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Essay #2 – The Social Media Spark

Each month, Facebook has approximately 1.55 billion active users, 83.1% of which are outside of the United States and Canada (Facebook Newsroom). Each day, Facebook has approximately 1.01 billion active users, 849 million of which are connecting from mobile devices (Facebook Newsroom). With so many users present on the same platform, social media makes for a powerful platform for connecting. The ability to rapidly share information through social media makes it a powerful platform for activism. Activists for any number of causes can start movements from behind the screen with little to no cost, and much less effort than was required before the creation of social media. Facebook pages for all kinds of movements have been created and followed by hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people. Because of these factors, social media has become a powerful platform for activism. However, social media is not just a powerful platform for activism, but in itself sparks activism and social movements.

Social movements arise from a number of factors. Generally, there is a problem that needs to be solved and there are people who want that problem to be solved. But a lot of work and resources are required in order for a movement to be successful. In the essay, "The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements: The New Opportunity and Mobilizing Structure," author Amandha Lopes of Creighton

University researches the formation process of social movements, taking into consideration the effect that social media has on this process. Lopes states that “first and foremost, social movements need *organization* and resources ... Time, money, organizational skills, and certain social or political opportunities – are critical to the formation and success of social movements” (Lopes, 6). But thanks to social media, the organizational process has become increasingly simplified. We must recognize “the impact of social media as an organizational tool” (Lopes, 4).

Connectivity:

Social media creates a place where people with common opinions and ideas can come together, despite geographical location. More importantly, Lopes argues that social media gives “a voice to individuals that otherwise would not be heard” (Lopes, 2). Before social media, people would have to search for others in the same location with similar interests. Now, ordinary people can get involved in movements from behind their computer screens, connecting them with others locally, as well as across the globe who share the same views. Social media gives a voice to those who otherwise may not be heard by uniting them with a group of people who share the same interests. Whereas one individual voice may not make much of an impact, the voices of many with the same cry are far more likely to be heard.

But in order to connect others to a cause, people need to feel like their opinion is important. “Individuals only participate in collective action when they recognize their membership in the relevant collective” (Lopes, 6). If an individual does not feel as if their opinion matters, they are not likely to speak up. This is another important reason to connect individuals to a group of similar thinkers.

Social media allows for a connection between individuals, and thus provides a feeling of inclusion and relevance to the cause.

According to Clifford Lampe in "Advocacy 2.0", the Independent Media Center (IMC), formed by advocacy groups out of the "Battle of Seattle," a movement to attempt to stop the World Trade Organization's Ministerial Conference, was "the first example of a successful intersection between online and offline mobilization" (Lampe, 5). The IMC uses what they call a "many-to-many" model in allowing people to post to social media. This model allows anyone to post information, rather than the "one-to-many" model, which allows only corporate media to post (Lampe, 5). This is an important model in helping individuals feel included in the cause, and thus creating a more collective cry as a movement. The many-to-many approach is necessary in giving individuals a meaningful voice in the movement.

Social media allows information to reach a larger number of people. Before the Internet, traditional news media required you to be at a television in order to receive the news. Now with smart phones, tablets, and laptops, news can be received anywhere and at any time. Smart devices and the Internet have allowed news to be uploaded online, viewable at any time and shareable across social media platforms. Posts on social media can be viewed at any time, and can be shared between users. When a user shares a post, this opens up the post to a whole new audience. Shares are a very important way to spread information through social media, and are critical to the development of social movements. Sharing posts expands the reach of posts, and thus makes social media a more effective platform for activism than traditional media sources.

The benefit of social media is that it can be used by anyone to connect with anyone. Social media has been used by a variety of organizations and social movements in order to promote and further their specific causes. For example, political causes often use social media in order to connect with people and promote participation in the cause. Deana Rohlinger of Florida State University writes on this specific use of social media in her article, "How Social Movements Are Using The Internet To Change Politics." Following the ideas of free social media and the extended reach of social media, Rohlinger discusses the ways social movements can use social media to advertise their movements for free. Rohlinger also makes an important point on how social media "get[s] supporters involved in the decision-making process" (Rohlinger, 1). The inclusivity of social media is an important reason why it is so successful in aiding social movements to become successful as well.

A key example of the way social media impacts and influences social movements is found in the #OccupyWallStreet movement. This movement was a protest against corruption within government, particularly in the financial services sector (Wikipedia). Mark Tremayne, assistant professor of Communications at the University of Texas at Arlington conducted a study on the Occupy Wall Street movement. The study consisted of analyzing tweets with the #OccupyWallStreet and #OccupyWallSt hashtags. The study found 4995 tweets using these hashtags between the dates of July 14 and July 31, 2011 (Tremayne, 114). Also found were 98 additional hashtags and mentions used in posts also containing the #OccupyWallStreet (Tremayne, 116). Essentially, by connecting all of the hashtags,

Tremayne was able to figure out a map of how each post was viewed and shared by users.

Cost:

Social media allows social movements to bypass the organizational resource of money. Most forms of social media, including Facebook and Twitter, are completely free to users. While users have the option of choosing to pay additional fees in order to boost posts or create advertisement, no initial fee is necessary for joining or posting on these sites. Low cost of social media is an important factor in the formation and success of social movements.

Because social media is free to the majority of users, this opens social movements up to different socioeconomic groups. Social media does not distinguish between rich and poor, black or white, or Christian or Athiest, but allows everyone to become a part of the conversation. This inclusivity is an important part of social movements, and is crucial to their success. As explored in “The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements,” members dedicated to a cause want to feel as if their opinions matter and are being heard. “Individuals only participate in collective action when they recognize their membership in the relevant collective” (Lopes, 6). Social media allows all voices to be heard through inclusion of all groups as well as instant feedback. Provided they have access to the Internet, social media allows anyone to be a part of a cause or movement. And because of the ability for instant feedback, users can feel more connected and included in the cause.

Speed:

“The Internet has had a positive impact on the activities of social movement organizations by increasing the speed, reach, and effectiveness of communication and mobilization efforts” (Lampe, 5). Social media allows information to travel extremely fast. We no longer have to wait for the next day’s newspaper, or even for the breaking news to appear on TV. Social media allows us to receive news and information in real time, on any device. Social movements can greatly benefit from this high-speed spread of information. Followers can be updated through social media as events are taking place, rather than having to wait for the event to be covered by traditional news media.

Due to the speed at which news and information travel through the Internet and social media, users can be provided with quicker and more instant feedback. Because social media operates in real time, when users comment on posts, other comments can be posted in reply immediately. This function of social media contributes to a greater connection between users. When users do not have to wait for feedback from social movement leaders, or other members of the movement, they may feel more connected to the whole of the cause, and therefore feel inclined to participate in the cause even more.

In his book “On Demand Culture,” author Chuck Tyron discusses what he calls “The Twitter Effect” and how social media, Twitter in particular, has changed the way we receive information. He writes about the process of “live tweeting,” sending tweets during an event to update users in real time (Tyron, 117). This allows people who may not be able to attend an event or watch it on TV to receive live updates on the event from their smartphones or computers. Live tweeting can

be an important concept in social movements and other businesses. Live tweeting contributes not only to the speed of information pushed out to online users and followers, but also expands the reach of an event by broadcasting it online. Events can expand their audiences by opening the event up to anyone who may see posts about the event online. Live tweeting includes users outside of the event by giving highlights of the event online. Expanding the audience of an event is extremely important, because users who may not be involved in the cause at all can be connected through live tweets. This connection may lead them to be a part of more of the movement's events later on. This connection may also lead users to discover a cause that might not have been aware of otherwise.

Another factor contributing to the speed of social media is the ability to access social media from mobile devices. Smart phones have revolutionized the way we receive information. News, entertainment, and a world of information are all available at our fingertips. According to Facebook's analytics, 849 million users are active daily from their mobile devices, and 1.39 billion users are active monthly via mobile devices (Facebook Newsroom). This is revolutionary to the way information must be shared. With the ability to receive information instantly via smart phones and tablets, social media is a crucial way of spreading information. It is absolutely necessary for social movements to make use of social media in furthering their causes simply due to the sheer number of users who are connected from their smart phones.

Reach:

Effectiveness of communication is another way social media has surpassed that of its traditional media counterparts. Because posts are generally constricted to a length or character limit, information is given in smaller doses, and is easier to digest. Studies have even been done to discover how long posts should be in order to receive the maximum level of engagement. While twitter has a character limit of 140 characters, studies show that posts written between 71 and 100 characters have 17% higher engagement than posts with more characters (Lee). Similar statistics go for Facebook and Google+, website domain names, and the length of paragraphs and headlines. Hashtags are also most effective when they use six characters (Lee).

Hashtags are an effective way of expanding the reach of social media posts, and can be a useful tool to activism and social movements. Hashtags are a convenient way of searching, because using a hashtag allows others to view all posts that use the same hashtag, and are related to the topic of the post. Hashtags “allow those not personally connected to a user to see and comment on messages that use the hashtag” (Saxton). Like sharing, the use of hashtags opens up posts to new and wider audiences.

Searchability is also improved through the use of hashtags. According to Saxton’s research, the more hashtags that are used in a post, the more searchability is improved (Saxton). Through an eight month long study of 105 organizations within the National Health Council, researchers found that the use of hashtags is an incredibly effective way of spreading social movements throughout the internet. Although the study only followed health organizations, results from the study can be

applied to social media posts as a whole, and are true of many organizations.

Research from this study found that by using at least one hashtag in a post, posts are spread exponentially further than posts without hashtags (Saxton). Further, posts that made use of more than one hashtag performed even better, receiving higher engagement with users, and spreading social media posts further amongst users in general.

Organizations can create original hashtags that are specific to promoting their organization, cause, or movement. Nonprofit organizations in particular benefit from this already. Since nonprofits do not have money to spend on major advertising, the use of social media and hashtagging to promote causes can be extremely beneficial (Saxton). This goes back to the idea that, generally, social media is free, but also greatly contributes to the spread of a movement. While money can be spent on additional advertising through the specific social media platform, no initial capital is necessary to create a profile on most social media platforms. Searchability is improved and reach is spread further at no additional cost to the organization. For social movements, which may have no budget for advertising or campaigning whatsoever, the use of hashtags through social media can be extremely beneficial in promoting the cause. Essentially, hashtags are a way of freely advertising for social movements, spreading reach at no cost to the user.

If we look back to the research done by Tremayne on #OccupyWallStreet, data is researched and explained to show how posts spread over time through the use of hashtags. By following the map made that connects hashtags in posts, Tremayne identified three diffusion points (Tremayne, 118-120). He defines

diffusion as tweets that were shared, or retweeted, without the addition of any new hashtags (Tremayne, 118). The first diffusion point was on the day after the first post using the hashtag. On this day, AdBusters used the hashtag in their post. Since AdBusters already has a large following on social media, the post is able to be viewed by their entire audience, spreading the reach of the hashtag to a new audience (Tremayne, 118). This is evidence of the way hashtags expand the reach and searchability of posts on social media. The second diffusion point was unique in that when a new hashtag was used in a post along with the #OccupyWallStreet, the audience was also expanded, contributing to a greater number of likes and shares, as well as overall tweets using the hashtag (Tremayne, 119). And during the third diffusion point, the addition of another popular hashtag contributed to the #OccupyWallStreet being used an average of 313 times per day (Tremayne, 119). Hashtags not only work to expand audience when they are used by users who already have a large following, but we see through this research that the addition of other popular hashtags in posts also contributes to the expansion of the audience a hashtag will reach.

Harmful Impact:

Graham Meikle, author of DIY Citizenship, writes on the importance of visibility to a social media movement. He writes, “Social media blur the line between public and personal communication” (Meikle 375). This can be both helpful and harmful to a social movement. Since personal and public communication are blurred by social media, posts can become more personalized, making other users feel more comfortable with being involved in the cause. Personalization of posts can be helpful

by making users feel more welcome, but can also be harmful. Posts that are too personalized may lead to others disagreeing with personal ideas, and thus drawing them away from participation in the social movement.

Another crucial aspect of social movements, according to Meikle, is “intercreativity.” This chapter of Meikle’s book focuses specifically on the infamous Kony 2012 movement. The Kony 2012 movement started with a 30-minute video. The movement failed in part due to bad publicity of the movement’s leader. But another factor that contributed to this failure was that the movement killed creativity by selling its premade “action kits.” Meikle claims that social movements need the intercreativity of followers in order to be successful. Intercreativity means that followers get involved in the cause in their own creative and individual ways (Meikle, 379-380). The Kony 2012 movement failed in this aspect because the “action kits” were already designed for the user, allowing no creativity for users to get involved in the movement in their own ways. Part of a successful social movement is allowing users to be creatively involved in the activism process.

Sparking Movements:

All of these factors of social media – speed of information travel, low cost of use, searchability, extended reach of posts, etc. – contribute to what makes social media a powerful platform for supporting and spreading social movements. But these factors of social media actually work to spark the growth of social movements and activism, as well as serve as a platform for improvement. Social media sparks social movements to start because of its low cost, its speed of information, its inclusivity, and all other factors. Because of the benefits that social media provides

for activists, the platform itself encourages users to start social movements, using the social media as their launching platform.

Social media users can use websites as platforms for launching social movements. People know their voices are more likely to be heard when using social media platforms. They can start to mobilize people to join their movements by connecting with others online under the same interests. The connections allowed by social media draw people of similar ideas together. These people can then share their common ideas in order to further the movement. The ease of connectivity of social media platforms encourages more people to connect. Social media platforms encourage this kind of social organizing through the connection of individuals.

Social media works to spark social movements through spread of reach. Users have to do very little in order to spread their post to further audiences. As explored earlier, hashtags can spread posts to wider audiences, and improve the searchability of posts. This aspect of social media encourages social movements to arise through social media as well. Hashtags can be used to connect other users to posts of the same hashtags. If users want to be heard, especially on a specific topic, the use of hashtags in a post can spread the post to where others searching for the same hashtag can see. Searchability makes it easy for information to spread, but also help to improve how new voices to a cause can be heard.

Social media allows for a broader range of communication and organization for social movements and activism. Its ability to connect people throughout the globe is a powerful tool for organizing those who agree with the cause. Through all of the aspects that make social media a powerful platform for organizing, mobilizing,

and advertising social movements, these aspects also contribute to what makes social media a platform that sparks new social movements and activism to arise.

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