Is Social Movement Organizing Easier in the Age of Social Media?

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Introduction

The age of modern, Internet-connected, social media-driven movements could be thought to be a golden era, given the range of new possibilities for expression. Indeed, new Internet-born social movements such as the Free and Open Source Software Movement (Elliott 2008) and #GamerGate (Antonsen 2014) behave in new, decentralized ways, and would be fundamentally impossible (and irrelevant) without the advent of the Internet. Yet the arrival of the Internet is not without its share of problems, from the perspective of movement organizers. After all, as Lauren Langman notes in her article "From Virtual Public Spheres to Global Justice: A Critical Theory of Internetworked Social Movements," the emergence of today's super-connected digital activist sphere is enabled by the same network technology that has given rise to modern globalization (1). Even as new means of expression, activism and mass organizing are enabled that were never before feasible, new challenges for movement organizing are appearing that may be making the work more difficult than before—both internal (e.g. structural shallowness and short movement lifespans) and external (e.g. government condemnation of social media).

Emerging possibilities in the age of the Internet

There is no doubt that the Internet and social media have changed the way social movements function. One way movements have changed is that they are more connected with one another than ever. According to Langman, new (leftist) justice movements form "unlikely coalitions of labor, environmentalists, feminists, peace

and global social justice activists collectively critical of the adversities of neo-liberal globalization and its associated militarism" (1). Such partnerships have been enabled through online organization. Connections forged in digital realms are not only surprising due to diversity of membership; solidarity relationships are also being built across great physical expanses. Notably, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (also known as Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN) has been successful during the past 20 years in building relationships with partners around the world through Internet campaigning, as an alternative to its less successful revolution building through Mexico, and as means of maintaining a hold in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas (Dutta 138). More recently, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), a rapidly expanding violent movement aimed at establishing a new Islamic caliphate in the Middle East, has used mastery of social media to attract allies from all across the world in a very short period of time (Hashem 2014).

Beyond assisting land-based collective movements, it has become clear that new media enables individuals to explore and perform their own identities in new, powerful ways. In "User-generated content on the internet: an examination of gratifications, civic engagement and psychological empowerment," researcher Louis Leung writes about social media content generation from the perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory, which "assumes that audience members actively seek out the mass media, fulfill expectations and actively select media and media content to satisfy individual needs" (Leung 1329). Leung finds that active civic participation in online communities is associated with higher psychological empowerment (1343).

He also finds that obtaining recognition through online content creation is an important influencer for a person's perceived empowerment (1344).

Related to the theme of psychological empowerment is a recent historical shift from social movements involving centralized leadership and collective action, toward a "new social movement" framework oriented around individuality and identity reclamation (Burford 29). The Internet provides an ideal space for this type of movement to be practiced. The amorphous, web-based, sometimes-hacker-activist collective Anonymous is a perfect example of an online "new social movement," according to Caitlyn Burford:

> Anonymous, by its design, is a very private operation. Because "Anons" are largely untraceable, their bodies are not initially part of a collective movement but part of a personal and private, local, control of identity politics. … Through the intermediacy of the web, many people develop alter egos and personalities that exist only in an online reality. … Following new social movement theory, Anonymous' success is in its ability to function as a decentralized, private movement that cannot be collectively controlled. (30)

Online movements affecting the real world

Anonymous has thrived as an activist movement online through coordinated mass tactics, most notably the Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack, a means of shutting down web servers of specific targets by having thousands of online users request access to that server at once (Burford 21). Yet Anonymous is especially notable for having manifested itself in real world protest space, by way of the token

Guy Fawkes mask, despite its members being difficult, if not impossible to identify. Burford writes:

> The group has no official leaders; temporary leaders emerge and shift along with the shifting organizational structure, allowing the group to be involved in a variety of causes, many online and others "offline," such as physical protest involvement as shown through the support of Occupy Wall Street. There is no formal process for membership. Instead, Anonymous is an identity and membership is given simply to those who decide to participate. The collective hive mind gives the group its coherence. (5)

Anonymous was not the only organization to take a leading role in Occupy Wall Street. In fact, the initial call to action for an occupation on September 17th, 2011 in New York City was made by *Adbusters*, a Canadian anti-capitalist publication (*Adbusters.org*). The hashtag #OccupyWallStreet quickly caught on and spread beyond *Adbusters*'s reach; OccupyWallStreet.net, one of the most prominent, continually updated web remnants of the occupation, makes no mention of *Adbusters* at all.

Occupy took inspiration from the Arab Spring, another movement largely transplanted into physical space from the Internet. Though the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bou Zid is commonly credited with sparking the uprising (Perry 2014), the revolution's rapid spread across the Arab World is widely attributed to Facebook and Twitter communications (Shirazi 2012).

Each of these movements thrived due to decentralization, and an element of leaderless-ness. Whereas protests against the state and capitalists could typically be

countered by targeting movement leaders, in the case of the Arab Spring and of Occupy, there were no clear leaders to target. In "Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing," Bruce Etling et al. write:

> Decentralized social organization is a much more challenging proposition … [T]he continued ability of authoritarian states to neutralize hierarchical civil society organizations (CSOs) implies a larger role for political change via other types of decentralized and bottom-up social action. (38)

Drawbacks of digital organizing

The leaderless element shared by the Arab Spring and Occupy protests, which resulted in fast, huge mobilization, is a reason each struggled to retain offline reinforcement over time. While the EZLN is an example of a movement clearly tied to a physical space with visible leadership, other, more nebulous digital movements experience more difficulty in maintaining formidable presence over time. According to Etling et al., "compared to more tightly structured hierarchical organizations, flash mobs do not have the same level of leadership, discipline, long-term planning, and ability to incorporate prior experience" (38).

The absurdly viral film *Kony 2012*, put out by the advocacy group Invisible Children in effort to stop Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony, is a prime example of online activism, intended at effecting offline action, going wrong. Unlike Occupy or the Arab Spring, *Kony 2012* had no physical offline base at all (the film's primary targets did not live even on the continent of Africa). According to Megan Hershey and Michael Artime:

> The response to the *Kony 2012* film fits with what the literature suggests: that is, social media can expedite the delivery of information to a wide audience and prompt discussion of or engagement with a particular issue. *Kony 2012* also disappeared rapidly from Facebook feeds, thereby illustrating the difficulty in using social media outlets to sustain debate over time. (637-8)

Hershey and Artime note that while *Kony 2012* was a campaign aimed at empowering young people, "it had the—likely unintended—effect of portraying African states as weak and African people as unable to address problems within their own countries" (640).

One other important weakness of social media-based organizing is its potential to be exclusively available if governments take efforts to limit access to social media. Surrounding protests protecting Gezi Park in Turkey, for instance, the Turkish government took serious legal measures to limit access to various forms of social media. Many countries employ similar measures on an ongoing basis to limit popular usage for insurrectionary purposes (Tufekci 6).

The challenge of sustaining internet-driven mobilization

Purely digital movements are a sustainable, meaningful and impactful reality today, but what about movements that aim to use online mobilization to effect lasting action in the real world?

Spontaneous-seeming mass mobilization is nothing particularly new. While mass action is arguably facilitated more easily through the Internet, movements in the past have organized around successive iconic moments to build toward the

point of victory. In "Lessons from the Revolutions of 1989—and Other Not-So-Spontaneous Uprisings," Mark Engler and Paul Engler argue that Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. are examples of organizers who used nonviolent work to "produce ruptures in the normal functioning of the political system, and … propel previously ignored injustices to the fore of public consciousness." King, they write, spent early parts of his career being "thrown into crises" forged by other groups. "But by the time of the Birmingham campaign," according to Engler and Engler, "he had developed a savvy understanding of how to manufacture nonviolent conflicts that could stir national indignation and move foot-dragging politicians."

The knowledge that past organizers have been able to consciously manipulate apparently random movement flashpoints should provide some theoretical assurance, that the proliferation of such flashpoints in the era of modern digital organizing does not inevitably mean shallowness and short movement lifespans. However, the structural nature of social media organizing presents major challenges. With the occasional exception such as the EZLN, which successfully proliferates online globally while maintaining distinct leadership and hold tied to a discrete physical space, nebulous, decentralized leadership characterizes mass online movements. This type of structure is well suited for longevity in an online space, but not so much for sustained activity in one space to the extent that the physical establishment becomes meaningfully threatened. It is unclear whether decentralized, Internet-born movements will be able to develop a sort of permanent, designated authority capable of organizing sustained, escalating mass mobilization in the tradition of King and Gandhi.

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