Chapter 20


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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores social movement theories 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 chapter 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.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY: TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL

Social movement theorists have recognized the significant transition in the discursive patterns and organizational aspects of collective action (i.e.: social movements) brought about by the rise of digital technologies and proliferation of tools such as social media platforms (Castells, 2009, 2012; Tilly, 2003, 2004; Etling, Faris, & Palfrey, 2010; Murthy, 2012; Hill, 2013). There is a lack of comprehensive research on the impact of the digital (or post-digital) tools that are being used by modern protest actors to spread awareness and ideology, and most importantly, to mobilize support for their cause. Karatzogianni’s “cyberconflict theory” (2001) is an attempt to reconcile collective action events in the digital realm by investigating the underlying context of not only the event, but the nation, culture and society in which the event is occurring. She argues, “In new social movements, the internet linked diverse communities such as labour, feminist, ecological, peace and anti-capitalist groups, with the aim of challenging public opinion and battling for media access and coverage” (Karatzogianni, 2015, p. 15).

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This article asserts that contentious collective action and contemporary movements have received an infusion of autonomy and grassroots energy that has been fueled by the internet, digital technologies, and more notably, social networking platforms. Or as Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) note, new social movements or contemporary collective action are increasingly dependent on shared knowledge (ideology, goals, messages of movement) and the use of soft power (discursive opportunities that are promulgated from the bottom-up). This adoption of the digital has led to the increasing detachment of movement networks from traditional organizational structures (NGOs, political parties, the State) that focus on resource mobilization and hierarchical forms of power toward more bottom-up, actor-oriented and coordinated protest organizations. Karatzogianni (2015, p. 18) notes that the adoption of digital technologies by activist organizations made “possible mass mobilization without leaders – a digital swarm, by allowing mobilization to emerge from free-willing, amorphous groups, rather than top-down hierarchies”. While Papacharissi also highlights that the “logic of connective action is reflective of contemporary reluctance to associate with formal organizations and the gradual prevalence of large-scale, fluid social networks over group ties” (2015, p. 70).

Social movements are a distinctive form of contentious politics that involve actors making collective claims to social or political action (or inaction), which if realized, would conflict with someone else’s interests; the generally accepted definition of politics denotes the existence of winners and losers, in protest it is the same. 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 establish 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. Thus, the seemingly egalitarian nature of the internet and digital technologies has become a breeding ground for decentralized dissent. Karatzogianni argues, “While the internet, as a network technology, is most appropriate for network forms of power, it exists in a dynamic field in which hierarchies, and hierarchy-network hybrids, also proliferate, containing and channeling its emancipatory potential through strategies of recuperation, repression, inclusion and exclusion” (2015, p. 34). This creates the de facto hierarchy of sociopolitical influencers (discussed later in the chapter) who by the nature of their popularity have undue influence over a protest or social movement network.

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; Blumer 1971) to the networked movements of today (Castells 2009, 2012; Murthy, 2012; van Stekelenburg et al., 2013; Papacharissi, 2015; Karatzogianni, 2015). In the 21st century, “The acceleration of protest, due to the digital virtual enabling the grasping of political opportunity, when there is a crack in the global political structure by ad hoc assemblages, protest networks and other resistant movements has spectacular spillover effects, and points to the critical importance of political communication in the global transformations taking place all over the world” (Karatzogianni, 2015, p. 100). 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 spread of the anti-austerity Indignados movement in Spain in