International Development, Community and
Environment (IDCE)

5-2018

Networks of Isolation: The Case of Donald J. Trump, Facebook, and the Limits of Social Movement Theory

Carol L. Stimmel
Clark University, cstimmel@clarku.edu

Networks of Isolation: The Case of Donald J. Trump, Facebook, and the Limits of Social Movement Theory

Carol Lee Stimmel

May 2018

A Master's Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art in the department of International Development, Community, and Environment

And accepted on the recommendation of

Dr. Nigel Brissett, Chief Instructor

ABSTRACT

Networks of Isolation: The Case of Donald J. Trump, Facebook, and the Limits of Social Movement Theory

The 2016 election that catapulted Donald J. Trump to the U.S. presidency has raised questions for how Facebook may have enabled the emergence and coalescence of a social movement among traditionally improbable voters. The research in this paper engages with contemporary social movement theory, assessing its adequacy for explaining the role of Facebook as a primary method for facilitating a social movement among the civically-alienated, who are the most unlikely of all Americans to join an organized collective for change. From a methodological perspective, the exploration takes up the case as a strategy of inquiry to explore social movement theory in the context of algorithmically-mediated social networking environments. It is concluded that the presence of a proprietary algorithmic mediator deployed by Facebook creates deliberate effects among its users which cannot be explained with social movement theory. These effects cannot be easily studied without unethical cognitive manipulations or information distortion.

Nigel Brissett, Ed.D.
Chief Instructor

Ramón Borges-Méndez, Ph.D.
Associate Professor

ACADEMIC HISTORY

Carol Lee Stimmel   May 2018

Bachelor of Arts

Philosophy

Randolph-Macon Woman's College Date   May 1987

Author and researcher, advanced technology, policy, product design and development.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the people of the United States of America.

You stumbled. Now get up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures

Introduction

The unexpected election of Donald J. Trump as 45th President of the United States has raised crucial questions about the organizing potential of online networked social movements, especially in the context of Facebook. Not since the democracy uprisings in the Arab world began in 2010, has social networking garnered such attention as a force for collective activism. In the run-up to the U.S. 2016 election, the Facebook platform emerged as a fundamental building block of the Trump campaign, serving as its primary channel of engagement with potential voters (Byers, 2016; Lapowsky, 2017). While social networking has long been recognized for its ability to catalyze and organize collective social change campaigns, it was a profound surprise to many political observers that the platform could be used so effectively to connect with politically- and civically-alienated voters, those who President Trump (2017) declares as his base, "the forgotten men and women of this country" (Barron, 2012; Castells, 2012; Moussa, 2013). Even a year after the inauguration, many questions remain unanswered about the election, from the impacts of a Russian influence campaign, to Trump campaign collusion, and most importantly with the vague ideology of Trump voters who appear to dissent so greatly with the norms of American political life.

The topics raised in this paper reflect upon the boundaries of a presumptive "Trumpist movement" (as the then-candidate himself described it), how Facebook may have enabled the emergence and coalescence of a movement, and how social movement theory does or does not help us understand the widespread engagement of the improbable voter. The core research in this paper engages with contemporary social movement theory,

assessing its adequacy for explaining the role of Facebook as a primary method for facilitating a social movement among the civically-alienated, who are, historically, the most unlikely of all Americans to join an organized collective for change. The question driving this examination is: *If Donald J. Trump embodies a powerful American social movement of civically-alienated people that was activated through the Facebook social network, how can social movement theory help us explain its structure, strategies, and political goals where there is no clear shared social change mission*?

Social movement theory is designed to explain collective mobilization and development for social change; but, nowhere does it comprehend a place of social ferment in which individual relationships are galvanized through an opaque, algorithmically-mediated, microtargeted curation system. Facebook's algorithm (first described by the company as EdgeRank and then News Feed) is purposely designed to increase engagement that drives commerce for platform advertisers by presenting messages that will actively interest users and increase economic opportunities. It is no surprise then, that when News Feed is relied upon to deliver ideological content, it will only surface those stories that are predicted to be interesting to a particular individual. Necessarily, this prioritized ranking includes the complete submersion of some content for some users. In this manner, users are pushed information that best supports their existing thinking and ideologies.

Because of the complexity of a user's measured engagement with Facebook and the many variables associated with it, there is no straightforward way to measure a person's unique feed for its correlative value with the world outside of the social platform. Facebook researchers themselves find this limitation difficult. In a 2015 *Science* report,

Bakshy et al. highlight the problems with examing questions related to how news and civic information are mediated on the platform. Implying that surreptitiously altering a user's personal page for testing is the best empirical approach to examining user behavior, they note that studies "have been limited by difficulties in measuring news stories' ideological leanings and measuring exposure—[instead] relying on either error-laden, retrospective self-reports or behavioral data with limited generalizability" (Bakshy et al., 2015, p. 1130). As such, a social movement theorist who intends to study activity within Facebook immediately encounters challenges in designing a test for how users respond to News Feed content, which would be a key factor in understanding social movement dynamics activated within the platform. Given the proprietary and dynamic nature of the Facebook algorithm, it is unclear how a movement participant would come to be galvanized within the boundaries of the system and how that process could be fruitfully analyzed.

　　　　Three immediate issues are raised for the social movement theorist who studies Facebook. First, to study movement formation in an algorithmically-mediated environment, there is no established agreement that the social movement paradigm is sufficient to explain the extent and forms of collective identity on Facebook. This is because of the way information is dynamically surfaced and presented. Secondly, where a social movement is thought to have emerged or coalesced on Facebook (especially one that seems to be unique or especially influential), it is difficult to study the phenomenon through extant theory, because the process of relationship formation and information dissemination cannot be straightforwardly observed or measured. Lastly, and perhaps most concerning to scholars who study movement theory, is that the opaque nature of the

ecosystem itself prevents generalizability of conclusions drawn about a user's or set of users' conditions related to their online interactions.

Because of these rather dramatic limitations, it is challenging to understand and assess a movement's potential—or perhaps even to validate its existence—in terms of its social, cultural, and political consequences. Further, if we cannot dependably deploy theory to study myriad forms of collective mobilization on the Facebook platform, how do we develop the knowledge required to improve our understanding of the flows of information and relationships when they are obscured under the cloak of a proprietary algorithm that seems to defy objective study? In essence, my study profers that the presence of an algorithmic mediator between system users most likely renders contemporary frameworks and ways of studying social movement formation structurally inadequate for explaining Facebook as a coalescing mechanism for voters who were heretofore deemed un-organizable because of their political-and civic-alienation.

Analytical Approach

This paper explores a limited set of issues related to the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump by exploring the literature on social movements, civically-alienated individuals, and information flows within the Facebook social networking platform. From a methodological perspective, the exploration takes up the case as a strategy of inquiry to comprehensively investigate the usefulness of contemporary social movement theory in algorithmically-mediated social networking environments. I explore multiple sources of information, including video interviews, documents, reports, books, and journalistic accounts. By limiting my inquiry to the 2016 election, this study comprises an instrumental

approach to the discussion by seeking to illustrate a broader issue regarding the adequacy of widely-accepted social science theory when scrutinized in the context of a computing environment where the flow of information is controlled by a proprietary, opaque algorithm.

Understanding Social Movements

As this study is primarily concerned with understanding the structure of collective identity within the boundaries of the Facebook social networking platform, an extensive review of the competing theories of social movements is not useful. However, some discussion is required to describe how certain foundational elements of the *general* theory of modern social movements fare in an algorithmically-mediated environment. This discussion will underscore how making observations about collective identification is challenging in this context.

The study of social movements rests in the discipline of sociology, even as it is interdisciplinary in nature. It is a topic of broad interest for those who study cultural, social, and political economies, especially in settings where the potential for organized opposition can have a significant impact. Organized opposition is already recognized for its wide varieties of mediations from unions and leftist parties to the more contemporary notion that social movements help marginalized people develop a political power base that can "reinvigorate issues of culture, ideology, ethics, and ways of life" (Peet & Hartwick, 2009, p. 287). But, in the most general of terms, social movements are expressions of a commonality that take shape as collective ventures (Crossley, 2002, p. 2). Their forms, of course, depend greatly on historical context.

Theories diverge when it comes to the question of why an individual might be motivated to align with a collective venture, the form and function that alignment might take, and the goals for that association. Breaking from Emile Durkheim's (1897) notions that the driving force for mass society movement was one of individual anomie, modern theorists regard one of two motivators as sufficient to demonstrate the expected shared normative orientation that represents a collective identity (James & van Seeters, 2014, p. xi). Neither imply a form or function of a group (Blumer, 1969, p. 99). The two main groupings of theories are as follows:

Dissatisfaction. Social movements emerge from a shared dissatisfaction for which a remedy is sought. Dissatisfaction, of course, may by subjective or represent a more structural problem at play, such as poverty or resource deprivation.

Shared Beliefs and Solidarity. Social movements emerge when people are drawn into a public debate about a common concern.

In both cases, individuals who hold a point-of-view that is *non-conforming* with current institutional power collectivize with others who agree with their perspective, thus becoming a *group of non-conformists*. While the members of a collective share an orientation, the form of that expression may be either of a temporary sort of collective creation or of a sustained nature. For example, the many post-1960s "new social movements" such as feminism, environmentalism, and animal rights shifted from campaign to campaign in alignment with their overarching cause (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Tarrow, 1998).

Prolific social movement theorists Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow write that a social movement is "a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organization, networks, traditions. These these social scientists draw an important distinction between social movements and other forms of contentious political moments in the following manner: although contested moments include many individuals who may share common thoughts, feelings, and actions, together these individuals represent a temporary and unstructured group of people. Moreover, social movements draw from a broader base of people, which may include existing solidarity networks or organizations. Moments of political contention and collective action may occur simultaneously, but social movements alone combine sustained *campaigns* that are characterized by many types of public performances (*movement repertoire*). From lobbying to marching, these public displays are designed to demonstrate a common identity, which these researchers refer to as *WUNC*: worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007).

The WUNC model helps differentiate between a social movement and a contentious moment. In one form or another, it is expressed implicitly among other theorists in describing the characteristics of any social movement. WUNC helps us understand a movement's idioms—expressions of meaning—that make up their self-representations; it is how we come to know a movement:

>**Worthiness**. Representatives with distinction, such as clergy, or mothers and children.

Unity. Expressions of unanimity, like matching hats, banners, singing, and chanting.

Numbers. Showing numbers of concerned people with marches, petitions, and rallies.

Commitment. Members will stand in the cold, put forth tireless effort, and step outside of their normal comfort zone to take personal risks for the cause (Tilly & Wood, 2013, p. 5).

To illustrate these constructs, Figure 1 below, shows how a group of individuals join in an explicit state of unity from which they create organized campaigns for their cause, and which is non-conforming with writ-large societal, cultural, or political conditions. These individuals become identified with each other because they are perceived, by those outside the collective, as having a common perspective. So, when they speak as a greater group that joins their causes together, it is with distinctiveness.

Figure 1. Social Movement Expression is Organized and Unified

Non-Conforming Individuals   Non-Conforming Group   Organized Expression
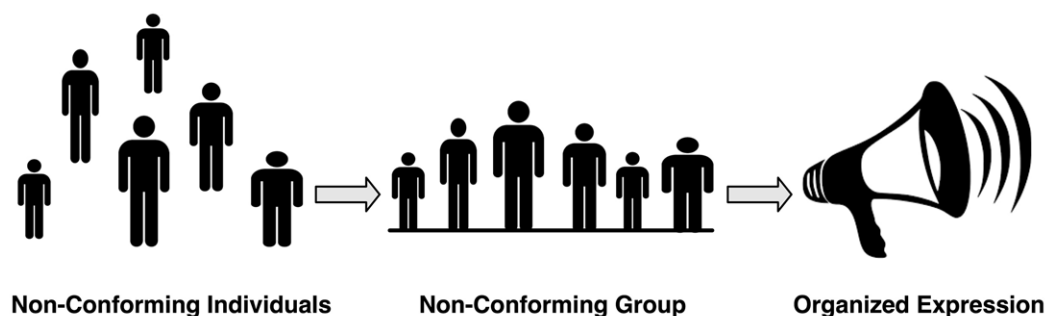
(Source: the author)

The idioms of certain movements can become well known in open societies, and every rebellion or uprising becomes associated with a memorable unifying performance. Importantly though, in order to be considered a social movement, the combination of WUNC expressions must be present. The most casual student of modern history recognizes the movements associated with their unifying symbols, such as the color red, the hammer and the sickle, and the rainbow flag. But true social movements in addition possess all of the WUNC qualities with distinct membership, large numbers of members, and an enduring commitment to the cause. Even the prototypical social movements such as labor and socialism display a full complement of WUNC characteristics and are memorable as much for their displays as their significant cultural, political, and social concerns. However, what they achieved was not through the actions a single moment of frustrated uprising with a bevy of matching hats, but with the persistence of organized action (Peet & Hartwick, 2009).

Stages of a Social Movement

Social movements represent a form of social conflict, even where they employ various arrangements in their organization (Tourraine, 1985). After World War II "new social movements" began to emerge struggling with radical societal reform initiatives; many continue to exist in their contemporary forms and include feminism, and civil rights for black and gay Americans. These movements have longevity in their cycles and will shift from cause to cause for their overarching campaign (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Since the end of the 1990s, global social movements have extended to those which engage individuals from all over the world in linked campaigns and causes, and have tended to be

primarily concerned with democratic reform (Castells, 2012). These movements share information across spaces powered by communication technologies conceived as 18th century-style cafes, which served a critical role in the exchange of ideas and forging of alliances. Jurgen Habermas described these spaces as *public spheres*, in which dialogue, speech, debate and discussion create "a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space" (Soules, 2007).

A social movement is a group of people who share a common non-conforming ideology and who choose to orient their personal resources to work to effect change. Four discrete stages, identified first by Herbert Blumer and enriched further by Charles Tilly and others, describe the trajectory of a movement: *emergence*, *coalescence*, *bureaucratization*, and *decline*. These stages are described in Figure 2, followed by a summary extracted from Della Porta and Diani's (2006) complete treatment of the topic (p. 150):

Figure 2. Generalized Model of a Social Movement's Lifespan
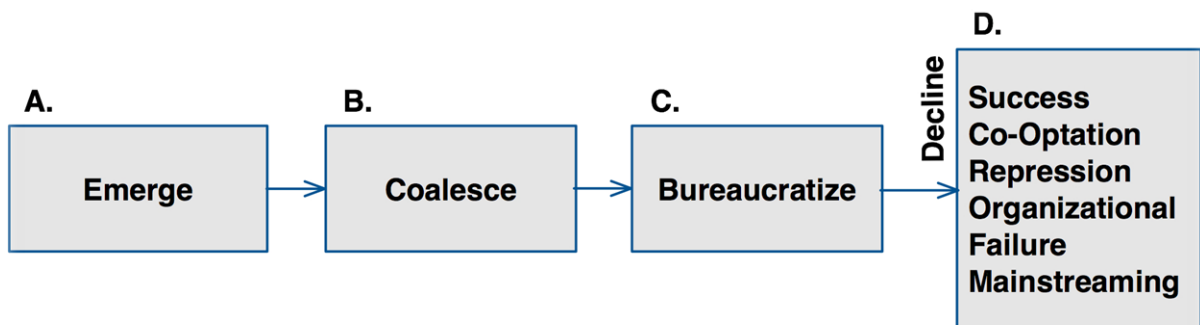
Adapted from Blumer (1969), Della Porta & Diani (2006), Macionois (2001), Mauss (1975), Miller (1999), and Tilly (1978)

Emergence. Blumer called this a stage of *social ferment*, which is like the contemporary idea of consciousness-raising. This initial stage is disorganized and represents a potential movement of people who are unhappy with some institutional policy or social condition with which their viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences do not conform. While individuals may have expressed their grievances to others and even performed some actions to redress them, there has of yet been no collective action (Macionis, 2001; Hopper, 1950).

Coalescence. To Blumer, this was a time of *popular excitement* and is a stage of differentiation where a shared sense of unease with certain conditions becomes clearly defined discontent (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). In this stage, individuals "become aware of each other," focused, under leadership, and strategic as a collective (Hopper, 1950, p. 273). A coalesced group may become quite high profile as they highlight their concerns and work to galvanize support for their movement. Prominent leaders will begin to emerge and the collective may become a potent political force.

Bureaucratization. Blumer called this *formalization*, but contemporary theorists tend to denote this stage as bureaucratization (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). As with any higher-level organization, this is when partnerships and coalition strategies become important to coordinate and unify across many related social movements. When a movement begins to have access to political elites, it develops a broad-based constituency and relies on staff to carry out day-to-day functions, even while volunteers may still be important to daily operations (Macionis, 2001; Hopper,

1950). New social movements, such as the gay rights and feminist movements are examples of those that have bureaucratized to continue to demand attention and action for their cause.

Decline. While Blumer called this *institutionalization*, that is just one measure of shift that indicates the decline of a social movement (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Decline doesn't mean failure though it certainly can, it may also decline because of *repression*, *co-optation* of the leadership by authorities, overt *organizational failure*, the successful *achievement* of a specific and stated aim, or through *mainstreaming* where their values become adopted by the state (Miller, 1999; Macionis, 2001).

This model for understanding social movements provides a measuring tool that allows researchers and theorists to remain consistent in their evaluation of collective behaviors, even where those behaviors may vary greatly in their idiomatic expressions of collective identity. Moreover, the model affords a common framework to coherently compare different movements' effectiveness, stages, or historical importance with another. This framework also helps assess the possibilities, challenges, and risks of the movements' identities and behaviors within broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

Considering the lifespan of a social movement in this way provides a basis for examining the collective identity formation and injustice framing that distinguishes each movement. An injustice frame helps a movements signify the significance its central concern as well as demonstrate how the movement's strategy will alleviate it. With this model, researchers can also deploy other theories and methodologies, such as actor-

network theory, development theories, linguistics, social network analysis, or social psychology studies. As Charlotte Ryan and William Gamson observed in their work on political framing:

> Like a picture frame, an issue frame marks off some part of the world. Like a building frame, it holds things together. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential - what consequences and values are at stake. We do not see the frame directly, but infer its presence by its characteristic expressions and language. Each frame gives the advantage to certain ways of talking and thinking, while it places others out of the picture." (2006, p. 14).

This ability to remain consistent in our understanding of the structure and characteristics of a recognizable social movement is especially useful for exploring the assumptions held in the subfield of networked social movements.

Networked Social Movements

The study of internet social movements is influenced greatly by the "weak ties" scholarship of social network theorist Mark Granovetter in the 1970s and the later work of global movement researcher Manuel Castells in the 2000s. Castells refers to digital and online movements in his work on *networked social movements,* which constitutes the predominant approach to contentious politics in the digital context. His notion of collective action is primarily an online reproduction of offline social network behavior. However, there are important critical challenges to this approach.

Castells' body of work embraces the idea of massive-scale *collective action* which essentially extends ideas about the structure of offline social movements to the online world. In this manner, networks are thought to make such collectives more efficient in their efforts—importantly, the logic of collective action does not change much (Bimber et al., 2009; Earl & Kimport, 2011). Alternatively, *connective action,* rooted in Yochai Benkler's book *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), suggests that participation in digitally-mediated networks does not follow the usual hierarchical logic of organizing. Instead, while individuals may participate with others in social networks, their expressions are better understood as behaviors of personalized co-production and sharing. Researchers studying connective action such as Bennet and Segerberg (2012) write, "When these interpersonal networks are enabled by technology platforms of various designs that coordinate and scale the networks, the resulting actions can resemble collective action, yet without the same role played by formal organizations or transforming social identifications" (p. 752).

Taking a "public" action or making a civic contribution online is an act of self-validation and expression, foreshadowing our discussion of Robert Putnam's (2000) notion of "citizenship by proxy." The key difference between collective and connective action when applied to social movements, is that, with collective action, the structural dynamics of a social movement will not change as it moves online. But with connective action, "members" shift their ideological frame to connect with others in order to share ideas, images, or even resources. Collective action networks require organizational coordination whereas connective action networks are self-organizing (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012). This

very notion of how connective action works in a network, while gaining traction as a useful organizational theory for networked collectives, provides no clear pathway for a useful application to the study of networked social movements. While this structure may help us understand collective moments, it does not offer coherent treatment of how connected power translates to the cultural, social, and political goals of the group. As such, it is not a framework that can be used to define a social movement.

Castells has been successful in tracing power dynamics to the digital world, beginning with the uprisings against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999 which serves as the progenitor to the networked social movements to follow. He argues that such movements, which by 2010 were making a remarkable impact in the pro-democracy "Arab Spring" movements in the Middle East, are facilitated by social media or other features of the internet that enable document sharing, collaboration, private and group messaging, blogs, and content aggregation (Castells, 2012).

To Castells and many others, networks are tools that accelerate movement evolution, from emergence, to coalescence, and performance. However, it is the configuration of people and devices in a network structure that represent the organizing principles of the movement, resulting in a decentralized global protest movement to challenge the decentralized globalized empire (Hardt & Negri, 2007).

The Network as a Tool for Organizing

Social movements of late have consistently leveraged tools such as Twitter and YouTube to coalesce their movements by broadcasting evidence for the problematic behaviors of the state. In places like Tunisia and Egypt, pro-democracy organizers relied

heavily on internet communications technologies (ICTs) to organize public gatherings and

garner widespread support by sharing dramatic videos of violence and crimes being

committed by actors of the state (Tufekci, 2018). In the United States, and in the current

post-2016 election of Donald J. Trump, ICTs are used extensively to facilitate civic

engagement through texting tools, such as ResistBot, and wider collective action of

existing platforms, like EventBrite (Fingas, 2017).

The popular use of online tools for the so-called #Resistance has grown since the

Trump inauguration in January 2017, but were also used extensively by Barack Obama and

Bernie Sanders for their organizing strategies with online fundraising, messaging, on-the-

ground organizing, responding to political attacks, and frequent communication with

voters (Miller, 2008). Figure 3 demonstrates how non-conforming individuals in a state of

emergence can be linked in a digital network as a non-conforming group, coalescing to

perform in an organized and uniform manner.

Figure 3. Networked Social Movement Expression

Non-Conforming Individuals   **Non-Conforming Group**   **Organized Expression**

(*Source: the author*)

16
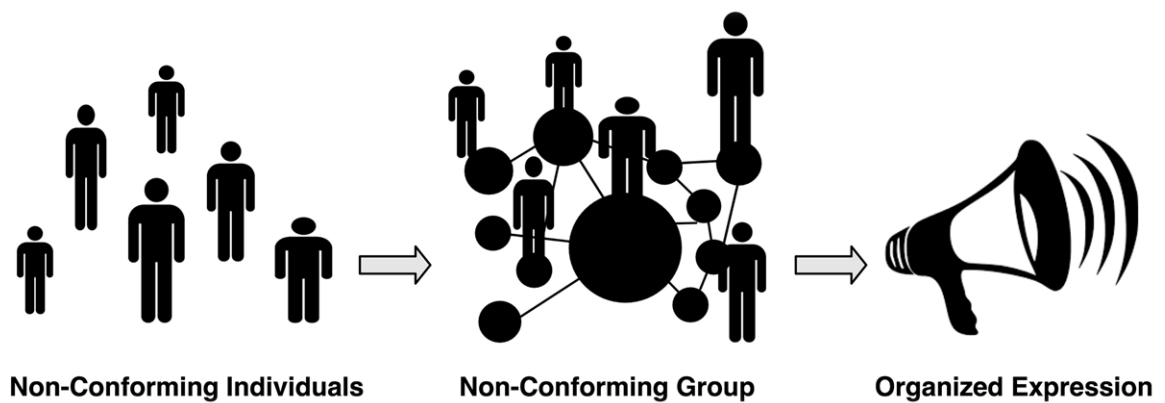
The ability to organize and attract international attention through the internet can pressure a governing state to change its actions or even push a social crisis, if not defend a movement from outright repression by making violence against it publicly consumable (Tufekci, 2018). However, within the body of scholarship on the topic, it is assumed that the structural dynamics of social movements online or offline are similar, whether the digital organizing tools used to meet their collectivization goals are used within the context of a social media platform or without. Thus, social networks may be especially well-suited to social movement maintenance, because they can facilitate direct access to a collective of individuals for online group feedback, discussion, and message amplification. However, it is not clear how algorithmic-mediation in a social network alters those functions or outcomes, especially in the case where discussion forums and even private chats are used as data to feed the News Feed algorithm.

The Network Structure as Organizing Principle

Networked social movements are naturally suited to a transnational scale, even if public actions are mobilized locally or nationally. In fact, many modern social movements with a network presence are pluralistic, living under the umbrella of an "anti-globalization movement" framed as opposition to the degradations of unfettered free market economic logic [for a discussion on political framing see: Ryan & Gamson, 2006)]. The idea of a pluralistic anti-globalization movement does have its ironies, as there are both right-wing and left-wing activists who describe their movements in this fashion. For example, on the right are nationalist groups like the British National Party, the Front National (FN) in France, and on the left ATTAC (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions Financière

17

et l'Aide aux Citoyens), anarchists, socialists, as well as labor unions, critical intellectuals, feminist movements, religious groups, and human rights groups.

Popularized by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (2007), the authors are utopian in their portrayal of this pluralistic antiglobalization movement in their tome "Empire." They describe the global movement as the *multitude* acting for a common cause, with decentered authority, in polyphonic dialogue, sharing cooperative power in an open source society through a direct democracy of all. For these authors, with so many problems to be campaigned against, the multitude is united in the common cause of resisting the harms caused by capitalistic globalization. To Hardt and Negri (2007), these problems can only be responded to effectively through a spontaneous and decentralized networked structure that can neither be dominated nor controlled by the global neoliberal superstructure.

Figure 4 shows a rendering for how non-conforming individuals may be linked across a network of ICTs on a platform, such as Facebook, to comprise an aggregate of non-conforming individuals—each with unique concerns— that serves as a plurality for a common benefit. Connective action theorists, might render a similar diagram to describe their ideas of networked amplified personal expression (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012).

Figure 4. Linked Expression in Social Movements

Non-Conforming Individuals   Aggregate of Non-Conforming   Linked Expression
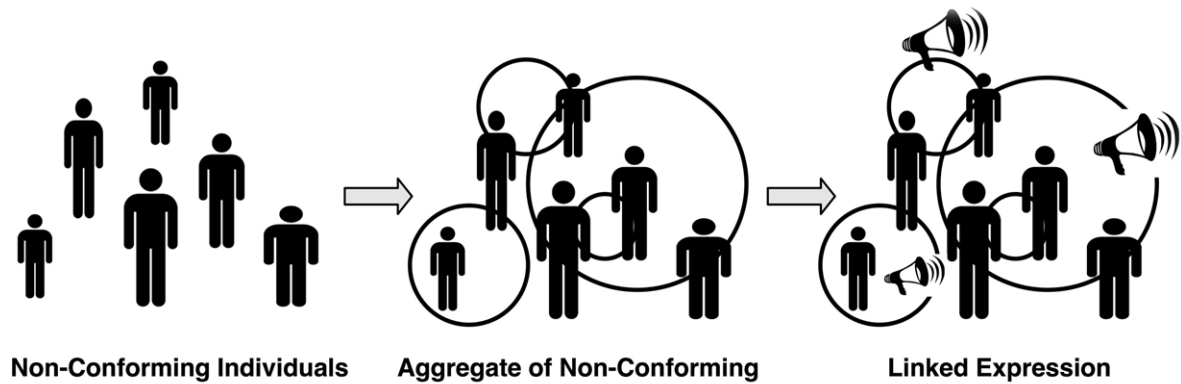
(Source: the author)

Power in Networks

In Manuel Castells' 2011 work on the topic of power in networks, *A Network Theory of Power* he writes the following, "Power is the relational capacity to impose an actor's will over another actor's will on the basis of the structural capacity of domination embedded in the institutions of society" (p. 775). Reflecting the ideas of the Hardt and Negri *multitude*, Castells writes, "new forms of domination and determination are critical in shaping people's lives regardless of their will…there are power relationships at work, albeit in new forms and with new kinds of actors" (p.776). Thus, Castells proposes a theory of network power which comprises *networking power*, *network power*, *networked power,* and *network-making power*. Counterpower is exercised in the network society by "changing the programs of specific networks" (p. 773). These key concepts are summarized and presented in Table 1 (pp. 773-775) and show that power in the network society is expressed and exercised through the network itself.

Table 1. Summary of Castells' Forms of Power in Networks

Networking Power	Power exercised by the global network over humans who are not included in those networks, such as collectives and individuals
Network Power	Power that results from the protocols of communication that coordinate interaction in the network or across networks. Power is deployed by imposing rules on who is included in the network, as opposed to how others might be excluded
Networked Power	Forms and processes that shape the power of social actors over other social actors
Network-Making Power	Power to adjust the operations of a network based on interests and values, through alliances between the prevailing actors in the participating networks

When it comes to the idea of counterpower, Castells' view is that both power and counterpower are aimed at influencing the human mind through mass communication networks. In that context he writes, "Counterpower is exercised in the network society by fighting to change the programs of specific networks and by the effort to disrupt the switches that reflect dominant interests and replace them with alternative switches between networks. Actors are humans, but humans are organized in networks. Human networks act on networks via the programming and switching of organizational networks" (Castells, 2011, p. 773).

Castells (2011) asserts that *network-making power* is the most crucial form of power in a network. This form of power is exercised through two mechanisms: *programming*, which is the ability to change the goals of the network and *switching*, which is the way that different networks form strategic connections that ensure cooperation and the best opportunity of achieving common goals. In a network society, the programmers

and switchers hold the power. Programmers and switchers are not invisible people behind a velvet curtain pulling levers of inclusion and exclusion, but "in all cases, [the programmers and switchers] are networks of actors exercising power in their respective areas of influence through the networks that they construct around their interests" (Castells, 2011, p. 786). These networks shape our institutions and organizations through human action, but depend on the interplay between power and counterpower that is constructed by activities that are in accordance with the values of the dominant actors.

Importantly, Castells work provides one of the few analyses of power in a network that avoids technological determinism. He focuses on the human actors, yet views the network society through a lens of technological impact on collective organizations, especially regarding the experience of power in that context. His notion of the processes and expressions of power in networks offers the opportunity and vocabulary to examine how a social network algorithm may diffuse information influences as an expression of the interests of its designers. These ideas afford us a basis to consider individual actors in a network, such as civically-alienated individuals.

Civically-Alienated Individuals

The literature defines civically-alienated individuals as those who subjectively perceive themselves as marginalized or disadvantaged by mainstream society, and who feel/are disconnected from mainstream political culture. These American citizens have been variously described as those with low-social capital, anomie, or political alienation. Though there may be important distinctions between such individuals, they share commonalities in how they generally describe affiliation with the broader society (Hoffer,

2010; Putnam, 2000; Warren, 1976). To avoid overburdening this analysis, I use the term civically-alienated (not to be confused with Marxian alienation, or estrangement from self) and indicate where scholars have chosen different terms.

Perhaps most importantly, civic alienation is not demographically confined, either by a race, ideology, or gender, even though it may occur more often in particular demographic groups. It is a subjective impression expressed as a negative perception of central institutions; these individuals regardless of their demographic designation hold this subjective perspective in common. One way that this perception is revealed is by a weak attachment to institutions (especially political ones), leaders, and societal values (Putnam, 2000). Civically-alienated individuals, by their very definition, are not "joiners," especially because of this sense of isolation. While they might show an inclination to respond to issues or problems that impact them and do demonstrate an inclination to respond or react to personal issues or problems, they often do so through proxy organizations or religious communities. But overall, these individuals possess a lack a propensity for joining organizations that offer sustained ideological advantage (Putnam, 2000; Warren, 1976).

Robert Putnam is best known for his scholarship on *low social capital* individuals in the United States in his popular text, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). His study explores the increasing disconnection among family, friends, and neighbors. Putnam concludes that a breakdown in civic engagement is caused by shifting work and family structures, suburbanization, television, computers, and women's changing roles in the society. Together, these factors contribute to the persistent decline of connection to a negative effect in our lives and communities. While Putnam

performed hundreds of thousands of interviews, he was not the first to identify the cross-cutting alienated American. Robert I. Warren, author of *The Radical* Center, performed primary research in the mid-1970s, identifying an American voter he called the "Middle American Radical" (MAR). This politically-alienated individual also has no clear demographic home, despite the appearance of a geographic context in his study (Warren, 1976). And two decades before that, a longshore man named Eric Hoffer wrote of the mass movements that surged in the 1940s, penning the seminal *The True Believer*, describing the *frustrated* man, alienated and wallowing in a Durkheimian-like anomie of personal unrest and uncertainty, lacking purpose and ideals (Hoffer, 2010).

While these three authors employ different frames (civics, political, and mass movements), they all describe a similar alienated individual. Warren's study is especially prescient to the election season of 2016 America. He concludes that alienation is not confined to a race, ideology, or gender but expressive of a common perspective towards central institutions. This conveys a weak attachment to political institutions, political and civic leaders, and even with the values of society. His research showed that there are individuals who share little of a religious, ethic, or regional affinity, but hold a distinct common perspective of feeling unfairly burned by institutional requirement to pay taxes for things or people for which they have no concern. While economics, education, or status may be implicated in this perspective, they are neither fully descriptive nor predictive. Middle American Radicals hold harsh views towards civic institutions, including schools, government, corporations, and even churches. MARs exhibit s a cross-cutting tendency

among most demographics perspectives, and in some cases, their sense of alienation alone that relates them (Warren, 1976).

Warren's study further suggests that an important factor contributing to the development of this world view is how individuals view their own position in society. Despite its subjectivity, he argues that this view is neither arbitrary nor spurious, but instead embodies "a distinct orientation of multiple threats of being caught in the middle between those whose wealth gives them access to power and those whose militant organization in the face of deprivation gains special treatment from the government" (p. 14). Like Durkheim's man "brimming with anomie" and Putnam's "lonely bowler," Warren's "middle American radical" reveals sparse social bonds between an individual and the community, a position that appears to lead to the consequent rejection of self-regulatory values with the long-term impact of the loss of a meaningful social identity.

Civically-alienated individuals, by their very definition, tend to want to "go it alone." Despite their lack of propensity for joining organizations that would offer them an ideological advantage, they tend primarily to respond individually to issues or problems that directly impact them. The lack of tendency towards a traditionally organized form is a barrier to collective emergence in the sense of traditional social movement formation, which results in the inability to muster sustained political efficacy. Such individuals characteristically show an ad-hoc concern on a current issue or problem, which does not typically result in a sustained response for change. This way of responding to concerns alone, then, becomes an impediment to collective formation with a strong preference for "individual autonomy and influence" through informal structures (Warren, 1976, p. 119).

Presciently to the topic of this paper, Warren noted that digital culture (television and film) and influence seem to further trigger the alienated person by catalyzing an even greater sense of anger and alienation from societal processes. Simply, these individuals do not seek opportunities for participation or desire that their concerns be treated in an organized structure (p. 119).

Putnam (2000) makes a similar observation about low-social capital individuals who might demonstrate an inclination to respond or react to important issues or problems: they do so through proxy organizations or religious communities. Putnam called this "citizenship by proxy," which typically involves direct-mail and memberships with political movement groups that supplants the grassroots activism of the previous decades in his study, especially those of mainstream religiously-based organizations (p. 160). Since Durkheim (1897) first suggested the condition of anomie in the late 1800s, the notion has existed that communities have within them individuals who express a lack of solidarity with others—a description that captures modern-day concerns about the effect of technology on eroding individuals' social connections with one another. Contemporary social movement theory rejects the idea that social movements are promising vehicles for civically-alienated people, who are drawn to more personal, discrete, and isolated causes.

Finally, then, we come to the proposition that there is something unique to Facebook. Does the platform's highly-personalized and targeted experience offer new access for the collective engagement of the civically-alienated individual? To begin to answer this question, it is important to look at how Facebook surfaces targeted information to its users

The Facebook News Feed

Facebook's marketing materials describe their core technology News Feed, writing: "Your News Feed is a personalized, ever-changing collection of photos, videos, links and updates from the friends, family, businesses, public figures and news sources you've connected to on Facebook." The site suggests that Facebook relies on three main ranking factors for their surfaced content, including who posted the original content, how popular it is (the volume and variety of interactions), and an assessment of the kind of content News Feed thinks you might "favor" based on your activity. To Facebook, News Feed is a collection of updates of content from people, places, and groups you have connected with, including precision-targeted advertisements. [1] Users only see what is presented to them, or what they are able to search out in public areas of the platform. At the core, News Feed is a collection of scoring, ranking, and sorting *algorithms*—automated reasoners in the form of procedures or formulas rendered in computational code for solving problems. News Feed prioritizes stories it predicts an individual with a specified profile will click on, share, or react to in order drive their most important business metric of *engagement*.

The goal of News Feed is to push the most engaging content it can for every unique individual, to keep that person coming back to Facebook, connecting with interesting people, and thereby increasing the company's ability to earn revenue from the advertisements that they show a user while "engaging." Facebook's description of News

---

[1] Transient marketing pages are not included in the bibliography. They can be retrieved from Internet Archives with the retrieval date. Facebook, "Personalized Stories You Care About" (2016, August 24). Retrieved December 18, 2017, from https://newsfeed.fb.com/the-stories-you-care-about.

Feed is quite revealing. To sum up, they claim it is: (1) **Private**. It is *an individual's* and no one else sees exactly what that user sees; (2) **Targeted**. it is *personalized*, based on many variables that tell News Feed about how to engage each person, such as unique user demographics, current location, mood, and political feelings; (3) **Homogeneous**. News Feed is populated to an individual's page with content that comes from that user's friends.[2] As Eli Parisier (2011) calls it: it's a person's perfect "filter bubble."

Increasing engagement (or *capturing eyeballs* as current social media lingo calls it) requires Facebook to surface content that creates a personalized world view consistent with that of the user, creating an online "filter bubble" within a web of one (Parisier, 2011; Bruni, 2016). New York Times op-ed journalist Frank Bruni mused in a commentary, "[Facebook is] designed to give us more of the same, whatever that same is: one sustained note from the vast and varied music that it holds, one redundant fragrance from a garden of infinite possibility" (Bruni, 2016). In other words, Facebook deploys conformity, which helps the company predict consistent and predictable revenue growth; it is the *raison d'etre* of News Feed. And it appears by Wall Street measures to be very effective.

It is likely that the majority of Facebook users continue to believe Facebook serves as a platform of many ideas, representing the nearly 2 billion users with unique viewpoints. Sadly, however, this is not the case, given that such a construct would likely fail the fiduciary obligation of the public Facebook company to generate ever-increasing revenues for its shareholders. Informational news publishing is not the problem that Facebook aims

---

[2] Ibid.

to solve, and as such, the platform should not be confused with an actual news publishing

medium. The only ideas that an individual see are the ones that the News Feed algorithms

calculate a particulat user might *want* to see. And, Facebook is not reluctant to publish this

fact. Their corporate materials state: "We don't favor specific kinds of sources — or ideas.

Our aim is to deliver the types of stories we've gotten feedback that an individual person

most wants to see. We do this not only because we believe it's the right thing but also

because it's good for our business."[3] It is no secret that Facebook is intentional in its

targeting of content, whether the general user understands that completely or not.

Data-Driven Targeting

Facebook announced in January 2017 that its revenue reached almost $18 billion

in 2016, with nearly $4 billion of that in profit. Most of this money-making was from

advertising which had already doubled on a per-user basis from 2013 to 2015. It is a fair

conclusion then, that News Feed has succeeded at consistently engaging users, capturing

eyeballs, and putting paid advertisements in front of them (Frommer, 2016). Facebook, it

appears, excels at using the derived and explicit interactions of system users to drive

predictable and frequent visits from its user base. Facebook has done this reliably enough

to produce dependable Wall Street earnings estimates for its investors. Clearly, the

platform enables Facebook company financial analysts to be more than good guessers.

Despite the opaque and proprietary nature of the Facebook algorithmic

mechanisms, much of what is known about its seeming omniscience is revealed through

---

[3] Building a Better News Feed for You. (2016, June 29). Retrieved December 18, 2017, from
https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2016/06/building-a-better-news-feed-for-you/.

the capabilities it provides to advertisers for targeting potential customers. For Facebook,

targeting can be offered only because of its tracking strategy; on-line or offline, the

company will attempt to collect anything that can be legally swept[4] or purchased from data

brokers (there is no data point that should be considered uninteresting). Then, when a user

is engaged, NewsFeed can provide relevant content and advertisements that account not

just for the identity, demographics, or user propensities and habits, but in-the-moment data

about the user's location, mood, and needs with real-time input (Murphy, 2015; Nunez,

2016).

      Facebook knows far more than the casual user might first imagine, as they pull in

information from as many online and offline information brokering arrangements as

possible. Because the density of information is comprised of hundreds of constantly

updating data sources, they can provide advertising that sometimes "seems creepy" in its

real-time response to user's desires (Nunez, 2016). First, the company keeps track of the

data that users willingly provide them through the regular enjoyment of the system,

including the posting of anniversaries, employment or family travel, political status, to

whom a person may wish a happy birthday, what is clicked, shared, dwelled upon, and to

whom one responds—all this is used to create a dynamic and distinct profile of your life

and propensities. Facebook scans and catalogues photos, using both object and facial

recognition techniques, and has even learned to track users based on the dust signature left

behind on a camera lens (Hill, 2018). Other gestures are ingested into the system, and,

---

[4] The act of sweeping data, or swept data, is a data analytics-related word to describe the gathering of public or individually proferred data from any and all sources

since 2015, users' "dwell time" is tracked as the period spent considering a friend's picture or an advertisement. This information further refines the algorithm's predictive power (Murphy, 2015).

News Feed is much more than the programmatic deployment of sorting and ranking procedures, it is a massive data analysis engine with computational routines that draw on the principles of behavioral economics and experimental psychology. As Peter Eckersley, the chief computer scientist at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, plainly states: "Facebook's business model is to amass as much first-party and third-party data on you as possible, and slowly dole out access to it. If you're using Facebook, you're entrusting the company with records of everything you do" (Dewey, 2016).

Digital Gerrymandering

It is impossible to discuss the platform of Facebook post-2016 without at least briefly remarking on its role in publishing what has become known as *disinformation* to its many users. After a congressional investigation into Russian propaganda being presented to users on Facebook in October 2017, the company admitted that "an estimated 10 million people in the U.S. saw at least one of the 3,000 political ads it says were bought by accounts linked to the Russian government" (Byers, 2017). This is a number that equates roughly to the size of the population of Michigan.

There is nothing inherent in Facebook that causes it to promote disinformation or inflammatory so-called #fakenews. Nor is there a contract with the user that would prohibit Facebook from serving factually false information. However, many users have inaccurate perspectives of what is being surfaced in their feed, including how or why it reached them.

Because of this lack of transparency as to why certain information appears in an individual's feed, the Facebook News Feed can be fairly described as an engine of propaganda. Consistent with the definition of propaganda, Facebook surfaces information to promote a point of view in a manner that pushes "targets to act in the interests of the propagandist without realizing that they have done so" (Paul & Matthews, 2016). The only twist is that with News Feed, the viewpoint is yours and the corporation Facebook is the interested party.

Because the News Feed algorithm does not assert its own existence, users do not possess knowledge for how algorithmic operations may be affecting the flow of information into their feed and how, as a result, their thinking or behaviors may be influenced. In a 2015 study, Eslami et al. found that more than half of the participants were not even aware of the existence of the curation algorithm, often becoming upset when they realized they were either not receiving information they expected from their friends or that their friends weren't receiving something participants posted . In this study of how algorithmically-curated content in social media feeds shaped users' experiences, the authors concluded: "With no way to know if their knowledge of these invisible algorithms is correct, users cannot be sure of the results of their actions. Algorithmic interfaces in Internet applications rarely include a clear enough feedback mechanism for users to understand the effects of their own actions on the system" (p. 1).

Testing the effects of algorithmic mediation on unwitting subjects is rife with ethical challenges. Furthermore, Facebook regularly makes indeterminate "tweaks" to its algorithm in the course of its business to observe how users behave. As early as 2010,

Facebook well understood and even *demonstrated* the potential for digital gerrymandering.

On election day in 2010, some of Facebook's United States users were the subjects of an experiment that tested if the platform could influence indolent users to cast a ballot. A graphic plant was placed in the newsfeed of millions of users that inlcuded a link to a polling place, a button to click to share that one had voted, and the photos of other Facebook friends who had done the same. This test of normative pressure showed remarkable results. There was a measurably greater chance that those, who got fed the graphic, voted as opposed to the control, who did not receive the graphic. The experiment concluded that the graphic had mobilized 60,000 votes directly and that, overall, an additional 340,000 votes were cast as a result of network effects (Zittrain, 2014).

As a reference point for the meaning of that number, the Washington Post reported the following of the 2016 election results:

> The most important states, though, were Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.
>
> Trump won those states by 0.2, 0.7 and 0.8 percentage points, respectively—and by
>
> 10,704, 46,765 and 22,177 votes. Those three wins gave him 46 electoral votes; if
>
> Clinton had done one point better in each state, she'd have won the electoral vote,
>
> too (Bump, 2016).

It appears then, that certain political outcomes can be mustered even with the most basic of microtargeting adjustments.

An algorithm can have consequences when it drives users to draw inferences about their personal relationships. When a person attributes the manner in which they see their world through the Facebook News Feed as an accurate representation of the intentions of

friends and family, negative real world impacts can occur. Worse, some users believe that when they are not responded to, that they had damaged their relationships over political disagreements or for generally being disagreeable, rather than understanding that their content may have been buried by News Feed (Manjoo, 2017). The views of others matter in the world of Facebook, especially when there is a deep familiarity, a friendly sense of a connection, or conferred credibility.

In an assessment reminiscent of Putnam's in *Bowling Alone* (2000), New York Times journalist Farhad Manjoo described Facebook as a self-referring bubble of confirmatory ideas that divorces people from the idea of a shared mission required by a civil society. He concludes, "With its huge reach, Facebook has begun to act as the great disseminator of the larger cloud of misinformation and half-truths swirling about the rest of media. It sucks up lies from cable news and Twitter, then precisely targets each lie to the partisan bubble most receptive to it" (Manjoo, 2017). In the interests of Facebook's economic viability, civil discourse, debate, and exposure to new ideas is necessarily controlled by the algorithm.

Discussion

During a 2015 campaign stop in Nashville, Tennessee, then candidate Donald J. Trump claimed himself as the vessel for a new American vision: "This is a movement…I don't want it to be about me. This is about common sense. It's about doing the right thing" (Schreckinger, 2015). After Trump was implausibly elected as president, pollsters and statisticians spent many months trying to determine just who this inspired Trump-voter was. At first, every answer was an attempt to identify a recognizable demographic bloc,

founded in the normal political knowledge that has been developed over the years, for the demographics and propensities of American voters.

However, in line with how most political pundits failed pre-election to predict Trump's win, efforts to identify the key demographic that pushed him to become President proved inconclusive. A flurry of public speculation after the election ran the gamut from racist white Americans, to suburban housewives, to the Wall Street affluent who wanted to get richer. Only recently have experts begun developing new understandings for how a combination of voters may have propelled Trump to electoral college victory. This combination of voters does include the angry white voters who reject racial equity frameworks, but also nationalists, preservationists (anti-globalization), and those who appreciate the comfort of an authoritarian making the big decisions (Ekins, 2017).

This cross-cutting alone casts doubt on the likelihood that Trump represents a new social movement that emerged from the algorithmic bowels of Facebook, thought it does raise other related questions. Specifically, if Donald J. Trump is not the vision-holder for a new social movement born of Americans who desire a return to what he called "common sense," did Facebook somehow connect these individuals in a new way? Castells' theories of networked social movements do not include the idea of algorithmic power-brokering. Do we require a new theory of individual connectedness to understand the emerging potential for social organizing in an algorithmically-mediated environment?

Analytical researchers of every ideological ilk have been equally challenged to provide decent answers to at least some of these questions. Emily Ekins, a research fellow at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute, released a comprehensive effort on the subject.

In her June 2017 public report, Ekins concluded that there is no such thing as *a kind* of

Trump voter. Examining the Trump-voting clusters and their opinions on a variety of

issues, Ekins sought to develop a model that would predict a Trump supporter. However,

in the web release of the study, she was ultimately forced to conclude—somewhat

inelegantly—that "Trump groups should be viewed as general 'flavors' of Trump voters

rather than precise, discrete groups of people…the fact that Trump voters come with such

unique combinations of attitudes suggests that Trump voters had different motivations in

mind when they went to the voting booth. In short, there is no such thing as 'one kind of

Trump voter' who voted for him for one particular reason" (Ekins, 2017, web release). The

author's conclusion is key point for this paper's discussion.

Among many questions, Ekins (2017) reconnoitered ideology, income, positions on

immigration, racial views, entitlements, economic anxiety, and feelings about Hillary

Clinton, but she could not convincingly find a way to envisage a "Trump voter." She does

however describe the Trump-prone skeptics, the disenfranchised, and low-propensity

voters among his voting base. Ekins concludes, "there is no one particular issue or

characteristic that positively and significantly predicts membership in all of the Trump

voter blocs" (from webpage abstract). If Trump represented the vessel for a rising social

movement, as he declared in Tennessee, no one has of yet identified a characteristic marker

for collective identity and shared discontent. So, where does that leave the idea of "a

Trump movement"? If Ekins is our guide, he is less a vessel and more of an ice cream cone

serving up the flavor-of-the month. However, if we consult Warren (1976), Putnam (2000),

and Hoffer (2010), we begin to recognize that Ekins' skeptics, disenfranchised, and low-propensity voters bear a striking resemblance to the civically-alienated American.

In the face of an inadequate voter typology, the obvious question arises: How was the Trump campaign able to succeed with such a high degree of heterogeneity among the concerns of his likely voters? Further, how was he able to speak to them about their personal values, priorities for their families, or their shared perspectives for the future of the country? These questions lead critics and researchers to wonder: Was it indeed a feature of Facebook that enabled Trump to reach these civically-alienated voters?

Trump's digital director during the campaign, Brad Parscale, explains in an October 2017 *60 Minutes* interview, how the Facebook targeting technology (with the help of embedded Facebook employees in the campaign) helped push Trump to victory. He describes how Facebook's microtargeting allowed the campaign to reach voters that could never have been reached with an expensive ad buy on television. For example, Parscale said of Trump's infrastructure message:

> It was voters in the Rust Belt that cared about their roads being rebuilt, their highways, their bridges. They felt like the world was crumbling. So I started making ads that would show the bridge crumbling…You know, that's microtargeting them. Because I can find the 1,500 people in one town that care about infrastructure. Now, that might be a voter that normally votes Democrat (Pramuk, 2017).

Parscale describes a microtargeting scheme that was repeated many times over by the Trump campaign on Facebook using News Feed, which allowed his campaign to

activate people at the level of their most unique and personal concerns. While this strategy

may reveal another level of connectedness that is not well understood, it does not fit

contemporary social movement theory where we expect a collective to emerge from the

sharing of a common concern.

Where Does This Leave Social Movement Theory?

Currently, one of the best ways to study collectivized political identity is through

social movement theory. The emergence of the Facebook platform as a tool to explain

Trump's unexpected win in post-election analysis suggests that Trump activated—or

potentially suppressed—Clinton voters. The idea of deploying social movement theory to

explain this method of rapid collectivization certainly seems like a next logical step in

understanding the shared concerns of the American public. However, it is also clear, that in

a domain of study where Facebook orchestrates the diffusion of information, using theory

designed for more organic contexts is a challenging proposition. Any research that does

not centralize the role of algorithm mediation rests on a shaky foundation.

Up until now, many of the claims about movement formation on social media have

been broadly optimistic and hopeful, with Facebook generally being regarded as a social

movement accelerator that has the potential to increase reach for pro-democracy

movements (Castells, 2012; Tufekci, 2018). Yet for the last several years, savvy social-

media activists have been raising alarm about the dangers of algorithmic intervention in the

platform, given the ability of the algorithm to broadly and arbitrarily restrict or censor

social movement messages and conversations (Tufekci, 2018). In the world of Facebook,

digital content is mediated and distributed based on the predictions of a cluster of

proprietary algorithms privy to massive quantities of personal user data. Through its microtargeting capabilities, News Feed, which is designed to facilitate precisely-tuned opportunities for individual commerce, behaves as a powerful propaganda engine when deployed for spreading information or disinformation. Because advertising revenues captured through News Feed represent Facebook's primary income channel, the company is motivated to provide an engaging experience for customers devised to drive conversions for paying advertisers. Regardless of whether that product is well-sourced information or unverified content pushing a personal brand of divisive ideology, Facebook gets paid. When social networking first went digital, and before social networks like Facebook became the major vector for online conversation, blogging was the best way to reach an international or diatomic audience, at sometimes considerable risk to the blogger (Derakhshian, 2015). The only constraint for accessing this information was the ability for users to access the site depending on the policy and regulatory constraints imposed on their internet provider. When Castells (2012) developed his theories of the network society, it made absolute sense that our current understanding of social movements would transfer to the online world; we assumed that online activity would simply accelerate a movement's ability to perform in a global and distributed fashion. Yet, even the critical challenges to Castells' framework that privilege individual expression over collective identity (connections over collectives), are not developed enough to provide an alternative understanding of social movement emergence and coalescence. But this weakness in understanding may not even matter, given the departure from here-to-fore-considered typical human connectedness that a privately owned algorithm creates. In sum, in a

proprietary algorithmically-mediated environment, especially one that grounds its framework in the ideas that information will flow freely, that a feeling of dissent can be shared with others, and that a normative group identity can form, social movement theory—even if refined to treat power as connective instead of hierarchical—may be at a dead end. In Facebook, for now, there is no way to observe, measure, or convincingly demonstrate that a social movement is following a prototypical trajectory.

Summary

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that considerable doubt exists about the efficacy of social movement theory in helping sociologists and others identify and analyze collective behavior catalyzed on the Facebook platform. While social movement theories may partially account for organizing, public display, and message deployment by activists on the platform, the theory can never truly explain how information flows through the system, who sees it, and how it produced meaning for its receivers. Simply, the mediating influences of the information distribution algorithm is deliberately intended to manufacture conforming behavior; and in the case of Facebook, that "influencer" is under the control of a single corporate actor who is free to modify its intentions at will.

Despite past successes by social movements that have harnessed Facebook for adjuvant uses, such as broadcasting updates to group members, scheduling events, or even awareness-raising campaigns, News Feed is a capability of a private company and is provided at the pleasure of that enterprise, in accordance with the fiduciary responsibilities to their shareholders. As of this writing, Facebook is not regulated as a media property. Nor has there never been any expectation that Facebook would adhere to a fairness

doctrine requiring it to present controversial issues of public importance in an honest, equitable, and balanced manner. Instead, Facebook is a for-profit business, and the algorithms that drive News Feed are designed solely to present content that will keep a user engaged and creating revenue opportunities.

This paper has shown that two features of the traditional social movement framework are not guaranteed to operate within the Facebook platform, emergence and coalescence. A summary follows of these constructs and their lack of fit within the proprietary algorithmic environment that defines Facebook:

Emergence. Facebook claims that the purpose of News Feed is to provide all individual users more of what will interest them. Because we cannot read the algorithm, we must assume that Facebook will continue to deliver to users the similar opinions characterizing their connected network. These individuals might express grievances to others, form new affinities, and even discuss ways of addressing their common problems, but there is no guarantee that these concerns will be broadcast to a broader audience in a way that allows new connections to form in unexpected ways or to produce a galvanizing moment. Further, in Facebook, some topics and people can become invisible by algorithmic downgrading of posts, a user's violation of the terms of service, crowd reporting (or complaints), outright censorship, or blacklisting.

Coalescence. Outside of the use of paid advertising to promote a political message to targeted users, there is no evidence that Facebook improves the ability for an individual to organize and mobilize across unconnected people in "public" spaces,

as sure as there is no evidence that it would always impede that ability. When a

social movement has already begun to coalesce, it may rapidly reach a more

prominent level of online visibility, attracting many "followers" for their sponsored

pages and allowing the movement's recruitment dollars to be effectively leveraged.

Unfortunately, the emergence of fake followers, or bots, and their functioning

within in the online social media platform casts some doubt on the ability to

accurately track followers as an authentic measure for movement growth or deeper

forms of coalescence.

Facebook is a private entity with terms of service that it alone controls. The

platform's sheer international reach makes it appear to be a potentially powerful tool for

organizing a collective moment. In reality though, the platform offers a risky wager for

new social movement members who hope to galvanize new members, share information

freely, and reliably garner political capital. In her book "Twitter and Tear Gas," Zeynep

Tufekci (2018) compares Facebook to a shopping mall:

> Neither shopping malls nor Facebook nor any other private company guarantees
>
> freedom of speech or privacy. Now, one person can reach hundreds of thousands or
>
> even millions of people with a live feed on a cell phone but only as long as the
>
> corporate owners permit it and the algorithms that structure the platform surface it
>
> to a broad audience (p. 137).

Yet, even if a movement did manage to find itself emerging and flourishing on Facebook, a

spurious or willful new corporate decision could disrupt—or even terminate—it with a

minor computational tweak.

Conclusion

The initial question that prompted this study regarded the extent to which the Facebook platform could be used to activate civically-alienated people. This paper concludes that this question could not be answered by the application of social movement theory, which, as it is currently defined and understood, does not offer an adequate framework for investigating the development of civic mission on the Facebook platform employing proprietary algorithmic mediation. Considering the case of the 2016 Trump Campaign, this paper found that, despite its microtargeting through Facebook, the campaign did not fan the excitement of a true collective response, as defined by social movement theory. Nonetheless, the campaign did find a way to reach potential voters through the platform and likely benefitted from those users' sharing information and engagements to help drive the campaign's visibility. Furthermore, in the process of reaching those voters, the 2016 Trump Campaign demonstrated that there may be something essential to the use of Facebook in enabling civically-alienated individuals to connect, even if these individuals do not ultimately comprise a social movement per se.

In this vein, more research is needed by social scientists to understand issues of self-esteem and self-perception among Facebook users that might help explain the role of the platform in influencing human relations. The other important question left mostly untreated in this study relates to the effect of computational propaganda on civically-alienated individuals who frequent Facebook. The ability to microtarget and rapidly deliver misinformation at scale within a social network may have been part of the matrix that gave a civic "voice" to alienated individuals. Even if there was no objective behavior-change in

these individuals' voting behavior, the structure of their relationships in the network and how they shared information may have played a significant role in attenuating the success of the get-out-the-vote efforts among likely Democratic voters. The importance of diminishing, shaming, and embarrassing in social networks for actions such as not voting, or for voting for the other candidate, are all relevant research topics for deepening understanding of the psychological impacts of News Feed and even of the propaganda that gets distributed in an algorithmically-mediated environment.

Considering the forces of algorithmic-mediation in Facebook, what we know about the civically-alienated voter, and microtargeting as a form of activation for the 2016 Trump campaign, there are several conflicting propositions that emerge and which may be interesting avenues for future research:

1. Current social movement theory is inadequate in explaining how cause-based collective behaviors emerge and coalesce in the context of an algorithmically-mediated social media platform such as Facebook. Other frameworks should be developed to better understand the idea of connected individual expressions.

2. Because of the opaque nature of proprietary algorithmic-mediation in such social networking platforms as Facebook, the formal study of social movement theory aiming to generalize findings based on measures related to message-effectiveness, engagement, information flows is a dead end without relying on potentially unethical research practices such as cognitive manipulations or information distortion. As such, qualitative research methodologies, extended quantitative measurements, or social network analysis (SNA) techniques must

be employed to complement studies that include assumptions about such social network user behavior.

3. This study unearthed no clear evidence that civically-alienated people are more compelled to join or be represented by collective action as a result of exposure to galvanizing Facebook messages than they would be in an offline environment.

4. The design of Facebook to silently, automatically, and algorithmically surface microtargeted information to individual users, without alerting them to its sources, impacts, or theories of delivery, can reasonably be viewed as an attempt to directly manipulate users in order to create an effect that aligns with the interests of the content producer.

As a social network medium, Facebook is designed—and has the power—to produce deliberate effects among its users. While the extent of this power is not well understood by researchers, the social platform's ability to drive political capital is just one of many possible capabilities. Finally, the ethics and policies related to closed algorithms that control the flow of information among massive, transnational, digitally-enabled information networks at high-velocity provoke a serious call to be taken up by policy makers and social science researchers.

References

Balz, D. (2017, June 18). Trump's contradictory coalition roils elections in Virginia, Georgia. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-contradictory-coalition-roils-elections-in-virginia-georgia/2017/06/17/.

Barron, L. F. (2012). More than a Facebook revolution: Social movements and social media in the Egyptian Arab Spring. *International Review of Information Ethics*, *18*, 84-92.

Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science, 348(6239)*, 1130-1132. doi:10.1126/science.aaa1160.

Benkler, Y. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Blumer, H. (1969). Collective behavior. In A. McClung-Lee (Ed.), *Principles of sociology* (3rd Edition). New York: Barnes and Noble.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Bennet, L. W., & Segerberg, A. (2012). *The logic of connective action, information, communication & society, 15(5)*, 739-768.

Bimber, B., Stohl, C., & Flanigan, A. (2009) Technological change and the shifting nature of political organization. In A. Chadwick & P. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of internet politics.* London: Routledge, pp. 72-85.

Bruni, F. (2016, May 21). How facebook warps our worlds. Retrieved December 05, 2017, from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/opinion/sunday/how-facebook-warps-our-worlds.html.

Bump, P. (2016, December 1). Donald Trump will be president thanks to 80,000 people in three states. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/12/01/donald-trump-will-be-president-thanks-to-80000-people-in-three-states/.

Byers, D. (2016, October 03). Facebook: Russian ads reached 10 million people. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from http://money.cnn.com/2017/10/02/media/facebook-russian-ads-10-million/index.html.

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age.* Cambridge, U; Malden, MA: Polity.

Castells, M. (2011). A network theory of power. *International Journal of Communication 5*, 773-778. 1932-036/20110773.

Crossley, N. (2002). *Making sense of social movements*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2011[2006]). *Social movements: An introduction*. Malden, MA.: Blackwell.

Derakhshan, H. (2015, July 14). The web we have to save – matter – medium. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from https://medium.com/matter/the-web-we-have-to-save-2eb1fe15a426.

Dewey, C. (2016, August 19). 98 personal data points that Facebook uses to target ads to you. Retrieved December 18, 2017, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/08/19/98-personal-data-points-that-facebook-uses-to-target-ads-to-you/.

Durkheim, E. (1897). *Le suicide*. Paris: G. Baillière & C.

Earl, J. & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Online and offline activism in the age of the Interne.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ekins, E. (2017, September 06). The five types of Trump voters. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publications/2016-elections/the-five-types-trump-voters.

Eslami, M., Rickman, A., Vaccaro, K., Aleyasen, A., Vuong, A., Karahalios, K., . . . Sandvig, C. (2015). "I always assumed that I wasnt really that close to [her]". *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI 15*. doi:10.1145/2702123.2702556

Eyerman, R., & Jamison, A. (1991) *Social movements: A cognitive approach.* Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Facebook. (n.d.). Drive discovery. Retrieved December 05, 2017, from https://www.facebook.com/business/goals/demand-generation.

Fingas, J. (2017, March 09). Contact your senator with a fax-sending bot. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from https://www.engadget.com/2017/03/09/resistbot/.

Frommer, D. (2016, January 29). How much money did you make for Facebook last year? Retrieved December 18, 2017, from https://qz.com/605343/how-much-money-did-you-make-for-facebook-last-year/

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2006). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Hill, K. (2018, January 11). Facebook knows how to track you using the dust on your camera lens. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from https://gizmodo.com/facebook-knows-how-to-track-you-using-the-dust-on-your-1821030620.

Hoffer, E. (2010). *The true believer: Thoughts on the nature of mass movements*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Hopper, R. D. (1950). The revolutionary process: A frame of reference for the study of revolutionary movements. *Social Forces, 28*(*3*), 270-279. doi:10.2307/2572010.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78(6),* 1360-1380.

James, P.; van Seeters, P. (2014). *Globalization and politics, Vol. 2: Global social movements and global civil society.* London: Sage Publications.

Kramer, A. D., Guillory, J. E., & Hancock, J. T. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 111*(24), 8788-8790. doi:0.1073.

Lapowsky, I. (2017, June 3). This is how Facebook actually won Trump the presidency." *Wired*. Retrieved December 12, 2017: https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-won-trump-election-not-just-fake-news/.

Macionis, J. J. (2001). *Sociology (8th ed).* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Manjoo, F. (2017, April 25). Can Facebook fix its qwn worst bug? Retrieved December 18, 2017, from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/magazine/can-facebook-fix-its-own-worst-bug.html.

Mauss, A. L. (1975). *Social problems as social movements*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.

Marx, G. & McAdam, D. (1994). *Collective behavior and social movements: Process and structure*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Miller, C. C. (2008, November 07). How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics. Retrieved December 16, 2017, from https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/.

Miller, F. D. (1999). The end of SDS and the emergence of weatherman: Demise through success. In J. Freeman & V. Johnson (Eds.). In *Waves of protest: Social movements since the Sixties* (pp. 303-324). Lanham, MD: Rowman Littlefield.

Moussa, M. B. (2013). From Arab Street to Social movements: Re-theorizing collective action and the role of social media in the Arab spring. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 9(2)*, 47. doi:10.16997/wpcc.166.

Murphy, I. P. (2015, October 01). Facebook now targets ads based on user dwell times. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from https://www.retaildive.com/news/facebook-now-targets-ads-based-on-user-dwell-times/406593/.

Nunez, M. (2016, August 19). All of the creepy things Facebook nnows about you. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from https://gizmodo.com/all-of-the-creepy-things-facebook-knows-about-you-1785510980.

Pariser, E. (2011, March). TED: Beware online filter bubbles. Retrieved December 05, 2017, from https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles.

Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016, July 11). The Russian "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model. Retrieved December 18, 2017, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html.

Peet, R., & Hartwick, E. (2009). *Theories of development: Contentions, arguments, alternatives*. New York: Guildford Press.

Pramuk, J. (2017, October 09). Trump's digital director explains how he used Facebook to help win the White House. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/09/brad-parscale-says-trump-campaign-used-facebook-to-beat-clinton.html.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Ronson, J. (2016). *So you've been publicly shamed*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Ryan, C, & Gamson, W.A. (2006). The art of reframing political debates. *Contexts*, 5(1), 13–18., doi:10.1525/ctx.2006.5.1.13.

Schreckinger, B. (2015, August 30). Donald Trump: 'This is a movement'. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from https://www.politico.com/story/2015/08/donald-trump-2016-movement-213160.

Soules, M. (2007). *Jürgen Habermas and the public sphere*, *MediaStudies.ca*, http://www.media-studies.ca/articles/habermas.htm.

Tarrow, S. (1998). *Power in movement.* Cambridge University Press.

Tilly, C. (1978). *From mobilization to revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. G. (2007). *Contentious politics*. Boulder: Paradigm.

Tilly, C., & Wood, L. J. (2013). *Social movements, 1768-2012*. London: Routledge.

Touraine, A. (1985). An Introduction to the study of social movements. *Social Research 52(4)*, 749-787. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970397.

Trump, D. J. (2017, January 21). Inaugural address: Trumps full speech. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/trump-inaugural-address/index.html.

Tufekci, Z. (2018). *TWITTER AND TEAR GAS: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

Warren, D. I. (1976). *The radical center: middle Americans and the politics of alienation.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Zittrain, J. (2014, June 01). Facebook could decide an election without anyone ever finding out. Retrieved December 18, 2017, from https://newrepublic.com/article/117878/information-fiduciary-solution-facebook-digital-gerrymandering.