Networked Protests: 
A Review of Social Movement Literature 
and the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement

Emily Stacey, Swansea University, Swansea, Wales

ABSTRACT

This article explores social movement theory and attempts to modernize and explain contemporary movements with consideration of the digital tools being utilized by citizens on the ground. The ability to transcend borders and traditional boundaries using digital media, to facilitate international participation and develop communication, and the dissemination of information and coordination among activist networks around the world is hugely important. This article asserts that modern contentious collective actions and contemporary movements have received an infusion of autonomy and grassroots energy fueled by digital technologies, and social networking platforms.

Keywords: Collective Action, Digital Technologies, Networks, Protest, Revolutions, Social Media, Social Movement Theory, Social Movements, Umbrella Movement

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY: TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL

Many contemporary political scientists and social movement theorists have recognized the significant transition in the communicative process and organizational aspects of collective action (i.e.: social movements) brought about by globalization and the rise of digital technologies (Castells 2009, 2012; Tilly, 2003; Etling, Faris & Palfrey, 2010; Steklenberg et al., 2013). Yet there remains a disconnect between the research conducted focusing on new technologies and instances of contentious collective action in identifying these contemporary events, how they are organized using online tactics, and how then, these movements are able to transcend the confinements of the online and move action to the streets. The characteristics that define both social and political movements do not adequately describe modern collective action, and more specifically, do not characterize the movements of the Umbrella Movement (2014). While we have new jargon such as “networked movement” or “hybrid movement” (Castells 2009, 2012), there is a lack of critical analysis detailing the shift in organizational and tactical opportunities as well as the criteria of new social and political movements.

This work asserts that modern contentious collective actions and contemporary movements have received an infusion of autonomy and grassroots energy that has been fueled by the internet, digital technologies and social networking platforms. This infusion has led to the detachment of movement networks from traditional organizational structures (NGOs, political parties) that

DOI: 10.4018/IJCESC.2015070103
focus on resource mobilization and hierarchical forms of power toward increasingly bottom-up, people-oriented and coordinated protest organizations. Modern movement organizations are utilizing preexisting networks while developing new ones via social networking sites (SNSs) and digital technologies to “express claims, build solidarities, and challenge (existing) repertoires” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, P. 108). Research has shown as transformations occur in society (emphasis here on globalization), the manner in which citizens are able to consume and disseminate information shifts. These shifts in communicative modes within the digital age have allowed for the instantaneous organization of citizens (whether for protest or flash mobs of dancers in public spaces) using cellphones, SMS, wireless internet and social media platforms (Rheingold, 2003; Castells, 2009, 2012). These tools have reorganized the manner in which movement networks are able to reach potential participants locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

Social movements are a distinctive form of contentious politics that involve collectively making claims, which if realized, would conflict with someone else’s interests. Politically, the government factor into the claim-making process, whether as claimants, objects of claims, allies of the objects or monitors of contention (Tilly, 2004, P. 3). It is widely accepted that social movements set up organizations, recruit participants, craft messages, foster collective solidarities, gain publicity and mount campaigns in order to confront an opponent (Della Porta, 2009). Thus, social movement research is often based upon the assumption that parties engaged in conflict “act instrumentally with respect to their goals and strategically towards each other with the outcome dependent on the balance of power among the relationships” (Johnston, 2009, P. 105). Social movements and movement networks in general, expand with rise of democratic (political) opportunities. Social movements occurred as democratization spread and waned when authoritarian regimes curtailed democratic rights and continued to do so in the 20th century (Tilly 2003, 2004).

Social movement theory has evolved from organizational and geographical differentiations, to political scientists in the later 19th and early 20th centuries pluralizing and extending social movements beyond the organized proletariats to the common masses (Heberle, 1951; Tilly, 1969) to the networked movements of today (Castells 2009, 2012; Murthy, 2012; Stekelenberg et al., 2013). During the 21st century, professionalized movements emerged that utilize preexisting organizations (or movement tactics), in particular, nongovernment, intergovernmental organizations and new communication platforms (Tilly, 2003, 2004; Castells, 2009, 2012). Once social movements have established themselves in one political setting they are able through modeling communication and collaboration to facilitate their adoption in other connected settings. The influx of revolutionary thought and tactics from Tunisia into Egypt in 2011 is important to note here. The ideals that led to the ousting of Ben Ali sparked the energy for mobilization in Egypt. For example, one early slogan for the Egyptian Revolution was “Tunisia is the answer,” a play on the popular “Islam is the answer” phrase perpetuated by the Muslim Brotherhood (Castells lecture, 2010).

Digital technologies, new modes of communication and the networked public sphere have shifted the tactical balance of power from the establishment to the people, thereby altering the manner in which they are able to coordinate dissent. Social movements assert popular sovereignty by embodying the general claim that civic and public affairs depend (normatively) on the consent of the governed. Rheingold (2003, P. xii) refers to “smart mobs,” or people who are able to act in concert even if they do not know each other personally. Smart mobs are able to connect instantly via text messaging (SMS), and more recently via social networking sites accompanied by wireless internet capabilities. Rheingold (2003) in accordance with Castells (2009, 2012) and others argues that this connectivity is taking over conventional tactics of 20th century social movements. Contemporary movements starting in the late 1990s have taken advantage of the available digital technology and communicative mediums that are arguably more open, able to organize citizens in protest movements, including:
Related Content

Water Crises in Urban-Rural Gradients of African Drylands: Insights into Opportunities and Constraints
www.igi-global.com/chapter/water-crises-in-urban-rural-gradients-of-african-drylands/155075?camid=4v1a

Multicultural Leadership in Higher Education
www.igi-global.com/chapter/multicultural-leadership-in-higher-education/231402?camid=4v1a
Civic Engagement on Voters Turnout in General Election: A case of Tanzania, Africa
www.igi-global.com/article/civic-engagement-on-voters-turnout-in-general-election/241857?camid=4v1a

Queering the Marianist Charism: Narratives Offer Insights for Change
R. Darden Bradshaw (2020). #MeToo Issues in Religious-Based Institutions and Organizations (pp. 76-105).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/queering-the-marianist-charism/233242?camid=4v1a