Digitally Networked Grassroots: Social Media and the Development of the Movement for Black Lives and Immigrant Rights Movement in the United States
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Summary

The advent of social media heralded great promises for social movements. First, social movements would be emancipated from the confines of geography. Since disparate activists can now communicate directly, protest can spread and scale quickly. Second, since social media allow activists to build horizontal networks, they would no longer rely on organizations and their leaders to organize mobilizations, opening up the possibility for more egalitarian social movements.

This book develops a unique approach to provide nuanced answers to both these assertions. Using new data sources and computational techniques, it addresses long-standing questions about how movements grow and develop leadership. Central to the approach are movements’ “relational dynamics”: the way relations are structured between activists over time and across space. Using a combination of computational, qualitative, and geographical analyses, the book shows that online activism is still firmly rooted in place and relies on leadership. But it also shows that the role of space and leadership has transformed in important ways, allowing more room for activists who were previously on the margin.

Thus, social media (re)produce inequalities in social movements, while simultaneously providing new means of analyzing relational dynamics. Contrary to popular understanding, these do not inherently produce egalitarian outcomes, and are just as likely to increase rather than decrease tendencies towards inequalities and conflict.