

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social Movements As Information Communities

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Abstract

Social movements are collective, coordinated actions that vary regarding their purpose, strategies, and goals, but share one commonality in that they endeavor to change the public sphere. Viewing social movements as information communities provides a framework for understanding the information needs and behaviors of activists within those communities. Using everyday life information seeking models, particularly the ecological theory of human information behavior and a framework of attention, the role of information in the success of social movements becomes evident. Information becomes the locus by which movements frame their story, mobilize its members, recruit new people and obtain public support. In this framework, disinformation becomes the means by which hegemonic powers seek to neutralize social movements. The role of librarians as information professionals in this environment is to provide a space for community, to promote and provide access to sources that may fall outside of people's normal information behaviors, and to actively counter disinformation.

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. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2018) states that social movements are “a mixture of organization and spontaneity” capable of sustaining membership through periods of inactivity and across geographical boundaries. 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.

Literature Review

Christen and Levinson (Fisher and Bishop, 2015) provide a starting point for analyzing social movements as communities by using four key angles: affinity, instrumental, primordial, and proximate. Fisher and Durrance's (2003) analysis of communities show that what distinguishes information communities from other types of communities is that they have information as a central component. Tufekci (2013) uses the term *attention* in describing how information is a key resource of social movements. In addition to information as being central to information communities, Fisher and Durrance (2003) argue that information communities share five distinguishing characteristics: 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.

Blumer (1971) describes social movements as, "Collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life (p. 99) and goes on to categorize them into three types: general, specific, and expressive. Tufekci's (2017) definition is similar; she describes them as collective, coordinated actions that attempt to change the public sphere. The change in social movements to modern networked movements, which is distinguished by the important role of digital technologies in modern movements, is described in Castells (2001) and Tufekci (2017). Much of

the literature regarding modern social movements focuses on the use of social media in the mass mobilization of activists (Pang and Goh, 2016). Gerbaudo (2012) argues, however, that although social media has had an important impact on social movements, it is much more complex and ambiguous than scholars have argued. In addition to its use in rapid mobilization, social media has an impact on leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012; Tufekci, 2013), how information is disseminated, and the ability to respond to tactical changes (Tufekci, 2017).

The ecological theory of human information behavior (Williamson, 2005) is a model of information seeking that is situated within the *everyday life information seeking* (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 most 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). An element of information seeking that has taken on new importance recently, is the role of disinformation (Cooke, 2017). Tufekci (2017) argues that the dissemination of disinformation is a common tactic used by hegemonic

powers to sow doubt and mistrust which then leads to inaction by the general public and ultimately the failure of social movements.

Methodology

The decision to choose social movements as an information community stemmed from reading Zeynep Tufekci's (2017) book *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. This book was the initial source for this project, but it was also valuable in providing leads to other sources. I also used the San Jose State University's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library to conduct a general search for additional papers written by the author which helped to generate other sources. In addition, I used a variety of articles provided in the class modules as a foundation for the theory of information seeking behavior. Finally, I searched specific databases such as Library & Information Science Source, Library and Information Science Collection, and Academic Search Complete using the key terms: social movements, activists, information needs, and information seeking. This helped to generate articles directly related to social movements and their information needs.

Discussion

Social movements act as information communities because they: 1) utilize technology, particularly social media in mobilizing and bringing attention to their movement, 2) often consist of multiple organizations that collaborate for a single purpose, 3) are formed around the needs of the community, 4) seek to provide information to a broader public, and 5) are collective actions that foster solidarity (Fisher and Durrance, 2003). Furthermore, as illustrated by Tufekci (2013), information is a central component of social movements because it is used to frame their story, get support from the broader public, recruit new members, and to counter disinformation. In

other words, information is the central component to the creation, development and success of social movements.

To grasp the information needs and behaviors of social movements, it is necessary to understand that not all social movements are alike. Blumer (1971) categorized social movements into three types: general, specific, and expressive. 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.

It is also important to understand that social movements are not homogeneous but consist of members with varying affinities to the community (Fisher and Bishop, 2015). For instance, Pang and Goh (2016) found that activists surveyed during an active protest had mixed motivations for participating. Their study found that only half of the participants 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 into the crowd. The particular information needs and behaviors of each participant would vary depending on the person's affinity to the movement.

Although social movements have long existed before the internet, digital technologies have had a profound impact on modern 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. In describing the use of the term "networked movements," Tufekci (2017) 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. (Chapter 1)

Although the use of digital technologies in modern movements has had a profound impact, many scholars have focused on the mobilization aspect of social media in social movements.

Gerbaudo (2012) agrees with many scholars that social media has facilitated mass mobilization but chooses to nuance this by calling it a "choreography of assembly" (p. 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" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 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 (2013) 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).

To better understand the information needs and behaviors of social movements, it is helpful to frame them using the ecological theory of human information behavior. In this model, information encountering is based on social and cultural contexts which in turn affects which information sources are utilized and trusted (Williamson, 2005). This can be seen in Savolainen's (2007) study of environmental activists who defined their source preferences in the context of seeking orienting information. 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. Although the study was done in the early days of social media, it does provide an example of how activists construct an information ecology.

A common tactic used against social movements is the use of disinformation (Tufekci, 2017). 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). 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).

In an environment of community unrest where disinformation is actively being used to sow distrust, the information professional must examine their ethical response. Social movements are by their nature taking an activist role. Libraries, on the other hand, are often seen as neutral organizations and are not meant to be advocates. Article VII of the American Library Association’s Code of Ethics states, “We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources” (ALA). Garnar (2018) claims that article VII has often been interpreted as meaning that information professionals should be neutral and should not take a stance on issues.

The neutrality of librarians, however, has not been shared by all in the profession. For instance, Radical Reference (RR) was formed in 2004 by a collective of progressive library workers and students who rejected the neutrality of librarianship (Morrone & Friedman, 2009). RR see librarians not only as professionals but also as citizens and members of a community who utilize their skills as librarians in evaluating resources to meet the social justice information

needs of their community (Morrone & Friedman, 2009). Members of RR would disagree with Dresang (2006) who argues that social activism would “dictate the elimination (nonselection) of some resources” (178). The RR community does not seek to eliminate resources, but to highlight alternative resources that could be used by social movements.

At the 2018 ALA Midwinter meeting in Denver, the issue of library neutrality was debated by several prominent information professionals. Chris Bourg, director of libraries at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, summed up the activist position by stating, “If we believe that libraries have any role to play in supporting and promoting truth in our current post-truth culture, then our work is political and not neutral” (Carlton, 2018).

If we agree that the work of the information professional is political and not neutral, then it is apparent that libraries can play a valuable role in meeting the information needs of social movements. First, libraries can offer the tools and spaces for activists within communities to connect. One of the first spaces established at many occupied protests globally are street libraries (Tufekci, 2017). For example, shortly after the Occupy Wall Street protest began on September 17, 2011 in New York’s Zuccotti Park, an informal library spontaneously formed that started with a pile of books that someone donated. This would shortly be organized into the People’s Library and serve the information and entertainment needs of anyone who could access the library (Zabriskie, 2011). Tufekci (2017) argues that libraries symbolize an ethic of non-commodified knowledge and are seen by protesters as aligning with their core beliefs. Libraries should make the most of this trust and offer spaces for activists to connect and access to digital tools to meet their information needs.

Second, libraries can provide and educate people about informational sources that might be outside of their everyday information sources. Some within the information profession argue against an activist role within librarianship because it would “dictate the elimination (nonselection) of some resources” (Dresang, 2006, p. 178). Activists librarians do not seek the elimination of resources, but to highlight alternative ones that might fall outside of someone’s information ecology. This already fits into the information literacy component of librarianship. Information literacy is a set of competencies needed to recognize when information is needed and how to effectively locate, evaluate, and use the information (ALA, 2018). Although information literacy pedagogy is often thought to be the domain of formal education settings, it can also be used in public libraries to further the lifelong learning of people of all ages in the community.

Third, librarians can actively engage in countering disinformation that is disseminated to confuse people and sow distrust within the community. Librarians seek to provide a high level of service by providing accurate information to requests by the community (ALA, n.d.). In an activist role, librarians would not wait to provide information but actively engage efforts by hegemonic powers in the dissemination of disinformation. This would mean librarians would have to be aware of what social movements are active in their communities and learning who is creating disinformation.

Conclusion

There are several challenges in examining social movements as information communities. Some of the challenges stem from the fact that social movements can be categorized into different types, they consist of individual activists with varying affiliations to

the movement, and they 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 a good deal 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 attention is vital to the success of social movements. 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.

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 a place where different groups of people with different conditions come together to oppose the hegemonic public sphere. As participants in this public sphere, librarians have an ethical duty to be actively engaged in the conversations that are taking place. This means that librarians no longer accept the position of neutrality but become active members in their community engaging in the difficult conversations that are taking place and seeking to provide spaces and access to accurate information to all members of its community.

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