Contentious Politics: A large-scale comparative analysis of online protest movements

Background: Online social movements are playing an increasingly important role in contentious politics. The past decade has seen multiple regimes toppled in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt as a consequence of protests that came to life online. Domestically, movements such as Black Lives Matter have gained significant traction in online spaces. This new form of civic participation is here to stay and has thus attracted significant attention from both computer and social science researchers. However, most studies of online social movements focus on a single case study and use data from a single social media platform. In addition, due to API limitations, researchers generally are forced to make arbitrary data collection decisions—some use keyword searches to collect data while others examine data generated by a subpopulation of interest. As a consequence, it is difficult to ascertain whether these studies’ findings accurately capture even the movements on which they focus. And perhaps more important, it is impossible to determine the extent to which their findings are generalizable to social movements and media platforms more broadly—or, instead, are unique to the specific movement or media platform studied. Motivated to tackle these challenges, the proposed project will collect data on various online social movements (e.g. #BlackLivesMatter, #metoo) from various social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Youtube) using a number of different data collection methods. The project will compare and contrast these representations. By describing how individuals participate in online social movements, how these actions shape movements and what role different social media platforms play in this process, this study will inform (i.) community organizers and citizens of strategies that result in desirable outcomes in civic participation, (ii.) the designers of online platforms that aim to support such civic engagement about which design choices lead to what type of civic engagement, and (iii.) journalists that aim to provide accurate narratives of online social movements.

Description: Students will work under the supervision of Professor Ceren Budak. Research projects will involve collecting and large-scale analysis of social media data (e.g. Twitter, Youtube). Analysis of data will focus on participation, coordination, temporal, and linguistic patterns. Consequently, students will use and improve upon their skills in programming, data science, social network analysis, data mining, information retrieval, and social science theories of social/protest movements.

Mentoring Plan: The student will meet regularly throughout the project with the research team. Beyond discussion of the progress of the research project, the meetings will include discussion on developing personalized goals for academic, professional, and personal growth. These goals will include identifying research interests, outlining specific skills and/or knowledge the student hopes to gain through the experience, and determining strategies for reaching their goals.

Desired qualifications: The student should have strong programming skills (in Python, R, Java, or C++) and a strong interest in applying their skills to a research project. Experience with large scale data gathering, manipulation, and exploration and knowledge in machine learning, data mining, or social network analysis is a plus.