Philip K. Creswell, *Chains of trust: Networks of persistent resistance in digital activism*. Uppsala University, 2021. Dissertation in sociology.

What role do social ties play in enabling political activism – particularly high-cost, high-risk activism? The literature on social movements is clear: such activism requires strong bonds among participants, and tight-knit organizational or interpersonal networks embodying a certain amount of trust.

Is this really so, however, asks Philip Creswell's recent dissertation, *Chains of trust: Networks of persistent resistance in digital activism*? Creswell interrogates the role of social ties based on a detailed examination of a fairly unique instance of political action: the unruly hacktivist collective, or digital "scene", known as Anonymous. Having launched cyberattacks against government agencies, corporations, and even the Church of Scientology, Anonymous represents a community of people whose wide-ranging activities include some that – if the "Feds" were to catch them – could mean prison time. The stakes for participants in hacktivism, or hacking into computer systems for political or social reasons, are, in short, high.

The puzzle here is that the internet is not supposed to foster strong ties. Rather, the sociological literature on the subject suggests the digital sphere fosters weak ties at most, and looser bonds of this latter kind are not supposed to be enough to enable high-risk activism. As Creswell discusses, the literature is therefore pessimistic about the internet's amenability to meaningful activism: you cannot really build bonds there, especially bonds of trust. At best, the web can facilitate fast, low-cost activism – what some call "slacktivism" (because you can do it even if you're a slacker). And, without trust, we know (for example from the work of Nobel Prize-winning political scientist Elinor Ostrom) that people are much less likely to participate in costly or risky collective actions. In particular, confidence that others will contribute is what leads any one individual to contribute.

The result of Creswell's three-year ethnographic study of Anonymous is therefore intriguing. Unexpectedly, in this least likely of environments, he found the predictions of social movements theory are, in fact, correct: Anonymous operates as a kind of federation, with so-called "crews", and the members of a given crew tend to share quite strong ties. In a broader environment characterized by substantial mistrust, members of given crews even trust each other. It seems, then, that tight bonds, and trust, may indeed be a necessary condition for collective action.

Creswell's ethnography entailed long hours online. He uses his data to establish that participants in Anonymous see their participation as risky – in the sense of potentially costly (with arrest and prosecution a constant worry). He also shows that they participate in the scene, nonetheless, because they achieve much the same kind of risk-sharing, resource-sharing, and mutual emotional support that any committed activists tend to share.

The dissertation makes this contribution after detailing the history of Anonymous – reviewing critical turning points in its evolution, and its fragmentation into networks. There is an extensive discussion of ethical issues, along with methodology. It examines

the ways that participants characterize the risks and potential costs they face, and the risk mitigation strategies that participants use, in a social environment characterized by pervasive mistrust.

Creswell shows that participants need to employ careful strategies if they are to collaborate; in particular, they need to believe that collaborators are not government informants. When activists put in the time, and show their commitment to Anonymous, these are not just costs, but investments – investments that can yield acceptance, integration, and social capital within the movement. The term of art here is “scene cred.” Participants do emotional work to keep each other – particularly fellow members of a given crew – calm, focused, and capable of managing the paranoia and stress that many feel. Such work helps create a sense of belonging and mutual support.

Overall, the study presents an interesting corrective for digital sociologists, showing them that strong ties can emerge in unlikely online communities. That said, the case of Anonymous clearly pushes social research on the internet to its limits. Hacktivism is a rather unique type of collective action. This reader at least would have been interested to know a bit more about what participants in Anonymous are really trying to achieve. In places, their agendas seem incoherent at best (though the reach of their attacks is certainly unnerving). Does the study of hacktivism take social movements studies back to collective behavior theory? And what political impact, ultimately, could Anonymous or something like it ever hope to achieve?

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