Literature Review: Information Communities

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Introduction

Social movements are collective, coordinated actions that attempt to change the public sphere (Tufekci, 2017). Although social movements vary greatly regarding their purpose, strategies, and goals, they share one commonality in that they endeavor to change society to reflect their own worldview. Examples of social movements include: the civil rights movement, the labor movement, the peace movement, and the environmental movement to name a few. A recent development in modern social movements is that they are often referred to by their hashtag: #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, #NODAPL, #MeToo. This practice is reflective of the widespread use of digital technologies, particularly social media, in modern social movements.

This project analyzes social movements as information communities and seeks to understand the information behaviors of activists within those communities. The following will explore the literature relating to information communities, social movements, the role of social media in modern social movements, ecological theory, and disinformation. Much of the literature on social movements focuses on the use of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, in mobilizing people. This, however is only one aspect of the information behavior of social movements. Therefore, this project seeks to analyze social movements using everyday life information seeking theories, particularly using a framework of ecological theory to provide a broader understanding of the information needs and behaviors of activists within social movements. Approaching social movement through the lens of information seeking reveals how movements seek to mobilize its members, recruit new people, obtain broader public support, and

neutralize oppositional framing (Tufekci, 2013). This project will conclude with exploring how librarians can respond to social movements and offer some suggestions regarding what services might best meet the information needs of activists within their local communities.

Review of the Literature

Information Communities

Communities can be approached using four key angles according to Christen and Levinson (Fisher and Bishop, 2015). Each angle (affinity, instrumental, primordial, and proximate) provides a framework for understanding the membership of a community. Although some communities may exist across one angle, communities "may exist along several dimensions simultaneously" (Fisher and Bishop, 2015, p. 21.) These angles provide a framework for examining activists within social movements and seeing how their affinity to the group affects their information needs and behaviors.

What distinguishes an information community from other types of communities, is that information is a central component to the community (Fisher and Durrance, 2003). In their analysis of information communities, Fisher and Durrance (2003), argue that there are five distinguishing characteristics of information communities: 1) they utilize technology to share information with a larger audience, 2) they collaborate with diverse groups to share information, 3) they form around people's information needs, 4) they remove barriers to information, and 5) they foster social connectedness within the larger community.

Tufekci (2013) analysis of *attention* as a key resource of social movements helps to see how social movements act as information communities. She writes, "Attention is the means through which a social movement can introduce and fight for its preferred framing, convince

broader publics of its cause, recruit new members, attempt to neutralize opposition framing, access solidarity, and mobilize its own adherents" (849). Another way of framing Tufekci's analysis, is by saying that information is the central component to the development and success of social movements.

Social Movements

Blumer (1971) describes social movements as:

Collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living. (p. 99)

Tufekci (2017) has a similar definition of social movements; she defines them as collective, coordinated actions that attempt to change the public sphere. In the tradition of Habermas and Hauser, Tufekci (2017) sees the public sphere as a discursive place where individuals discuss matters of mutual interest, but she also understands it is not a uniform public sphere but as a place where different groups of people with different conditions come together to oppose the hegemonic public sphere.

Blumer (1971) categorizes social movements into three types: 1) general movements, 2) specific social movements, and 3) expressive social movements. General movements are defined as those that seek to change the cultural values of people while specific movements have a well-defined objective or goal. Expressive movements, on the other hand, do not seek to change institutions but are characterized by expressive behavior such as religious and fashion movements. Blumer's categories illustrate how not all social movements are alike and that their

ultimate objectives will shape the information behaviors and needs of activists within those movements.

Castells (2001) uses the term *Networked Social Movements* to distinguish modern movements from earlier periods. He argues that many social movements have adopted the use of the internet as part of their campaigns for change for three reasons. First, these movements are mobilized around cultural values. Second, they are *ad hoc* movements and seek to change public opinion and not state power. Third, movements have become globalized. Part of Castells argument regarding a networked society is that it consists of networked individualism which are networks built around an individual's interests, values, affinities, and projects. Tufekci (2017) also recognizes the role of technology in changing social movements. In describing the use of the term "networked movements," she states:

> It's a recognition that the whole public sphere, as well as the whole way movements operate, has been reconfigured by digital technologies, and that this reconfiguration holds true whether one is analyzing an online, offline, or combined instantiation of the public sphere or social movement action. (Tufekci, 2017, Chapter 1)

Social Media

Much of the literature regarding modern social movements focuses on the use of social media in the mass mobilization of activists. In a study of real-time participants during a protest against overpopulation in Singapore, Pang and Goh (2016) found that social media played a significant role in the dissemination of the protest; most participants heard about the protest through Facebook, Twitter, and miscellaneous blogs. However, participants had mixed motivations for participating in the protest. The study found that only half of the protesters that

participated in their survey had a clear intention of supporting the protest and its cause while a

little over a third of them were there to seek more information. They also found that about 15

percent of those surveyed were there because of friends or family, or simply because they

happened to be passing by and were drawn in to the crowd.

Gerbaudo (2012) argues that social media has had an important impact on social

movements, but that it is much more complex and ambiguous than scholars have argued. He

agrees with many scholars that social media has facilitated mass mobilization but chooses to

nuance this by calling it a "choreography of assembly" (12). He writes, "This has to be

understood as a process of symbolic construction of public space, which revolves around an

emotional 'scene-setting' and 'scripting' of participants' physical assembling." (12) Gerbaudo

also counters the argument of horizontal leadership in modern social movements that is presented

by scholars. He argues that social media has transformed social movement leadership into 'soft'

forms of leadership where in actuality a small group of people control the flow of information

(Gerbaudo, 2012). Tufekci found that social media has led to the rise of microcelebrities within

social movements through the affordances of social media which bypass traditional pathways of

mass media.

In her book *Twitter and Tear Gas,* Tufekci (2017) makes the argument that the internet

allows networked movements to mobilize and grow rapidly, but at the expense of a sound

organizational infrastructure that comes from years of movement building. Social movements

can leverage social media affordances to rapidly mobilize, but they are unable to respond to

challenges that arise because they often do not have an internal infrastructure to effectively

handle collective decision making (Tufekci, 2017).

Ecological Theory and ELIS

The ecological theory of human information behavior is a model of information seeking

that was developed by Kirsty Williamson (2005) and is situated within the *everyday life*

*information seekin*g (ELIS) field of research. Savolainen (2010) generally defines ELIS as the

acquisition of information to be used in daily life or to solve problems outside of professional

tasks or study. Although this field of study differentiates work and non-work information

behavior, it views activities done within both contexts as being equally important (Savolainen,

2010). The ecological theory is also built on Bates's (2002) integrated approach to information

seeking which takes a holistic view of the human subject as a physical, biological, social,

emotional, and spiritual being that acquires the majority of their information by being aware of

their social and physical context. The ecological model of human information behavior

emphasizes that information is not always purposefully sought after, but often is incidentally

acquired (Williamson, 2005). Furthermore, this model considers social and cultural factors that

influence information seeking which in turn affects which information sources are trusted and

used (Savolainen, 2010).

Savolainen (2007) studied how activists in the environmental movement defined their

source preferences in the context of seeking orienting information. This study adds to ELIS

literature because it provided empirical evidence of how activists within a movement select

information sources in everyday contexts. This study interviewed 20 individuals active in the

environmental movement and utilized Alfred Schutz's model "describing the ways in which

actors structure everyday knowledge into regions of decreasing relevance" (Savolainen, 2007, p.

1709). The study found that the activists preferred printed media the most, followed by

networked sources, broadcast media, and then human sources. Savolainen (2007) argued that the

findings support previous research which showed that individuals prefer printed media when

seeking information orienting sources. The problem with this study, however, is that it is rather

dated. Although social media platforms were in use at the time of the study, they were in their

formative years. Since 2007, social media use has grown tremendously followed with a decline

in printed media.

Disinformation

Disinformation is the deliberate dissemination of false information (Cooke, 2017).

According to Cooke (2017), "The key to disinformation is that it is borne of maliciousness or ill

intent" (p. 213). A common tactic used against social movements is the use of disinformation

(Tufekci, 2017). Tufekci (2017) argues that this tactic is commonly used by governments and

those in power to overwhelm the public with bad and disturbing information so that they give up

trying to figure out what is truth. Disinformation campaigns can make it challenging for social

movements to frame their message and bring attention to their cause, but they can also be used

for more villainous purposes such as ethnic cleansing (Tufekci, 2017).

Conclusion

There are several challenges in examining social movements as information communities. Social movements are not monolithic organizations but consist of individual activists with varying affiliations to the community. Furthermore, social movements vary depending on their purpose, aims, and goals. However, when looking at social movements through the lens provided by Fisher and Durrance (2003), we can see that social movements incorporate many of the elements of information communities. They utilize technology to share information with the larger community, they often collaborate with other movements and groups, they attempt to remove barriers to information, and they attempt to form solidarity within the community.

There is plenty of research regarding the use of digital technologies in modern social movements, but much of the research places its focus on the platforms and not the information behaviors and needs of the activists. Therefore, it is useful to look at everyday life information seeking behaviors to interpret this research. The ecological theory helps to show how people encounter information within their daily information patterns. This is important to social movements because as Tufekci (2013) argues, attention is vital to the success of the movement. This is particularly important when we see that disinformation is a common strategy employed by hegemonic powers to thwart the success of social movements. Understanding which informational resources people prefer and how they use them in making political decisions are important in examining social movements as information communities.

In reviewing the literary research, it becomes apparent that information professionals, particularly librarians, can have a significant role when it comes to the information needs of social movements. First, libraries can offer the tools and spaces for activists within communities

to connect. Second, libraries can provide and educate people about informational sources that

might be outside of their everyday information sources. Third, librarians can actively engage in

countering disinformation that is disseminated to confuse people into being complacent. These

are just some ways in which librarians can support social movements within their communities.

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