

## **Born in Facebook: The Refugee Crisis and Grassroots Connective Action in Hungary**

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This article explores the impact of social networking sites on social movements and collective action. Literature on the subject ranges from celebratory claims to critical stances. However, the more sophisticated approach conceptualizing “connective action” broadens the theoretical scope. The case of Migration Aid, a Hungarian Facebook-based grassroots relief group for refugees, is such an example. In this study, we contextualize the group’s activities, exploring how they relate to the broader political environment, arguing for a need to reexamine the concept of contentious politics. We explore the characteristics that make connective action possible, with an emphasis on the group’s rhizomatic structure. The findings detail the characteristics of the rhizomatic organization and how these characteristics shape the group’s action repertoire.

*Keywords: social media, social movements, collective action, Facebook, refugees*

The rise and growing importance of social networking sites (SNSs) have garnered considerable and growing research attention related to different aspects of social media use, and have given a new impetus for the wider discussion of the relationship between communication technologies and social organization (Castells, 1996, 2009, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Most observers agree that the effects of social media influence collective action, but there is little consensus regarding the exact nature of this influence.

The theoretical debates have focused on whether the contribution of social media can facilitate traditional action (the so-called reinforcement hypothesis; Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011; Van Laer, 2010) or generate new types of collective action (the innovation hypothesis; Benkler, 2006; Mossberger & Tolbert, 2010), whereas empirical case studies mostly have focused on already existing forms of collective action. So far, relatively little empirical attention has been given to organizations outside the realm of political campaigns and activism, social movements with explicit political aims, or self-interest and identity groups—formations that existed prior to the rise of social media. Although a large body of work argues that social media can be a potentially innovative tool in terms of creating new modalities of organization (Bennett & Toft, 2009; Chadwick, 2013), there is a lacuna in research investigating such newly enabled forms. In this study, we looked at the case of the Hungarian Facebook-

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Date submitted: 2015-10-21

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based relief aid group Migration Aid, arguing that it is an emerging form of organization. Migration Aid is a grassroots relief group that was formed on social media without the use of traditional mobilizational agents; it has taken over roles traditionally occupied by formal NGOs or the state. The aim of the study was to explore how a coherent and effective organization was created using Facebook as a platform for cooperation.

In what follows, we first outline the most important concepts relevant to the object of our study and form our research questions. Then, we provide a context of the events, followed by an overview of Migration Aid's activities. Then, we describe the approach and methodology of the research. Our findings address our research questions focusing on the group's organization and action repertoire. Finally, we revisit the conceptual framework and discuss its relation to our findings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The role of social media in the organization of social movements and collective action in general has been at the center of debates since its inception. In fact, as soon as the Internet emerged, the first views that posited that digital technologies carry in them the possibilities of nongovernmental self-organization appeared (Bimber, 1998). Regarding the offline positive effects of the Internet, it has been argued that it makes possible the extension of one's social network (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001).

Techno-optimism related to civic activity and self-organization gained a new momentum with the appearance of social media bringing to the fore many-to-many communication. Writing as early as 2008, Clay Shirky found that social media has a role in spreading information and coordinating collective action. With the appearance of large social media platforms, literature emphasizing their role in communication, identity formation, and networked organization potentials emerged.

Miller (2015) identifies three dimensions in the optimistic discourse regarding the effects of social media on social movements. They emphasize, first, an increase of information originating in the ease of media production and distribution. Second, an increased ability to connect, organize, and mobilize is underlined. Finally, social media, according to these views, naturally increases participants' ability to self-express.

The first decade of the 21st century presented numerous political events that strengthened this optimistic view: Moldavia's Twitter revolution, Iran's Facebook revolution, Chile's student movements, Iceland's kitchenware revolution, and the international Occupy and Indignados movements have been conceptualized as being made possible by social media (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012). These political events serve as examples underlining the mobilization potential of social media. Such stances have been reinforced further by the events of the Arab Spring, in which participants themselves often stressed the significance of SNSs. Hence, it is no surprise that literature reflecting on the events of the Arab Spring often focuses on organization methods using social media (Castells, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

There are four strands of criticism that stand against these optimistic views. Malcolm Gladwell (2010) argues that the contagious spreading of revolutionary movements predates social media. Works dealing with the history of information give detailed accounts about how novel ideas were able to spread well before the emergence of SNSs (Gladwell, 2010; Standage, 2013).

Second, Gladwell (2010) also questions Granovetter's renowned thesis on the strength of weak ties (1973). He maintains that the thesis is context-dependent, as weak ties show their strength in certain situations (e.g., getting a job), but this may not be the case in other contexts. According to Gladwell, collective action carrying physical risks is such a context, where strong ties are more important. Morozov (2009) uses the term *slacktivism* to describe nonrisky, nonmeaningful activism based on such weak ties on Facebook.

Third, a further criticism questions the mobilization potential of social media. As Fuchs (2012) stresses, looking at Internet access rates in the countries of the Arab Spring, the number of Facebook and Twitter users was far behind the number of protesters; therefore, the view that social media was a catalyst of these revolutions cannot be upheld.

Fourth, Morozov (2011) and others note that social media-based social movements leave behind digital footprints that authoritarian powers can exploit for the surveillance and oppression of such movements and their members.

The debate surrounding the effects of social media on collective action has itself been criticized (Lim, 2012) for pitting against each other human and technological actors as primary drivers of social organization, arguing that these actors are not detached from each other; rather, they coexist and coevolve in an increasingly hybrid world (Treré, 2012).

Therefore, we believe that a more sophisticated and comprehensible approach and conceptual framework are needed to address the relationship between social media and collective action. An important advance in this direction is the concept of *connective action* developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) as opposed to traditional forms of collective action.

The concept of connective action stresses that individual frames allow the personalized understanding of issues for participants, and these frames are easily distributed through a network in which digital technologies become "important organizational agents" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 755); therefore, organizational structures are no longer needed to create new forms of mobilization.

Discussing motivation for participation in connective action, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) emphasize the role of community appreciation, peer production recognition, and respect. Indeed, examples of Wikipedia and open software movements all point to the importance of such recognition structures in online communities. This is of particular significance for our case. As Bennett and Segerberg explain, such self-motivated forms do not lead to self-centered behavior: It is not only individual recognition but also working toward a commonly understood goal that form the basis of motivations. In the case of Migration Aid, this commonly understood goal was humanitarian action. As we will see later,

this does not mean that self-centered and humanitarian action are exclusive as their relationship is more complex.

To apply the logic of connective action to Migration Aid, the metaphor of the rhizome originally developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) seems particularly useful. Theoretical literature on social movements recently turned its attention to their rhizomatic nature (Castells, 2012; Funke, 2012). Funke (2012) describes rhizomes as “unlike a tree structure, with its ‘root node’ or starting point and end-points, or ‘leaf nodes,’ rhizomatic structures can be entered and exited from any point” (p. 29).

As opposed to the formal, hierarchical, rigid structures built by clear-cut binary concepts, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) present the rhizome as a more informal, centerless, spontaneous, even hybrid system of relations. The organic, dynamic characteristics of the rhizome make it more adequate and suitable to our research than the network metaphor, which is more sterile, model-like, and structural. Although the network approach has great merits, the rhizome fits our research subject better. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome describes both a connected mode of knowledge and communication and processes of reality. This notion became remarkably useful to describe new, grassroots social movements that were created in the digital sphere given the networked nature of SNSs. To understand the interpretative power of the rhizome, it is worth contrasting rhizomatic movements with those successful social movements of the previous epochs. As put forward by Gladwell (2010), the civil rights movement in the United States had a charismatic leader, an ideology, a clearly defined hierarchy with functionally differentiated competencies, established top-down communication channels, and precise, almost military-like operation. The new rhizomatic social movements exhibit none of these elements; actually, they embody the exact opposite and therefore epitomize a new type of operation for social movements. Without having a firm structure, rhizomatic movements are highly flexible and are able to adapt, proliferate, and restart when necessary.

By putting an emphasis in the connective action framework on rhizomes, a central question that emerges is how the rhizomatic structure shapes the action repertoires of social movements. When applying the term *repertoires of collective action*, we refer to what Charles Tilly (1984) describes as “distinctive constellations of tactics and strategies developed over time and used by protest groups to act collectively in order to make claims on individuals or groups” (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004, p. 265). There is a general understanding that the Internet has broadened these repertoires of collective action in the case of social movements (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tilly, 1984). Such a development is not surprising given that the combination of offline and online tactics naturally leads to an increase (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Although offline and online actions add up to a new “digitalized” repertoire, the interdependency of these actions within the movement also points to blurring of the boundaries of offline and online actions.

With regard to movement repertoires, the effect of the rhizome also can be conceptualized as allowing for the emergence of hybrid organizations in which the boundaries between online and offline activities are blurred, allowing for fast “repertoire switches” between the two spheres (Chadwick, 2007). The question regarding why such hybrid organizations existing on numerous platforms do not disintegrate is posed by Bennett, Segerberg, and Walker (2014). Linkages and networks are crucial for the survival of

such organizations; furthermore, a key platform gains a “stitching” role, they argue, allowing for a coherent organization to be maintained.

The emergence of hybrid organizations with rhizomatic structures may affect action repertoires with regard to low- and high-threshold activities. Literature on Internet-based movements often associates them with the creation of weak ties (Harp, Bachmann, & Guo, 2012; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010), which in turn lead many authors to conclude that participation based on such weak ties excludes the possibility of high-threshold/cost activities (Gladwell, 2010). Slacktivism (Morozov, 2009) refers to the phenomenon of low-threshold/cost activities performed online with little to no effect. Whether such a distinction applies to hybrid organizations needs further empirical investigation.

One of the ways in which the rhizomatic structure affects a group’s action repertoire is the implication that organizations tend to respond more quickly to challenges than hierarchical organizations (Powell, 1990). This is the characteristic we call the *information thermostat* function of Facebook. The concept of the information thermostat refers to the operation of a self-regulative system that permanently receives inputs from given surroundings and changes its outputs accordingly. At the same time, information thermostats themselves are subjects of continuous change, and they drive transformation of the broader context as well.

The concept of the rhizome as applied to the structure of hybrid social movements and its relation to action repertoires drove the research questions of the present article:

*RQ1: How do the characteristics of the rhizome appear in the organization of Migration Aid?*

*RQ2: How does the rhizome influence the repertoire of action of the group?*

In what follows, we use an empirical case study to broaden this theoretical framework, as we are confident that such case studies are necessary not only to test and refine theoretical considerations but they can also contribute to the progressive development of theories. Epistemological modesty is not the only rationale for such an empirically focused starting point. As we will see, real-life events often follow unpredictable patterns incongruent with theoretical constructs.

Before we begin to give an empirical account of our findings, we first need to investigate the political context in which the events related to our research took place. To present this context, we follow the power/counterpower logic proposed by Foucault (1990) and later applied by Castells (2009) to social media and power struggles.

### **Context**

Migration Aid is a nonprofit organization based on the voluntary association of its members and dependent on the donations it receives, which would make the group either a voluntary association or an NGO by definition (Vedder, 2007). Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 22) suggest the term *consensus movements* to overcome the problem of including charities and voluntary associations—groups that lack

the conflictual element and the motivation to alter the social structure—within the movement framework of analysis. We argue here that the boundaries of the political point to more complex issues: The self-definition of Migration Aid states that the group is nonpolitical in nature. What constitutes political action in a given context is not necessarily shaped by the group alone and is subject to the intentions of those in power, namely the Hungarian government in our case.

### **Power**

Following the terrorist attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, 2 million people took to the streets of Paris on January 11, 2015. Among them was Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, who gave his interpretation of the events in an interview:

We should not look at economic migration as if it had any use, because it only brings trouble and threats to European people. . . . Therefore, immigration must be stopped. . . . We will not allow it, at least as long as I am prime minister and as long as this government is in power. ("Hungary PM Orbán Says," 2015, para. 4-6)

Orbán's words were echoed by a number of state officials later. The applied frame was clear from the beginning: There are no refugees escaping the horrors of war, only economic migrants who jeopardize Hungarian jobs, culture, and "way of life." A number of political and communication tools were applied to reinforce this message. The government set up a working group to handle the immigrant question ("A Kormány Felkészül," 2015). This was followed by a so-called "national consultation" in April, including questions that asked, "Do you agree that mistaken immigration policies contribute to the spread of terrorism?" ("Viktor Orbán Will Take Care," 2015). A month after this, the government announced a major billboard campaign with three basic messages: "If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture!"; "If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our laws!"; and "If you come to Hungary, you can't take away our jobs!" Given that the language of the billboards was Hungarian, it is presumable that the target audience of the campaign was Hungarian voters and not the migrants themselves. A couple of days after this announcement, the government also declared that it planned to build a fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border ("Hungary to Fence Off Border," 2015).

The government's offensive was not without its effects. According to polls, a majority of Hungarians agreed with the billboard campaign's statements ("Századvég," 2015). The findings of another opinion poll ("Csúcson az Idegenellenesség," 2015) showed that xenophobic sentiments had reached a record high.

During the first six months of 2015, Hungary has indeed become a prominent transit route for refugees, further strengthening the effects of the above-described campaign. It has to be noted, however, that Hungary was not an intended destination for these refugees; the majority continued toward Germany and Western Europe in general (Eurostat, 2015).

### **Counterpower**

As Castells (2007) writes, "one of the few natural laws of society, verified throughout history, asserts that wherever is domination, there is resistance to domination" (p. 248). At first sight, it seems that the striking fact about the Hungarian case is that this "natural law" of Castells' did not operate here. Orbán's leftist opposition had been in the state of a permanent crisis at least since 2010, and the extreme-right Jobbik had lost its momentum specifically because of the refugee crisis. Attempts to establish new political parties or social movements in the past have been unsuccessful. Orbán's power has yet to meet its counterpower. Nevertheless, Castells also maintains that counterpower can take a number of different shapes, "be it political, cultural, economic, psychological, or otherwise" (p. 248).

Even though the formation of Migration Aid has been an unpredictable and unexpected event, in hindsight, one can see the growing potentials of resistance and alternative discourses clearly. When the government announced its billboard campaign, an outburst of memes followed. This time, however, the outrage did not stop there. The portal Vastagbor and the satirical Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party launched a crowd-funding campaign setting out to collect HUF 3 million to buy 50 billboards to mock the government's campaign ("Óriásplakátra Gyűjtünk!", 2015). The call became an overnight success: HUF 33 million were collected that allowed the organizers to produce and display more than 500 billboards.

Both the case of the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party and, as we will see, of Migration Aid point to the more general analytical question about the "boundaries" of the political and whether collective action can become political against the intentions of its actors. Castells' (2007) notion of counterpower has its origins in Foucault's (1990) oft-quoted thesis on resistance: "Where there is power, there is resistance. . . ." For us, the second part of this statement is also relevant: "and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1990, p. 95). Migration Aid had a clearly expressed nonpolitical agenda at its conception, but its actions carried clear political meaning in the given context. One way to conceptualize this apparent contradiction is to turn to the study of humanitarian action and how it appears in the case of Migration Aid. Humanitarian action in the West historically relies on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Pictet, 1979). It is worth examining how these values were present here.

One possible approach to frame trends in the field of humanitarian action is offered by Chouliaraki (2013), who argues that we live in the age of posthumanitarianism given that in the past decades, a shift from the ethics of "pity" toward the ethics of "irony" has taken place. The ironic spectator is presented as "an impure or ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as skeptical towards any moral appeal to solidary action and, yet, open to doing something about those who suffer" (Chouliaraki, p. 2). Three trends that led to this shift are identified by Chouliaraki as the marketization of humanitarian action, an individualist morality of activism in which the donor's emotional benefits are central to action, and a new communicative structure. Although the first trend, consumerization of humanitarian action, was present in Hungary, such activities of mainstream NGOs stood in sharp contrast to those of Migration Aid. Although The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched a billboard campaign to promote solidarity as refugees and other NGOs reluctantly organized traditional charity activities, such practices were slow in reaction, distanced from the problem, and very rarely took place at

the actual locations where refugees were to be found. If anything, the case of Migration Aid is a clear criticism of such humanitarian practices. Nevertheless, Chouliaraki's work is central in pointing out that self-centered behavior and humanitarian action are not mutually exclusive, but have a more complex relationship.

In his theory on collective identities, Castells (1997) delineates three different kinds of identities: legitimizing, resistance and project identities. Whereas legitimizing identities serve to maintain the power structure, resistance identities aim to exclude the excluders by the excluded. Castells proposes that project identities—where participants do not define themselves against the system, but aim to realize immanent values outside of the power dichotomies—will be the dominant forms of collective identities in the network society. From this perspective, it is fascinating that the impact of social networks on collective action has mostly been demonstrated—from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement—on resistance movements.

The Migration Aid case is an attempt to use the connective action framework in such a project identity movement. We also argue that regardless of the (nonpolitical) intention of the participants, in this highly politicized context, humanitarian action had a huge political relevance.

### **Migration Aid—An Overview**

Established by a previously unknown one-person NGO on June 29, 2015, Migration Aid is a Facebook group that had 9,000 members at the end of September 2015. In the course of a few weeks, Migration Aid built a highly complex relief infrastructure, one that the government was hesitant to provide and traditional NGOs were incapable of establishing.

After three months of relief work, Migration Aid compiled statistical data about its operations and the efforts undertaken by its members and donators. According to these data, 500 activists in 70,000 work-hours provided for 111,600 refugees. Telephone bills related to relief work amounted to €11,000. Volunteers distributed 140,000 bottles of water, 49,400 sandwiches, 90,400 cereal bars, 73,200 cleansers, 7,830 pairs of shoes, and tens of thousands pieces of clothes, among other things. Migration Aid spent €22,200 on public transport tickets for refugees. From 2,100 donators (90% of whom were members of the Migration Aid group), the group received €118,000 for medication for the refugees ("Migration Aid Számokban," 2015).

### ***First Phase (June 29–July 14)***

During the initial phase of its operation, the first members of the group concentrated on gathering information in the field about the whereabouts and primary needs of refugees. Based on these first experiences, a general operational network for Migration Aid was established. Because the state did not actively organize the transportation of refugees, they had to use the railway infrastructure designed for civilian purposes that was unfit for the needs of refugees. The documentation received by the refugees was in Hungarian, making the process incomprehensible for most of them. Once they arrived in Budapest,



they did not receive information about how to reach their destination. Those arriving late at night were not provided for and often slept near the train stations.

In terms of what the tasks of Migration Aid were, the first related post summarized it in six points: (1) examine within Budapest what kind of help is needed, (2) establish a phone-based duty and dispatch service, (3) find locations outside of Budapest that require help, (4) locate a storehouse, (5) find transportation, and (6) recruit volunteers (June 30).

A number of house rules for the group were established. On its third day, the Facebook group "closed" to protect it from outside attacks. The group's founder requested a restraint from "politics," "incitement," and "xenophobia" (July 1).

Two types of communication existed and were reflected on by the group. "Phatic" communication (Malinowski, 1923; Miller, 2015)—acts of speech that do not necessarily serve information exchange; rather, they create a feeling of community—had to be separated from "useful" functions. There were numerous strategies to overcome this problem: Migration Aid established a Migration Aid Conversational group and local groups also moved in such a direction.

### ***Second Phase (July 15–August 30)***

The developments in the next month show a number of interrelated trends. Both the number of the group's members and the amount of donations grew in size. At the same time, the demands pressed on the group were also escalating. This led to a renegotiation of the group's roles and a shift of the activities from the previously established framework.

In mid-July, posts on the Facebook page repeatedly warned about the original tasks of the group, implying a growing concern about whether its activities could remain within those boundaries:

July 13: We have a lot of returning "clients," what we do now is counter-productive.  
Passers-by . . . only see the growing crowd hanging out around the railway stations.

By the end of July, the online posts showed a markedly different approach: The cooking and distribution of meals and establishment of stable transit zones where refugees were taken care of became part of the group's roles. This shift was made possible by a number of internal and external pressures on the group.

So far, Migration Aid's activities were either ignored or hindered by authorities. In the first week of August, however, city officials and Migration Aid agreed to open three so-called transit zones provided by the city and managed by Migration Aid's volunteers.

### ***Third Phase (August 31–September 15)***

The week between August 31 and September 4 was described in the group's discussions as the heaviest days of the crisis. An unprecedented number of refugees reached Budapest. As they refused to enter camps and were unable to board trains toward western Europe, and human trafficking became a difficult solution, with Austria introducing strict border controls, most refugees were stranded in Hungarian train stations, mainly in Keleti. State officials locked down the train station, prohibiting refugees to enter. The situation with 3,000 refugees pushing the limits of the transit zone's capacities plus miscommunication from authorities maintained tension during the week. On September 4, approximately 1,000 people decided to leave Keleti and walk toward Austria. This event marked a turning point in state response: Hungary and Austria reached an agreement whereby Hungarian state authorities provided buses for refugees that took them to the Austrian border where Austria accepted them. A newly built fence on the Serbian–Hungarian border and a number of legal changes on September 15 made entry for refugees close to impossible, and the decision of Austria and Germany to open their borders rendered the relief efforts of Migration Aid obsolete in Budapest. The group continues to ship donations to refugees in need by and through the border.

### **Method**

The analysis is based on Migration Aid's posts as units of analysis. All posts between the foundation of the group (June 29) and the creation of the fence by the Hungarian–Serbian border (September 15) were analyzed. We retrieved 4,614 posts from Migration Aid's Facebook group during the researched period. The attribute of "date" was added to each post, which allowed for the frequency and distribution of posts to be analyzed. Two types of posts were differentiated: posts that contained only text, and posts that contained outlinks with or without further comments.

To give an overview of Migration Aid's activities, we applied content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980), which consisted of the close reading of the posts, notetaking, and identifying emergent issues and patterns.

To answer RQ1, we used link analysis. According to Hogan (2008), a useful distinction in network research is one between the analysis of whole networks, personal networks, and partial networks. Our approach fit into the partial network model as it situated Migration Aid in the context within which it operated, collecting the nodes linked to Migration Aid's Facebook page. This approach in general is usually referred to as link analysis. Two main types of outlinks were (1) links to media sources and (2) links to other groups and pages as actors. The link analysis was carried out using NodeXL and maps out Migration Aid's relations to other groups and pages.

Thematic analysis was undertaken to answer RQ2. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, the aim of the method is to identify, analyze, and report patterns in the data. During the data analysis phase, we followed the six processes put forward by Braun and Clarke: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. In accordance with these steps, we started with a close reading of the data

for emerging codes. Each post was treated as a single unit of analysis. The formation of themes took place in an iterative manner, that is, followed by reflection on the initial codes and links between them (Bryman, 2008). Initial codes were thus summed in nine larger themes, as shown in Table 1: question by member, help/donation offered by member, materials produced by member, idea by a member, materials produced by the group, group-focused communication, practical knowledge-sharing, calls for help/donations, and sharing of related news.

**Table 1. Themes Identified in Migration Aid's Facebook Group's Posts.**

Theme	
Field information offered	Individuals post information, news, description, field reports based on their offline experiences.
Field information requests	Questions related to what is happening somewhere offline.
Help/donation offered	Individuals offer their capacities—help or donations—to the group.
Help/donation requests	Individuals or administrators of the group—in the group's "name"—post requests for donations or volunteer help that specify what is needed and where.
External media content shared	Links to news sites, articles, broadcasts.
Self-produced media content shared	Members who made pictures or videos during their volunteering offline upload these contents to the group.
Knowledge production	Files uploaded to the group that volunteers can individually disseminate or use: vocabulary lists, timetables, laws and regulations, maps.
Ideas	Bottom-up ideas shared by members that serve innovation.
Group-related communication	Posts that discuss issues related to group meetings, group rules, and group activities.

During its existence, Migration Aid conducted two short online surveys to get a picture of its members' opinions and aspirations, the second of which (September 18–21) yielded 230 respondents (see Table 2).

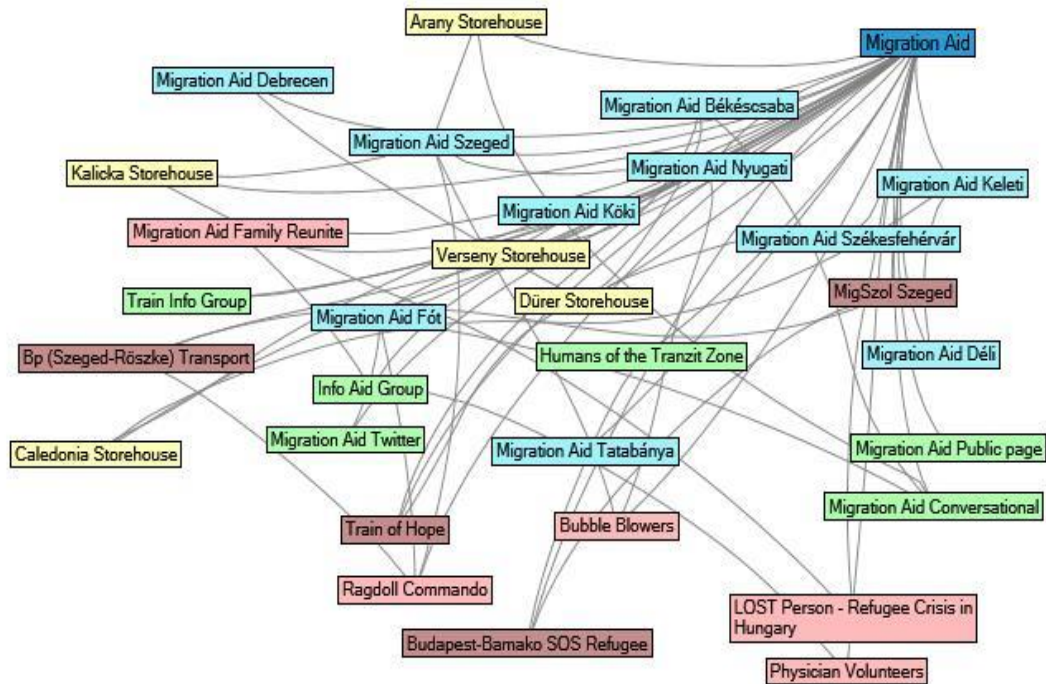
## Results

We consider Migration Aid an emerging form of organization as it took the form of highly complex, coherent, and effective connective action. We emphasize the role of rhizomatic structure as central to understanding how the logic of connective action operates. Our findings point to a number of characteristics of the rhizome. How these characteristics influence the group's repertoire of action is also detailed.

### ***The Rhizomatic Structure of Migration Aid***

Our first research question, how the characteristics of the rhizome appear in the organization of Migration Aid, was examined by link analysis. Figure 1 gives a schematic network topology of the group.

Social media network connections



Created with NodeXL Basic (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>) from the Social Media Research Foundation (<http://www.smrfoundation.org>)

**Figure 1. A network topology of Migration Aid's connections. (1) Local subgroups (Migration Aid Keleti, Migration Aid Déli, Migration Aid Nyugati, Migration Aid Fót, Migration Aid Szeged, Migration Aid Debrecen, Migration Aid Köki, Migration Aid Békéscsaba, Migration Aid Székesfehérvár, Migration Aid Tatabánya). (2) Storehouse facilities (Caledonia Storehouse, Kalicka Storehouse, Arany Storehouse, Verseny Storehouse, Dürer Storehouse). (3) Online groups (Info Aid Group, Train Info Group, Humans of the Tranzit Zone, MA public page, MA Twitter, MA Conversational). (4) Specialized groups (Physician Volunteers, Migration Aid Family Reunite, LOST Person—Refugee Crisis in Hungary, Bubble Blowers, Ragdoll Commando). (5) Partnerships (MigSzol Szeged, Budapest-Bamako SOS Refugee, Bp [Szeged–Röszke] Transport, Train of Hope).**

The central group operated closely with local subgroups that were positioned at train stations in the capital and in the country. A number of storehouse facilities were also connected to both the central and the subgroups. A number of online groups—with no offline activities—operated to distribute information for group members and the wider public. Furthermore, specialized groups with thematic aims

also functioned. Finally, it has to be noted that Migration Aid formed partnerships with similar organizations.

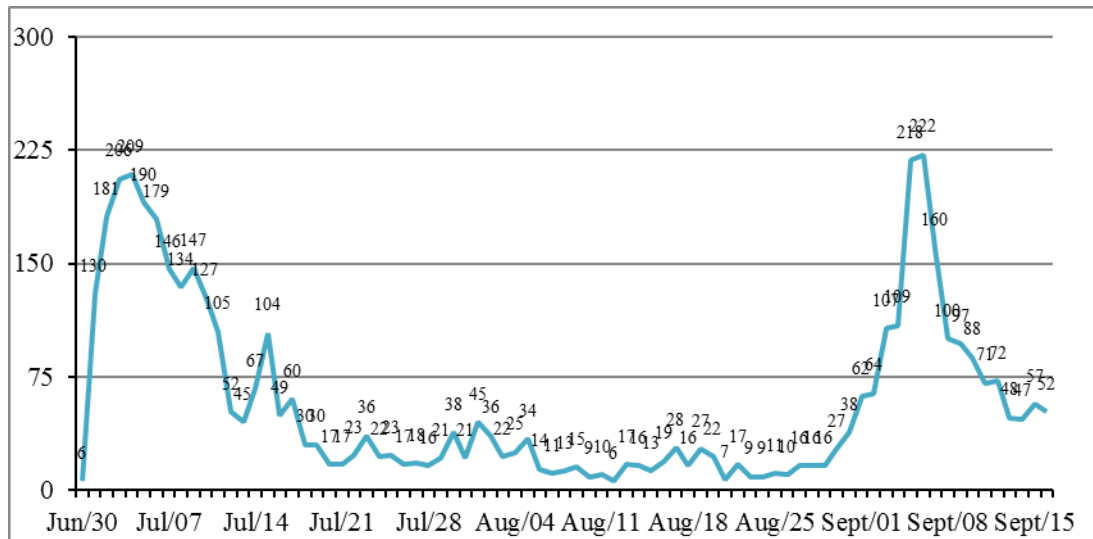
The rhizomatic structure of Migration Aid shapes the organization of the group in a number of ways: It is nonhierarchical in nature; it is hybrid in terms of connecting the online and offline spheres; it is an organization for which Facebook has an important stitching function, but it is not the sole online platform used; and it allows for a long-term flexibility of the organization over time.

First, the rhizomatic structure allows the group to be nonhierarchical. Information within the group does not flow in a top-bottom manner; it lacks fixed starting or ending points. However, this does not mean that the organization is flat or lacks a certain structure. Although it is often assumed in the literature that new, Internet-enabled social movements are leaderless (Castells, 2012), even within the rhizomatic structure, supernodes emerge, and hyperactivists (Nunes, 2005), who are more available than others, are present. The uneven distribution of digital skills (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006) also creates in-group differences.

Second, the rhizomatic structure blurs the boundaries between Internet-based online and Internet-supported offline activities. The deep interdependency of these two spheres makes one question whether such a distinction is still analytically useful (Bimber, 2000). Applying Chadwick's (2007) terms, Migration Aid can be seen as a hybrid mobilization movement operating both in the online and offline realm, where social media make effective switches between the two spheres possible.

Third, although Facebook was central in the creation of and cooperation within Migration Aid, social media were not the only communication technology used by the group's volunteers. Verbal communication was significant at the locations and during the group's weekly meetings. Volunteers used their cell phones in a number of ways: A network of interpreters useful for their work was available by phone for fieldwork volunteers, the dispatch service and volunteer operators who distributed up-to-date information about train arrivals and the number of refugees on a given train were both phone-based services. When communicating with the general public, Migration Aid used several channels: an open Facebook page, websites, Tumblr, and Twitter. In this complex, rhizomatic communication ecology, the closed Facebook group of Migration Aid remained the main platform of collaboration, stitching together different groups and communication media (Bennett et al., 2014).

Finally, a characteristic of a rhizome is its flexibility over time to challenges. The above-described divisions of labor—between online and offline, between different communication technologies, and between the original group and further subgroups—therefore were dynamic throughout the researched period. To illustrate these changes, we looked at the number of posts in the original Migration Aid group (see Figure 2). First, following the establishment of the group, the number of posts grew rapidly and started to slowly decline after July 3, stabilizing after mid-July. This balanced Facebook activity lasted during the six weeks between July 15 and August 31. In the first two weeks of September, however, a rapid growth and a second decline are visible when looking at the number of posts in the group. These three phases can be explained by a number of factors both internal and external to the group.



**Figure 2. Number of posts/day.**

First, as posts reached a certain frequency within the group, coordination became difficult for the members. That is one of the reasons why subgroups were established on July 2 and a great proportion of discussions “moved” to those subgroups. A second movement leading to the decrease of posts was from online action to offline action: Once relief points within the city were established, Facebook became one of the many platforms through which offline work was organized. The crisis that unfolded from the end of August put a strain and a need for reorganization on Migration Aid, leading to the growing number of posts. On September 15, the border fence accompanied by new legislation put an end to the influx of refugees. Although Migration Aid continues to ship aid to crisis points in Hungary and abroad, the relief efforts as once established in Budapest ended in mid-September. A rhizomatic structure is dynamic in the sense that it allows adaptability to these long-term changes by restructuring the organization of the group accordingly.

#### ***Effects of the Rhizomatic Structure on the Action Repertoire***

Our second research question addressed how the characteristics of the rhizome shaped Migration Aid’s action repertoire.

The first identified characteristic, namely the movement’s nonhierarchical organization and lack of clear starting and ending points, leads to the emergence of new modalities of participation and therefore a high degree of autonomy of members to shape the action repertoire of the group.

The existence of a wide range of modalities of participation is exemplified by the variety of roles undertaken by members. This is evidenced in the findings of Migration Aid’s own online survey, shown in Table 2. Furthermore, there were opportunities to join relief work temporarily (visiting a location once with donations) or permanently (joining activities as a Migration Aid volunteer or coordinator), online

(coordination and administrative tasks) or offline (volunteering as drivers, at storage facilities, or at railway stations), in a hierarchical (coordinators and experienced volunteers were higher in the hierarchy than novices) or a horizontal (individual contribution) manner. Acts otherwise seen as slacktivism found their function: When a post was considered important, members added a simple dot in a comment to keep the post "afloat."

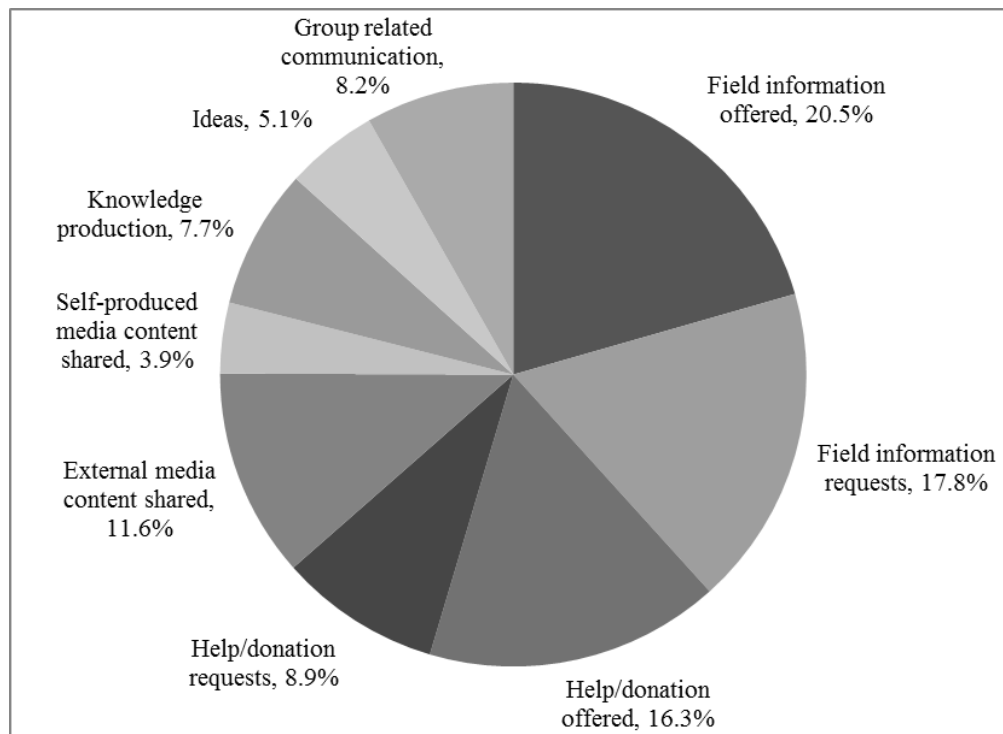
**Table 2. Migration Aid Online Survey (N = 230, September 18–21, 2015).**

What type of volunteer work would you participate in within Migration Aid in the future?	
Collecting donations, sorting, transporting donations, working in the warehouse.	40%
Background work, coordinating different Migration Aid activities.	38%
Work in the field (setting up, coordinating Migration Aid teams in the field, participating in their work).	37%
Taking a role in shaping the public opinion about asylum seekers and migration, participating in think tanks to elaborate proposals for political decision makers.	22%
Working on "getting the word out," gathering information and articles on this topic and also writing and creating different contents regarding the topic (infographics, micro studies, data and fact sheets).	21%
Helping the asylum seekers in camps, registration points with things that have to do with the legal process of being recognized as refugees.	13%
Health care and medical assistance (treating, or if not qualified, then working with doctors, nurses in caring for the asylum seekers and/or refugees).	12%

The second identified characteristic is that Migration Aid is a hybrid organization, blurring the boundaries between offline and online participation. A consequence of this characteristic with regard to the group's action repertoire is that an unreflexive distinction between low- and high-threshold activities as independent variables underlying individual and collective action within a group needed to be readdressed in a more reflexive manner. The questions of what constituted a "risky" activity were continuously negotiated and formed in a discursive style within the group. These discussions navigated around the question of legality, possible counteractions from the state, and possible negative or unintended consequences. As an outcome of Migration Aid's activities, risk thresholds were lowered for relief efforts in general.

Furthermore, low- and high-threshold activities often organize in an interdependent manner, where low-threshold activities are a necessary precondition for high-threshold activities that build on them. These low-threshold activities often took the form of crowd-sourced action in which the effectiveness of the task relied on a large number of participants, whereas the high-threshold on-site activities had a limit on the number of participants. Donations or information were thus gathered by many members, requiring relatively little effort and risk, and later built on, distributed, and articulated by a few. Our findings underline that the organizational logic builds on the coexistence of what Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) identify in their model as Internet-supported and Internet-based, low-threshold, and high-threshold activities. This interconnectedness of ranges of activities is made possible at least partly by the new modalities of participation (Van Lear & Van Aelst, 2010) afforded by social networking sites and the Internet in general.

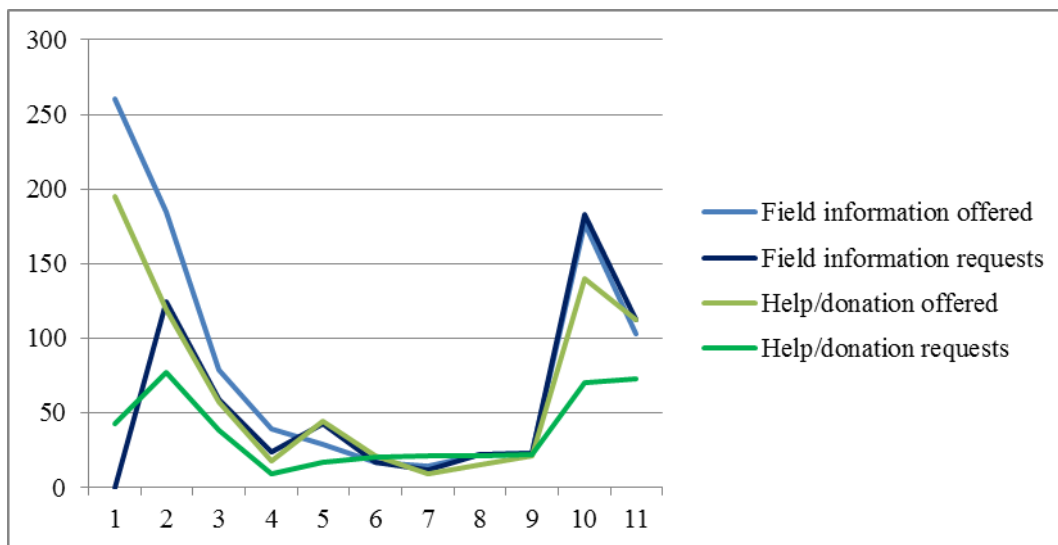
Third, we argue that within the rhizomatic structure of Migration Aid, the Facebook group had a stitching role. This affected the group's action repertoire in its ability to permanently receive inputs and change its outputs accordingly in a highly flexible manner. The mechanism of connecting and circulating inputs and outputs is evidenced in the results of the thematic analysis. This analysis led to the identification of nine themes as described in the Method section. The breakdown of the themes within the group's posts is shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. The distribution of themes in Migration Aid's Facebook posts.**



The most common theme to appear was field information offered combined with the second most common theme, field information requests. There were twice as many help/donation offer posts than posts requesting them. Twelve percent of posts shared external media content. Group-related communication and knowledge production appeared in 8% of the posts. Ideas and self-produced media content were the least common types of posts. We see that diagnostic inputs (information from the field or from media) and outputs were prominent in the functioning of the Facebook group, followed by prognostic inputs and outputs (help/donation requests and offers). A look at how the frequency of these themes changed over the course of the group's existence (see Figure 4) further shows that such inputs and outputs were in close accordance with each other.



**Figure 4. Frequency of four themes (breakdown by week).**

We see that Migration Aid's Facebook group was permanently receiving inputs and changed its outputs accordingly in a highly flexible manner. This flexibility was made possible by the rhizomatic structure of the group, allowing it to change its shape and reconfigure itself in an adaptive manner.

The thematic analysis also sheds light on how the fourth identified characteristic—the rhizome's highly flexible nature and its ability to reconfigure itself—affected the action repertoire of the group. During its operation, Migration Aid continuously adapted, changing its rules and tasks over time. Newly established activities broadened the range of tasks and tactics. Once the group was established, original functions were supplemented by new undertakings. They covered issues related to the well-being of refugees (children's activities, musical performances), specialized tasks undertaken by professionals (physician and pediatrician services), and tasks targeting the volunteers themselves (self-help groups, training). SNSs were also fostering bottom-up initiatives—individual ideas to flow and gain popularity. It was not only internal mechanisms but also a constantly changing external environment that shaped this adaptive repertoire of collective action.

The concept of the information thermostat refers to the operation of a self-regulative system that permanently receives inputs from given surroundings and changes its outputs accordingly. At the same time, information thermostats themselves are subjects of continuous change, and they drive transformation of the broader context as well. Such an information thermostat was a prerequisite for effective functioning because the needs of newly arriving refugees at a given location and the nature of incoming donations were largely unpredictable. The concept is crucial to theoretically grasp the highly complex operation of the "digitally born" Migration Aid. Started as a Facebook group, Migration Aid as a self-organized relief network operated in an institutional vacuum. It did not get any support from official agencies. The tasks the newly formed movement faced were substantial. Members aimed to take care of the rapidly growing numbers of refugees who had very different psychological and physical needs. Therefore, members had to "learn by doing," developing procedures on the go. Not only did they lack any former well-tested procedures to follow, the total number and the national, cultural, and demographic composition of the refugees who arrived in Hungary changed day by day. Hence, the refugees' grievances and needs also fluctuated on a daily basis. To be able to provide relief for these refugees, Migration Aid developed a hybrid communication system to monitor the actual needs of the arriving refugees. By relying on its network-based communication system, Migration Aid was able to reallocate resources and deliver goods to address these needs, be it food, water, blankets, tickets of public transportation, entertainment for the children, or legal or logistic information. It is remarkable that it all happened without clearly defined competencies and responsibilities or any kind of formal hierarchy within the group. Hence, using the information thermostat, we understand the operation of a connected action cycle consisting of permanent and decentralized monitoring, processing, reallocation, and delivery.

### **Conclusions**

The Migration Aid case study is an attempt to use the connective action framework for a project identity movement. We also have argued that regardless of the seemingly nonpolitical intentions of the participants, in the highly politicized context, humanitarian action had a huge political relevance.

Inquiry into how Migration Aid operated sheds light on how the concept of connective action can be applied and further developed to understand the specific ways a coherent organization is achieved in digitally born movements. Proposing that an emphasis on the rhizomatic structure of the group provides a unique insight, we have suggested that new rhizomatic social movements epitomize emerging types of organizations. Our inquiries led to the identification of four central characteristics of the rhizome as they appeared in the case of Migration Aid. The movement is nonhierarchical and lacks fixed starting and ending points. This organizational characteristic affected the group's action repertoires in allowing a wide range of modalities of participation in Migration Aid's activities. Furthermore, we also found that—although born digitally—the group was a hybrid organization. The blurring of lines between online and offline spheres within the structure also affected the group's activities; we conclude that a hard-and-fast distinction between low- and high-threshold activities associated with offline/online operations is not applicable to rhizomatic movements. The existence of a stitching platform in rhizomatic organizations was central for the group's survival; in the case of Migration Aid, its Facebook group played such a role. A unique characteristic of the rhizome is its ability to reconfigure itself in both the short and long run. This flexibility, together with the stitching role of Facebook, leads to what we coin the information thermostat,

a self-regulative system that permanently receives inputs from given surroundings and changes its outputs accordingly. In a broader sense, Migration Aid might be considered a manifestation of humanitarian activity in a posthumanitarian context in which the traditional principles of humanitarian action are being called into question. These principles are substantially endangered now; therefore, the relevance of Migration Aid and similar relief groups goes much further than their actual aid.

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