

Chapter 2

Understanding Internet Use in Grassroots Campaigns: Internet and Social Movement Theory

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1 Introduction

Brussels, February 2004: One of the authors attended a seminar organized by the European Union, where he listened to a presentation made by Glaude (2004). He was an activist, part of the Association Electronique Libre, and he told an amazing story. During the fall of 2003, the European Commission proposed a new software patent directive. The open source community, other organizations and many individuals were concerned that the new patent directive would hinder innovation. A petition website was set up, and more than 300,000 signatures were collected. On September 24, 2003, the European Parliament passed the directive but with significant limits on the patentability of software. On July 6, 2005, the European Parliament rejected a revised proposal with 648 against 14 votes.

Holmestrand, Norway, February 2005: The majority coalition of the local government proposed introduction of a property tax. Since property tax had been downplayed as a non-issue during the municipal election campaign in 2003, some citizens felt deceived by the majority coalition. One citizen, Tommy Sundstrøm, took the matter in his own hands. He downloaded an open source petition application from the Internet, set up his own website and registered the domain name nok-er-nok.net (enough is enough) (Jarlsberg 2005a). By sending e-mails to friends and acquaintances, asking them to sign and also to forward the message, he was able to collect around 700 signatures within a short time (the city of Holmestrand has a population

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of approximately 10,000). The largest party (labour) changed their position, and the proposal was abandoned. The mayor made explicit references to the movement when explaining why the party changed position (Jarlsberg 2005b). Also, the majority coalition fell apart as a result of the successful campaign against the proposal (Jarlsberg 2005c).

Norway, 2011: Maria Amelie (Madina Salamova) was a 25-year-old illegal immigrant, who came to Norway with her parents when she was 15 years old. She was educated in Norwegian schools and universities and finished with a M.Sc. degree. All her friends were from Norway, and she had no connections in Russia, her country of origin. After 10 years, the Norwegian government decided to deport her. This caused an immediate reaction from friends, who started a Facebook campaign. In 2 days, the campaign page received more than 60,000 “likes”; after 1 week, the number was more than 90,000. She was eventually sent back to Russia, but the Norwegian government was pressured to change the regulations. She has now returned to Norway, working as a journalist (Aftenposten 2011). Even if the campaign focused on Maria Amelie, it brought attention to the way that long time illegal immigrants were treated. In many ways, Maria Amelie became a symbol for a larger cause.

These three case examples show that the Internet has become an important channel of exercising influence and acts to dispel concerns about the state of democracy. The Norwegian research project *Power and democracy*¹ conducted a study on the state of democracy in Norway between 1998 and 2003. One of the main conclusions of the study was that Norwegian democracy is in decline. Loyalty to political party politics and the broad social movements that characterized the period following World War II have been replaced by an electorate who moves from one party to the other. This, according to the study, means that political power is slipping away from parliament and moving towards non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and industry lobby groups (Østerud et al. 2003). This conclusion is supported by statistics showing that voter turnout has been in steady decline from the 1960s up until today (SSB Statistics Norway 2011).

While the authors of *Power and democracy* (Østerud et al. 2003) are concerned about the state of democracy, others claim that online engagement and engagement on single issues is a sign that democracy is not decaying, but rather is changing both in form and outlet. Graham (2008) claims we need to rethink what should be included as part of political discourse, and Castells (2000) argues that we are living in a network society where the Internet and various networks of citizens have created a networked space for engagement (Castells 2008). As long as the social context fosters participation and action (Roberts 2009), the Internet and social media can attract even more citizens to participate (Sæbø et al. 2009). The utilization of the power of the network to form communities of like-minded individuals can facilitate the formation of social movements or protest groups. (Svendsen and Svendsen 2006; Benkler 2006).

This chapter aims to discuss the impact of the Internet on such movements, by using social movement theory as a theoretical framework.

¹For information in English, see <http://www.sv.uio.no/mutr/english/index.html>.

2 The Evolution of Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory has primarily been developed through studies of large social movements, like the peace movement or the women liberation movement. One definition of social movements was formulated by Moyer (2001): *Collective actions in which the populace is alerted, educated and mobilized to challenge the powerholders and the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values.*

Also, some definitions emphasize that social movements should attempt to build a radically new social order (Zirakzadeh 1997). In this context, it would be bold to categorize the above-mentioned examples as social movements. In our case, we have to do with three different protest groups. Karl-Dieter Opp (2009) has defined a *protest group* as a collectivity of actors who want to achieve their shared goal or goals by influencing decisions of a target.

Although one may trace the sociological interest for protest and forms for social unrest back to Marx, social movement theory, as we know it today, developed in the post-war period. It has changed and expanded greatly over time (McAdam et al. 1996; Beuchler 2011). Early studies of protest were dominated by theories of ideology and psychological approaches, focusing on crowd (i.e. deviant) behaviour. Later studies were influenced greatly by Olson's (1965) economic rational theory and were rooted in classic collective action theory. Theories of organization and rationality then became the theoretical trademark of social movement research, especially in North America. From the 1980s, social movement research was influenced by the cultural turn in the dominant European school of new social movements. The role of culture and identity in social movements was highlighted (Johnston et al. 1994), and more recently, scholars even returned to the question of emotions (Flam and King 2005). There have been attempts to synthesize the various approaches, and the social movement field has also expanded to encompass modes of contentious action from revolutionary movements to protest groups structured through networks (McAdam et al. 2001; Opp 2009). Chester and Welsh (2011) even argue that social movements today are entering a new stage, evolving into *network movements*.

Despite the cultural and emotional turn, theories of rationality and organization remain central to scholars interested in explaining protest regardless of whether it is based in a movement organization or a network. Based on costs, benefits and opportunities, rational actor theory explains protest actions and their mobilization modes, such as social movements, as the outcome of participants acting out of self-interest. One major theory, resource mobilization theory (Gusfield 1994), argues that social movements appear when participants are able to mobilize sufficient resources (money, people, etc.). Working within the same theoretical framework, some authors (McAdam 1996) have analysed social movements as part of the larger political process. The movement should have a political objective, aim to change society and be long lasting. When the goal has been achieved, i.e. change has been accomplished, the movement either ceases to exist or refocuses on a new societal issue. Another important contribution to social movement theory from social scientists of the rational school is the concept of a protest or action repertoire (Tilly 1986; Tilly and

Wood 2012). A protest repertoire is a set of means, tactics and strategies that protest groups can utilize in their campaigns. A protest repertoire is historically embedded and dependent on social custom and political circumstances, as well as communication technology.

2.1 Social Movement Theory in Studies of Technology

Several scholars have in recent years applied social movement theory to studies of Internet-based grassroots campaigning. Bevington and Dixon (2005) ask whether social movement theory is relevant for the actors being studied and conclude: “we see a promising, emerging movement-relevant approach, one based on direct, dynamic engagement with the concerns and questions of movements themselves” (p. 203). A similar study points to the diversity in application of social movement theory and through a literature review shows how the Internet can both sustain and demobilize social movements.

Other studies examine the practical implications and results. Technology can facilitate collaboration, destabilize existing organizational hierarchies and lead to increased collaboration between organizations (Garrett 2006). Grassroots efforts to influence media coverage of social and economic issues have also been examined, and social movement theory was shown to provide valuable insights for researchers (Carroll and Hackett 2006). A survey of US social movements revealed that a majority of social movements were not utilizing the Internet to its full potential (Stein 2009). As a result, the author calls for further research into different types of social movements, the resources and constraints they face, linkages between different social movements and user studies of movement websites. Social movement scholars have argued that the Internet has indeed had a revolutionary effect on protest because it has created new publics and withdrawn the boundary between the public and the private, thus increasing greatly the demand side of protest (Polletta et al. 2013).

Further, there are several case studies of online social movements. Examples include online petitions against Yahoo.com closing several websites created by Yahoo members (Gurak and Logie 2003); a study of Indymedia, a user-driven alternative news website (Kidd 2003); digital anti-globalization protests against the World Bank (Vegh 2003); and a social network analysis of the Zapatista movement in Mexico (Garrido and Halavais 2003). These case studies contribute to uncovering the breadth of social movements and the various ways in which the Internet has been used to further the movements’ objectives.

3 The Relevancy of Social Movement Theory

We argue that concepts and theories developed by social movement researchers are relevant to the understanding of Internet-based protest even if the object of investigation, as in our three cases, does not necessarily qualify as a social movement as

defined above (Moyer 2001). Social movement theories deal, as we have indicated previously, with the larger field of collective action and are thus relevant to understanding protest groups and their campaigns. Our cases certainly lack the durability of social movements, although lifespan may be coming less important, since technology may reduce time to achieve a result. Our protest cases do, however, classify as collective actions, which alerted, educated and mobilized the populace to challenge the powerholders. The protest campaigns in our study, again with the exception of the Amelie case, did not redress social problems. For sure, one may argue that introduction of a patent directive or property tax is a grievance, but there is no question of restoring critical social values as stated by Moyer.

These two rather mainstream campaigns deviate also from Zirakzadeh's (1997) criterion of promoting a broader and alternative social vision to that of the establishment. However, his definition also emphasizes that social movements are non-elitist, meaning that social movements operate outside the system of party politics. It has also been pointed out that social movements use political confrontational and socially disruptive tactics, actions that often breach political rules and conventional norms (Flacks 1994; Zirakzadeh 1997). All three examples in our study were non-elitist grassroots initiatives and operated from outside formal political institutions. They also employed means typical for the protest repertoire of social movements, using political confrontational and socially disruptive tactics by making a lot of "noise" helped by mass media.

Our cases involve concrete political decision-making, and the most political of the social movement theories, political process theory, contains concepts that can be fruitful for analysis. According to this theory, there are three central factors that can explain the formation of social movements (McAdam et al. 1996):

- Political opportunities
- Mobilizing structures
- Framing process

A political opportunity must exist. In order to mobilize, there must be reasonable chance to change current policy. If no one believes it is possible to do something about a problem, it will be impossible to mobilize. There must also be some kind of structure that makes it possible to enrol supporters of the movement. McCarthy (1996) tried to enumerate the range and variety of mobilizing structures. He stressed the importance of existing informal human networks such as kinship and friendship networks for mobilization. But mobilizing structures may also include such things as the Internet, including social media. In this context technology may help mobilization by rapidly enlarging the network, but also to coordinate the different resources enrolled. Without mobilizing structures, it will be impossible to mobilize. Lastly, there must be a clear message that is well understood by people deciding to support or not to support the movement. The process of message presentation, framing, is critical to the formation of collective protest. If there is no clear message, it will be impossible to mobilize.

4 Applying Theory to Case Examples

In all three cases described in the introduction, there was a political opportunity. In the two first cases, the issues were to be voted on by the political system within a short time frame. The third case (Maria Amelie) was about an issue that had recently been debated, not only amongst political parties but also within the government party. It was well known that different fractions were arguing about how refugees should be treated.

Therefore, this case was a spark that rekindled an already built fire.

All three cases also had a clear framing process. The messages communicated were simple. The software patent directive would undermine innovation. The introduction of property tax would violate promises made during the election campaign. Maria Amelie would be sent home in spite of her growing up in Norway. That she also had finished her master's degree made her stand out as different from many other refugees. She was not unemployed and criminal; she was highly educated with excellent Norwegian language skills and many (and only) Norwegian friends.

In all three cases, supporters were enrolled through the use of the Internet (Glaude 2004; Jarlsberg 2005a): E-mail was used to urge people to join the movements. Web-pages were used both to inform the public and to collect signatures, and in the case of Maria Amelie, social media was used extensively. The use of Internet was crucial to all three grassroots campaigns.

It seems clear, protest groups using these kinds of campaigns believe in the concept of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970). They raise expectations that people can and should be involved in the decision-making process in all aspects of public life, and they use technology to enrol people to form a collective action.

Figure 2.1 shows a model for social media use. Typical use starts with informing the users/supporters while building the network. The network is then mobilized, and network participants are asked to disseminate information to friends and even take part in physical events. The third stage is when social media is used to interact amongst the users to plan and coordinate the campaign.

At the same time, use of technology, in particular social media, may attract supporters with a more shallow commitment to the cause. It is much easier to support a cause on social media, e.g. using the "like" button in Facebook, than to join a street march or engage in other time-consuming protest activities. This superficial approach to activism has been called clicktivism.

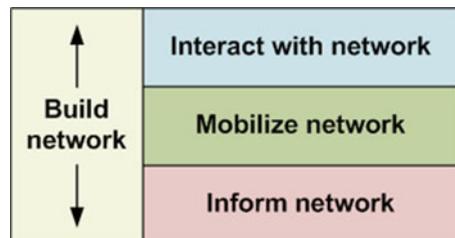


Fig. 2.1 Maturity of social media use

5 Analysis and Discussion

The three grassroots campaigns described in the introduction span almost a decade, and they were all successful. The two early campaigns were both based on petitions, while the last one used social media. Technology has always been important for grassroots campaigns, from the printing of leaflets, to distribution of cassette tapes, to electronic communication through Internet and mobile phones. The use of technology has given organizers tactical advantages; it has been easier to initiate campaigns and enrol supporters. Technology also makes it easier to coordinate resources and communicate with the followers. The model presented in Fig. 2.1 illustrates this especially through the interaction phase. While the two petitioning cases used technology to inform and mobilize, the Maria Amelie case was able to go one step further. Aided by the communicative and network features available through social media, this campaign managed to interact with sympathizers and organize events and protests, reaching out to hundreds of thousands of people as more and more participants shared and discussed the case on Facebook and Twitter.

One observation is that the three campaigns did not exist on Internet only. All three campaigns had a protest repertoire, including demonstrations, sit-downs, etc. But we found the most important interplay to be between the campaign and the mass media. When each campaign reached a critical mass, the mass media started mentioning them. This brought the messages to more people, which again prompted them to use the Internet to show their support. As the campaigns grew, so did the attention of mass media. This is an upward spiral effect caused by this ongoing interplay between campaigns and mass media.

The use of social media made this interplay even stronger. Traditional media reported on the messages delivered on Facebook and number of likes. The protest group members reported whenever the traditional media wrote about the case. This made the upward spiral effect very strong.

Another observation concerned new ways of utilizing social media, most importantly the use of social media to report in real time. Typical examples of real time messages were:

- Interview on national broadcasting channel now
- She is now put in the police car

It is important to recognize that a social media campaign seldom lives its own life. It is often one element in a repertoire of means to achieve a goal.

6 Future Implications for Politics

In most countries, the voter turnout has decreased during the last decades. Fewer citizens are members of political parties. Yet political mobilization is still happening around specific political issues.

One government study observes that on the local level, there is often mobilization for specific issues (NOU 2001:3). This observation is not related to technology but to the fact that people are mobilizing. As Flacks (1994) observed, movements rather than parties are more likely to be vehicles of popular voice.

This has some implications for the political system. First, the three cases reported here show that while voter turnout is decreasing, political engagement is not necessarily lower. Rather, it is changing form and moving towards grassroots activism on single issues. This means that in order to be seen as relevant by citizens, political parties should consider deeper engagement with these types of campaigns. Second, we show that the Internet, especially social media, is being used as a mobilizing structure for several different kinds of grassroots campaigns. Once the political opportunity is identified and action is initiated, the Internet can facilitate mobilizing structures through its inherently networked nature, aiding activists in reaching out with their message. By using websites, social media spaces and other Internet technologies, the Internet also facilitates the framing process of social movements. The model presented in Fig. 2.1 also shows how in particular social media can aid campaigns in reaching out to a broader public, as well as being a tool for organizing protests and meetings amongst participants in the campaign. While the fact that grassroots campaigns use the Internet is not new, using social movement theory as a lens for analysing these campaigns provides valuable insight into the mechanisms that drive and shape campaigns. Finally, the finding that traditional mass media tend to cover stories that emerge online shows that successful campaigns should work towards achieving this synergetic effect. With mass media attention for a case already high on the online attention ladder, we see an upward spiral of awareness that further aids the campaign organizers to gain sympathy for their cause.

This chapter has shown how Internet may be used as a mobilizing structure. There is reason to believe that the use of Internet and social media for this purpose will increase in the forthcoming years (Castells 2013).

7 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to put the impact of Internet use in movements into a theoretical context. The Internet provides tools that support the mobilizing structures and framing process of campaigns, and this understanding can aid future campaigns in their planning. Movement organizers can benefit from the use of Internet to enrol supporters and organize events and utilize social media to interact with the broader supporting network and increase awareness of the issue at stake. With enough support from online channels, traditional media tend to cover the story as well, leading to an upward spiral of awareness for the campaign.

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