Avalanche or Storm in a Tea Cup:
The Case of 38 Degrees

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Abstract

38 Degrees is a UK-based online, multi-issue campaigning organisation, which emerged in 2009 and currently has over one million members. The organisation takes its name from the critical angle at which the incidence of a human-triggered avalanche occurs, which is meant to symbolize the power invested in mass mobilization. 38 Degree was inspired by MoveOn in the United States, GetUp! in Australia and Avaaz globally and is founded on the same campaigning model, which is commonly described as 'digital activism' meaning using the internet to mobilise people through campaigning. Groups such as 38 Degrees represent a challenge to traditional forms of political participation in that they operate outside of the state and are often critical of the state and corporate interests. Drawing on interviews with 38 Degrees staff and a discourse analysis of the 38 Degrees website, this paper considers the strategies and outcomes of 38 Degrees 'actions'. It is suggested that whilst 38 Degrees uses a range of online mobilisation tactics, it is also highly dependent on offline and traditional tactics and, therefore, represents a continuation of traditional mobilisation strategies. Further, whilst 38 Degrees campaigns are usually targeted at the state, formal politics remains central to this model of political participation, which suggests that 38 Degrees' aim is not to reject formal politics, but to improve it through enabling greater participation and re-connecting people to government.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a range of new online campaigning organisations, which are heavily dependent upon developments in ICTs to mobilise their membership. These organisations position themselves as being distinct from traditional types of political organisations, such as interest groups and political parties, and they often use a range of repertoires, which suggest a departure from traditional modes of political participation. 38 Degrees is one such organisation.

In this paper, I consider the emergence and growth of 38 Degrees, and discuss it within the context of broader debates about changing modes of political participation. Following Norris, I argue that there has been a decline in traditional modes of political participation and a concomitant rise in alternative modes of political participation. Further, I show that there have been changes in the *agencies*, *repertoires* and *targets* of political mobilisation (Norris, 2012). Drawing on an interview with a Campaign Manager at 38 Degrees and through a discourse analysis of the 38 Degrees website, I identify 38 Degrees as a new agency of political mobilisation, which uses a range of repertoires and identifies new targets of mobilisation beyond the nation state. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the changes suggested by 38 Degrees' approach, I also highlight continuities between its approach and those of traditional modes of political participation. In particular, I highlight two key areas of convergence: First, I argue that whilst many of 38 Degrees' campaigns use online repertoires of action, 38 Degrees is also dependent upon offline or more conventional repertoires of action, such as contacting one's MP. Second, I argue that a large proportion of 38 Degrees campaigns target the state. As such, this paper argues that whilst 38 Degrees may suggest a new approach to political participation today, it also utilises more established repertoires of action and operates in relation to the state as opposed to outside of it.

This paper has three sections. The first section introduces the case study, 38 Degrees. Next, I discuss the changes that have occurred in traditional forms of political participation. In the third section, I introduce Pippa Norris (2012) and discuss her distinction between agencies, repertoires and targets of political mobilisation. The fourth and final section, discusses 38 Degrees in relation to Norris' framework.

The Case Study: 38 Degrees

38 Degrees is a UK-based online, multi-issue campaigning organisation, which emerged in 2009 and currently has over one million members. 38 Degrees takes its name from the critical angle at which the incidence of a human-triggered avalanche occurs, which is meant to symbolize the power invested in mass mobilization. Under the motto of 'people. power. change.', 38 Degrees argues that it 'puts power into people's hands' by giving members 'a new way to be involved in politics', with the ultimate aim of strengthening democracy (38 Degrees website - accessed 01.06.13).

38 Degrees was inspired by MoveOn in the United States, GetUp! in Australia and Avaaz globally and is founded on the same campaigning model, which is commonly described as 'digital activism', meaning using the internet to mobilise people through campaigning. The organisation describes itself as non-partisan and issue-orientated, with a commitment to a progressive agenda, which seeks to: "campaign for fairness, defend rights, promote peace, preserve the planet and deepen democracy in the UK" (38 Degrees website - accessed 01.06.13).

The question of whether 38 Degrees marks a succinct break from traditional modes of political participation, or whether there are continuities, is an important one for the study of political participation. In terms of its organisational structure, 38 Degrees argues that it has attempted to avoid the concentrations of power and hierarchy, which it argues characterize formal politics:

> There was a conscious decision by David Babbs (Chief Executive) and the board to organise horizontally and not become bureaucratic like some other NGOs and therefore not able to react fast (James, Campaign Manager)

As such, 38 Degrees presents itself as a de-centralized and non-hierarchical organization, whose primary focus is to campaign on issues selected by its membership. The issue of how campaigns are selected and by whom is a key issue in

terms of exploring how 38 Degrees operates and the precise nature of its relationship with its membership, and which I will return to later in the paper.

Whilst 38 Degrees presents itself as non-hierarchical, it could be argued that its organisational structure resembles a top down institution, given that 38 Degrees comprises a small core team of paid and voluntary staff, headed by Executive Director David Babbs. It also has a Board, which advises on campaigning and financial matters. Andrew Chadwick (2007) is useful here in his observation that new social movements and online organisations often reflect a mode of 'organisational hybridity', where hierarchical structures and horizontal networked structures exist side by side. Further, he emphasises that this position could not be achieved without the internet. Following Chadwick (2007), 38 Degrees appears to be a hybrid organisation, in that it reflects a traditional top-down approach to organising, but one that also seeks to incorporate a grass roots approach to mobilisation. The next section moves on to locating 38 Degrees within broader changes in political participation today.

2. Changing Modes of Political Participation

Concerns over declining levels of political participation, particularly in traditional activities such as voting and political party membership have led many to argue that political apathy is increasing and that democracy is at risk (Macedo et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000). Moving beyond this approach to political participation, there has been an increasing recognition in the literature that there have been important changes in the types of political actions in which individuals are engaging, the reasons for their actions and the outcomes of these actions. Norris (2002), in particular, provides a helpful conceptual framework for understanding these changes. She argues that there have been distinct changes in the 'agencies' (the collective organisations through which people mobilize for the political), the 'repertoires' (the ways in which they choose to express themselves politically) and the 'targets' (the actors towards whom participants are attempting to direct their action) of political participation. Here, I examine each of these changes in turn.

a) Agencies

Norris (2002) points out that, whilst the agencies of political actions were traditionally characterized as interest groups or parties, they have now diversified and broadened to include social movements. These groups are formal organisations, which usually have well-established organisational structures and formal membership rules. Their main aim is to influence government, whilst also providing representation of members. Norris argues that these formal agencies certainly continue to exist, but, more recently, new social movements are emerging as popular avenues for informal political mobilization.

In contrast to traditional interest groups, social movements have more fluid and de-centralized organisational structures and more open membership criteria. Whilst they do not necessarily oppose formal decision-making processes, they favour looser coalitions with more informal modes of belonging, focused on shared concerns about diverse issues, community building and identity politics.

b) Repertoires

There is increasing recognition in the more recent political participation literature that there is a need to move away from a focus on conventional repertoires, such as voting and joining interest groups or political parties (Norris, 2002; Karpf, 2010). This strand of the literature acknowledges that recent decades have seen a diversification in the types of activities or repertoires used for political expression (Karpf, 2010; Chadwick 2012). Perhaps the most significant way in which the repertoires of political action have changed involves the use of communication-based, technological innovation and, specifically, internet activism (Bang, 2009). Whilst the earlier literature drew a line between conventional and protest forms of activism, it is not clear whether this distinction remains appropriate today (Verba and Nie, 1972).

c) Targets

According to Norris, the targets of political action were traditionally focused on the nation state, but have now widened to include other actors. Traditional theories of representative government claim that citizens hold elected representatives and governments to account directly through regular elections. Norris explains that,

whilst these activities remain important, there has been a 'shrinkage' of the state through globalization, privatization, marketization and de-regulation, which has meant that decision-making has flowed away from the state to complex private agencies working at local, national and international levels.

Norris' conceptual clarification between agencies, repertoires and targets is important and enhances our understanding of political participation. The changes she identifies reflect a broadening of the topics on which people engage and, in particular, the inclusion of lifestyle politics (Norris, 2002). This paper will use this framework for exploring the activities of 38 Degrees, because in my view, it provides a useful lens through which to understand and explore the activities of 38 Degrees.

3) Methodology

The paper will draw on an interview conducted with a Campaign Manager, James, from 38 Degrees. I also use a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology, as developed by Fairclough (2002), for exploring articulations of politics on the 38 Degrees website. CDA aims to combine analysis of language with analysis of wider social structures and complements a critical realist position, which, in my view, provides a robust ontological framework for this research.

I identify 38 Degrees as a new *agency* of political participation, and in the following section, I focus on two key aspects of Norris' framework - the *repertoires* used by 38 Degrees and the *targets* of its actions.

4) Results and Analysis

i) Repertoires: Online and Offline

Online technology is critically important to the new method developed by digital activists such as 38 Degrees (Norris, 2005, 2006; Vegh, 2003; Garrett, 2006; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Van Laer and Van Aeslts, 2010). However, in this section, I

want to show that whilst online methods are critical to the organisation's mobilisation strategy, it is also dependent on offline actions.

38 Degrees uses the internet and social media to mobilise, co-ordinate, communicate and build community amongst its membership. Like GetUp! and MoveOn, 38 Degrees' core tactic for campaigning is mass email, although social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs are also used to promote campaigns. The 38 Degrees website has three main functions: offering members 'actions' that they can mobilise on; polling members opinions about which campaigns 38 Degrees should champion next; and providing information about the progress of campaigns.

In addition to its reliance on online methods, 38 Degrees is also heavily reliant on offline methods, such as telephoning or writing to an MP, meeting with MPs and organizing local meetings. As such, it could be argued that 38 Degrees' campaign strategy reflects a mix of online and offline methods.

'Stand up for the NHS', 'Spotlight on Tax Dodging' and 'Save our Forests' are all examples of 38 Degrees campaigns. The success of campaigns is measured through achieving stated aims and raising awareness of the issues. As an example, the 'Save our Forests Campaign' was a response to the UK Government's plans in 2010 to sell off publicly owned forest and woodland in England. In response, 38 Degrees co-ordinated a series of actions, beginning with an online vote on whether 38 Degrees should develop a campaign on the issue. Following a positive response to this question, key actions included: an online petition; members donating to fund a YouGov poll; emails and calls to MPs; and ads in national newspapers. Additionally, local groups around the country campaigned and members shared the campaign on Facebook. As a result of its actions, 38 Degrees claims to have succeeded in persuading the UK Government to drop plans to privatize England's forests in February 2011.

The construction of 'success' or how social movements understand a successful campaign is difficult to define but is now also a growing and interesting area of debate. In her research into GetUp!, Vromen (2011) argues that GetUp! makes a distinction between 'output' and 'outcome' success. Whilst 38 Degrees may consider

the 'Save our Forests Campaign' a success, the success of this campaign is contestable given the stated aims of the campaign. 38 Degrees were not able to encourage the UK Government to abandon their policy of selling of the forests, but were able to secure a postponement and review of this issue.

Another key issue when considering 38 Degrees' approach is how they select the campaigns on which they mobilise their membership. 38 Degrees argue that their campaigns are largely selected by the membership, who vote on which campaigns the organisation should mobilise on. This can be seen on the homepage of the website, which displays the various vote counts for different campaigns. Enabling members to vote for which campaigns to pursue ensures that campaigns are member-led, which is central to their campaigning model. This aim is also achieved through the 'Campaigns By You' section of the website, which allows members to initiate new campaigns and act as the contact and executor of the campaign. An important question which must be considered when exploring 38 Degrees' campaigns selection strategy is where do the initial ideas for campaigns come from, i.e. the campaigns that form the majority of 38 Degrees' campaigns and that do not emerge under the Campaigns By You' section of the website. From this perspective, arguably, initial selection of the campaigns comes from 38 Degrees and reflects a top-down approach to campaign selection.

b) Targets: A declining role for the State?

Groups such as 38 Degrees arguably represent a challenge to traditional forms of political participation in that they are not directly involved with the state and, indeed, are often critical of the state and corporate interests (Bang, 2009). In the interview with the Campaign Manager at 38 Degrees, this point was certainly emphasises:

> We represent a challenge and alternative form of politics that is substantially different to the existing model of politics. People don't think that voting matters anymore, but they still care about things, and we offer them an option to do something about it all. (James, Campaign Manager, 38 Degrees).

James' comment here would seem to support Bang's view that organisations such as 38 Degrees represent a significant challenge to the state. Whilst 38 Degrees may operate outside of the state and position itself as an alternative mode of political participation, this view is rather more complicated when you consider the targets of their campaigns. In line with Norris' framework, (2012), 38 Degrees targets a range of actors, which include private corporations (N Power) and banks (HSBC). However, they also target the state and a significant proportion of their campaigns are targeted at the state ('Save the NHS' and 'Cut Bankers Bonuses'). In this vein, I argue that whilst 38 Degrees are critical of the state, many of their campaigns target the state and engage with the existing political institutions. From this perspective, the state and formal politics remains central to this model of political participation, which suggests that 38 Degrees' aim is not to reject formal politics, but to improve it through enabling greater participation and re-connecting people to government.

Conclusion

With declining levels of formal political participation, it may be tempting to posit a radical change in forms of mobilisation. Stuart Shulman and Micah White, however, suggest caution in this view and argue that 'clicktivism', or digital activism through mass emailing as is used by 38 Degrees, requires minimal engagement effort and has negative long-term effects for citizen engagement because authorities learn to ignore such tactics and they crowd out more substantive participatory efforts. In contrast, David Karpf suggests that online mobilization is, for many, a first step on a 'ladder of engagement'. In addition, he argues that mass email is often one strategy amongst many, and that digital activists also employ many offline strategies. This is certainly true for 38 Degrees and was also found to be the case by Ariadne Vromen and William Coleman (2009, 2011) in their research on GetUp!

As a new online campaigning organisation, 38 Degrees is good example of an alternative agency of political mobilisation, which uses a range of targets and repertoires when campaigning. As such, Norris framework provides a useful lens through which to consider alternative modes of political participation today. In its focus on the repertoires and targets of political mobilisation, this paper has sought to

highlight recent changes in political participation, but to also highlight the continuities that exist with older forms of political mobilisation. 38 Degrees use of online and offline repertoires and its engagement with the state are important points, which reflect changes and continuities in political participation today.

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