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# Moral Monday Is More Than a Hashtag: The Strong Ties of Social Movement Emergence in the Digital Era

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## Abstract

This article explains the origin puzzle of the 2013 Moral Monday protests in North Carolina. Social media were marginal to the emergence of this civil disobedience movement, yet a common view is that digital technology's weak ties are an integral part of large-scale collective action in the digital era. Instead, strong offline ties with structured organizations were critical to its emergence. Qualitative data show that a network of structured organizations, grassroots organizing, traditional media, and an ideological response to an economic and political crisis worked together to propel this large-scale movement. In effect, both structural and cultural factors shaped the activism in this case, not individual or digital explanations. Consequently, this article also traces the historic phases of social movement theory, situating a *digital* emphasis as part of an evolving focus on social movement origin mechanisms. Emergence scholarship on digital activism would benefit from expanding the entry point of protest earlier and broader than a hashtag's debut, as digital explanations may not be as distinct of a theoretical construct as previous research suggests.

## Keywords

social movements, origin, emergence, social media, digital activism, Twitter, Facebook, Moral Monday

## Introduction

On Monday, April 29, 2013, police arrested 17 protesters in the North Carolina legislative building in Raleigh. Their act of non-violent civil disobedience would soon develop into weekly “Moral Monday” protests. Arrestees included union activists, university professors, and religious leaders. They were protesting a variety of conservative bills introduced in the new super-majority Republican state legislature. Not since the civil rights movement in the 1960s had the state witnessed such large protests from the political left. By the end of the summer's legislative session, the police had arrested almost 1,000 North Carolinians, and tens of thousands had showed up for the Monday protests, which grew weekly and expanded to other North Carolina cities and across the South. Even in just the first month, the movement had become a major protest worthy of national media attention.

One might expect that digital technology fueled the initial growth and strength of Moral Monday, as it occurred 2 years after such digitally notable movements as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, as well as the statewide Wisconsin protests. Scholars have suggested that these earlier movements emerged and spread, at least in part, because

of the Internet (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011; Caren & Gaby, 2012; Karpf, 2012; Tufekci, 2017; Vasi & Suh, 2016). By the end of the summer, the Moral Monday movement had a sizeable online presence, such that it might have appeared that it was a central part of the movement. But findings from ethnographic data, in-depth interviews, and online analyses of Moral Monday show that digital technology barely registered in this movement's origin.

Rather than spontaneous digital weak ties of participants without any strong institutional connections, strong ties in the form of structured organizations and grassroots organizing propelled this large-scale movement.<sup>1</sup> A coalition of groups, which had cohered ideologically in the face of an economic and political crisis, was critical to its emergence.

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The social media that began to flourish after more than a month into the large statewide Moral Monday protests *reflected*, rather than *started*, the movement.

In the face of the media hype around so-called Twitter and Facebook revolutions, a few scholars have tempered some of the digital euphoria in favor of examining the organizational and political context of digital activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; della Porta, 2016; Karpf, 2012), yet the Moral Monday finding is still unexpected with the literature's focus on weak, networked ties. What could explain this difference? This article investigates this puzzle by analyzing the emergence of this protest movement. I ask broadly how digital technology may function in the origins of a social movement.

These findings build on sociological scholarship that has analyzed movements at the outset and has found that a combination of factors shape emergence (Andrews & Biggs, 2006; Freeman, 1973; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In particular, I draw from Jo Freeman's (1973) origin analysis of the American women's liberation movement. She pointed to the limitations of focusing on one factor to explain social movements, and with the current excitement around digital explanations, it is useful to turn back to foundational analyses, such as hers. Freeman's work predated yet pioneered subsequent trends of social movement scholarship over the last 50 years. Even before the diffusion of social media technologies, social movement scholars often focused on one set of factors to explain collective action emergence. Overall, sociologists have generally theorized social movements in what I summarize as three overlapping waves. The first trend was an *individual* model of often weak ties: movements were thought to have consisted of people making psychological behavioral choices (Traugott, 1978). The next explanation focused on strong-tie *structural* reasons, such as inequality in the face of capitalism, which explained why they emerged, and resources explained how they organized. (e.g., McAdam, 1999). Then, social movement scholars focused on *cultural* and identity reasons (e.g., Armstrong, 2002), which also included issue framing (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000). The cultural wave combined strong and weak ties. Overall, theorists often merged and built on theories from previous waves, yet the emphasis has shifted over the last five decades.

This article conceptualizes and contends with a fourth origin explanation for social movements: *digital*.<sup>2</sup> Building on broader arguments about the significant role that digital technology plays in a more networked society (Raine & Wellman, 2012), a common view is that weak ties are now an integral part of modern social movements (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasserli, 2016; Tufekci & Freelon, 2013; Wells, 2015). Scholarship on the relationship between social movement emergence and digital technology has been gaining traction, such as arguing for the "digital origins" (Howard, 2010) of some political movements. No one has suggested that digital technologies supplant the other three broad explanations nor work in isolation. Still, a few scholars have argued that online-intense activism may change foundational models of

collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Stohl, & Flanagin, 2005; Earl & Kimport, 2011) because of lowered costs: Internet-enabled individualized weak ties replace strong organizational ones.<sup>3</sup>

Studies that examine the influence of digital technologies on social movements have greatly expanded, yet we have known less about the origin period: what was happening before a movement began and the first few weeks or months of its emergence. For practical reasons, research often examines a movement after it has started, reducing data on social media practices in the early stages of social movements and how technology may play a role in its origin. Many social movement studies on digital activism use technology not only as an explanatory variable but also as a data source, such as hashtags (Earl, Hurwitz, Mesinas, Tolan, & Arlotti, 2013; LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2016; Wang, Liu, & Gao, 2016), which has brought efficiency in analyses but has limited our understanding of what happens offline, particularly non-digital factors.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I build on emerging scholarship which has begun to widen the time and technology scope (e.g., Jackson & Wells, 2016) in order to examine more fully the origin period of Moral Monday.

Overall, my findings of the minimal role of digital technology in the case of Moral Monday provide three theoretical contributions. First, rather than weak ties or spontaneity, the strong ties of social movements, particularly organizations, can still be very much part of the everyday practices of emergence, even in what some argue is an individualized weak-tie centric digital era. Next, this study's unique methods and findings suggest that emergence scholarship on digital activism would benefit from expanding the entry point of protest earlier than a hashtag's debut. As a result, digital explanations may not be as distinct of a theoretical construct as previous research suggests. Finally, I show that new technologies do not necessarily supplant old theories. Social media's *reflection*, rather than *creation*, of a social movement aligns with the argument that social media can simply become normalized into movements (Nielsen, 2011).

## Social Movement (Origin) Theories

The Internet has created a "new species of social movement," wrote Manuel Castells (2012, p. 15). A key part of this view is that digital communication *is* organization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), with digital tools often viewed as a substitute for organizational requirements. One of the earliest proponents of the digital *Power of Organizing without Organizations* (2009) was Clay Shirky and his argument that people can organize underneath the traditional "Coasean floor" of organizational overhead and costs. No longer are the heavy chains of bureaucracy necessary to organize a movement, the story goes. Digital activism scholars have built on Shirky's stories, suggesting that visible protest movements can flourish without strong organizational ties.

According to recent research, Internet tools have shaped movement emergence, in particular, with some suggesting that their largest contribution is in a protest's early formative period (Tufekci, 2017). A consensus has developed that digital technology now fuels, spreads, and facilitates the fast diffusion of major protests with weak ties (Margetts et al., 2016; Schwarz, 2011; Tufekci, 2017; Tufekci & Freelon, 2013; Vasi & Suh, 2016). The three primary and related ways that scholars have discussed the digital role of emergence is in the networked distribution of protest information (e.g., Vasi & Suh, 2016), logistics planning and coordination (Earl & Kimport, 2011), and how participants hear about a protest movement (e.g., Margetts et al., 2016). One study found that the vast majority of participants of a nationwide protest did not have any organizational affiliation (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Although no one jettisons social movement organizations, the general digital argument is that weak ties enable information to be spread quickly and farther to a more heterogeneous group of people connected by weak, rather than strong, ties—and without the need for costly organizational intermediaries.

In contrast, long-standing theories of collective action have often emphasized strong ties in movement emergence (Andrews, 2004; McAdam, 1988; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993). Some digital activism theorists have also suggested that organizational ties propel digital politics and activism while still emphasizing that a digital evolution is still underway. For instance, activist groups in the digital age may be “different kinds of organizations,” less reliant on vast brick-and-mortar organizational infrastructures (Karpf, 2012), a “hybrid” between the old and new (Chadwick, 2007), or more likely to be self-organizing networks, rather than organizationally “enabled” or “brokered” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Still, the academic needle has tipped in favor of the decreasing relevance of strong-tie organizations in the digital era.

But what came before these *digital* accounts, both in practice and in theory, that could help understand Moral Monday's strong ties?

Over the last century, member-based civic organizations with regular in-person meetings have waned in the United States (Bennett & Iyengar, 1998; Putnam, 2001; Skocpol, 2004). In its place, individualized political participation began to flourish outside of organizations, even before the digital era. One replacement were advocacy issue-based groups in which people choose specific causes for donations yet rarely attend meetings. Some have argued that the Internet has gone hand-in-hand with—even accelerating—this shift away from institutional allegiances (Karpf, 2016; Polletta, 2014; Raine & Wellman, 2012). For instance, in 1998, the online advocacy group Moveon.org became a model for mobilizing individuals (Karpf, 2012). Even earlier, in the 1980s, online bulletin board communities laid the groundwork for other digitally connected movements. Communication historian Fred Turner (2006) emphasized that for these digital activist pioneers, “the liberation of the individual” was paramount (p. 45).

During this transformation—implicitly from strong to weak ties—social movement theory also evolved. Three theoretical phases of explaining social movement emergence not only preceded the fourth *digital* wave but can also help contextualize it. These previous three approaches mirrored historical periods over the last 50 years, and they infused both the why (causes) and how (mechanisms) of origin and participation (Buechler, 2000; Walder, 2009).

In the 1960s, collective action scholars came from a rationalist perspective and focused on the *individual*, implicitly those with weak ties. Explanations often centered on collective action as having a psychological basis, bordering on negative behavior and isolation (Traugott, 1978). Researchers have generally not approached digital activism with this psychological lens. However, theorists *have* privileged the individual as agentic with social movement emergence in the digital era. For instance, a contention is that online-intense social movements are more personalized (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), resulting in a theory of “connective” action of individuals, rather than traditional strong-tie “collective” action theories. A common viewpoint is that the Internet is the epitome of the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) for social movements. The most cited example of this argument is the wide-spread critique (e.g., Shirky, 2011) of Malcolm Gladwell's (2010) portrayal of digital activism. The *New Yorker* columnist derided weak tie and individualized accounts of “Twitter Revolutions,” arguing that digital activism does not account for the strong ties found in previous movements (e.g., McAdam, 1986). But researchers of online activism have argued that strong ties are simply less necessary in the digital era, as the Internet can link weak-tied individuals together for mobilization (e.g., Theocharis, 2015). A leading argument is that digital media enable citizens to act less as *members* of an organization and more as individual *users* participating in activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Earl, Copeland, & Bimber, 2017; Earl & Schussman, 2003). A key claim is that “networked individualism” (Raine & Wellman, 2012) changes the starting point of collective action from organizations to individuals who decide to go online to participate (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012; Wells, 2015).

Next, at an apex of left-activism in the United States and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, sociological social movement research expanded and took a new direction from the individual. Many argued for more *structural* reasons and mechanisms of social movement origin, often hinging on a crisis of capitalism or other systematic upheaval. Some of these approaches included the political process and opportunities model (McAdam, 1999; Tilly, 1978), in which the broader political climate, often a crisis, incited movements. Structural theories also include arguments that institutional support, often in the form of mobilizing structures or “resource mobilization” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), were critical to social movement emergence. This structural framework epitomizes

the strong ties argument.<sup>5</sup> The digital activism literature has been mixed on structural origins. Sometimes they are implicit, such as many studies of the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) or the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests. However, these crises of capitalism cases are often background for arguments on the role of the Internet, resulting in one example of what Goodwin and Hetland (2013) have argued is “The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies.” In response, some scholars have outlined how recent digitally visible protests around the globe have been anti-capitalist *and* characterized by the young and the Internet (della Porta, 2016).

Nonetheless, a main thrust of digital activism scholarship is that mobilizing and resource structures, that is, with strong ties, are less relevant in the digital era: recent movements have spread because of the lack of central nodes in a more spontaneous rhizomatic revolution (Castells, 2012; Vasi & Suh, 2016). Spontaneity may be less of a contrast to structural determinants of collective action and more aligned with the first rational-choice and individualized theoretical wave, as Andrews and Biggs (2006) pointed out. Still, the assumption is that the Internet can supplant many of the functions of mobilizing structures in digital era movements, and of the three waves, the structural tends to be the most de-emphasized in the digital activism literature. For instance, some scholarship has suggested that the organizational resources that were required for older forms of collective action are not always necessary with online-intense activism, creating a newer Theory 2.0 (Earl & Kimport, 2011) in that resource mobilization and traditional collective action theories (e.g., Olson, 1965) are less relevant. One study did find that classed organizational resources are still critical for digital activism (Schradie, 2018), but the most common assumption is that strong structural ties are waning with the digital era.

The second structural wave of social movement theory often clashed with the third approach: *cultural*. Often called “new social movements” and later “social constructivist,” these identity-based movements and subsequent theories developed in the 1980s and 1990s (Buechler, 1995). Some of their proponents argued that then-current social movements were different from older movements because they were decreasingly challenging the state around capitalism and increasingly stressing cultural goals, such as with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights. Yet this wave was also a cultural-institutional hybrid of both organizational structure and individual identity (Armstrong, 2002), suggesting a more complex strong/weak-tie argument. At the same time, this cultural wave included an increasing number of studies that began to analyze the function of issue framing with all types of social movements, whether state-focused or not, in explaining how activism happened (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). In other words, the discourse around a movement was critical to its success.

Some digital activism studies on emergence have harnessed this cultural aspect to argue that the type of framing in

an online political space can spur offline organizing. For instance, the democracy framing of social media posts inspired Egyptian and Tunisian protests (Howard & Hussain, 2013) or digital collective identity can facilitate anti-racist movements like Black Lives Matter (Clark, 2015; Milan, 2015). Based on this scholarship, we would expect that online issue framing and social media collective identity, especially among marginalized communities, would enable the digital to be critical to movements like Moral Monday, which had African-Americans at the forefront. As the framing literature expanded, one criticism, though, was that it began to supplant ideology, often isolating it from broader state and institutional structures (Oliver & Johnston, 2000; Walder, 2009), unlike some previous Marxist scholarship which had connected structure with ideology (Gramsci, 2005). This has remained a point of contention (Snow & Benford, 2005), yet the digital activist literature has taken this question in a different direction. While some scholars have linked ideologies to levels and types of digital activism (Agarwal et al. 2014; Rohlinger, Klein, Stamm, & Robers, 2014; Schradie, 2015), a common argument is that individualized digital participation is tied to personalized, rather than institutionalized, ideology (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber et al., 2012).

Many social movement scholars have integrated these three theoretical trends as they have evolved over the years. For instance, McCarthy and Zald (1977), in a major article on resource mobilization, called it a “partial theory,” recognizing an intersection of factors. Still, a debate ensued in 1999 on how to navigate political and cultural explanations—whether to “split” or “lump” them together (Goodwin, Jasper, & Khattra, 1999; Koopmans, 1999). In an effort to reconcile competing material and symbolic sources of power that social movements face, Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) suggested a “multi-institutional” approach for a more comprehensive explanation. And many researchers who were leading proponents of one theoretical wave later came back and critiqued themselves for not considering other factors (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Yet, a series of scholars have not only critiqued the chasing of one theory but also for asking too narrow of emergence questions that fail to involve the state, ideology, or political economy more broadly (Goodwin & Hetland, 2013; Krinsky, 2013; Walder, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

However, Freeman’s (1973) articulation of the structural and cultural explanations for the feminist movement was one of the earliest and most comprehensive analysis of multiple origin effects. As it turned out, Freeman’s framework of a 20th-century movement aligns with my findings of a movement of the 21st century, Moral Monday.<sup>7</sup> Even though she was writing in the midst of the first (individual) trend, she found neither individual nor psychological explanations. By conducting on-the-ground research during the emergence period, Freeman showed that stay-at-home atomized women were not as likely to participate, as were those with strong ties. She argued that the four factors for movement origin

were an existing and organized communications system (structural and cultural), a network of groups that are open to the interpretation and ideology of the new movement (structural and cultural), a political crisis (structural), and focused organizing by a cadre of people (structural). Without mentioning Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, in many ways, these linkages she described fit into his early 20th-century analysis of how political and cultural factors interact (Gramsci, 2005). Many of her findings were also confirmed in later studies. For instance, Andrews and Biggs (2006) found that organizations, social networks, news media, and resources were critical to the growth of the civil rights sit-in movement.<sup>8</sup> I build on this scholarship to evaluate the origin of Moral Monday.

## Research Design and Methods

I analyzed the emergence of a social movement: Moral Monday in North Carolina. This was an ideal case because of participants' diverse demographics. It included a multi-racial, multi-generational movement that was statewide (and beyond). It was also a notable movement in mainstream media nationally. This study focused on the year leading up to the launch of the first Moral Monday mobilization until the fifth protest on June 3, 2013: "Mega" Moral Monday. This is a significant date to mark the end of the origin period because it represented the first apex of the movement, due to a jump in arrests and participants. After this date, conservatives began to take notice. For instance, a prominent right-wing think tank published demographic details of the arrestees.<sup>9</sup> Methods consisted of an online and offline ethnography, as well as semi-structured interviews before and during the protests. The analysis also included a qualitative examination of offline communication tools, as well as Web site, Facebook, and Twitter posts.

These data centered on the main organization of the Moral Monday protests: the North Carolina Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NC-NAACP), as well as other key groups and protest participants. Research assistants aided in the gathering and analysis of data. Data collection began in the Fall of 2011 and continued past the Mega Moral Monday until the end of the first summer's protests.<sup>10</sup> Data also incorporated Facebook and Twitter metrics of the NC-NAACP account and real-time downloading of Tweets which included the phrases "Moral Monday," "Moral Mondays," #MoralMonday, #MoralMondays, and #ForwardTogether when they emerged.

## Minimal Social Media Traces

February 9, 2013 was the annual HKonJ (Historic Thousands on Jones Street) march and rally. This coalition of progressive organizations started their march for social justice in an African-American neighborhood in Raleigh, and it continued

until they reached the General Assembly building. Many of these groups would also lead the Moral Monday protests 2 months later. Throughout HKonJ, I observed only a handful of people using mobile devices. This was not a survey of protest participants, yet this observation of minimal use was mirrored in the initial Moral Monday protests. Research assistants confirmed this finding. It was not until the June 3 Mega Moral Monday protest that more people used mobile devices.

Neither key organizers nor participants harnessed Twitter in the early stages of the Moral Monday movement. As of the first protest, there was only one Tweet with a slow increase over the next month. By the June 3 "Mega Moral Monday," Twitter finally picked up with over 500 Tweets that mentioned the event. Yet, as of late June 2013, the lead organization of Moral Monday, the NC-NAACP, still had no functioning Twitter feed. They had opened up a Twitter account a year earlier in 2012 yet had only Tweeted 11 times—and none during the first 2 months of the protest movement. It was a month into the protests before they had a discussion and solicited advice as to what hashtag to use. On June 10, after the emergence period, the NC-NAACP launched a new Twitter account, and it soon gained traction with thousands of retweets and mentions of the group by the end of the summer's legislative session, when the protests wound down for the year. When I asked the young NC-NAACP communications staff person, as well as a field organizer, how he had gotten involved, he quipped, "I didn't find out about it on Twitter." That seemed to be a standard reaction from many key organizers who did not deem Twitter as important to their primary organizing tactics. Twitter usage was minimal for other key groups involved in the movement, as well. For instance, one organization, Democracy NC, an advocacy group challenging money in politics, became very active in the movement by tracking the legislative action—and reaction. In the lead up to Moral Monday, they had no Tweets about it, and during the course of the first five protests, they Tweeted a dozen times. Other active groups whose members were among the early arrestees, such as UE local 150 and Black Workers for Justice—two groups leading the labor Moral Monday theme day—had no functioning Twitter accounts.<sup>11</sup>

The use of Facebook to encourage participation in the early mobilization of Moral Monday was also minimal yet slightly more than Twitter. The NC-NAACP initially had an open Facebook group, in which anyone could post, comment, and "like." But the proliferation of racist trolls led the group to shut it down. Instead, they encouraged people to move to their Facebook page—a platform in which they could moderate posts and control the feed. There were no Facebook posts encouraging people to come to the first four Moral Mondays on this site, though there were videos posted afterwards, created by a volunteer. Two posts were about an offline organizing tour to encourage people to participate in the Mega Moral Monday, and one post announced a location change for a pre-rally. Other Facebook pages began to

emerge, for instance, a “Forward Together” page, a common NC-NAACP slogan, but it had a marginal role in the initial mobilization of Moral Monday. For instance, 9 days after the first protest, there was one post of a video showing the clergy members being arrested on the first day, and there was only one “share” and two “likes.” The NC-NAACP staff person explained his role in updating their Facebook page and posting for events, “I do some of that. It’s not done systematically either. [A volunteer] puts pictures up there . . . we don’t have the robust social media as you can see.” Other groups active in Moral Monday, such as Democracy NC, reflected these findings. Personal Facebook pages of some of the early arrestees did post about their experience, as did some NC-NAACP local chapters.

Rather than a dedicated Web site for the protest, in the origin period, the NC-NAACP copied and pasted the same content it used for flyers and e-mails onto their own Web site, a relic of early 1990s HTML technology. A NC-NAACP staff person described their site: “Our Web site is an interesting thing . . . I don’t even say we have a Web site—we have someone who puts things up there. It’s a mess.” The Web site lacked a streamlined look and had multiple fonts and a cluttered appearance. However, it was updated during the origin period, including some video clips and information about the protests.

The NC-NAACP did use other digital communication tools. For instance, they sent out regular e-mail communication to their members and supporters, as well as reaching out to a few local listservs, and they used a texting system to send out information. But what they emphasized more were what they called “different modes of communication” that were more traditional and less digital. They used “robocalls” as a major part of their communication strategy, as well as postcards. They also still used faxes, as some rural NAACP chapters still relied on this technology.

As the protests expanded after the origin period, social media grew in sync with this growth. These posts occasionally included logistical information, but many were selfies or political commentary. The NC-NAACP eventually launched more sophisticated Internet platforms, such as a streamlined Web site, as well as its revamped Twitter feed. Numerous Facebook pages began to emerge as well, sometimes for specific Moral Monday protests or issue-related groups supporting the movement, as well as for other regions around the state and country that organized their own Moral Monday protests.

If social media were not critical to the initial five Moral Monday mobilizations, then what explains its popularity such that thousands attended and over 300 people of a variety of ages, races, and occupations faced arrest?

## The Southern Crisis

First, Moral Monday responded to a racialized economic and political crisis. North Carolina has a long history of inequalities. Like many southern states, its slaveholding agricultural system held people in poverty, particularly

African-Americans for years, and that legacy continues today. Risking arrest was not unusual in this southern state that birthed the civil rights sit-in-movement, yet it had been over 50 years since a protest like the magnitude of Moral Monday had emerged. After the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, when the Ku Klux Klan opened fire and killed five anti-racist and pro-labor protesters (Boger, McDowell, & Gwynn, 2009), mass civil disobedience was non-existent outside of universities. But the national financial meltdown three decades later created an opening that shifted the willingness to face arrest, most visibly with the Occupy movement in 2011.

Economically, the Great Recession (2007–2009) magnified and increased disparities. In 2007, North Carolina unemployment rates grew steadily. By 2012, they were some of the highest in the country and were twice as high for African-Americans, with one in six Blacks unemployed (Gable & Hall, 2013). The poorest areas are in the eastern region of the state, part of the South’s Black Belt, the former plantation region. In 2013, 25% of children lived in poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2013), one of the highest in the country. Overall poverty rates are two times higher for African-Americans (North Carolina Justice Center [NCJC], 2012).

Politically, in the wake of the financial collapse and Obama’s election, the Tea Party movement emerged in 2009, including dozens of groups in North Carolina. In 2012, these groups ushered in a conservative takeover and super majority of the state’s General Assembly, as well as being instrumental in installing a new Republican governor for the first time since Reconstruction. This resulted in a deluge of legislation that curtailed voting rights, refused federal Medicaid and unemployment funds, limited labor unions, and restricted reproductive health services.

The NC-NAACP responded to the election by petitioning the Governor, attending legislative committee meetings, and engaging in other electoral work. Without getting any results, they did what they called spiritual and moral self-meditation and prayer for moral grounding. The group and allies then decided to engage in non-violent civil disobedience, viewing it as a last resort. They first focused on protesting voter ID laws, which they believed threatened voting eligibility for African-Americans, the elderly, and college students. On Sunday, April 28, 2013, the NC-NAACP held a mass meeting at a church, where they decided to organize what they called a “Pray-In” the next day at the General Assembly, which regularly conducted legislative sessions on Monday evenings.

On the first day of the protests, Reverend William J. Barber, NC-NAACP president, said,

*[W]e have no other choice but to assemble in the people’s house where these bills are being presented, argued, and voted upon, in hopes that God will move in the hearts of our legislators, as he moved in the heart of Pharaoh to let His people go. Some ask*

*the question, "Why don't they be quiet?" . . . it has been our collective silence that has quietly opened the city gates to these undemocratic violators of our rights.*

Moral Monday was anything but silent in the wake of what these left-leaning groups viewed as a capitalist and racialized crisis, which had opened the door for this movement.

## **We've Always Been Here**

Durable and strong ties propelled this movement, not digital weak ties. First, ties within the century-old NC-NAACP itself were strong. They had a statewide membership of approximately 20,000 people, and they maintained these connections in three related ways: socially, religiously, and politically. Banquets and other social events were common ways the membership expanded and solidified existing ties. Religiously, the organization has a symbiotic relationship with the church. Many Moral Monday mobilization events took place in local Black churches to encourage people to participate. Politically, the NC-NAACP was active in mobilizing members for legislative and protest actions. For instance, many of their chapters participated in the HKonJ mobilization in February of 2013, including organized NC-NAACP contingents with banners displaying their affiliation. Some chapters consisted predominantly of older people, and, according to NC-NAACP staff, some were not as digitally proficient as younger members. However, the organization also had many student chapters, particularly at historically Black colleges and universities in the state. All of these intra-organizational ties were already in place once Moral Monday launched.

Second, the strong ties from a network of organizations were critical to the origin of Moral Monday and its initial mobilization success. The public face, as well as the primary organizer, of Moral Monday was the NC-NAACP, but they were not alone in mobilizing. They coordinated with long-standing allied groups to organize a different theme each week for the protests, whether voting rights, education equity, or labor protections. And these groups, then, often rallied their own base to participate in civil disobedience. For instance, arrestees of the first protest featured key religious leaders, including Barber himself. The second protest's arrestees included prominent academics, such as a former Dean from Duke University. The third Moral Monday focused on labor rights, and union organizers and rank-and-file workers were arrested. While all of the arrestees over the course of the Moral Monday movement were not orchestrated or pre-selected, during this origin stage, organizational networks were critical for the planned civil disobedience.

These connections did not happen overnight. It was part of an inter-organizational network that had been coordinating together for a long time. For instance, many of the

groups had also coalesced to try and defeat a statewide gay marriage ban, fight a Tea Party takeover of a school board, repeal a ban on public sector collective bargaining, and support the Occupy Movement the previous year. More directly related to Moral Monday was a loosely structured HKonJ coalition that had been coordinating for at least 7 years. Many of these groups were part of the Moral Monday planning, showed up at the protests, and volunteered to be arrested. A minister active in the movement said, "Since 2006, the HKonJ coalition under Reverend Barber has grown from 16 partners to over 150 partners . . . with a rainbow of participants." While the focus of these events changed each year depending on current politics, these yearly marches remained dedicated to social and racial justice in what became a "14 point agenda," reflecting the issues of the groups involved. A common sentiment among group leaders, as well as participants, in Moral Monday was that these organizational ties were foundational. "People just assume that HKonJ just happened," explained a NC-NAACP staff person, "They're so used to it. HKonJ is unbelievable how much goes on behind the scenes."

Many Moral Monday protesters were surprised that spring and early summer when asked whether they had heard about the events on Facebook, Twitter, or other digital formats. Some laughed at the idea. People found out about the protests in various ways, but regardless of the communication channel, whether at churches, at union meetings, or listservs, most said they got involved through local organizations' pre-existing communication networks.<sup>12</sup> One participant said, "Oh, we're word-of-mouthers." Another, a teacher and community activist, simply said, "We've always been here." In other words, participation in Moral Monday was part of a long struggle of participating groups. And these broad-ranging organizational affiliations, from environmental and student groups to LGBTQ and reproductive justice groups, were reflected in the signs, T-shirts, buttons, and banners people wore and carried at the Moral Monday protests.

Third, each of these groups had a similar response to the economic and political crisis. They usually focused on different issues, but they blended their disparate ideologies around fairness to come together for the protest movement. Using the term ideology in the broad sense of linking institutions, ideas, and practices (Gramsci, 2005), the Moral Monday movement tethered these groups together with what speakers at the rallies often called "fusion politics" into a *fused ideology*. This was a way to bring together groups with a broad progressive agenda around their common reaction to the conservative legislation coming out of the General Assembly, which was deemed, in effect, "immoral." The theme embodied in the term "Moral" Monday was for many participants the "just" and "democratic" response. The North Carolina government was a clear target yet also part of the fused ideology of fairness and equality. Reverend Barber explained this at an organizing meeting, when he said the movement was the "soul of the state." A common chant at rallies was "This



is our house!” and “We built that house!” In other words, the legislative assembly should be the “people’s,” not only those from corporate or conservative interests. Another common chant was “Forward Together, Not One Step Back!” In order to effect social change, the message itself was often how people needed to fuse together their different philosophies. Despite the variety of social justice issues that the multiple groups worked on and a lack of a pithy unified phrasing, these various slogans and messages brought people together at a time of crisis. And it was because they already had built up trust through coalition work before that they were able to build this temporary ideological bridge.

While not every group was religious, the movement’s fused ideology had a strong spiritual element. Ministers of a variety of faiths were some of the first arrestees. Ministers often opened up organizing events, and one said at a Greenville church in eastern North Carolina, “These mean and bitter legislators are against God. We unite across color [and] class and are talking sense, [while they’re] driving us into hell . . . We are ready to stand up for God and justice!” In Taylortown, in the central part of the state, another minister said, “[They] act like they are Christian, but we will not allow the war machine to act as if they had God on their side. Jesus asked the rich man to redistribute wealth and love your neighbor.” These religious overtones were part of the overall message at Moral Monday yet still attracted a broad audience, from Occupy and student anarchists to Jewish groups for peace. This ideology appeared at events and infused online content, yet one minister quipped, “Harriet Tubman found the faith book . . . despite not having a Facebook . . . or an iPhone or Twitter. She saved a thousand and could have saved ten thousand if they only knew they were slaves.” This was a common view—educating people politically required face-to-face organizing.

Fourth, on-the-ground mobilizing was key to building and sustaining the strong ties of the Moral Monday movement. Rather than relying on social media or other digital technologies to spread the word, organizers launched a 25-county statewide “Forward Together, Not One Step Back” tour in the early stages of the protest movement. Between the fourth and fifth Moral Monday protests, a Monday fell on May 27, Memorial Day, when the General Assembly was not in session. In this 2-week period, organizers traveled across the state to set up public meetings, mostly in churches. When they could get the technology to work, they showed some videos at these meetings, but most of the activities were in-person. Speakers included local NC-NAACP chapter leaders, ministers, coalition group leaders, as well as people who had already been arrested. Organizers encouraged people to sign up for Moral Monday activities, and Democracy NC often handed out voting report cards that listed the legislative issues of concern. Yet, this was not the first statewide tour that the NC-NAACP organized in 2013. Earlier that year, they also toured the poorest counties of the Black Belt region to spotlight socioeconomic inequality. It was called the “Truth and

Hope Tour of Poverty in NC: Putting a Face on Poverty.” This event also involved meetings in local communities and was one of many offline organizing projects that built awareness of what became the Moral Monday movement.

Fifth, as part of the general organizational structures that shaped the mobilization, there was a key cadre of organizers in these networks to strengthen these ties. The charismatic leadership of Reverend Barber was critical to the movement, but it was more of his organizing style, rather than him as an individual, that was significant. He was a minister from Goldsboro, North Carolina, a town in the Black Belt eastern region of the state. Barber came up through the NC-NAACP ranks. His running for President was a revolutionary turn for the group that had become moribund and a-political, and his victory helped revitalize the group. But it was his radical community and coalition strategies that enabled this movement to coalesce with other movement-building organizing cadre in the state. He never positioned the NC-NAACP to be “the” organization, which enabled the groups to work together. An example of this strategic organizing was the coordination of the civil disobedience. Anyone could participate, but they first targeted leaders from the Monday’s theme, and then others who wanted to get arrested were all encouraged to come to a civil disobedience training before the protest. Leaders talked about organizing as a dedicated skill and outlook, not a spontaneous act. Another common theme that emerged in interviews and observations was the significance of the *local*—that Moral Monday was not simply a state capital event but required efforts of a cadre of organizers across the state in their own communities, workplaces, and churches. I often heard people say that they could not “rely” on social media. More common was what one arrestee said—that she never was a part of protests until her Greensboro church pastor, a NC-NAACP activist, recruited her.

Finally, although the NC-NAACP and affiliated Moral Monday groups used a variety of communication tactics other than town-to-town tours and campaigns to strengthen their organizational and movement ties, they also had a communication network ally. The groups put out an array of information, but they also had very strong ties with the mainstream media which would regularly come to their press conferences. In the time leading up to and during the origin period, every time they put out a press release about an event, the media would come. Local TV and newspapers generally went to the 25 county tour events, whether in rural towns or metropolitan areas. The mainstream media also reported on the early Moral Monday events before social media began to grow, including the national press, such as MSNBC, which had a reporter that was actively covering the civil disobedience.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, neither the press nor digital gadgets of any kind were allowed at the civil disobedience trainings before each Moral Monday protest, so this relationship with the news media was strong yet distant.

## The Strength of Strong Ties

If one were to examine the Twitter feed from Moral Monday at the end of the summer of 2013, one might think technology was critical for the movement's origin. Moral Monday grew quickly, yet this participatory movement did not emerge online, and social media played only a minor role in its initial popularity. In the first month of the protests, people showed up because the NC-NAACP organized county-by-county events in churches, coordinated with other progressive organizations in the state, and engaged in traditional forms of grassroots organizing. These organizations worked with traditional media, as well as coalesced around a fused ideology both of which they had been developing for years through coalition work.

In short, strong ties were critical to the emergence of Moral Monday, not spontaneous weak ones from digital networks. But to understand these findings, which go against the grain of the digital activism literature, I will situate them in the social movement scholarship waves more broadly. This study confirms that the second wave (structural) and third wave (cultural) are important elements of this origin story. The first (individual) and fourth (digital) explanations, though, are not.

Starting with the structural findings that were embedded in the emergence of Moral Monday, this movement was a response to the racialized political and economic crisis in the state. As Freeman and other scholars have pointed out, though, there are always these types of crises around the world, yet movements do not always emerge. It is a necessary though insufficient explanation to Moral Monday, yet the turning point of the super-majority Republican legislature coupled with growing inequality was the window of opportunity for this social movement to emerge, and thus, this aligns with the social movement scholarship on the political process model. It also confirms recent scholarship arguing for an incorporation of the impact of capitalism on social movement emergence (Goodwin & Hetland, 2013), especially in the digital era (della Porta, 2016).

Yet, the structural findings are not just on the macro-level but also embedded in the strong ties within and among the organizations involved in Moral Monday. The NC-NAACP's internal organization as well as their networks with other groups created strong structural ties, and these connections were then mobilized with a core cadre of organizers. They had lobbied the new Republican majority, but its lack of response, they argued, propelled them to plan civil disobedience methodically. This organizing was conducted not only with people who were "easier" to organize, but with a broad cross-section of the population, which took a concerted effort. Given the diversity of arrestees, not just White college students who have less to lose, this cadre organizing was critical to enabling a broad range of people to participate and, as many arrestees said, "feel supported." In fact, many respondents interviewed at the initial protests talked about

who was there to support which arrestee. These strong ties were tethered through what scholars have called "mobilizing structures."

These structural connections fused together a fragmented ideology of various left causes. Freeman dubbed such a phenomenon as "ideological willingness," or groups which are co-optable to the ideas of a new movement. Despite groups having a wide-ranging set of issues they each worked on, the crisis coalesced the groups that sponsored the initial Moral Monday protests—and many of its participants. The "moral" in Moral Monday became a driving ideology, however disparate the issues. Despite the lack of agency that "co-optable" implies, the Moral Monday groups had a collective response to what they perceived as a crisis in the state's conservative legislation. They believed these bills attacked this broad coalition's sense of democracy. As a result, this was both a cultural and structural approach, which not only aligns with the framing literature but also with a Gramscian view of how ideas are linked to civil society and the state. Contrary to the literature's expectations and absent from the Moral Monday origin story, though, was a digital collective identity or individualized online ideologies. Some politicized selfies from the event emerged on social media but this was toward the end of the summer, not during emergence.

Another cultural *and* structural explanation, then, was in the communication infrastructure that the movement organizations used. The findings here challenge newer theories on how the many-to-many affordances of the Internet can supplant more traditional communication infrastructure in mobilization. The NC-NAACP and related organizations used digital technologies to communicate, yet it was more of a conduit between existing strong ties. In fact, most of their communication in the movement's early stages was often one-to-many, such as e-mailing, texting, robo-calling, or sending postcards. It was not until the June 3 Mega Moral Monday that an even broader range of people began to come and use social media. And one of those early communication networks was the relationship with local, statewide, and even nationwide mainstream media. The movement's relational communication was on-the-ground and expanded on existing social ties and organizational structures.

Next, the individual/rationalist approach was more complicated in this study. Neither the atomization/alienation of the first wave nor the personalization/networked individualism of the fourth digital wave fit the origin of Moral Monday. As the protests diffused more broadly and built more momentum, individuals not tied to organizations participated and posted to social media. For instance, more and more people began to Tweet while at the protests as the summer wore on. However, these individual posts reflected, rather than started the protest, similar to Nielsen's (2012) arguments around the normalization of digital activity as part of a social movement.

As a result, Moral Monday's emergence was based on a combination of factors, mostly structural and cultural, rather than individual or digital. While digital activist scholars do not

discount structural and cultural influences, the focus tends to be on weak, rather than strong, ties. Instead, this study revives scholarship, such as Freeman's, whose categories of emergence explanations preceded the social movement literature's four waves. Writing before the digital era, she and other theorists could not have anticipated the networked society's role in using this communication network. Yet, her understudied work not only integrates decades of subsequent scholarship but her origin story of the American feminist movement also sums up the movement origins of Moral Monday: a communications infrastructure, ideological willingness by a network of groups, experienced organizers, and a broader crisis.

In some ways, the digital wave in social movement theory reflects the current time period. Just like the structural model reflected the apex of political movements of the 1960s and 1970s against the "system" or the cultural model reflected the identity movements of their era, so may digital-focused theories reflect the current novelty of technology increasingly becoming part of social movements' repertoire. Yet, this is not a binary bashing of online versus offline. The digital is not to be discounted in this or any other study, as it was a part, albeit small, of the movement's origins. And it has played a larger role in other movements. Nonetheless, the digital does not necessarily play as big of a role as some scholars have said characterize movements in this era (e.g., Castells, 2012). Therefore, this study does not point to new and different theoretical models to explain social movement origins. Instead, it suggests that theorists, from Gramsci to Freeman, who have demonstrated an evolving political economy with shifting institutional and ideological allegiances, can shape the emergence of movements.

The theoretical implications for this strong-tie finding extend beyond affirming pre-digital studies. Instead, it shows the digital is the latest wave of social movement explanations—none of which have turned out to work on their own. Rather than viewing social movement theory as chasing the latest model or explanatory variable, we need to look more broadly at what is beyond, around, inside, above, and before social movement protest. No digital activist theorist has claimed that the other three waves are irrelevant, yet this study clearly shows that the *digital* is neither necessary nor sufficient at explaining contemporary collective action. As a result, this study builds on scholarship (Bimber et al., 2012; Han, 2014; Karpf, 2012) that has suggested that organization still plays a role in contemporary social movements.

This study's finding steers the literature in a direction much more detached from digital technology than most scholarship. It is possible that other studies have not had the opportunity to do research with movement participants and their online footprint before a movement emerges. This study was unique in this regard. Analyzing hashtags at the height of a movement and interviewing people who use these hashtags could skew results toward more digital explanations.

What about other alternative explanations? It is conceivable that because the NC-NAACP is an older, more traditional membership organization, its era of founding could

influence its members' willingness to embrace newer technology. In this same vein, this finding of low digital use at the emergence of this movement could also reflect the average age of participants. Perhaps low levels of digital engagement among older African-American members may explain how this study's finding was unexpected in the context of the development of Black Twitter. The movement's leading organization is majority African-American, yet digital technology was not a major part of the movement's origin. Occupy Wall Street and anti-globalization protests, widely studied in the digital activism literature, skewed young. Is it an adoption curve issue in that these activists had not yet embraced digital technology? While this may partially be true, as the NC-NAACP now has more digital tools, many college students were involved at the outset of the protests, the communication and other staff people were young, and, more importantly, key organizers emphasized how they were intentionally using traditional and relational means to organize. It is clear that structured membership organizations are neither dead nor dormant. They are still taking to the streets.

It is possible that *because* Moral Monday started with strong organizational ties, this strong-tie structure hindered the weak-tie networked individualism of digital activism. In turn, given that I did not capture all the digital traces of every individual who may have posted online about Moral Monday, it is possible that there were high levels of digital engagement around the event with personal networks. Yet, if this were a large undiscovered trove, many would have ended up on the NC-NAACP Facebook page liking posts or on Twitter tweeting with "Moral Monday," which was not the case in the early stages. Furthermore, some research shows that more organization does lead to *more* digital engagement over the long term (Eimhjellen, Wollebæk, & Strømsnes, 2013; Merry, 2011; Schradie, 2018).

Another explanation for this seeming discrepancy with existing literature is that Moral Monday was different from other movements in its strategy or other types of demographics. It differed from Occupy, for instance, in that it likely had more diversity behind it in terms of class and race, which could have made a difference in digital activism levels. Moral Monday organizers did want to reach more than the digitally engaged, and its membership is mixed-class, but if that were the only issue, they could have used more social media tools for their membership that was plugged in. Regarding strategy, Moral Monday had a similar spirit of civil disobedience and revolt against some of the same forces that Occupy did. Perhaps, though, these two factors of demographics and strategy were working in sync. For the Moral Monday arrestees, their high-risk activism mirrored much of what McAdam (1986) found in his study of civil rights activists who participated in Freedom Summer—that participation was associated with strong ties to existing movement networks. While McAdam's study did not point to emergence, per se, it does parallel my findings of how organizational support worked in sync with a similarly diverse group

of high-risk activists. In other words, working-class participants of Moral Monday could risk losing their jobs for public protesting yet had the support of their church, union, or civic group in the process.

These strong ties, then, enabled the Moral Monday movement not just to engage in high-risk social movement participation but also to sustain it over the long term. While the movement waxed in Raleigh that first summer, it continued the next year, and the movement persists as of the writing of this article, unlike the Occupy movement. Its strong social ties were also critical in the spreading of the movement to other areas of the state and country. It has not, however, stopped much of the legislation they were opposing, although the NAACP was eventually able to convince the U.S. Supreme Court that the voting suppression laws the General Assembly had passed were unconstitutional.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this research also puts a spotlight onto a critical movement that has escaped scholarly purview. Moral Monday has so far gone largely unnoticed by social movement scholars, compared to other similar movements, possibly due to its minimal digital footprint. Future multi-method research could compare different types of movements in different states or countries to further interrogate these findings and to understand better the role of the *digital* in origin stories. Regardless, this research shows that context matters. It is essential to study movements as more than a hashtag. As Freeman (1973) said, “Most movements have very inconspicuous beginnings. The significant elements of their origins are usually forgotten or distorted by the time a trained observer seeks to trace them out, making retroactive analysis difficult” (p. 793).

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### Notes

1. In this article, I am not doing a formal mathematical network analysis measuring ties. For parsimony, strong ties defined here are with structured organizations and weak ties are defined as those without such institutional bureaucracy.
2. I define digital as inclusive of the Internet, Web, social media, and mobile platforms.
3. This article does not interrogate costs as a variable. In another study (Schradie, 2018), I show how costs still exist with high levels of digital activism and are particularly relevant when comparing groups from different social classes.
4. A common view is that one cannot distinguish between the offline and online world, as that is “digital dualism.” Still, given that digital technology is not integrated evenly into every group or movement, it is important to distil out what is happening online and offline.
5. Much of this literature often hinged more on why individual people participated rather than emergence, although the two are related.
6. For instance, Walder (2009) argued that until the 1970s, social movement studies were embedded in political sociology and asked broader questions. He described three veins of this research: class analysis à la Marx, relative deprivation or role theory (Merton), and Durkheimian structural functionalism.
7. Freeman’s work preceded much of the innovation in movement literature that was to come. While not naming it as such, she articulated the importance of strong ties—before scholars began calling it political opportunity or resource mobilization. In addition, her argument that people who were connected with common experiences would be receptive to a movement’s ideas preceded the original framing papers from the early 1980s, as well as being a connection to previous studies on ideology.
8. Their article focused more on diffusion but has some overlap with origin studies.
9. NC Civitas has taken down the mug shot series, but the local National Public Radio station had a story about it: <http://wunc.org/post/civitas-moral-monday-arrestee-database-elicits-critical-responses#stream/0>
10. I had conducted qualitative research in the origin period as part of a larger research project.
11. UE local 150 had no Twitter account. Black Workers for Justice had opened up an account a few years earlier but had only posted once.
12. This was not based on a randomized sample of participants.
13. That is, <http://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/moral-monday-protest-pits-naacp-vs-nc>

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