Flash Mobs and Smart Mobs: A Study in Social Network Coordination and Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms both online and through mobile devices utilize new media to strengthen social networks in order to promote human rights to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. When individuals assemble there is a collective intelligence inherent in the organization of the group. One of the most popular models in mass coordination and mobilization is the trend known as a flash mob which uses ordinary channels of communication to collaborate and coordinate without the general public or authorities knowing about it beforehand.

The mobs that use the power of social network mobilization to prompt change are often referred to as smart mobs. On January 21, 2001, a smart mob in the Philippines effectively used text messages to generate a protest that led to the fall of President Joseph Estrada. The simple text messages including "Go 2EDSA, Wear blck." reached more than a million citizens as witnessed by their participation in the silent protest.

In this paper I will argue that these mobs use the power of social network mobilization to express their point of view and to prompt change. I will also seek to answer questions concerning the formation and rationale of these mobs. Why do individuals participate in these mobs? How do these mobs measure their success? What motivates the individuals who conceive and instigate these smart mobs? What happens when that power is wielded for unscrupulous ends?

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RAW Graduate Symposium
March 24, 2012

On June 3, 2003, an unusually large number of people visited the ninth floor rug department of a Macy's store in Manhattan. The nearly 200 visitors arrived at the same time, and they were all interested in the same expensive rug. Sales assistants who tried to help these customers were all given the same response: They belonged to a commune living in the outskirts of New York, and they were looking to purchase a "love rug." Since they made all of their decisions together, the massive group discussed whether or not they should purchase the rug. Ten minutes later the group disbanded and left the store.

The Macy's rug department had been the target of the first successful flash mob. The "love rug" project organized a group of relative strangers for a brief period of time to perform a single, synchronized act. The editor at *Harper's* magazine, Bill Wasik, created the event by emailing instructions to the nearly 200 people involved letting them know where to meet and what they were going to do once they got there. Wasik's goal was to stage a type of street performance while also pointing out the social satire of conformity. With this social experiment, Wasik meant to ridicule the hipster culture and its attempts to be "in the know" on the latest in culture.

Flash mobs are characterized by their ability to organize people quickly and efficiently by means of social media tools. E-mails, text messages, and social media platforms have lowered the costs of communication so dramatically that they have led to faster coordination with less notification needed in advance. The speed at which people are able to reach each other is almost as impressive as the speed at which people can connect to and form their social networks. A mob can begin with a few dozen participants, who may or may not know each other, and then rapidly increase to a few

thousand participants who forwarded the instructions to those within their social networks.

The success of the "love rug" mob led to the formation of several more flash mobs modeled after Wasik's design of briefly appearing in public to conduct acts of artistic expression. Zombie walks, pillow fights, and silent dance parties have all been organized and performed in various cities and various countries around the world. An ordinary day can unexpectedly become known as a day that the undead roamed the streets, or a day that strangers carried pillows around looking as though they were ready for bed and not a playful fight, or a day that everyone wearing headphones suddenly began to dance as if they were could not resist giving in to a rhythmic song that only they could hear. In April 2006, London Victoria Station was the site of a flash mob where nearly 4,000 people armed with personal music devices participated in a silent dance party. One of the largest flash mobs occurred internationally on March 22, 2008 in what is now known as Worldwide Pillow Fight Day. New York City alone had over 5,000 people participate in the event. The flash mobs tend to be viewed as harmless and entertaining, but the distraction, disruption, and minor property damage that occur are common consequences of the mobs' actions.

Finding people who want to participate in these mobs is one of the key factors to a mob's success. In the flash mobs previously mentioned, there is a shared amusement at the idea of participating in something entertaining yet esoteric that is played out in front of a bewildered public. The element of surprise is a crucial component of flash mobs. Aside from feeling a slight thrill of participating in a flash mob, another reason individuals feel compelled to join is that they know someone else who is also

participating in a flash mob. The longing to be a part of a group can be a powerful motivation within a social network, and to put it more concisely, "we want what others to whom we are connected to want," (Christakis and Fowler 222). In *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, Christakis and Fowler note that individuals are driven by a deep desire to connect to others and to be accepted by their peers. This concept in turn motivates individuals to covet what others have, to develop similar tastes, and to want to know what others know. When several people in a network reach this conclusion, a flash mob can escalate from a few participants to several thousand participants.

While a number of flash mobs are performed solely as acts of amusement or satire, the method can be used to promote a political agenda as well. In 2006, some youths in Belarus were arrested for participating in a flash mob that consisted of nothing more than gathering in a public square while eating ice cream. The peaceful group had staged the flash mob in protest of the contested Presidential elections, and it had seized the opportunity to publicly criticize the government's prohibition against unauthorized group actions.

The types of mobs that serve as platforms for political agendas are often referred to as smart mobs. In his book *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, Howard Rheingold first introduced the term smart mobs to define social groups that behave intelligently by coordinating themselves through the links in their social networks. Rheingold expanded on Mark Granovetter's concept of a "threshold model of collective behavior" by suggesting that the "right kinds of online social networks know more than the sum of their parts: Connected and communicating in the right ways, populations of

humans can exhibit a kind of collective intelligence," (Rheingold 179). The intelligence of the individual members of a group can in fact be intensified by the group's ability to communicate with one another. When effectively put to use, the power of this collective intelligence has the potential for generating real social change.

On January 21, 2001, a smart mob in the Philippines effectively used text messages to generate a protest that led to the fall of President Joseph Estrada. The simple text messages such as "Go 2EDSA, Wear blck." managed to reach more than a million citizens in four days as attested by their participation in the silent protest on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue. The silent protest of the Manila residents as an organized smart mob was influential in "bringing down a government without firing a single shot," (Rheingold 158). The Filipinos had been using Short Message Service messaging a few years before the 2001 protest and had taken to text messaging as a useful and inexpensive tool for communication. In a developing country where more citizens have access to cell phones than PCs, text messaging can become the primary means of organizing groups. Text messages can be sent out quickly and used to speed up the action of assembly:

> The "People Power II" demonstrations of 2001 broke out when the impeachment trial of President Estrada was suddenly ended by senators linked to Estrada. Opposition leaders broadcast text messages, and within seventy-five minutes of the abrupt halt of the impeachment proceedings, 20,000 people converged on Edsa. Over four days, more than a million people showed up. The military withdrew support from the regime; the Estrada government fell…largely as a result of massive non-violent demonstrations. (Rheingold 160)

In the case of the silent protest in Manila, the motivation of the citizens was clear: to put an end to the regime of Estrada. The Filipinos mobilized and assembled through text messages which allowed them to circumvent the traditional lines of communication that were run by the state and to reach over a million citizens within a short period of time.

Of course, there have always been significant moments in history when technology affects how groups form and how ideas spread. The technology of text messaging used in the silent protest and its ability to incite political change is akin to the technology of the printing press and its influence at the time of its invention. In *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein claims that the printing press propelled a revolutionary shift in history because it brought together all types of people through a collective access to knowledge. This new mobility of books meant that the readers could congregate with peers to share ideas, exchange knowledge with each other, and compare notes on what they had read. Perhaps the most influential event at the time, Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses would be considered as the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. Luther utilized the printing press to produce and hand out pamphlets of his theses to the gathered public. Eisenstein agrees with Maurice Gravier that the historical significance of Luther's actions was that they were far-reaching:

> The theses…were said to be known throughout Germany in a fortnight and throughout Europe in a month…Printing was recognized as a new power and publicity came into its own…the printing presses transformed the field of communications and fathered an international revolt. It was a revolution. (Eisenstein 171)

The speed and influence demonstrated by the dissemination of the theses was unprecedented for the early 16th century and was made possible through the technology of the printing press. Today, the latest technologies in digital communications have amplified the speed at which word travels and has significantly expanded the number of individuals who are able to be reached by social media tools. Instead of reaching a few thousand people within a few weeks, messages can now be sent out in a matter of minutes to theoretically reach over a million individuals.

Using social media to convey messages to a multitude of individuals and to effectively organize them into flash mobs and smart mobs is a powerful and yet slightly unnerving model. Flash mobs that are designed for amusement have had issues with leaving minor property damage after their performances. Other than causing momentary disruptions and leaving remnants of the event behind, flash mobs do not set out to cause harm to other individuals nor do they intend for severe property damage. So what happens when someone uses the method of forming these mobs for ill-serving purposes? A flash mob that has an unscrupulous objective is created the same way that every other flash mob is created. It uses emails, text messages, and online forums to reach participants and provides them with instructions on what to do when they meet up. The objective of the mob may not be to merely serve as some sort of artistic performance but may instead be used to distract citizens while committing a crime.

On April 28, 2011, almost two dozen teenagers descended upon a retail store in Washington D.C. and stole $20,000 worth of merchandise. The flash mob entered the store in broad daylight and used the size of their group to intimidate the employees and other customers as they took products from the store. The crime occurred only two

months after a similar flash mob in St. Paul, Minnesota occurred wherein nearly fifty teenagers robbed a convenience store. These flash mobs are a new wave of mob robberies where individuals surge into stores and brazenly steal items. Some of the mob robberies have been caught by surveillance cameras and a few of them have even been posted on the Youtube website.

These crime mobs have taken advantage of the same protocols and use the same social media tools that flash mobs use to gather people together quickly for a single objective. As explained by Galloway and Thacker in *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, a particular method that connects or even controls a network of actors that can be infiltrated and used for a personal agenda is known as an exploit: "Protocological struggles do not center around changing existent technologies but instead involve discovering holes in existent technologies and projecting potential change through those holes. Hackers call these holes 'exploits'," (Galloway and Thacker 81). The hole that exists in flash mobs lies in the first step of their creation: communicating through social media tools. A group of criminals can potentially reach a mass audience to promote their own objective by using the same means available to any other flash mob creators. These crime sprees have so far been limited to retail and convenience stores, but there is a potential for a greater arena, such as a national bank, to become the target of a future crime. While these mob robberies have not led to serious injuries, the combination of theft, intimidation, and force could lead to violent situations just as easily as it can materialize in any kind of mob.

A large crowd of people united by a common end is not particularly new. The word "mob" itself tends to draw more negative connotations than positive. Historical

references to mobs likely conjure up images of throngs of people acting irrationally. Mobs that are fueled solely by emotions and theatrics can easily lose control of their original agenda and spiral into hostility and violence. The Salem Witch Trials are the most infamous example of what can happen when a large group of individuals unite behind a malevolent goal. Lynch mobs are also characteristic of self-serving mobs where collective behavior horrifically turns into a warped version of vigilante justice. These kinds of mobs definitely exhibit signs of irrational collective behavior that can emerge out of a group's shared fear and wrath. With nothing but emotions to drive them, they block out all reason and regard for laws and moral codes.

Flash mobs and smart mobs do not ordinarily materialize out of distress or out of a need for drastic reform. They remain focused on the one agenda that they have organized around, and they do not typically display an emotional state of mind that is usually a trait of lynch mobs. The difference is that flash mobs and smart mobs are organized from the start. Instructions are passed along to those who understand and agree to the proposed motives and actions. While some require more preparation than others, they rely on the trust and faith of their fellow allies to not deviate from the agreed upon plan. These mobs are kept secret until they have been carried out and then they peacefully disband. They are not characterized by violence of any sort, and they demonstrate a composure that reflects the devotion of each participant to the success of the mob.

Flash mobs and smart mobs are among the most popular models in mass coordination and mobilization. While a number of flash mobs are performed as acts of amusement or satire, the method can also be used to promote political agendas. These smart mobs utilize social media platforms as well as mobile devices to publicize issues

concerning humans' rights to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. However, these mobs only ensure that there will be an outcome regardless of whether it is a positive or a negative one. The power found within a social network, the unified message of a group of individuals, and the potential danger that the method holds are all components to be considered in the formation of any mob.

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