and for the identity of individuals quoted in each piece as indicators (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rogers, 2003). (Categorical descriptions are

presented in Chapter 5 and the analysis codesheet listing all variables can be referenced in Appendix B.)

Traffic Analysis Sample and Procedures.

Finally, a web traffic analysis of the Saturday Chores Tumblr site was conducted to determine the number of inbound hyperlinks and visits following the event. As the viral event occurred one day after the Tumblr site was launched, this analysis provides an illustration of the speed and scope of the event as many of the publications, social media platforms, and blogs included a direct link to this source of the Saturday Chores photos. This examination contributed to the four virality measures. Additionally, as noted by the Haver Currins, since the initial viral event, there have been occasional moments where the Saturday Chores story “resurfaces” for comparison or reference. As “permalink” use is a very common search engine optimization practice for online publications, even three years after the event there should be evidence of these linkages as well as any significant traffic from related articles in the hyperlinks directed to the Tumblr and social media traffic sources. The Google Analytics Referral Traffic Report from the date of the Tumblr launch to a one-year period following the protest start (April 2016) provided a holistic view of the event including the “afterlife” of continued web traffic from numerous viral linkages (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

Meta-Interferences – Final Stage of Mixed-Method Data Analysis

To conclude my analysis of the Saturday Chores viral event, data was correlated from both qualitative and quantitative stages of my research to determine what activist tactics and message themes helped drive the information flows of the event, as well as to discover the primary social and digital network processes that supported it. A meta-inference is a conclusion generated through integration of the inferences made from the qualitative and quantitative

strands of a mixed method study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This procedure permitted me to draw from prior inferences and multiple datasets corresponding to research questions to formulate my conclusions. This qualitative analysis was performed from the perspective of dialogic public relations theory to discuss implications for practitioners and public relations scholarship. Therefore, I reviewed study findings from the theoretical perspective of Kent and Taylor's five key features of ethical public-organizational communication (mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and long-term commitment) and the "ethic of care" model of socially responsible activist public relations (2002; Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

Method Summary

In summary, the overarching goal for this dissertation project is to illustrate the social and digital processes that support a viral event. By following Yin's case study procedure, I have attempted to produce an in-depth narrative of the viral event and describe the social and digital network processes that triggered and propelled content diffusion through various media platforms. This mixed method research design included qualitative interviews, social network analysis, and content analysis. The design produced ample data to triangulate and allowed me to develop a robust depiction of the event. In the next chapter, I provide an in-depth narrative of the Saturday Chores viral event constructed from interviews with key actors involved in the counter-protest and content sharing, and I also present the results of my descriptive social network analysis of the Saturday Chores Facebook group.

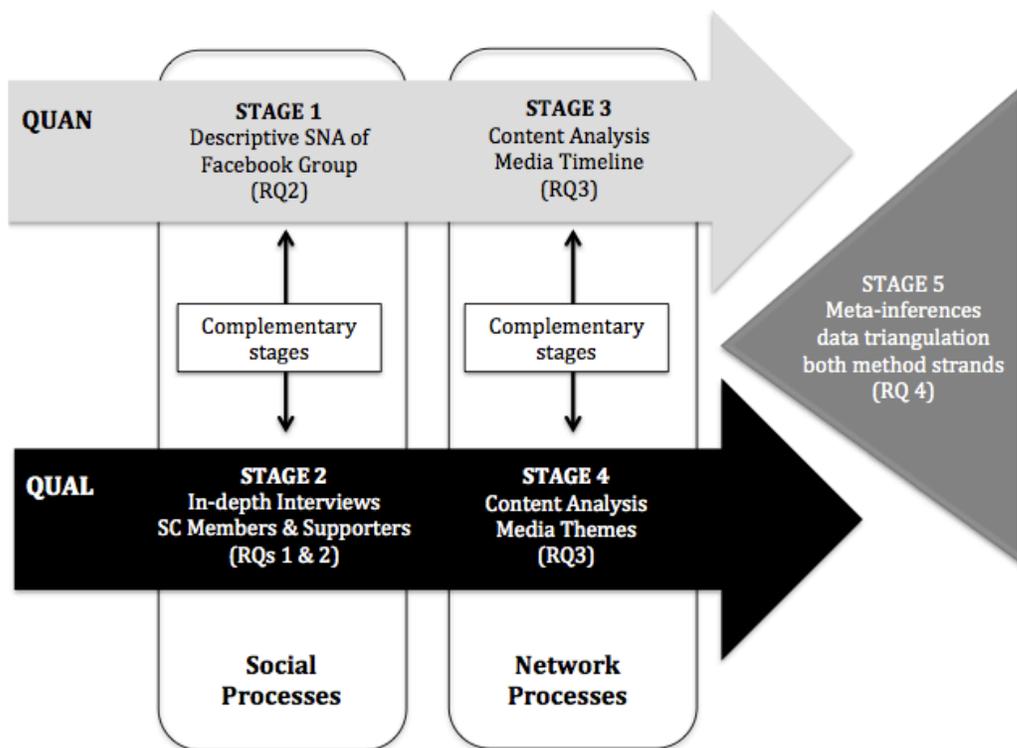


Figure 3.1 - Multi-level mixed method research design.

CHAPTER 4

Saturday Chores Social Processes

This chapter examines the social processes that supported the Saturday Chores viral event. Following an overview of the communication aspects of the viral event itself, I will address the questions (RQ 1 & 2) and present results from in-depth interviews with the activist group founders and key actors involved with the events. A descriptive social network analysis of the Facebook group is also presented to illustrate their information sharing and group dynamics, as well as the prominence of two individuals within the group. I will illustrate this with a network graph and apply concepts from diffusion theory and social network analysis measures to create my analysis.

The Viral Event (Interview Data Reconstruction)

Through their shared photos on Facebook and Instagram, Saturday Chores rapidly gained local attention and by early summer of 2014, the Haver Currins were joined by dozens of supporters who replicated their tactics. Physical silence (no verbal engagement with the Pro Life protestors), obstruction of the line of sight between the visitor parking lot and the Pro Life protest line, and absurdly funny signs were the primary tactics.

In July, a local news media personality and blogger asked the Haver Currins to create a web repository for their Saturday Chores photos, as she wanted to write about them. The evening of July 19th, the couple created a Tumblr blog that collected their photos to date in sequential order and Tina Haver Currin wrote short descriptions for each, creating a short narrative of the counter protest and their strategy. On July 21st, a professional and personal friend who had seen the Tumblr blog shared the link to Grayson's Facebook profile timeline (see Figure 4.4 in Appendix C). One of Grayson's professional music industry acquaintances - an independent

label owner in Austin, Texas - shared the Tumblr link to his own Facebook profile.

Subsequently, one of this person's Facebook friends, a writer from *The Daily Dot* (also based in Austin), wrote a feature drawing largely from the visual appeal of Tumblr content.

As part of the Billboard Music Group family of publications, *The Daily Dot* is an online publication or "The ultimate destination for original reporting on Internet culture and life online" according to the "About" webpage. The mobile-optimized publication boasts a readership of over 23 million unique visits and has offices in New York and San Francisco in addition to Austin. The article titled "This couple's counter-protesting with pro-lifers, and documenting it on Tumblr" gave Saturday Chores a global audience. As it included a direct link to the blog (in addition to containing photos), Saturday Chores number of Tumblr followers jumped from 13 on July 20 to over 50,000 by the evening of the 21st. Within days, the article had been shared over 108,000 times. According to Grayson, "A friend of ours said, "And they kind of gave you the mic then didn't they?" because they sort of interviewed us and published everything we said - and that ended up getting over 108,000 shares - an insane amount - it went crazy!"

They watched as the viral event continued to explode the week of July 21, 2014 and took screenshots, as the Saturday Chores Tumblr blog became a trending topic. They noted at least three different significant spikes in visitor traffic to their blog – one immediately following the viral post (Austin professional acquaintance to his Facebook timeline), another after the *Daily Dot* article, and finally, one more when "God" (an anonymous Facebook user) and celebrity George Takei both reposted an article by Bustle (women's interest blog) on their timelines. Both of the latter Facebook posts received over tens of thousands of shares and the Takei post alone received over 36,000 "Likes" just within the first hour after it was posted.

As a result of this high visibility, the couple's personal social media accounts were inundated with friend and follower requests. As both Tina and Grayson's accounts were public at this time, anyone who read the *Daily Dot* article or viewed the blog and "googled" them was able find their Gmail address and personal social accounts quite easily. Over the next few days, several other publications contacted the couple about Saturday Chores and they were featured or interviewed in a variety of mainstream digital media outlets including *Cosmopolitan*, *The Daily Mail*, and regional newspaper *The Raleigh News and Observer*, as well as popular blogs such as *Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed* and *Jezebel*. (A full list of the media coverage during the two-week viral period is described in Chapter 5 and depicted by the Media Timeline in Appendix C.)

Quite literally overnight, Saturday Chores had exploded in status from being a small local counter protest to being a media sensation and the Haver Currins were hailed as innovators for their clever non-violent and somewhat absurdist tactical approach to activism. Articles with titles such as "This Pro-choice Couple Trolls Anti-abortion Protestors with Clever Signs" and "Couple Uses Humor to Defuse Abortion Protests" typify the media framing of Saturday Chores tactics (*Elle*, 2014; *Uproxx*, 2014).

The high visibility of the viral content and media coverage drew both supporters and negative attention from Pro Life activists and bloggers. In addition to fielding numerous interview requests and thousands of emails, Tina and Grayson found themselves dealing with personal attacks and death threats as well. They realized that they were not only a target of anti-abortion vitriol, but in the position of founding an activist group and ongoing counter-protest. Again, according to Grayson:

It consumed our life - for weeks, for months! There were nights where we would work eight to ten or twelve hour days on whatever we were doing and then come home and sit

there and work for four hours on whatever was involved - answering emails, responding to interview requests, responding to email interviews, having meetings with people to kind of figure out what to do... Specifically with the viral (article), it was mostly interviews, just sort of trying to monitor what was being said was a big thing because of the nature of what it was, there was a lot of malicious language with Tina being threatened or called names... it was more of keeping an eye on that.

In order to formally organize out of public view (and protect against ongoing threats), a local activist approached the Haver Currins about creating a closed Facebook group. This formation of Saturday Chores as a formal hybrid online/offline activist group came about the first week of August 2014 following the viral media event and it was started by someone previously unknown to the Haver Currins. A woman, who had seen the *Daily Dot* article on Facebook, attended Saturday Chores immediately after becoming aware of the counter-protest. This individual self-describes as a women's reproductive rights activist and it was her idea that the group formally organize via a closed Facebook group to avoid Pro Lifers. "The first Saturday Chores that I attended, afterward, I met Grayson and Tina and I asked them a little bit about what their plans were, if they were trying to get a wider view, reach a wider range a people, etc. I asked them if they'd be interested in creating a Facebook page and offered to help them out with that. And they said, "Absolutely."

Therefore, this person became the primary group administrator and shared recruitment (or admission requests) with the Haver Currins and Saturday Chores as an activist "group" formed as a direct result of the media coverage and social sharing during the viral event. The Facebook group allowed Saturday Chores supports to discuss and plan upcoming actions and share news

about permitting, signs, and other things related to the counter-protest. They added friends and local supporters first then carefully reviewed requests from strangers.

The group administrator explained:

We were actually kind of careful, we were trying to pay attention to who we were approving. We'd go to their page and see other groups that they were involved in and made sure that they weren't one of the protesters trying to get into the group.

In short – Saturday Chores as a formal activist group was formalized as a result of the initial viral event and included many people previously unknown and completely unrelated socially or professionally to the Haver Currins. Of course, many local friends and acquaintances joined the group to support the couple's efforts, but as the group became a formal organization, key tasks and communication were often managed by experienced activists whom they had met as a result of Saturday Chores.

Considering this, what were the social dynamics and processes of the growing group like? Did Grayson and Tina Haver Currin still play key roles in subsequent content creation and information sharing even though they were not experienced activists? Was their opinion leadership and innovation still the focal point for Saturday Chores? How and why did the Saturday Chores group use social media in the first place?

Interview Results

In response to the first research question (Why and how did Saturday Chores use social media?), the Haver Currins reported that they did it as part of their habit of sharing daily events with their personal network. They also asserted that the social sharing of photos was not intended

as an activist strategy – it was just something they did, but they disagreed about whether the action itself was not strategic in its intention.

We didn't really think about it - there wasn't a strategy. It was not planned for social media. It was us, being goofballs together and then we did upload the first picture to Instagram... I wouldn't say it was an afterthought but I wouldn't say that it was the motivating factor. (Tina)

I would disagree with that slightly. I feel like we knew we would do that when ... I felt like I knew that one of us would do that - that we would put them (photos) on the Internet. Because if you do something in this world and you don't put it on the Internet, then it actually doesn't exist. That's a little sarcastic you know.... but it's a strategy, that's for sure. (Grayson)

After the viral event, their use of social media changed. The couple changed their privacy settings on their personal accounts and used the Facebook group to share Saturday Chores specific messages and links. However, they were aware of the way that social media had made it possible for the viral event to happen and began to question their motivations for its use as well as a tension between what is “real” in their online versus offline lives.

Had we not put that on Instagram then nobody would ever know. We would probably be out there doing it out there here and there...but when you can watch it travel around the world which is pretty cool, like it's in North Carolina, it's in America, is in Britain it's in Spain it's in Germany and it recently made its way to Australia.... and so that's very driven by being on the Internet and using our phones on the Internet and cultivating this presence online that people seem to crave and enjoy. But also it was a very *real* thing and

we would be surprised weekly by the amount of people who would show up at the physical space and we struggled with that a lot I think... you know, “Is this an Internet thing? Are we doing this for media attention for a cause that we support and that’s it?” (Grayson)

Saturday Chores group members reported that they used social media similarly, to seek information and to stay in touch with family and friends and follow social issues or activism. Most also noted that they used it professionally (seven of eleven). They also noted that they had “overlapping networks” with other group members such as the Hopscotch Music Festival network (based in downtown Raleigh, managed by *IndyWeek*) and other professional networks although they may not have been personally acquainted or connected.

The social processes of the Saturday Chores Facebook group and the content diffusion process followed norms of online social sharing and networked individualism as described by Baym & boyd (2012), Rainie and Wellman (2012), and the notions of connective action and networked participation as new norms of online activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Theocharis, 2015). But most importantly, they exhibited Rogers’ roles of opinion leadership and network bridging as key processes and how they allowed Saturday Chores content to spread rapidly beyond immediate personal networks (2003).

Seven of the eleven respondents reported being already connected to the Haver Currins on social media before joining the Saturday Chores group, and all but one of the seven considered themselves “professional” connections on Facebook. Three respondents reported that they were also connected to Grayson on Twitter or Instagram. All eleven said that they use social media for maintaining relational ties with friends and family as well as engaging in activism or following

social justice issues of interest (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Baym & boyd, 2012; Rainie & Wellman).

As online activism figured prominently as a motivation for engaging on social media, it is not surprising that ten respondents reported that they first became aware of Saturday Chores through social media posts. This result aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's notion of connective action (2012) and Theochraris's networked participation (2015) as all respondents noted digital activism as one of the most important reasons that they were active online and did not differentiate those actions from physical protest participation. Social media was a component of their activism and an important source for obtaining information about activist causes. Even the two group members who are also personal friends with the couple noted that Facebook was the way they learned about the counter-protest – not direct conversation. Therefore, this group of socially engaged people were already actively participating in social issue advocacy and activism online before Saturday Chores and doing so on Facebook as their primary tool.

Innovation, Opinion Leadership, and Network Embeddedness.

The eleven interview participants described the “Saturday Chores approach” to non-confrontational protest in terms of innovation. Both the messages and the way the couple presented them was described as novel, “fresh” and “brilliant” and several people recognized that the approach presented a way to participate in the counter-protest without having to engage in confrontation with the Pro Life side. They also reported that the irony and humor made Saturday Chores photos very amenable to widespread sharing.

My reaction was finally somebody is doing something that might actually work. Finally, somebody is doing something that's not just standing outside a clinic screaming back. Finally, somebody is calling this out and they're, I'm looking for a phrase ... They were

reframing the conversation to make the protestors look ridiculous. They were reframing the conversation from, "We're going to stand here and scream about abortion rights" to "You are harassing women and we're going to stop you from doing that."

I remember being very impressed with the idea behind the counter-protest. I thought that it was refreshing. And I thought that, I kind of, got the impression that this is actually out there and people are noticing. This might actually help us make a difference. So I was overall, just very impressed.

I was on fire as soon as I as soon as I saw them. I just, there was something about their whole response to it that was so inventive and so fresh and so effective that I immediately thought of a whole lot of people, not necessarily Raleigh, but people I knew who would just love it. I have friends in Portland who would be all about it. I have friends in Connecticut I knew would be about it. I had friends in Houston. I mean, I remember immediately sharing it with a whole lot of people and said look at how great this is.

The innovativeness of it totally got my attention from the get-go. It was something new. And it was something new that was of interest that seemed to be effective and there was an element of fun involved - I mean anything other than a grind where we're saying "Yeah, we gotta go do this" which is pretty much going to be a shakedown situation.

Yeah, that (distraction?) made it FUN and that was genius - that was like a masterstroke! Plus, the strength of the images themselves, the photography, I think that's crucial... The photos that say "Weird Hobby" with the arrow pointing to the left ... the impact of the

images and the ability of the images to boil down resistance or a counterforce eloquently and to express that counterforce clearly. I think those are the reasons it went viral.

All but one respondent reported that they shared information to their personal Facebook networks, thus they performed a network bridging function between personal networks within the platform. Two respondents reported sharing Saturday Chores content from Facebook to other social media platforms - Instagram and Twitter. This activity represents important network bridging processes – cross-posting content or “jumping networks” through social sharing as described by Nahon and Hemsley as a defining feature of viral media and network gatekeeping (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). One individual was particularly important to bridging as she shared Saturday Chores content to her large heterogeneous professional/personal Twitter network of over 16,000 followers.

Rogers and other social network scholars have noted the importance of heterogeneity in social systems and as described above, this was evidenced by both group members, but also particularly so in the Haver Currins’ personal networks. The diversity of their social networks was apparent to others as well as well as to the couple. When asked, “Why do you think Saturday Chores went viral?” one group member spoke directly to this point:

I think a big part of it too is you know Tina and Grayson because of at the time the kind of jobs they had and being involved in the Triangle music scene and I mean **they knew a lot of different kinds of people** and so having that, having those kind of ... connections and especially like with them both working in media and Tina worked in marketing, having those ideas like that knowledge on how to make something more viral I think also really contributed. (Emphasis added.)

Rogers described opinion leadership as a key social process in the diffusion of innovations. Opinion leaders (and their immediate helpers, change agents) have the ability to influence the spread of innovation and can speed up or enable the adoption process. He defines opinion leadership as “the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals attitudes or overt behavior informally in a desired way with relative frequency” (Rogers, 2003, p. 27).

Generally, opinion leaders are deeply embedded in their networks, and model social norms and technical competence as well as innovation adoption behavior for others. Rogers describes them as being at the “core of interpersonal networks” but often have a high degree of innovativeness. Opinion leaders are highly connected individuals that occupy advantaged positions in a social system that allows them to share innovations to many groups (or networks). Through the model of their own adoption, opinion leaders influence individuals in these networks to also adopt the innovation. Opinion leadership in may be measured through the pattern of the spread of an innovation through interpersonal networks and by identifying those individuals in most embedded and advantageous positions within the network. Interview data repeatedly confirmed the Haver Currins opinion leadership – especially Grayson’s.

Grayson Haver Currin’s large heterogeneous personal network on Facebook of over 4,000 personal and professional friends provided an extraordinary ability to spread information across multiple networks. He and Tina described the development of their social networks during the first interview, especially their different practices on Facebook. Until the viral event, the couple maintained public Facebook profiles – no privacy settings were enabled. Whereas Tina was more guarded, only accepting “friends” when they were actual in-person personal or professional acquaintances, Grayson’s habit was to accept any and all “friend” requests he received despite

knowing them or otherwise being connected in any way personally or professionally. As he was already a public figure as a local writer and internationally recognized music critic, anyone “googling” him might find his Facebook profile and request to be his friend. This accounts for the size of his Facebook network, however after they became a couple and Tina began to be involved in Grayson’s music industry travel and work, her Facebook network began to develop as well (around 2,000 at the time of the event). Considering this information, Grayson’s 4,000+ Facebook network was large, diverse, both personal and professional, containing connections both known and unknown, and represented a global audience ready to receive content he shared.

In addition, several of Grayson’s connections had many thousands of friends themselves, mostly related to the music industry. Some of Grayson’s friends had as many as 20,000 followers on Twitter and Facebook at the time of the viral event. As these individuals are editors of major publications (such as Pitchfork), music label owners, or members of popular indie bands (Cake, John Darnielle of The Mountain Goats), they can certainly act as opinion leaders when sharing social issue content like that of Saturday Chores’ innovative messages.

These highly connected individuals in Grayson’s personal networks only add to his opinion leadership and ability to produce innovations according to Rogers. “The network interconnectedness of an individual in a social system is positively related to the individual’s innovativeness” (2003, p. 330). Grayson is deeply embedded in his digital networks if you consider the value of his direct ties as well as these highly connected individuals – some of whom joined the Saturday Chores Facebook group. As Rogers said, “Opinion leadership is a matter of degree” (2003, p. 312).

With his ability to reach tens of thousands of people across multiple networks - including those with other similarly networked opinion leaders - Grayson could be described as a hyper-

networked polymorphic opinion leader. His thousands of online connections – especially those to other music industry professionals around the world – supports his ability to be cosmopolite, taking in new ideas and information from numerous outside sources to share to his interpersonal and local networks. This strong cosmopolitan orientation is an important factor supporting Grayson’s ability to act as both opinion leader and innovator (Rogers, 2003). People who are more focused on local than “outward” connections are localites - part of groups who share similar demographics, values or political orientations. Localites who adopt innovations are able to spread information deep within their dense, smaller interpersonal groups as change agents assisting the opinion leaders by promoting message adoption in these homophilious networks (Rogers, 2003).

Additionally, Saturday Chores’ innovative message tactics lead to their reproduction in other areas of the United States and in cities around the world. This evidence provides additional proof of Saturday Chores’ opinion leadership as, noted by Rogers, “copycat” crimes are the result of network influences on interpersonal networks during the diffusion process (2003, p. 335), therefore, copycat protests most certainly indicate networked influence.

Respondents repeatedly reported that Grayson’s position as a music industry leader and editor at the local alternative weekly newspaper gave his activist messages a lot of social clout. A few individuals described the use of humor and pranksterism or “trolling” in Saturday Chores as typical of Grayson’s personality and digital fluency. Many commented on the couple’s unique ability to create strategic messages (signs) and leverage digital media to draw critical attention to the Pro Lifers.

I think it was that it was such a different approach. They had come up with something really novel that was clearly effective. That really got the goat of these people who had been so

smug and so authoritarian, and so ... It seemed like it was just a very fresh, different, effective response to point out how ridiculous it was. To point out how hypocritical it was... it was pointing out that this was ridiculous and that all that's really happening is that these people are standing here harassing women, they're not doing one thing to help actual real babies.

So Grayson was and is a very powerful.... His words wield a lot of power. Much like a food critic, he could make or break bands and people really hung onto his words. He's a fantastic writer. But he wielded a lot of power in the Indy and knew who Grayson was and wanted to be in his orbit, so when he started doing this, it was almost magnetic that people wanted to be associated with him, and I think that had a lot to do, certainly around here, with why it went as crazy viral as it did - name recognition... He and Tina are innovators and people love to be in the halo of that – I mean they're brilliant people and other people want to be associated with that. I believe that his position at The Indy added a lot of legitimacy with what they were doing...thought leader, opinion leader, whatever you want to call it - and they still are!

Tina and Grayson have a bizarre ability to find that thing and present it in a way that works so amazingly well...They just have this different level of creativity that allows them to express it in a way that just immediately speaks to people.

Certainly Tina Haver Currin and at least three members of the Saturday Chores group interviewed for this project also exhibited opinion leadership based on their personal social media accounts (1,500-2,000 + connections) and the heterogeneous nature of their networks

(both professional and personal). Like Grayson, Tina and the three group members described social networks that were characterized by diversity – many different kinds of people, professions, and global locations were included. Among these group opinion leaders were two internationally known musicians and a leader in the online learning and training industry. Also similar to Grayson and his networks, these individuals exhibit a high degree of cosmopolitanism or outward network orientation – a key trait of opinion leadership (Rogers, 2003). Together, these individuals shared content to at least 20,000 network ties during the viral event and formalization of Saturday Chores. Like Grayson’s other friends and followers, the three group members represent music industry connections that are embedded in their networks and who could be described as experts in that field, but are also influential when commenting on activism or social issues. This ability to exert influence in more than one issue or topic is polymorphic opinion leadership (Rogers, 2003). Grayson and these connections could be described as exhibiting polymorphic opinion leadership, which in itself may provide them additional network influence in the diffusion process (Rogers, 2003).

Interview data suggest that other group members may have functioned as change agents to help spread the Saturday Chores messages to other groups or to subgroups through social sharing. Rogers defines change agents, as “an individual who influences clients’ innovation-decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency” (p. 27). Change agents act as lieutenants of opinion leaders, helping spread innovation information and achieve message adoption. Obviously, Saturday Chores was not an organization with paid change agents involved, however, within the Facebook group, there were at least six individuals who performed tasks similar to those Rogers describes. Rogers notes that these individuals are usually educated and although he is primarily thinking of professional marketers or public relations professionals with

this description, it aligns with the experienced activists involved with Saturday Chores who were among those interviewed. These group members performed key planning, organizing, and information sharing functions within the group and outside it to subgroups to promote Saturday Chores messages in their personal networks. For this study, active “recruitment” and support seeking as well as organizing functions were considered part of the work of change agents.

Below is an example from one of these respondents:

So it's like, there's this thing of, you want to be associated with this. I think that's a huge driving factor of why people share media. You can find some content interesting, or informative, or fun, but I think to share it that means to be you. Right? It has to reflect you and your perspectives, and you want to be associated with that. I think that was a huge piece of it in that you ... It was a breath of fresh air in that conversation where it wasn't the same old arguments, the same old debate back and forth.

To summarize the analysis of interview data, results indicate that the Haver Currins played key roles as both innovators and opinion leaders. However, Grayson’s opinion leadership was especially important as he had the ability to influence other opinion leaders who were part of his diverse and expansive personal social media networks. Certainly, any innovation that Grayson shared via these networks would reach other equally connected influencers who might also share it. In addition, six interview respondents reported functioning as change agents to spread Saturday Chores messages to various networks and subgroups to share the innovative messages and tactics and gain support.

Descriptive Social Network Analysis Results

To complement the interview data, I used social network analysis to examine the Saturday Chores counter-protest Facebook group social processes – their interactions and information sharing practices. I applied network measures such as centrality and cohesion (number of relational ties) to identify actors that were the focus of interactions and look for any significant subgroups. My goal was to determine the basic network structures of the group, identify focal nodes (members) in advantageous network positions by using both network measures and visual analysis. Such advantaged placements may signify the opinion leaders of the group. Previous research has indicated that this method is appropriate for evaluation of these concepts (Borgatti et al., 2013; Hanneman & Riddle, 2014; Himmelboim et al., 2013; Himmelboim et al. 2014; Yang & Taylor, 2015). Therefore, the goal of this analysis was threefold: to determine the basic characteristics of the Saturday Chores Facebook group, attempt to identify opinion leaders and confirm the importance in the group’s organizing and interactions; and look for any significant subgroups in the network that might play a critical role in information exchange and network formation.

Through correlation of viewable profile information (location, gender) and network measures, two nodes were identified as those most likely to be Grayson and Tina Haver Currin (nodes #344 and #343 respectively) due to their advantaged positions and embeddedness in the network as supported by the interview data. However, despite this correlation, the depersonalization of Facebook data represents a significant validity issue and therefore this study cannot make a claim to their identity with absolute certainty. Instead, these nodes are discussed by their assigned identifiers “343” and “344” and the analysis is descriptive only.

The Saturday Chores Facebook Group whole network is comprised of 346 nodes (individuals or actors) and 930 arcs (directed network relationship ties). The network is seven

degrees (relationship “steps” or ties) in diameter and the average degree is 2.68 (the average number of ties that connect any one node to another node in the network). This means that the network is rather loosely connected as a whole (seven “steps” or relationships wide) but that on average, individuals are less than three relationship ties away from each other. The average distance among reachable pairs is 2.11 degrees. The network overall density is .008 and the standard deviation is .088 - a data point which also implies that there are a large number of loosely connected nodes in the network. Considering this, a decision was made to remove the isolates from the network to better examine the active component (in this case, this means those nodes that have posted, liked a post, shared or commented on a post in the group). After 138 isolates were removed, a network of 208 active nodes was graphed and basic centrality measures applied to create a diagraph of the group for further analysis (see Figure 4.1 next page).

The diagraph revealed the general structure and most prominent nodes of the network. When non-active group “lurkers” are eliminated, the 208 node network is largely organized around two central actor/nodes of #344 and #343 (the two largest, lighter nodes in Figure 4.1).

Although the data were “depersonalized” upon extraction, I was able to make an informed identification of the couple (the counter-protest founders) within the network by correlating centrality, number of arcs (as this is a directed tie graph), and positions with evidence from the interview data that supported #344 and #343 being the focus of attention and interaction within the group. Per this information, it is reasonable to assume that Grayson is represented by node #344 and Tina by #343 as they were by far the most prominent in the network in regard to their centrality measures and the large number of arcs connecting them to other group members (as seen in Figure 4.2, principal component’s view). Node #344 has the highest betweenness centrality of the network (an astonishing 5,527 in a network where only a few actors have values over 200). Betweenness centrality is measure that determines the extent to actors lie on geodesic paths (the shortest possible distance) between actors and indicates how much influence an individual has over the control of information passing between those nodes (Hanneman, 2005).

In addition, #344 has an out-degree centrality of 80 and an in-degree centrality of 78, which indicates that he/she is almost equally influential (or reaching out interactively) as he is the recipient of actions (and information). Conversely, node (#343) had an out-degree centrality of 27 and an in-degree of 75 showing that this person received many more comments and likes on her posts than she reciprocated. In addition, this node shares many ties with the other prominent node and has the second highest betweenness centrality of the network – 1,861 – indicating that this node is also an important “hub” in the network – able to send information and receive it from many other nodes.

Also, it is important to note that nodes #343 and #344 only have one directed tie between them (see Figure 4.2) yet they share many other connections with active group members. When you consider that this network graph is based on interactions with the Facebook group, it makes sense that a married couple would have no reason to interact (comment, post, etc.) with each other within that context (a.k.a. they are obviously talking offline frequently or via private digital channels such as SMS).

Based upon this initial analysis of the active network, ego network measures and graphs were produced to determine the size and reach of these two key nodes.

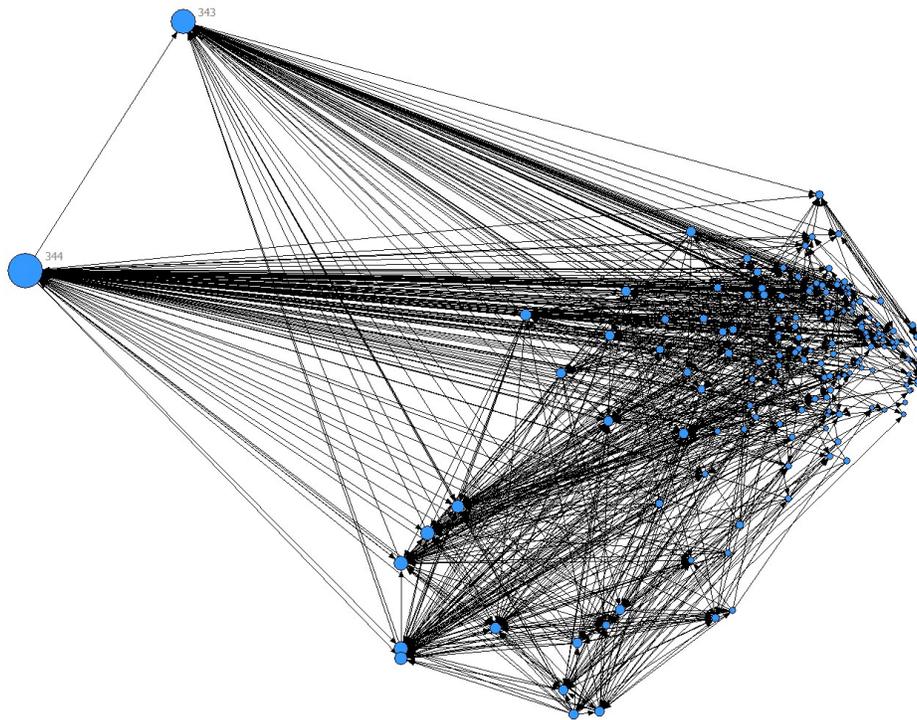


Figure 4.2 - Principal components view, only density measures represented.

As noted earlier, actors #343 and #344 have the highest betweenness centrality scores of anyone in the group. The Eigenvector centrality (another measure that calculates any actors importance to network information sharing, however with more important relationships considered by weighting of ties), #344 is .378 and #343 is .293 in a network where the average is

.047. When you also consider the density and size of their ego networks (#344 has 158 nodes and 657 directed ties; #343 has 102 nodes and 442 directed ties), the power of these two to access and control the information and interaction within the group is profound. #344's ego network alone represents 75% of the nodes in the active network. Additionally, this actor has an out-degree closeness centrality of .144 and an in-degree closeness centrality score of .255, which means that this person is very close/less far from other nodes. If you look at this in terms of reach, #344 is one step away from anyone in the active part of the network.

To summarize this ego analysis, node #344 had an out-degree of 80 and an in-degree of 78 ties which shows that this actor had a relatively equal balance of interacting with others' posts (80), and other actors interacting with his posts (78). This actor had an astronomical betweenness centrality score of 5,272 – more than double that of the second prominent node and compared to two nodes with the next highest scores (#338 with 310 and #199 with 283). It is abundantly clear that this node is the most important actor of the network in regard to interaction or information exchange.

Structural holes in a network are places where key actors “bridge” otherwise unconnected or less connected individuals (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). This measure provides a measure of the effective size of any given actor's ego network and their reach within that network to help understand that individual's influence or ability to broker relationships. Looking at their structural holes measures, both #344 and #343 are able to reach far across the network and reach many actors that did not share a tie with their other connections. #344 had an effective size of 149, which means that out of his/her 158 connections in the local group; he/she is able to broker 149 of those relationships (and that this node has very few redundant relationship ties in his local network). Node #343 has an effective size of 93, meaning that she/he brokers 93 of the 102

connections in her neighborhood. Therefore, these two individuals are remarkably at the center of the interactivity in the Facebook group.

Several measures of subgroups were used to perform a thorough subgroup analysis of network. The goal of this part of the analysis was to determine if there were any subgroups that were not connected to the two most prominent nodes. This analysis was performed on the active component of the network of 208 nodes (isolates were removed).

An analysis of the number of cliques (the maximum number of actors who have all possible ties present among themselves) found that the network contained 357 cliques at the minimum level of three per clique and 220 cliques if the minimum was raised to five. Therefore, even with five people as the minimum number in a clique, there are still a large number amount of cliques in the network. This high number of cliques illustrates the tight interconnectedness of the core members of this Facebook group – there is a lot of interaction between the active members even using the more restrictive measure of relationship.

In addition, using a “bottom-up” approach to look for network subgroups, a K-Cores analysis was conducted and ten partitions (differentiations between subgroups) were created, with the highest coreness value of 11 and two being the minimum number of group members that any one actor may not be connected to yet still be part of the group. A K-core group is a maximal group of actors, all of whom are connected to some number (k) of other members of the group (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). To be included in a k-plex, an actor must be tied to all but k (in this case, two) other actors in the group (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Looking at the Saturday Chores network via K-Cores, the “tightest” group is the 11th K-Core containing our two key nodes (#343 & #344), as well as 19 other members including our other advantaged nodes based on their well above average betweenness centrality (#199, #205 and #338). Although this

measure is a more relaxed view of subgroups, it allows us to identify this 11th K-Core, which can be considered the set of actors that are at the heart of the network - the most engaged and likely the most influential set of actors of the group (represented by the lighter color nodes in Figure 4.3).

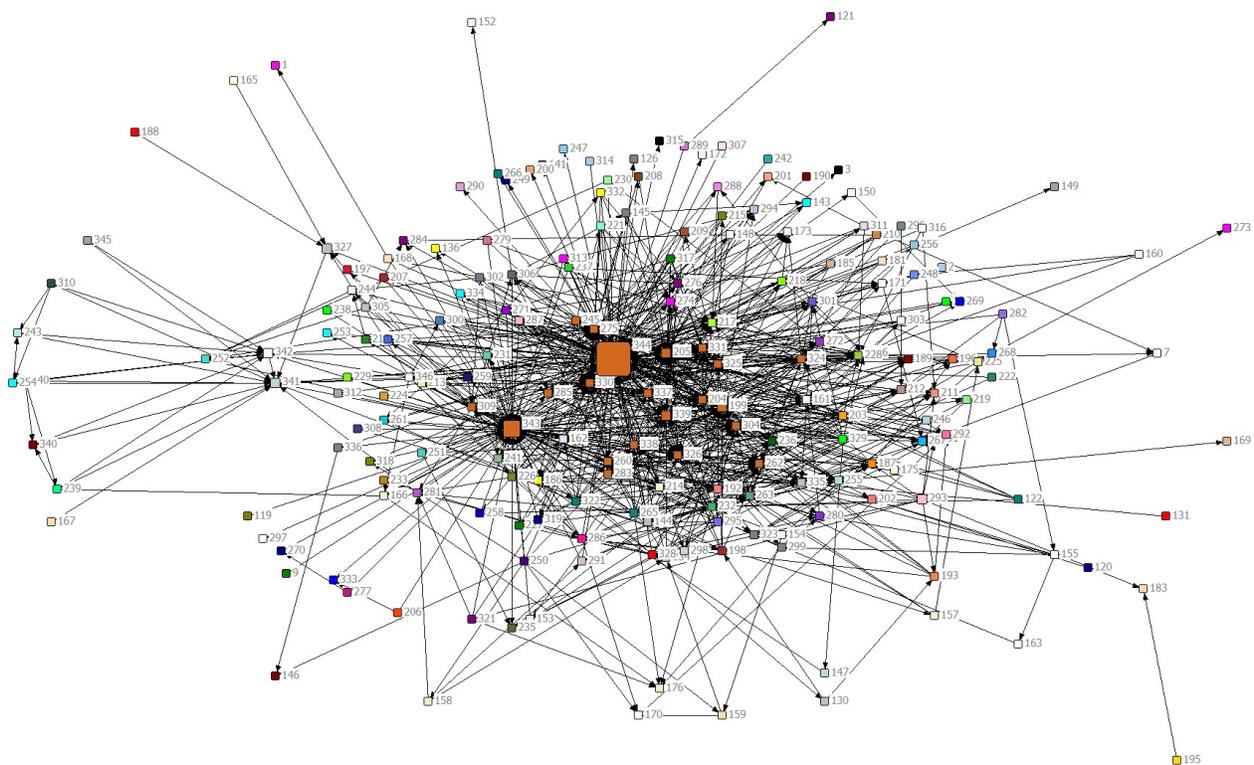


Figure 4.3 - K-cores by color, size betweenness centrality.

A different way to look at network subgroups is by using a “top-down” approach of looking at Lambda Sets. A Lambda Set is a means of determining the importance of subgroups by identifying groups of actors whose connections, if removed from the network graph, would disconnect the structure (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Basically, if there were several key Lambda Sets in a graph, severing any of those sets of relationship would disrupt the flow of information and disrupt relationships within the network. An analysis of the Saturday Chores Facebook group Lambda Sets reinforced what has been identified previously – that there is a

single core group of actors (surrounding #343 and #344) whose connections are the “glue” that holds the network together and that are essential to the Facebook group’s social interactions.

Summary

This descriptive network analysis illustrates the importance of two nodes in the social information exchanges within the Facebook group. In particular, it illustrates the prominence of node #344 which I postulate represents Grayson Haver Currin. Based on the position, network embeddedness (cohesion), and the scope of his ego network, this individual is not just the information hub for the group – he/she is its information superhighway and the social focal point or opinion leader of Saturday Chores.

Considering this as well as the subgroup analysis, these measures indicate that nodes #344 and #343 are the main focus of group activity in the Facebook group. These findings support the interview data analysis indicating that Grayson and Tina (if they are represented by these two nodes) are opinion leaders who have tremendous influence within the Facebook group as an organization even though they did not start it.

No other group members even remotely reach the level of importance these two nodes have in maintaining flow of information. Even the other most prominent nodes (based on their degrees, network position with the core block and size of their ego networks) could not connect the group without these two most important nodes.

Further evidence of this incredibly strong network organization around the two key nodes was shown by the subgroup analysis. There are no other significant groups other than the core group containing #344 and #343. If that group were disconnected from the network, it would disrupt the structure. It is apparent that this **is not** a complex network comprised of various subgroups representing different interests or various strong opinion leaders, instead it is a highly

focused network organized around the actions and information exchanges of #344 and #343 and their core group.

Limitations – Social Processes Analysis

Obviously, the major limitation to the social network analysis was the depersonalization of Facebook data. Although it is very reassuring to know that the personal IDs of Facebook users as well as their names are now being masked with variables upon extraction, it means that such data cannot be used with confidence to correlate to network nodes and only be used to identify network structures and indicate the key actors. In this case, the evidence for Grayson Haver Currin representing the “key” network node #344 is compelling. Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that Tina Haver Currin is node #343 due to its centrality, network embeddedness, and its multiple shared connections with node #344. Although very likely, the claim that they are indeed represented by these nodes cannot be made with the current data set, even when correlated with supporting interview data indicating the Haver Currins were of critical importance to information sharing and influence - within the group as well as in outside networks.

An additional limitation was the length of time between the event and the subsequent interviews. Obviously, an ideal research situation would have been to conduct research interviews with everyone immediately following the viral event. However, due to the nature of this project and multiple IRB approvals required, that wasn't possible to do within such a short timeframe. Therefore, participants relied on their memories and review of their social media accounts to answer some questions and could not always assure complete accuracy of recall.

A final limitation in regard to the timing was the issue salience. As the Haver Currins moved on to activist roles focusing on other local social issues after the privacy fence was built at the protest site, group activity came to a standstill online as well as physically. For this reason,

it was a long process to recruit participants, as many members are no longer actively engaged with the group or the issue. This is not an uncommon challenge, as scholars of other activist groups and social movements have reported that issue-based coalitions dissolve quickly once their primary objective has been reached or when the issue become less salient (Svensson et al., 2014).

Responses to Social Processes Research Question

In response to RQ1 (How and why did the Saturday Chores group use social media?), the Saturday Chores group used social media to share information with friends and family and organize the counter-protest. In particular, the Haver Currins noted that they also used social media strategically to gain attention for their “prankster” innovation. Two group members who knew the couple well before Saturday Chores commented on their creativity, media savvy, and a strategic sensibility that informs the couple’s use of social media.

“I would add something about the intentionality of Grayson and Tina – I mean it’s an accomplishment and it’s not an accident that this went viral.... I’m not suggesting that the spark of it was.... strategic. I believe in the spontaneity of the first thing -- but I also believe that they are very aware of how to manipulate the media.”

“I don’t know that this was entirely spur of the moment like they claim it was. But once it got going, they grabbed that bull by the horns and sorta knew what to do with it.”

Opinion leadership, change agents spreading messages deeper within the individual networks, and the new digital norms of connective action and networked participation were key social processes of the Saturday Chores viral event and activist group. The opinion leadership of

the Haver Currins was evident in interview data - Grayson's in particular. As a respected writer and music industry critique, his actions and innovations are examples for others to model. In addition, his extensive social media network meant he was able to reach many networks outside local personal and professional connections to share information to other influencers for resharing. This was evidenced by both interview data and the descriptive social network analysis. Even based on the interview data and social media metrics alone, Grayson's network embeddedness and his ability to influence other opinion leaders supported widespread diffusion of content across multiple social networks and heterophilous audiences. Rogers said that change agents should work with several different sets of opinion leaders to reach outside groups (who are homophilous) with the goal of finding role models that resonate with group members of all kinds (2003, p. 307). Considering this, Grayson's vast personal networks, opinion leadership, and social sharing facilitated this process, as did the change agents or experienced activists who joined the group. Therefore, the Saturday Chores founders online social behavior as well as the behavior of their friends and followers substantiate virality as a social information flow per Nahon and Hemsley's argument (2013) – an organic process of information diffusion triggered by easily sharable novel content and influenced by opinion leaders.

To quote Rogers on this social process:

“The heart of the diffusion process consists of interpersonal network exchanges and social modeling by those individuals who have already adopted an innovation to those individuals who are influenced to follow their lead. Diffusion is essentially a social process.” (2003, p. 35)

Finally, the interviews and the descriptive social network analysis identified at least three other group members who were very active in information exchange inside the group and outside

it. I have argued that at least three group members were also functioned as opinion leaders based on the interview data and their social media networks and metrics. These may be the individuals also represented by Saturday Chores Facebook group nodes with the next highest betweenness centrality scores (#199, #205 and #338). Although it is worth noting, it is impossible to confirm this with the current depersonalized data set.

Therefore it was largely the social processes of opinion leadership and their change agents that allowed Saturday Chores content (such as the photos and the Facebook post with the direct link to the Tumblr site) to “jump” or bridge networks and bypass network gatekeeping functions of the media platforms (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Cross-platform sharing by opinion leaders and change agents between networks effectively bypassed network gatekeeping by brokering tens of thousands of connections between personal and professional networks and Saturday Chores content (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). (Please note that I discuss the actual digital network gatekeeping functions that supported the viral event in the next chapter.)

When group focus moved to more traditional messages and away from the innovative ones, the message became increasingly diluted and possibly less meaningful to those who were most attracted to the novel approach. Although much of the group remains intact (464 members as of the time of this report), some interviewees mentioned members who had left due to the change in direction of the group and the lack of activity.

A few long-time women’s reproductive rights advocates still occasionally post in the Saturday Chores group. But without the direct involvement of Grayson and Tina, the group has become inactive and there is no new content being created within it that reflects their innovation. As the group administrator put it, ““Especially with Tina and Grayson gone Saturday Chores has kind of just fizzled. So it had fizzled a bit before, but now it's like really fizzled.”

The erection of the privacy fence was meant to substitute for the physical presence of Saturday Chores members and founders at the site. An ongoing counter-protest was something the Haver Currins were not interested in as they expressed their desire to extricate themselves physically early on in the action. In addition, as the couple moved on to other activism, Saturday Chores group issue salience and identity faded without their opinion leadership and innovation. By the time the privacy fence was built and as the conventional Pro Choice messages became commonplace, the group had essentially reached network saturation with the Saturday Chores message idea – it was no longer novel or as exciting (Rogers, 2003).

This de-evolution of the social processes and diffusion lifecycle also aligns with Nahon and Hemsley's notion of viral event interest networks dissolving when issues become less salient (2013). After reaching network saturation, interest groups focused on a single issue or innovation may dissolve or simply become latent (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rogers, 2003). When asked about what would happen if the Haver Currins would reengage with Saturday Chores, she emphatically stated that the group (interest network) would activate. "Oh, everybody would get back together in a second I absolutely know that. And be supportive, absolutely."

Next, I discuss the network processes of Saturday Chores in the following chapter, including those supporting the viral event, the media timeline, network gatekeeping, and the message themes represented in the coverage of this innovative counter-protest. I will present the results of a three-part content analysis to describe the movement of Saturday Chores content between digital media platforms, note any network gatekeeping functions that were identified as supporting the process, and report results from my operationalization of Nahon & Hemsley's four bases of virality (i.e. did Saturday Chores "measure up" per their viral event definition?)

CHAPTER 5

Saturday Chores Digital Network Processes

Digital network processes also played a role in the diffusion of Saturday Chores content during the viral event. Just as the social processes of sharing, opinion leadership, and connective action created awareness of the counter-protest and innovative messages, ultimately resulting in the formation of a formal activist group with tens of thousands of followers, digital network processes and structures supported the media content flows. Over the course of this chapter, I address the third research question by examining the network processes that were involved and how they contributed to the event. I also discuss whether or not the Saturday Chores event met the four bases of Nahon and Hemsley's definition of virality (2013), consider the dominant messages themes present in the coverage, and identify individuals quoted in interviews as evidence of opinion leadership. The results of a three-part content and a web traffic analysis of the Saturday Chores Tumblr analytics are presented to answer these questions and a media timeline of the event is used to illustrate the progression of the story and content from social media to mainstream media publications and back.

Content Analysis Results

Traffic Analysis.

A clear picture of the scope of the Saturday Chores viral event can be seen in by looking at the web visitor traffic coming to the Tumblr blog. As noted earlier, the Haver Currins created the blog in response to a request from a local journalist friend who wanted to write about the counter-protest. Tumblr is an easy-to-use blogging platform and it allows bloggers to follow other Tumblr blogs and repost photos from them. The format is similar to other blog platforms, it is a scrolling interface (posts are in order of date posted with the most recent being at the top)

and it is integrated with Instagram (you can simultaneously cross-post) and Google Analytics. When they finished posting Saturday Chores photos, the Haver Currins enabled analytics tracking when they published their blog.

Therefore, the Tumblr blog had only been “live” for a couple of days when the viral event occurred following the publication of *The Daily Dot* story. The article contained a direct link to the blog for reference. Readers who wanted to view more Saturday Chores photos simply clicked through to the Tumblr and “followed” it. This web traffic spike is clearly seen in the Google Analytics report from the period beginning when the blog went live through April 2015 (see Table 5.1 in Appendix B for measures). The report was further filtered to include the top 5,000 referrers (sites referring traffic) and resulted in 110 pages of data that comprised the sample for the analysis ($N = 5,000$). The number of 5,000 referrers was used as that included sites with only one visit, most of which were other Tumblr blogs from reblogging across the platform. No additional referrers or cases would have added meaningful data to the analysis.

In Google Analytics terminology, sessions refer to “a group of user interactions with a website that take place within a given time frame” (Google Support, 2018). This timeframe is usually 30 seconds. Since the Tumblr blog scrolls and does not have separate sections, this measure is analogous to visitors coming to the site (and staying there long enough to be counted as a “session” visit.)

The site traffic report for the viral period also represents a highly compressed S-curve signature of traffic to the Tumblr site. The S-shaped curve often typifies the adoption cycle of an innovation that peaks as the innovation is shared, the angle of the curve decreases as adoption moves into later stages, sometimes with a smaller “uptick” in adoption before finally trending down or decaying to flat (Rogers, 2003). However, in this instance, with the viral event, the

number of visitors to the Saturday Chores Tumblr is more like an explosion rather than a typical S-shaped curve of an adoption cycle. Saturday Chores Tumblr traffic signature is like those discussed by Nahon and Hemsley in regard to viral events which is more reflective of a typical power law distribution (2003). According to the authors, in viral events, there is acceleration, then a slower decay resulting in a longer “tail” of sharing or views/visits. This viral signature is also indicative of social sharing of content. As shared content spreads widely, network clusters become saturated (meaning that there are fewer individuals to whom it is “new” content). They describe this is often a slow-fast-slow S-shaped curve (Nahon & Hemsley, 2003). (See Figure 5.1 in Appendix C.)

In this case, there is a sharp spike of traffic immediately at the beginning of the Google Analytics report showing the initial viral event of the week of July 21, 2014. Following that initial spike, traffic had a sharp decay where activity calmed down after the first week, then it spiked again in late summer, quickly followed by a second decay. The notable spike of over 25,000 visitors around August was most likely the result of the Bustle article being shared on Facebook by Star Trek celebrity George Takei, or possibly the publication of *The Daily Mail* article five days afterward as both pieces contained direct links to Saturday Chores’ Tumblr.

Although the extreme rate of acceleration of Saturday Chores web traffic is atypical of a viral signature, the timing of the event and the blog going live had much to do with it as does the fact that the viral content was the Tumblr link – not a video or single piece of content. Therefore, it is to be expected that there would be some differences between this event and other viral events measured by the sharing of a particular piece of content. Also, as the event was a Facebook event and not Twitter, measuring the shared link is possible but not all of the shared content (due to privacy and platform restrictions). Therefore, measuring traffic that resulted from

the shared link is one way to illustrate the scope and timing of this event. As of the timing of the Google Analytics traffic report (July 19, 2014 through Aug, 18, 2016), the link to Saturday Chores Tumblr site had been shared over 4,098 times on Facebook. It had received almost twelve thousand “Likes” (11,975) and it had been commented on 3,419 times.

Media Timeline.

The constructed media timeline of the viral event illustrated the number of people exposed to the Saturday Chores content as the Tumblr link was shared and mainstream publications took note. Although many newspapers and blogs did not have social metrics (shares, likes, retweets, etc.) or readership “counters” on their sites, the figures that were collected show that the content moved from Facebook (original post), to publications (*The Daily Dot*, *Cosmopolitan*, etc.) and back via one (*Bustle*) to be shared again on Facebook. All of this happened in one week with the most mainstream publications of interviews with the Haver Currins happening July 23 through 25. (See Table 5.2 in Appendix A for the full media timeline with all measures and Figure 5.2 Appendix C for a graphic illustration.)

Some articles were shared widely just within a few days, such as *The Daily Dot* which had received over 109,000 shares by late summer. Others received thousands of “Likes” indicating a wide readership/viewership as in the case of the *Huffington Post Live* interview. Some of the highest visibility Saturday Chores received was on Facebook when an anonymous comedian known as “God” (with over a million followers) shared the *Bustle* article (See Figure 5.3 in Appendix C). That post was subsequently re-shared by celebrity George Takei who had even more followers – about five million at the time. Both posts received tens of thousands of shares and likes, and several million people were exposed to this content on their Facebook timelines.

The Google Analytics report allows us to gauge long-term impact of the publications of this period on the Tumblr traffic. All Facebook traffic combined equaled 73,618 visits to the site during the July 2014-August 2016 period, but the Bustle article alone resulted in almost 47,000 sessions – most likely due to the celebrity sharing. The top sites referring more than 10,000 visitors to the Saturday Chores Tumblr were Facebook, *Bustle*, *The Daily Dot*, Google (organic search), *Mic.com*, *Huffington Post* and Yahoo News. Both *Huffington Post* and *The Daily Dot* reprinted/republished the original articles and interviews with Saturday Chores in other sections of their sites including a newsletter. Although it wasn't a top referrer, *Cosmopolitan* also published versions of their interview in affiliated Hearst magazines *Elle* and *Marie Claire* and included a direct link to Tumblr (see Figure 5.4, Appendix C). Affiliate content was published the same day, thus maximizing visibility to their readership.

Despite the availability of these publication and social media metrics data, it is difficult to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the media coverage in particular because of the lack of consistent meaningful social metrics and the continued challenge of measuring online readership (Thompson, 2014). Also, some media coverage through news syndication was particularly difficult to identify as that content changes constantly and the only evidence left is in the Tumblr site visits from publications such as *Vice.com* (News.Vice.com) and *Newsweek.com* there is no confirmation of the date it was first posted. There may have been many such news sites and publications that posted Saturday Chores content within the timeframe of the initial viral event, but due to the scope of the diffusion, timing, and possible pay walls involved for some publications, a comprehensive archeology of all Saturday Chores media is not possible. For this reason, aggregate measures from the preceding analysis and the interview data were combined to consider whether this event fit Nahon and Hemsley's definition of virality (2013).

Results – Four Bases of Virality

After explaining that there is no one measure or particular number that signifies a viral event, Nahon and Hemsley proposed four “bases” to measure a viral social information flow to distinguish them from flows that represent online content that becomes popular over time. At this stage of the study, Saturday Chores data was analyzed for fit with these measures to confirm that it was truly a viral media event. Following Nahon and Hemsley’s examples in *Going Viral* as a reference, a variety of data were used to complete the analysis and a table describing the operationalization of each measure can be found in Appendix B of this dissertation.

Digital Social Sharing.

The first “base” of virality is informed by social sharing behavior, the human aspects of social information flows that create and support viral events. Based on self-reported behavior, the media metrics referenced in the event timeline, and the Google Analytics traffic report; Saturday Chores content flows were a product of social sharing. As shown in the previous analysis, Facebook sharing activity fueled the event much more so than mass media. In addition, the interview data illustrates the role of opinion leadership as a factor as this event content was activist in nature, and although abortion is a highly sensitive subject for most, the group’s innovative tactics and messages were widely adopted and replicated. Based on the social and Google Analytics metrics, tens of thousands of people shared Saturday Chores content and many began following their Tumblr to see more content.

Speed of Diffusion.

The second measure is the speed of the viral spread. Nahon and Hemsley argued that virality is defined by speed and reach (spread of diffusion) in social networks and that it tends to follow an S-shaped curve (2013). Analysis of the media timeline and Google Analytics report

data provides evidence of an extremely rapid diffusion of Saturday Chores content via media coverage and social sharing. Basically, the initial viral event occurred within a week with the last major press interview (*The Daily Mail*) happening within two weeks. The week of July 21, 2014 – Saturday Chores simply “blew up” on social media and online news. As a result of the direct links shared on Facebook and in the articles, their Tumblr site received an enormous amount of traffic—tens of thousands of visits—within days of going live. This was observed in the exaggerated S-shaped curve with long tail in the Google Analytics report. Therefore, the incredible speed of information diffusion was a defining characteristic of the Saturday Chores event.

Reach by Number of People.

Due to the speed in which Saturday Chores content spread through social and news media, the number of people it reached during the viral period far exceeded that of the group founders personal networks (as large as they are). This third base of virality considers the reach by number of people who were exposed to the content. Based on the social metrics and available readership numbers of the individual articles, hundreds of thousands and probably millions of people (based on the two celebrity Facebook posts alone) were exposed to Saturday Chores messages and tactics within the initial two-week event. Certainly, many more have seen the photos as much of the media coverage has persisted online and due to the popularity of the content and linkages with Saturday Chores and other popular content, rank high in search results. *The Daily Mail* article is one example of this phenomenon since its publication in August of 2014, it has received over 14.4 million “Likes” indicating that audiences have continued to read the piece.

Reach by Number of Networks.

The final “base” of virality is reach by networks. As the ability to bypass network gatekeeping is an indicator of virality, the number of networks that information flows reach through content sharing or other means of jumping networks is key. In the Saturday Chores case, interview data showed that supporters as well as the founders shared content through multiple social networks to heterophilous groups of personal and professional connections (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rogers, 2003). The founders’ use of the Instagram application as a primary tool allowed them to post content simultaneously on social platforms although Facebook was their main venue for discussing and organizing the counter-protest. Therefore, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were represented in the information flows as well as Pinterest to a lesser degree. One factor that supported widespread sharing among social platforms and article readers was the use of floating social icons - especially on mobile versions of publications. Blogs and blog-like publications such as *Bustle*, *Feministing*, and *Crooks and Liars* all featured these floating icons that moved with the reader as they scrolled through content, thus making it simple to quickly share, tweet or “pin” content to personal accounts. Content only reached Pinterest following coverage by these publications. Additionally, mainstream U.S. media coverage during the initial event reached more than 20 mass media platforms and in at least two cases, to their affiliated publications and networks.

Saturday Chores content obviously reached networks in Australia and the United Kingdom as witnessed by the interviews in *The Daily Caller* and *The Daily Mail*. As a result of global coverage, “copycat” Saturday Chores counter-protests later occurred in Brisbane, Australia as well as several locations in the U.S. Apparently, populations in China were also

exposed to Saturday Chores photos as a beer advertisement posted well after the viral event featured Grayson's PhotoShopped image holding a sign promoting the brand.

When taken as a whole, this evidence indicates that the initial two-week Saturday Chores event involved at least two dozen global media networks and the five largest social media networks in the U.S. and English-speaking countries, possibly even reaching English-speakers in other areas such as China.

In summary, the Saturday Chores event met Nahon and Hemsley's criteria of a viral social information flow based on evidence obtained from the in-depth interviews and the media metrics obtained during the first part of the content analysis. The event represented social sharing, the speed and reach by number of people exposed to the content typical of viral information flows and the ability to jump networks through both human and digitally supported network gatekeeping functions.

Content Analysis Results – Message Themes, Opinion Leadership, and Network Gatekeeping

The next stage of the content analysis examined the message themes presented in each article or blog post. The goal of this part of the analysis was to provide evidence about the types of messages and themes that “go viral” online. As video content analysis was not part of this examination, the AOL and Huffington Post Live content was not included, neither were duplicate reprints (the second Huffington Post article). The final sample consisted of the remaining 20 articles collected during the initial viral period of the week of July 21 through the first week of August 2014.

Articles were coded into three message theme categories based on this study's operationalization of innovation as a novel strategic approach to counter-protest (Saturday

Chores tactics and messages) and the activists group's primary social issue, women's reproductive rights. The category of "Other" was used to identify any other message themes appearing in more than one article. Each message theme was coded as either being "Primary" (the dominant message of the headline and article body) or "Secondary" (included, but not the focus of the article). To be categorized as the "Primary" message, the article headline, lead, and at least the first paragraph had to reinforce that focus. Similarly, to be considered a "Secondary" message theme, the article body copy had to address the theme, or it be mentioned in the headline or lead. The categorization scheme was developed by the primary researcher following several readings of the articles' manifest content to identify dominant themes including keywords indicating innovation (for example, "clever," "brilliant," and "genius") and women's reproductive rights ("anti-abortion" or "abortion" for example). The number and subject (signs depicted) of Saturday Chores photos included in the article were also tabulated. Due to the small sample size, a second trained researcher also coded the entire sample and no statistical analysis was performed.

Direct hyperlinks to Saturday Chores Tumblr or personal social media accounts of Tina and Grayson and the hashtag (#saturdaychores) were tabulated when included as part of the article, as were links to other coverage about the counter-protest. This data was used to identify network gatekeeping functions of the articles and commercial media platforms as means of linking across networks (Castells, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). If an article was reprinted or reposted content picked up from another source, this was also noted and the original article or blog recorded.

Finally, researchers tabulated the names of individuals quoted in the articles and blog posts (Grayson, Tina, "Both" or "Other") to augment the findings of the opinion leadership

analysis. Named quotes were considered indicative of opinion leadership whereas “Both” were where both of the couple were named and quoted or where quotes were taken from the Tumblr blog and used without attribution. (Note, findings from these two categories are reported in the next section and in the results summary of Chapter 6.)

Following coding, simple agreement and Krippendorff’s Alpha were calculated using Freelon’s ReCal (2013). For the ten variables of the study, there was 100% simple agreement (Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient 1.0) exceeding the generally accepted 80% or Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient of 0.80 for content analysis reliability measures (Riffe et al., 2014).

Message Themes.

Findings from the message themes analysis showed that innovation was the primary topic of the media coverage as it was present in 15 of the 20 articles or 75% of the sample. Women’s reproductive rights or “Pro choice” was also present as a content theme (16 articles or 80% of the sample) however the Saturday Chores tactical approach was the topic of most headlines and leads. Therefore, innovation was the primary topic with women’s reproductive rights or abortion representing a secondary theme. Two articles also presented abortion as a secondary theme, but were negative coverage. The first was an original article in *The Daily Caller*, a conservative publication founded by political strategist and commentator Tucker Carlson, and the second was an aggregation or reprint of it in *YahooNews*. *The Daily Caller* presented a message of admonishment toward Saturday Chores and described the couple as publishing a blog to mock the mission of the anti-abortion protestors. The focus here was on calling conservative attention to the blog and the Haver Currins, portraying their actions as disrespectful or even shameful.

Under “Other,” two message themes were presented in at least two of the articles or more. The first, “Couple” focused on Tina and Grayson as a young couple engaged in this

activity, drawing attention to them as innovators (N = 12, 60%), “Couple” and “Trolling” as a linked theme was present in headlines and the body copy of three articles (15%). As the first article, The Daily Dot’s headline (“This Couple's Counter-protesting with Pro-lifers and Documenting it on Tumblr”) seems to have set the message frame that persisted throughout the viral event as the content of that and related articles was reproduced. In addition to the message themes, one important semantic difference was noted considering keywords used. Rather than “anti-abortion” the feminist-focused blogs used the term “anti-choice” to describe the Pro Life protestors (*Feministing.com* and *TheHairpin.com*). Only these two pieces of media coverage featured this term, and they represented the two where women’s reproductive rights were the primary message theme.

The Saturday Chores photos most reproduced in these twenty articles and blog posts were “I Like Turtles” (N = 15, 75%), “Women’s Rights Expert” (N = 13, 65%), “Bring Back Crystal Pepsi” (N = 11, 55%), and “Weird Hobby” (N = 10, 50%). Several other photos were included in covering such as “Jesus Slays” most notably in *The Daily Caller* (probably as an example of the couple’s mocking activities). The twenty articles/posts included a wide range of photos used - between two and fifteen depending upon the publication, depending upon their page format. All of the articles used at least one of Saturday Chores photos.

Opinion Leadership.

The results of the content analysis of the twenty articles and blog posts published during the initial viral period provided additional evidence of Grayson’s opinion leadership and of the couple in general. Seven of these pieces of coverage contained quotes from Grayson only (35%), mostly likely due to his lengthy interview for *The Daily Dot* and that story’s narrative tone and his eloquence. None of the articles only have quotes from Tina only, but nine of them (45%)

contain quotes from both of them (although it is not often clear who is being quoted as some were pulled directly from the Tumblr blog). No supporters of Saturday Chores were quoted in this coverage. This finding is not surprising, as at the time, the physical support for the Haver Currins was limited at best (just a few “friends”) and this coverage coincided with the formation of the group as the private Facebook group itself wasn’t created until August 5, 2014. Perhaps more importantly, no one from the Women’s Preferred Center or national or local Pro Choice groups were quoted or referenced. The focus of the articles (based on the interviews and message theme analysis) was the innovative protest tactics of the Haver Currins and the content of their Tumblr blog as evidence of their brilliance.

Network Gatekeeping.

As discussed in the previous section, the digital smart phone application Instagram allowed the Haver Currins to cross-post content and comments on multiple social media platforms simultaneously. Therefore, this application allowed them to bypass any Network gatekeeping functions of those single platforms. Possibly more importantly, many of the media coverage sites and blogs were similarly optimized for mobile devices and easy social sharing on multiple platforms. As long as an individual had corresponding accounts, anyone reading the *Bustle* article (for example) could instantaneously share it with their personal networks on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. Such digital affordances made sharing Saturday Chores content between platforms – including between more controlled media platforms and social media – simple to do. Coupled with the social processes discussed in the previous chapter, this behavior was reported by all respondents, many of them also noting their advocacy work on behalf of Saturday Chores tactics and counter-protest. These endorsements influenced adoption and helped extend Saturday Chores message content deep into these networks and illustrate the power of

these opinion leaders and change agents to bypass network gatekeeping structures to make the content accessible to their connections.

The Facebook group administrator also recruited several friends – also self-identified as women’s reproductive rights activists – who brought similar experience to the group as well as personal connections with local chapters of Planned Parenthood and the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL). These connections helped Saturday Chores reach people deep in issue-based networks they otherwise may not have been able to reach.

(It began with the chapter in) North Carolina, I think, initially. Eventually, it spread through different Planned Parenthood, and NARAL networks, but they reached down to us directly to thank us. And I believe they shared it publicly in the beginning. And then, obviously, tap into a network of people, who are very interested in the issue. I think that was an important piece of it. (Grayson)

These nonprofit connections were important to the group, however their part in the diffusion of Saturday Chores content remains unconfirmed as they declined to participate in this study. (In addition, no evidence was found of nonprofit content sharing and only one NARAL tweet tagging the group was identified during data collection and analysis.)

This ability to share information that reaches “the gated” or audiences otherwise accessible to the source or activist group – be it a digital or human ability – is the essence of network gatekeeping in action (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Castells, 2015; Deiliis, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Bypassing network gatekeeping or creating a bridge between otherwise unrelated networks to make information available has been previously illustrated in the organization of social movements such as #OccupyWallStreet and it was present in the actions of Saturday Chores group members and the founders use of social media applications such as

Instagram and Tumblr. Both human and digital network gatekeeping functions supported the social information flows of the Saturday Chores viral event during those two weeks leading to the formation of the formal activist group (Castells, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

Algorithmic network gatekeeping also contributed to the continued visibility of Saturday Chores content as shown in the example of *The Daily Mail*'s 14.4 million "Likes" and the high search results rank of the Saturday Chores Tumblr site and associated social media accounts. Due to its numerous in-bound linkages from mainstream media and number of followers, the Tumblr site is still the top result of a Google search with keywords "Saturday chores" despite the ambiguity – four years after the initial viral event. It is also the top site when the keyword "protest" is added and the group's IndieGoGo account, Twitter as well as several of the mainstream media articles immediately follow in rank order. (See Table 5.1 in Appendix B.)

Interview data from the Haver Currins also provided evidence of algorithmic gatekeeping as both reported that Saturday Chores became a "trending topic" on Yahoo News and other aggregators following the *Daily Dot* story and the *Huffington Post Live* interview. Therefore, people who would not otherwise have been exposed to Saturday Chores messages and photos were able to access them with one click from the main dashboards of their email providers or aggregate news sites through this digital syndication process.

Findings from the quantitative content analysis also provided evidence of this linkage and the syndication process. There were 34 direct hyperlinks to Saturday Chores Tumblr and personal social media accounts (Twitter, Instagram) included in the articles and blog posts from the initial viral period. Also, 11 of the 20 articles (55%) contained one or more links to other digital publications coverage of the event or were included as part of content syndication from the original source. *The Daily Dot* and *Mic.com* links and content were reproduced through

network syndication in *Huffington Post* and in other networks such as the Hearst family of publications, (first *Cosmopolitan* article for example). The *Mic.com* piece and others reproduced content, links to reference materials (such as a then recent court ruling about abortion protest “buffer” zones) and quotes from the Haver Currins from other publications such as *Elle* and *The Daily Dot* and backlinked to them to give credit as sources. This best practice of online journalism is a content strategy used to optimize search results and it essentially creates its own sub-networks of online content around a topic, allowing millions of readers one-click access to a variety of editorially and socially shared original content.

To quote Nahon & Hemsley once again,

The power of network gatekeepers does not necessarily reside in the ability to stop information from getting to people or by filtering it. On the contrary, **it is hidden in the ability to link networks together, allowing information to travel far and fast and to connect to people to information and ideas.** (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013, p. 48)

Through applications supporting cross-posting, sharing, and featuring aggregated news and trending topics compiled by algorithms designed to promote popular content (and thus drive click-throughs and online readership), digital network gatekeeping processes complemented human social actions to enable global audiences to access and spread Saturday Chores content at will. Therefore, only those without access to the internet could truly be described as “the gated” per the definition of network gatekeeping provided by Nahon, first writing as Barzilai-Nahon in 2005, then further refined in 2008. Only through direct observation of the actions of Saturday Chores at the Raleigh, NC protest site, or through the limited print coverage of one article in the local newspaper of record, would those without Internet access have been able to access the messages or learn about the group’s innovative tactics.

Limitations – Network Process Analysis

As noted in each analysis discussion, the major limitation of the quantitative content analysis of social sharing, traffic, and media coverage was the lack of consistent reporting of these metrics by the publications. Finding articles manually through search and essentially “working backward” to compose the media timeline and its metrics was time consuming and unfortunately did not produce an exhaustive list of coverage. Therefore, the Google Analytics analysis was necessary to create a more holistic picture of the speed and reach of the viral event.

Also, the fact that this particular viral event happened largely on Facebook versus Twitter compromised the researcher’s ability to trace the sharing of Saturday Chores content due to the closed nature of the platform. Only the Saturday Chores Tumblr URL was trackable via Netvizz statistics prior to the changes imposed by Facebook’s API in 2017. For these reasons, a complete analysis of the content spread could not be performed to illustrate and measure the diffusion.

Another limitation was the lack of unrestricted access to the Tumblr’s Google Analytics account. The Haver Currins provided the report used for the traffic analysis but as neither were/are trained users of the platform, the amount of data pulled was limited to their ability to create a standard report. Research plans originally included additional report periods. As the account is linked to Tina’s personal Gmail account, the couple was unsurprisingly reluctant to provide direct access to the primary researcher who was more experienced using the tool. However, the couple moved and communication with them became limited, as they have been mobile ever since. This limitation was mitigated by the ability to use search data to complement the traffic report during the creation of the media timeline to confirm publication dates and significant social media sharing events.

Finally, due to the need to use different units of analysis for various measures, and to depict the immediate as well as the long-term impacts of the event, the data collection periods for this mixed method study were not consistent as is ideal for single method research. The media timeline focused on the period of July 23 – August 6 to include all coverage and key social activity of the viral event itself. The Tumblr blog content referenced for the study provided context for the counter-protest since its start on March 8, 2014 through the end of that July when activity moved to Facebook (group started around August 7, 2014). The descriptive social network analysis data was pulled to reflect the period of highest group activity (August through end of 2014) and one year following to provide a longitudinal view of social processes. Lastly, the longitudinal Tumblr Google Analytics report (as discussed above) was used to provide data to illustrate the impact of the viral event and then the overall impact of the media coverage.

Research Question Responses

Based on findings of content analysis findings, the answer to the third research question is that digital processes of network gatekeeping and algorithmic gatekeeping helped support the social information flows of the Saturday Chores viral event of July 2014. The use of digital applications allowed group members to post across multiple social networks simultaneously via their smart phones unhindered by platform gatekeeping functions. Additionally, the presence of “floating” social media icons on many of the mobile-optimized articles made it exceptionally easy and quick to share content to diverse personal and professional networks, as did the inclusion of hyperlinks to Saturday Chores Tumblr and other media platforms in syndicated content and quote sources.

These digital processes were complemented in bypassing network gatekeeping structures by human sharing between platforms reported in participant interviews. Because most of the

media coverage contained direct links to the Tumblr blog, the Google Analytics traffic analysis provided a picture of the reach and speed of the event that was not possible to observe through publication and social media metrics. This constructed media timeline was supported by the interview data (and member-checked for validity by the Haver Currins) as were the human factors of social sharing and network gatekeeping. The content analysis provided additional support evidenced by the presence of numerous hyperlinks between the coverage and Saturday Chores (as many as three in some articles) and other media platforms. Therefore, in response to research question 3a, yes, the Saturday Chores event was a measurable viral media event that satisfies Nahon & Hemsley's definition of viral events as a social information flow and their four bases of virality as evidenced by the aggregate findings from this stage of the study (2003).

Conclusion of Saturday Chores

As the weekly Saturday Chores counter-protests progressed during the summer of 2014, signs representing more of a traditional Pro Choice movement message strategy became common at the site. Signs saying "Pro Choice" and "I Trust Women" appeared depicting a more conventional response strategy to the anti-abortion messages. The diffusion process slowed as social media networks became saturated with content, however as evidenced by the later articles in December 2014 and into 2015, people and media outlets were still learning about Saturday Chores and sharing their messages. However, it became increasingly clear that the pressure of keeping up the physical activism at the site was not really sustainable as growing Saturday Chores support also meant growing numbers of Pro Life protestors showing up - some even from out of state. By the autumn of 2014, this issue, coupled with ongoing threats of personal violence, repeated trouble obtaining protest permits, and the strain of dealing with the local police (who had an increasing presence as both sides of the protest grew in numbers), led to

discussion about the possibility of building a physical barrier to take the place of the human barrier of Saturday Chores. Saturday Chores launched an IndieGoGo campaign to raise funds to build such a privacy fence with the clinic's permission and it was a huge success, far exceeding its goal.

The Haver Currins also attempted to "put the brakes on" the viral event by turning down further media interview requests. The couple felt that they would use the power of their newly expanded personal social media networks and Saturday Chores social accounts to fundraise and build a fence to eliminate the need for ongoing physical intervention at the site.

According to Grayson:

We also sort of like harnessed in some way, the power of the Internet to create this attention and that attention kind of had a backlash as in "A" more of the Pro-lives showing up but then also as "B" it kind of backed us into a personal corner - with people being very threatening, people saying awful things, people making really substantive threats to do things. And I think that we realized that this wasn't sustainable. It's not like we can go out there every Saturday morning with this group of people and stand there and do it. Because it isn't a question of "if" something is going to happen it's a question of "when" something is going to happen.... the only answer to that that really seemed stable and sustainable thing to do was to once again to use the power of the Internet to like harness the physical change to (do something) that we didn't like have to be there for everyday.

After the fence was erected in early February of 2015, Saturday Chores quickly became an inactive group. Although some Facebook group and supporters continued to share related articles and updates, the interest network became inactive once the Haver Currins stopped feeding

content via new signs and interviews. Within two months, the Haver Currins and the people that supported their Saturday Chores had mostly moved onto to other local social issues of significance. This swift decay of activity is typical to viral media events as discussed earlier in this chapter as is the eventual dormancy of the interest networks they create through social media connections and numerous network hyperlinks to viral content.

However, that does not mean the event fades away completely from public attention. As Nahon and Hemsley explained, every time that content was copied, replicated, or otherwise shared during the viral event, the process of recovering it later is facilitated (2013, p. 130). This was evidenced by search results that place Saturday Chores Tumblr in the top position years after the viral event. Nahon and Hemsley noted that this impact – when a similar topic or event occurs and the viral event is referenced (usually with hyperlinked articles or to social media), it can easily resurface from time to time (2003). Therefore, viral events have an “aftermath” that continues long after the initial viral diffusion period. This is an issue for consideration in activist public relations as well as one that practitioners and scholars must consider. Uncontrollable during the initial event, viral media has long-term impacts on organizations and individuals involved that require ethical responses and the radical transparency digital communication requires. To consider how public relations might respond to such events or leverage their power, in the next and final chapter, I discuss the findings of the preceding analyses and present practical recommendations based on the five tenets of the theory of dialogic public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014) to answer my fourth research question. I begin with an overview of the aftermath of the Saturday Chores viral event.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

From the analyses of the social and digital network processes presented in Chapters Four and Five, a picture of how Saturday Chores “went viral” the third week of July 2014. In response to RQ 1 (How and why did the Saturday Chores group use social media?) we learned that the Haver Currins used social media to share content with friends and family as well as their extended social networks on their public accounts. This behavior is unsurprising given their ages (late twenties at the time) and media professions – digital photography, writing (and copywriting) were shared skills and staging pranks was something they did for fun. Capturing these antics and sharing them to their social networks was automatic for them. Therefore, although strategic and genius in their messaging and staging of the first Saturday Chores, there was no plan to start an ongoing counter protest at that time – it was more of an inspired moment shared by two incredibly digitally savvy individuals, one of whom happened to be a recognized opinion leader. They just happened to accidentally start an activist group with their innovation when they shared via Instagram as part of their everyday online sociality as networked individuals (Baym & boyd, 2012; boyd, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Based on content analysis results, humor, irony, and absurdity helped spread content exemplified by the “I Like Turtles” sign photo being the most prominent one to appear in media coverage (Boyd, 2002).

To answer the second research question - what social processes were involved in their group and (how) did they contribute to the event? Interviews with the Saturday Chores founders and the eleven people who supported the counter-protest showed that social sharing on Facebook was the primary activity that supported widespread diffusion of content. The viral event itself was triggered by a weak-tie of Grayson’s – a loose music industry connection who shared the Tumblr

link on Facebook. His post with the link was seen by a reporter for *The Daily Dot* who published the first mainstream media article about Saturday Chores messages and tactics.

The interviews with Saturday Chores group members illustrated Grayson's opinion leadership as well as the social sharing behaviors within the group. Most importantly, the member who created the Facebook group was previously unknown to the Haver Currins. A self-identified long-time women's reproductive rights activist, the administrator knew how to set up the closed group to protect organizing activities from public view. Members reported that they primarily used the Facebook group to obtain planning and protest information or to share related news articles on women's reproductive rights.

Results from the descriptive social network analysis, complemented by the interview data, indicated that the Facebook group interactions were focused around two members (nodes #343 and #344) who, based on measures of network cohesion, were by far the most connected and important members of the group. These two nodes are the most embedded in the network and play a key role in the group's information exchange. Node #344 is the "information hub" of the network and mostly likely exerts a good deal of influence in the network due to all of its brokered connections (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rogers, 2003). Finally, this analysis showed that there were no other significant subgroups other than the core group surrounding the two key nodes.

By correlating these two analyses, I have proposed that these two most important nodes represent the Saturday Chores founders, however due the limitation of the depersonalized Facebook data, this cannot be stated conclusively. If these nodes do represent the Haver Currins as I have postulated, this is an interesting finding as they are the center of attention and activity

within the Facebook group although they themselves did not start it or perform many of the initial organizing activities.

Content analysis results showed that Grayson was the most quoted person although several articles quoted both Saturday Chores founders. But none quoted supporters, group members or partnering organizations. Yet, interview findings illustrated opinion leadership of three group members and that other members may have played the role of change agents helping to spread the Saturday Chores innovation deeper within homophilous networks. Interview data identified three group members who acted as opinion leaders or “influencers” who purposefully shared Saturday Chores content to blended personal/professional networks at scale (thousands of friends and followers) aiding widespread diffusion - key to message adoption and viral media events (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rogers, 2003).

In addition, the Haver Currins recognized the opinion leadership of others within their personal networks:

I think he, when he was sharing it and sort of just talking about it, and then showing up, and then posting photos of him showing up, was for our area. By (name of musician), I should say (his name) and (his partner’s name), because they're both well-known people in the area. And I think that gave a certain legitimacy to these kids, to some extent. (Grayson)

Speaking of the support of a New York City-based music journalist connection, Grayson pointed to a high-level “tastemaker” social media friend and Saturday Chores supporter as an example of network influencers that shaped information flows:

Yeah, he's sort of connected. He's a music critic, and he's been there for a long time, and an editor. He's very well connected with famous New Yorkers, I guess, or taste making,

as Tina put it New Yorkers. It spread that way, and it spread, Chicago and California, through those networks. That sort of whole network was important. Just the **how** (it spread) part. (Grayson)

Therefore, opinion leaders in strategic network locations helped influence adoption in interpersonal networks during the Saturday Chores diffusion event. This finding leads to the response to the next questions - What network processes were involved and how did they contribute to the event? Does the Saturday Chores event meet Nahon and Hemsley's definition of virality?

Opinion leadership enabled Saturday Chores members and their most "hyper-connected" tastemaker network connections share content between and across otherwise unrelated networks. Acting as bridges between networks, these individuals bypassed network gatekeeping through both their influence and their actions to support the social information flows of the event as described by scholars of virality and social networks (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Castells, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rogers, 2003).

Digital network gatekeeping and algorithmic gatekeeping also figured into the viral event. The Instagram smart phone application allowed Saturday Chores to bypass platform-based network gatekeeping by enabling social media cross-posting and instantaneous sharing from the protest site. From the traffic analysis of the Tumblr site, we know that direct hyperlinks to the blog embedded in the media coverage also permitted direct access to Saturday Chores content and activist group updates. The first, the *Daily Dot* article, drew heavily from the Tumblr photo content and included a direct link back to it, and traffic to the site exploded within hours of its publication. This led to further Facebook sharing and other interviews with the couple that week

producing over 20 stories within days of the Tumblr going live. Digital floating social media icons or “buttons” on the articles that were optimized for mobile devices also contributed to network gatekeeping activities as they helped readers easily share them to social media.

Evidence of mobile audiences was evidenced in the Google Analytics traffic analysis and article screenshots.

Search played a role in algorithmic network gatekeeping during the event and continues to do so as Saturday Chores content consistently ranks high or at the top position in Google’s page rank results. Saturday Chores became a “trending topic” on Tumblr and several news aggregators due to the popularity (high traffic) of the blog. Because of the thousands of hyperlinks published during the viral period between Saturday Chores Tumblr, social media, and the various articles, the event is deeply embedded in digital networks. Therefore, Saturday Chores often “bubbles up” when a related topic such as Pro Choice activism or innovative message strategy refers back to previous coverage, or the Tumblr, or to Tina and Grayson’s social media accounts. (I will further discuss the implications of this viral afterlife that persists due to search and deeply embedded network content in the next section.)

As Saturday Chores content “blew up” shortly after the Tumblr went live, we have evidence from Google Analytics to complement social media and publication metrics to measure the scope and reach of the event. The extreme number of sessions (from 13 to over 50,000) that occurred within a day of the first news article along with the socially shared content reaching millions of people within days (including those as far away as Australia and Europe) all indicate virality. Based on these findings, Saturday Chores was a media event that satisfies Nahon and Hemsley’s four bases of virality by illustrating viral social and human factors (exceptionally wide-spread sharing), viral speed, and viral reach by number of people and networks (2013).

The Viral Aftermath

Following the building of the privacy fence at the women's clinic and the deactivation of action at the site, Saturday Chores continued to receive attention online as the group's Tumblr or the Haver Currins were referenced in related articles, as discussed previously. Year-end list articles for 2014 ("Top Feminist Moments of 2014" for example) and 2015 coverage added more direct links to Saturday Chores Tumblr or previous coverage. Therefore, Saturday Chores as a topic of interest "bubbled up" from time to time due this new coverage and search results and the Haver Currins reported that during 2015 "ever month or so" someone would send them a link to a (new) old story, or reach out to them for advice. This experience is typical of the viral media event "aftermath" stage which may persist for months or even years (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

In addition, due to the high visibility of the viral event, there was at least one instance of a copycat Saturday Chores in North Dakota that seemed motivated by a desire for viral fame more than a wish to positively intervene in an ongoing anti-abortion protest (Merlan, 2015). Although this sole counter-protestor denied knowing about Saturday Chores, he used a nearly identical "Women's Rights Expert" sign with an arrow and bragged about his identity as an online troll (Merlan, 2015). This story focused on the fact that this individual was making anti-abortion protestors feel unsafe at the site as he also issued threats and verbally harassed them. This article in *Jezebel* was linked to Saturday Chores as Tina was contacted for a quote regarding his copycat tactics.

I think it's great when people draw inspiration from Saturday Chores, and folks have staged similar counter-protests all over the world," she wrote in an email. "It's been really amazing to see. But I am NOT into it if it's done with the intention of "making it big" or "going viral" or whatever. We have always worked in concert with the director of

the clinic in North Carolina to make sure that nobody is uncomfortable. That's the number one goal (Merlan, 2015).

Therefore, despite their best efforts at denying requests for interviews, Saturday Chores continued to be a part of their lives – both online and offline – for much of 2015 and 2016. As noted during the content analysis, search results still return their personal Twitter accounts and the Saturday Chores Tumblr at the top of the list for even generic searches of their keywords.

The Haver Currins were and are well aware of the continued searchability and network embeddedness of Saturday Chores as well as the existence of the (now latent) interest network it created around the issue of abortion. The following quote from their first interview reflects this and their awareness that the global scope of the viral event had on the impact of a local counter-protest.

I don't know if this is relevant or not -even with the active de-escalation, it seems like it (Saturday Chores interest network) is still continuing to "sizzle" I guess I would say. I get people hitting me up for interviews or wanting to do -- like it's become more of an academic thing. It's becoming like people are starting to study it now, but every month or two it's still surfacing in a new news story and is taking on like new forms, like the one in Australia... it was amazing, it had "weird hobby" and "women's rights expert" and things we wrote on our signs -- but it didn't mention us at all! It didn't have our names or Saturday Chores - but it was just like "Counter protest does this"... So it just has little blips and if we post something, it will still get hundreds if not thousands of likes.... (Tina)

Content is expected, but we don't deliver it. I think... like maybe this is foolish... but the weird thing is that we could tap that kind of instantly... (Grayson)

Yeah, I feel like it's at a low boil, it's simmering, and if we wanted to turn up the heat, we could, because everyone is invested in it and the issue's not going away...and the strategy is not going away and the humor is not going away and that's what people liked and that's what took off. (Tina)

And the effect is still there - not only was it funny, but it had an impact. (Grayson)

So what does the case of Saturday Chores viral media event offer for public relations scholars and practitioners? How can practitioners respond both effectively and ethically to these challenges and opportunities as network gatekeepers? In the following sections, I answer my fourth research question by offering some recommendations using the dialogic theory of public relations as a framework. Then, I offer specific implications for both activist public relations and non-activist public relations practice. Finally, I discuss some unique opportunities that viral events may offer for practitioners and for future public relations research.

Recommendations for Public Relations Based on Dialogic Communication

Hon (like many public relations scholars) addresses activist public relations based on the two-way symmetrical model of public relations as balanced communication between organizations and their publics (Grunig, 2006).

However, I will base my recommendations for practitioners based on the Saturday Chores case public relations tactics from a publics-perspective approach via the dialogic theory of public relations put forward by Kent and Taylor (2002). I will use their five features of dialogic communication as the framework for my discussion (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). According to Kent and Taylor, publics should not be thought of by organizations as

“others,” rather, public relations should be “public centered.” The procedural approach to dialogic public relations involves creating organizational mechanisms for facilitating dialogue (2002, p. 32).

I chose this theoretical framework because it is based in a publics-perspective and recognizes the interactivity of digital media, both key elements contributing to the success of the activist tactics involved in this case. However, many of these features may also be found in the “ethic of care” model of socially responsible activist public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). As discussed in the literature review, Kent and Taylor’s five key features of ethical public-organizational communication are mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and long-term commitment (2002). The authors define these features as a dialogic orientation to public communication (to quote at length):

Dialogue as an orientation includes five features: mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics. (2002, pp. 24-25)

Mutuality

Saturday Chores used digital media platforms for collaboration and coalition building during the duration of their active engagement at the site. Not only did this “collaborative orientation” allow them to diffuse messages across many social groups and media networks, it differentiated them from other activists such as the North Dakota copycat case as it was based on

mutual respect, transparency and credibility. This was evidenced by their dialogic stance in Saturday Chores message. One interview respondent (who happens to be a journalist and professional writer) described their tactics and messages as an “invitational rhetoric” that opened up an opportunity for participation in Saturday Chores, not a typical activist demand for support. To quote this respondent at length:

Interpersonally (Grayson) is a low-key kind of guy when you converse with him, etc. He’s deceptively self-effacing. That might be a good description. And just very low key. And Tina... they’re both lovely people. Not what we would exactly call “firebrands” or “evangelists” you know, that type of grabbing people by the lapels and trying to sell them something. The discourse in which their initial posts came out is not confrontational were very low key, it’s like “We’re doing this you’d like to join us” - it’s not really escalating. It is a not escalating rhetoric of “We’re doing this if you’d like to join us” and letting the images say what they want. I am thinking that given the populations involved, that that rhetoric had its own appeal – that someone just puts it on the table and walks away – just puts it on the table and says “This is available and join us if you will.” But in terms of public relations, yeah, the rhetoric of the approach that they used also had a lot to do with their success. Again, it wasn’t like a sorority rush or something like the evangelism of saying “you must do this!” (I’m not using evangelism in the religious sense but in the terms of social media and saying) “You should do this or you’re a bad person!” The rhetoric of escalation – of raising the stakes in social justice, social intervention – I think this is frequently counterproductive. They kind of hit the sweet spot in terms of their rhetoric and their forms of presentation.

Considering this, public relations professionals should consider an open, mutually collaborative tone in their online conversations with activists (and others). This seems rather evident advice to professional communicators however, many organizations establish and maintain a high-level professional tone or use terms exclusive to their business or industry. Although this example relates specifically to the physical counter-protest, the couple used this tone in all of their observable communication between the group and other organizations – very friendly, open, and focused on mutually beneficial outcomes as part of the conversation. This framework could provide guidance for difficult online conversations with activists, or consumer relations and issues management communication.

Propinquity

Public relations should learn from this case that online conversation and dialog extends beyond person-to-person, to something that might be described only as network-to-network communication as messages are shared between platforms and presented in context with other content or search results.

Practitioners must consider the effects of this interplay between platforms and content as well as how these conversations might be shaped or reconfigured during this process in order to produce understanding and desired long-term outcomes (Curtin, 2016, Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

Structures to facilitate direct conversation during and following viral events or activism should be created to support timely and accurate responses. Social media communication presents the best possibility for spontaneous conversation and timely dialogue between most organizations and their publics; therefore it should be a primary tool for public relations responses.

Empathy

Following Saturday Chores example, public relations professional should also be empathetic with the organizations who are impacted indirectly by their activities. This is illustrated in Tina's assertion in the *Jezebel* article that (unlike the North Dakota copycat) Saturday Chores made repeated efforts to reach out the Preferred Women's clinic to make sure that the attention of the counter-protest wasn't making the situation worse for their visitors worse.

Communicators should also reach out to ensure that their responses to viral events or activist demands are not having unintended consequences whenever possible in order to remedy the situation before it becomes an issue unto itself.

Risk

Digital communication on social media and public communication in network society in general is risky – especially in situations where messages might be reconfigured or resurface years later. Therefore, those engaged in public relations following a viral event or responding to activist demands must consider how their messages will appear to future publics as well as address issues with transparency and from a public's perspective. This case illustrates how content can quickly go out of control through both social and network processes to become a viral event.

Public relations practitioners should not attempt to “manage” these social information flows when they occur, instead, they should respond openly and ethically to any negative coverage and enlist support as needed for ongoing social media monitoring. Emphasis should be placed on content planning for the viral “afterlife” as additional responses and interactive media

may be required to restore desired outcomes including search results and the organization's online reputation.

Long-term commitment

Although this case study presents a single instance of a viral event springing from a small local counter-protest, several viral events have been triggered by social movements and similar activist protests such as the University of California "pepper spray incident" photo of 2011 and the "United Breaks Guitars" video of 2009 (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). As scholars have argued, in digital society all activism is global, no matter the size or locale, as small activist groups can create social change by leveraging the power of digital media to share messages and gain support (Castells, 2015; Shepard & Hayduk, 2002).

Therefore, it is possible that any activist group engagement could result in a viral media event. Public relations practitioners must consider the long-term impacts of the virality and its afterlife when engaging in public conversations or issuing public position statements during the period, and possibly, for years going forward.

This does not mean that viral events are always detrimental for the organizations involved, in fact they often present opportunities as well as a chance to build long-term relationship. But this must be recognized in daily public communication practice.

As Hon noted in 2006:

The value of public relations to society is tied to the choices practitioners and other managers make about public relations at the program, functional, and organizational levels. (2006, p. 54).

Implications for Activist Public Relations

As reviewed in the introduction of this dissertation and discussed in the review of literature, scholars have recognized the relationship between activism and public relations practice. Recent calls for a publics-focused perspective of public relations note that in network society, practitioners are boundary-spanners between organizations and activist publics, therefore, therefore activist voices should be considered as positive social change often occurs due to issue-based activism (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Demetrious, 2013; Hon, 2006). Due to social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and blog platforms such as Tumblr, activists now have the ability to communicate directly with global audiences, bypassing traditional mass media gatekeepers (Castells, 2015; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Hon, 2006) and rapidly build loose action coalitions focused on specific issues or events (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Svensson et al., 2014). Activists may also use tools such as the Instagram application to leverage the digital network affordances of replicability, scalability, and searchability to bypass network gatekeepers and diffuse information to global publics (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). This case study illustrates the power of these tools when used strategically and creatively by activists.

Although virality cannot be engineered, creative activist tactics – such as the theatrical ones used by ActUp! and Billionaires for Bush – translate effectively online when optimized for “spreadability” as were Saturday Chores photos featuring their ironic signs (Jenkins, et al., 2013; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Shepard & Hayduk, 2002).

These innovative messages, coupled with the ironic stances and expressions of the protestors involved, had a rare ability to disrupt existing conversation and rapidly gain global attention and necessary resources (Boyd, 2002; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Shepard & Hayduk, 2002; Wood & Moore, 2002). Saturday Chores photos acted as collectivist action frames or

memes, visually encapsulating their messages in a way that could be shared readily through digital media without changing meaning (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Boyd, 2002; Grote, 2002; Guadagno, et al., 2013; Svensson et al., 2014). Their publication in magazines, newspapers, and blogs covering this innovative activist message tactic positively impacted the outcomes of the counter-protest as well (Hon, 2015). Such strategic use of digital media (or “meme warfare “as it has been described) has been show to be effective in coalition building and the mobilization of social movements (Boyd, 2002; Shepard & Hayduk, 2002) and helps these groups frame issues in a manner that support larger social advocacy engagement (Hon, 2015). Saturday Chores strategic use of digital media to share their photos, although not originally intended as a call to action, lead to a formal counter-protest and the formation of an activist group of “fellow travelers” who shared their vision, and helped them meet their immediate goals (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002).

Opinion leadership played a large role in the spread of Saturday Chores content. Obviously, not all activist groups will have members who have access to digital social networks like those of the Haver Currins, but by reaching out to those who do (such as community leaders, celebrities, etc.) those engaged in activist public relations may strategically leverage those networks to spread their messages.

Activist communication tools.

Based on this case, those engaging in activist public relations should consider how messages might be shared across platforms without losing meaning or impact. Being able to tactically communicate messages across multiple platforms in a highly “spreadable” form is key to message adoption based on this case. Although Saturday Chores did share messages on Twitter and did start using the hashtag #saturdaychores during the counter-protest, the viral event

and their support networks happened due to widespread sharing on Facebook – a much more closed platform where hashtag linkages are less important. Therefore, using visual communication and Instagram, Tumblr, and other cross-platform and mobile-friendly applications would be beneficial as they are not tied to any one platform. Also, Tumblr allowed Saturday Chores to create a “home” for their highly visual messages yet provide context to tell their story. It is important to note that it was that was the link itself, not one photo, that went viral and having that story in place made it easy for the media to write about the counter-protest. Activist groups should also consider this when planning media relations.

Implications for Professional Public Relations Practice

As I have just discussed, widely diffused digital content has a persistent afterlife. The impacts of an event such as the one experienced by Saturday Chores’ founders will follow them through their daily lives for years. The material affordances of digital networks such as algorithms that rank search results and promote “trending” topics expose content to new audiences and may help bridge networks as people see it in appear at the top of news feeds and searches (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). We saw this illustrated in the case of Saturday Chores activist-produced content, however any exceptional content may benefit from these digital network processes and gain heightened visibility, therefore professional communicators should consider the “searchability” of their messages, images, and social media accounts. Virality can impact organic search results for years to come and impact existing media campaigns drastically – both by framing first impressions of an organization through search results, but also through affecting unrelated campaigns already in market (such as cost-per-click campaigns based on keyword pricing).

Considering the findings of this study, public relations scholars and practitioners should consider the inherent unmanageability of a viral event and even social media communication in general. Other than the tone and content of the messages put forward on their behalf, organizations cannot predictably control the flows of information within digital networks (aka social media “management” is a myth). The best practices of ethical digital communication discussed earlier in this dissertation (pages 40-45) provide a framework for professional communicators in network society.

Ultimately, the lessons this case presents for public relations is that responses to viral media events should be considered as social information flows and practitioners must recognize their roles as network gatekeepers between publics and their organizations. In addition, they should be aware of the impacts that digital network gatekeepers such as search engines will play in reputation management long after the immediate event and interest have subsided. They should ask themselves, “What story do we want to have visible online afterward?” and create content and messages reflecting that goal.

Public relations professionals and scholar must also recognize viral media events as part of digital culture – an increasingly common one. With this in mind, practitioners should undertake all public communication as conversations between equals – with the goal being to create understanding and productive relationships that benefit the greater social good (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Social advocacy efforts and public conversations during and following viral events spawned by activist content may present unique opportunities for productive dialogue. Certainly, by being open to interpersonal communication channels, the Preferred Women’s Clinic staff and visitors benefitted from Saturday Chores, however they and their nonprofit allies may have missed an opportunity by not engaging in more public conversation with the group – especially

as the activists' innovative messages created an opportunity for dialogue about an issue typically constrained by strong binary rhetoric. As one interview respondent pointed out, Saturday Chores' use of "invitational rhetoric" and humor helped fuel the viral event as it afforded a different perspective of how women's reproductive rights supporters might engage in counter-protesting, and pointed to a desire to reframe calls for action.

Finally, this case provides an example of the human activities involved in network gatekeeping as Saturday Chores hyper-connected opinion leaders and change agents helped content bridge networks. Network gatekeeping activities as part of digital activism have impacts on the understanding of social issues and further social change (Castells, 2015; Demetrious, 2013). Public relations professionals need to recognize themselves as network gatekeepers and potential social change agents who perform these functions between their publics and the organizations they represent, as well as within their own personal and professional digital networks (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Rogers, 2003). The tools that enabled effective activist public relations illustrated in this case (sharing experiences, practicing empathy, using social media conversationally, etc.) are also best practice for all public relations professionals to model as socially conscious citizens, advocates, and practitioners, as the roles are not exclusive (Toledano, 2016).

Public relations practitioner communication tools.

In addition to recognizing the need for ethical public relations responses to viral events, understanding the social and network processes involved in one such event provides professional communicators with a broader understanding of how to plan campaigns and use tools that leverage these processes. Specifically, using tools such as cross-posting social media applications to help create "spreadable" content. Thinking about content as it will appear across

platforms is key to creating content that is amenable to sharing as well. Content may be posted to specific platforms, but it isn't "rooted" there. Public relations professionals should consider how to maximize flows of content as a way to bridge networks (Jenkins, et al., 2013) and recognize the increasing importance of visual communication as exemplified in the case of Saturday Chores photos.

Opportunities

As Hon has argued, activism presents opportunities for public relations and as I have just discussed. While the viral case of Saturday Chores also presents challenges, but it opened up opportunities for relationship building between the organizations benefitting from the counter-protest and all their publics who became part of the loose, online coalition.

Public relations practitioners should recognize and leverage viral interest networks as new publics of their organization. There was a notable missed opportunity with this case as none of the nonprofit organizations that Saturday Chores collaborated with during the protests took the opportunity to engage in open dialogue with the interest network. Had they done so, they may have either gained volunteers to serve as clinic escorts or added new financial supporters. The women's clinic also did not attempt interaction with Saturday Chores supporters either offline or online. As it is a private business, it is understandable that they may not have the resources to devote to outreach. However, as an organization at the focus of such a controversial topic and a community member, the clinic may have benefitted from taking more of an activist communication stance by leveraging the support of the interest network. If nothing else, communication professionals should consider viral interest networks as valuable resources to gain input on focal issues as long as they do so ethically and with a view to the social impacts of their activities.

Public relations should also fully recognize their boundary-spanning role in every-day as well as viral public relations. Through the example of this case, we have seen how opinion leadership contributed to the widespread diffusion of Saturday Chores messages. As organizational-publics boundary-spanners, public relations practitioners are situated in an advantageous position within organizational digital networks. As network gatekeeper and boundary-spanners, they are uniquely able to identify opinion leadership or develop their own opinion leadership themselves through modeling norms or innovation adoption.

Significance of Research

This dissertation helps extend existing research boundaries of public relations research through application of diffusion theory to an instance of tactical innovation and activist public relations. The use of network theory, critical approaches to public relations, and nontraditional digital methods to explore virality also contribute to the development of the field as a multifocal discipline (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Using a mixed method approach rather than a single quantitative method to understand networked opinion leadership and examine the social and network processes that shaped the information flows adds a new methodological framework for future public relations research along with an operationalization of Nahon and Hemsley's four bases of virality.

This project also was a first step bridging viral media studies with public relations that will hopefully support future theory building in this area of communication as a field. Viral events – understanding how they happen, but more importantly, their lasting effects and possible opportunities - should become an important topic of public relations research as the frequency of this phenomena continues to increase.

Future Research

Future research on the topic of opinion leadership in activist public relations would benefit from a qualitative approach. Virtual in-depth interviews (done via Skype or Google Hangouts) with group members would help further identify factors that constitute influence as opinion leadership in digital networks. Currently, social media scholars consider this from the network perspective while most public relations scholars discuss the role of individual “influencers” in network communication, yet little has been done to synthesize these views or better define this term. Formative research questions for this research might include asking how opinion leadership differs between online and offline networks, and what social role(s) or influence do activist public relations activities have in blended media networks (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Lee & Riffe, 2017; Leung & Lee, 2014; Rogers, 2003).

Based on this case study and the recognition of the impacts of the “viral aftermath”, public relations researchers should consider the role that organic search results play in reputation and issues management and to consider possible agenda-building or agenda-setting functions in relation to social advocacy or corporate social responsibility (Guo & McCombs, 2016; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Turk, 1986). This research might take the form of an experiment presenting different scenarios of search results to respondents to measure differences in their perceptions of the organizations and their salience based on how they are ranked or presented with accompanying linkages.

Finally, future researchers should examine public relations response strategies following other viral events to identify possible best practices for responses during the aftermath, and for engaging resulting interest networks as new organizational publics, as this was a missed opportunity for the nonprofit organizations in this case.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – IRB Approved Interview Questionnaire and Data Analysis Code Sheets

Questionnaire for Saturday Chores Network Analysis Interviews**Facebook Friends, Group Members and Others**

1. When and where do you first recall seeing the Saturday Chores posts or pictures?
2. What was your reaction to the post or pictures? (Can you describe your response?)
3. At that time - were you connected to either of the Saturday Chores principles (Grayson or Tina) on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter?
 - a. If so – how were you connected?
 - b. Did you know them “in person” at that time?
 - c. Are you connected to them personally now?
4. Did you share those pictures or comment on them? If so, why or why not?
5. If you shared them, where and how did you share them (to the best of your recollection)?
6. Why did you share the Saturday Chores content? (What compelled you to share them?)
Can you describe your thinking?
7. In your opinion – what made the Saturday Chores social media content “go viral”?
8. Also in your opinion – was it the people, the photos or the issue that was most compelling about Saturday Chores?
9. Finally – can you describe your own social media networks? Which platforms do you use personally and professionally? What “groups” are you engaged with on them (can be personal or professional and either formal groups or just networks of people with common interests such as music industry)?

MEDIA FRIENDS ONLY

10. Why did you choose to cover Saturday Chores?
11. What content did you use and/or link to (from what platforms – Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram?)

Thank you again for participating in this study. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you have regarding the project at any time before or after submission of your responses. We hope this study will help other organizations use social media more effectively to promote their efforts.

Melissa Adams / mbadams4@ncsu.edu
Mobile phone (919-225-XXXX)

Interview Codesheet – Saturday Chores Viral Event

RQ1: How and why did the Saturday Chores group use social media?

RQ2: What social processes were involved in their group and (how) did they contribute to the event?

1. Social and network structural factors

Existing connection to T&G? YES / NO

How WERE they connected? (X all that pertain) (Opinion leadership)

Professional _____ Personal/Interpersonal _____

Facebook _____ Twitter _____ Instagram _____ Other (describe) _____

Bridge to other networks YES / NO

Description(s) of network:

(FOR RQ4 Network Gatekeeping) Shared to other media platform)? YES / NO

Description:

Network Embeddedness (list & # of ties/primary network):

Reasons/how they use social media (RQ1)?

(Homophily) Connect to friends & like-minded others YES / NO

Activism/social issues YES / NO

(Heterophily) Professional YES / NO

2. Diffusion theory concepts

Awareness – How did they first learn about SC & join group?

Already connected to T&G YES / NO

Socially shared post/tweet YES / NO

Publication media YES / NO (Describe if yes) _____

Opinion leadership YES / NO

Description:

Change Agent (Heterophilous – shared to heterophilous networks) YES / NO

Description:

Aide? (Homophilous- shared within homophilous networks) YES / NO

3. Emergent themes from interview (note below and on back of paper):

Content analysis code sheet

Content Analysis Codesheet – Saturday Chores Viral Event

Unit of analysis – each article or blog post (from 2 week viral period). Refer to Screenshots/JPGs captured and media timeline as needed.

RQ3: What network processes were involved and how did they contribute to the event?

3a. Does the Saturday Chores event meet Nahon and Hemsley’s definition of virality?

N&H - 4 bases of virality (as a social information flow) operationalized in this study:

1. Human & social aspects of sharing (diffusion) – decision to share factors: **content**, context, **form**, social forces, identity/stance of people involved) (Interviews, form & content of pubs)
2. Speed – of the viral spread (dates, “viral signature” # visits to SC site from Google Analytics)
3. Reach by People – number of people exposed to content (social metrics, Google Analytics metrics)
4. Reach by Networks – the number of digital networks content diffused through (pub names/media networks, #social platforms, geographic locations, Google Analytics metrics)

(N&H form)

Type of pub: Newspaper _____ Magazine _____ Blog _____ Other _____ describe:

Publication name: _____ (N&H) Date of pub: _____

Reprint or Reblog? Yes / No Parent Pub or Content Network: _____

Section of Pub or Blog (ex. Lifestyles): _____

Geo of pub (Country or US City): _____

(Network gatekeeping) Part of media network or “family of pubs”? YES / NO

(N&H content)

Article headline/post title (record): _____

SC Photos used (list “Weird Hobby” etc.) _____

(N&H Reach measures) Social icons / # of shares, retweets

| | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|---|----------|----------|---|
| Facebook | YES / NO | # | Twitter | YES / NO | # |
| Instagram | YES / NO | # | Tumblr | YES / NO | # |
| Pinterest | YES / NO | # | LinkedIn | YES / NO | # |

#Readership (if available) #

(Network gatekeeping) Does the article contain:

Hashtag (#saturdaychores) YES / NO

Direct Tumblr Link (saturdaychores.tumblr.com) YES / NO

Links to other Saturday Chores coverage YES / NO

(Opinion leadership / Activist PR) Subjects interviewed/quoted in the article:

Grayson YES / NO Tina YES / NO Other YES / NO Name(s): _____

(Message frames/Activist PR) PRIMARY focus of article:

Innovation (activist tactic) YES / NO Other (describe): _____

Women’s Reproductive Rights YES / NO

Describe SECONDARY focus of article (if any): _____

Appendix B – Tables

Table 5.1

Traffic analysis - Tumblr visits by platform/website July 2014-July 2016 (N = 359,336).

| Platform/Article | #Visits |
|------------------------------------|---------|
| (direct) / (none) | 51,979 |
| Facebook | 73,618 |
| Pinterest | 136 |
| Twitter | 92 |
| Instagram | 46 |
| Google (organic search only) | 19,806 |
| Yahoo (Yahoo News, organic search) | 10,261 |
| Bing (search) | 391 |
| Bustle | 46,901 |
| The Daily Dot | 28,646 |
| Mic.com | 19,265 |
| Huffington Post | 12,419 |
| The Daily Mail | 12,117 |
| The Daily Caller | 1,103 |
| Buzzfeed | 8,738 |
| Feministing | 3,603 |
| The Hairpin | 2,557 |
| Elle | 1,717 |
| Cosmopolitan | 1,661 |
| Crooks & Liars | 1,374 |
| Cosmopolitan | 1,169 |
| Refinery 29 | 821 |
| Uproxx | 627 |

Tables

Table 5.2

Viral media timeline – social metrics and media coverage.

| Date | Publication/Blog/Social Platform | Shares, Tweets/Retweets, “Likes” |
|------|-----------------------------------|---|
| 7/21 | Facebook (Tumblr) | 36 likes/13 shares |
| 7/23 | The Daily Dot - Lifestyle | 109K shares |
| 7/23 | The Daily Caller | 169 shares/ 27 tweets |
| 7/24 | Buzzfeed | (not available) |
| 7/24 | Feministing* | (not available) |
| 7/24 | The Hairpin | (not available) |
| 7/24 | Yahoo News | (not available) |
| 7/24 | Uproxx | 225 likes |
| 7/25 | Refinery 29 | 2.5K shares |
| 7/25 | Bustle* | (not available) |
| 7/24 | Cosmopolitan (1)* | 1.2K shares/72 likes |
| 7/25 | Cosmopolitan (2) | 272 shares/14 likes |
| 7/25 | Crooks & Liars | 1.87K shares / 23 tweets |
| 7/25 | Elle* | 2.4K shares /18 tweets |
| 7/25 | Huffington Post* | 17K likes /176 tweets |
| 7/25 | Marie Claire | 334 shares / 1 tweet |
| 7/26 | Addicting Info | 1.2K likes |
| 7/28 | Huffington Post Live* (Hot Blogs) | 268K likes |
| 7/28 | HuffPost Women | (not available) |
| 7/28 | AOL (via Huff Post Live) | (not available) |
| 7/28 | Daily Life (Australia) | 1.1K shares /21 tweets |
| 7/31 | Facebook (George Takei) | 36K likes (1st hour) |
| 7/31 | Facebook (God) | 11K likes / 26K shares |
| 8/4 | The Daily Mail (UK) | 14.4 million likes as of 4/12/2016** |

* Publications repeating story with their "family" of media outlets and products.

** No metrics available from viral period.

Tables

Table 5.3

Four bases of virality measures as operationalized in study.

| Base | Measure | Data |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| 1. Sharing (Human aspects) | Social sharing behavior – self-reported and social metrics | Interviews, Google Analytics |
| 2. Speed of viral spread | Media timeline, “Viral signature” (sharp S) # visits to SC Tumblr during viral event | Articles, social media posts captured during viral event, Google Analytics |
| 3. Reach (by people) | Number of people exposed to content | Social metrics, Tumblr site visits |
| 4. Reach (by networks) | Number of digital networks content diffused through | # pub /media networks, #social platforms, geographic locations (country) |

Appendix C – Figures



Figure 4.4 - The Viral Post on Facebook.

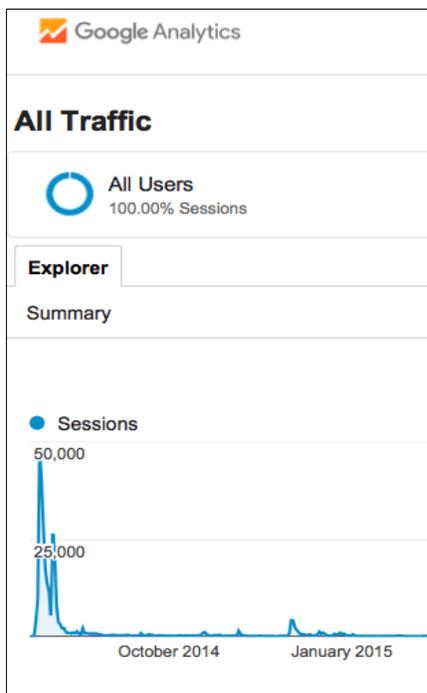


Figure 5.1 - Viral event traffic spike Google Analytics.

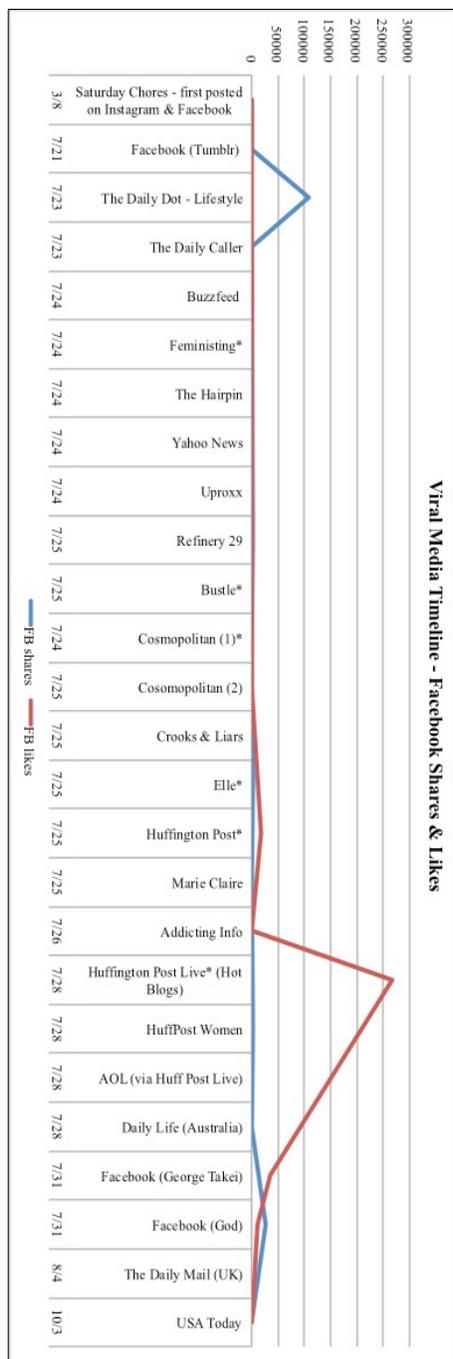


Figure 5.2 - Media timeline graph.

God
July 31, 2014 · Edited · ✱

The best answer to hate is humor.



Grayson and Tina Haver Currin's Counter-Protest to Abortion Clinic Picketers Is the Stuff of Genius
Pro-life advocates protesting outside women's health clinics are a common sight these days. At their least offensive, they hold up signs condemning both the...

BUSTLE.COM | BY LUCIA PETERS

Like · Comment · Share

11,048 people like this. Most Relevant ▾

25,945 shares

Figure 5.3 - "God" Facebook post of *Bustle* article.

COSMOPOLITAN LOVE | CELEBS | BEAUTY & STYLE | HEALTH SUBSCRIBE FOLLOW

Six-Pack Model Mom Posts More Ridiculously Hot...
Say Good-Bye to This Barbie Forever
Have a Glass of Water and Check Out Joe...
9 Inspiring Women Who Prove You Can Be Fit at Any...
You Must Read This Mom's Viral Anti Stut-Shaming...

NEW REVLON ULTRA HD™ LIPSTICK

JUL 24, 2014 @ 4:17 PM POLITICS ABORTION RIGHTS GRAYSON HAVER CURRIN SATURDAY CHOICES TINA HAVER CURRIN

You Have to See This Couple's Brilliant Response to Anti-Abortion Protesters
Best married couple ever.

By Emma Barber
272 Shares

SHARE 280
TWEET 14
PIN

MOST READ

Hospital Reports Chiropractor's Allegations
Wants to Police for Safer...



Grayson and Tina Haver Currin are fighting back in the funniest way possible against anti-abortion protesters who viciously threaten women at abortion clinics. A few weeks ago, the married couple decided to confront the protesters in their hometown of Raleigh, N.C., with some witty signs of their own. The photo shows their counter-protesters on their blog, [Saturday Choices](#).

Figure 5.4 - Cosmopolitan article with direct link to Tumblr.

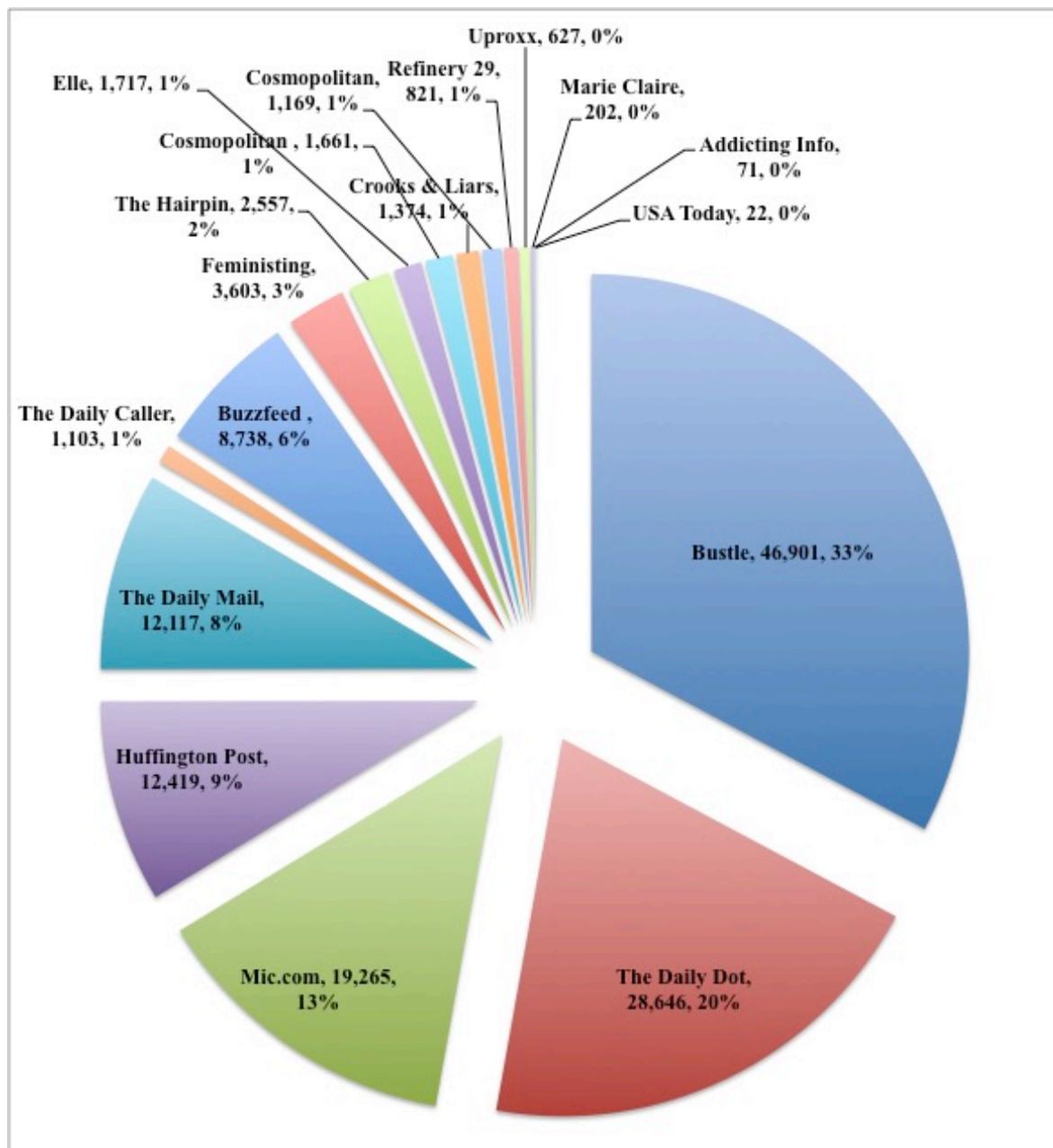


Figure 6.1- Tumblr Traffic by media platform (# Sessions, N = 143,013).