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The Power of the People through Technology

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Abstract:

The Internet has grown rapidly, from being a communication hub to the transfer of information globally. What makes it terrifying, however, is the voices of the individuals. With a large world suddenly condensed to a screen, one will encounter dissenting voices throughout the internet and views that one would never have considered. At some point, all of this can accumulate into groups forming and debates being held over issues that never had to clash with each other before in a wider world. This paper will use a connective action framework to connect the power of people to technology, and from there, conclude whether or not the power of people has grown through technology, and what may affect that strength.

Introduction:

Democracy: a government by the people, especially: a rule of the majority (Merriam Webster).

A core principle of democracy is that the people are educated to some degree about those they vote for, especially for a democratic republic such as the United States. This was assisted by the spread of news through newspapers and television, as those who could gain access to politicians and their stances quickly grew across the country. This is one of many examples, but all show the similar process of information spreading to the populace from the media. As of recent, however, technology has evolved into creating forums where people can gather, spreading and discussing information within groups of people rather than from centralized sources.

A rather common story has surfaced from these advances of technology. Groups of people on the internet have begun forming on these forums, ranging from conspiracy theories to gaming communities. One popular story that showed the power of these groups is the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election Protests, otherwise known as the Green Revolution. With more than 36 deaths of people during protests and shutdowns of websites and rallies, protesters utilized social media, including Twitter, in order to depict their situation and how to proceed with future actions.

Technology and the power of the people often come hand to hand. With technology and the influx of information due to it, the people overall become more informed, whether that is beneficial or not. Overall, the voice of those people have been louder, but what is important to discern is how much power technology provides to the people. This will be established through connecting the main STS framework, connective action, to social media, and from there, analyzing events as they occurred to determine the effects of technology and the groups of people behind their messages in order to create the change that they seek.

Framework:

The Difference Between Collective and Connective Action within Democracy

Collective action is a commonly used term, used in general for when large groups of people mobilize to act.

Connective action is when large groups of people mobilize to act.

Even if the two are so similar, the critical difference is within how they are mobilized. The difference between the two is that connective action has no central figure as its head of operation. Susan G Komen's Race for the Cure is an example of collective action, where people are mobilized in order to stand for a central message: breast cancer takes too many lives away. Since they started, they have involved more than 840k people, with more than 140 races. The idea behind their race is that, every participant has a different story to tell about Breast cancer, whether it took a family member, close friend, or even for the sake of the race, but all of them have come under the same banner. Los Indignados, which was a connective action event, relied on messages sent among the Spanish populace throughout social media, in order to fight against government changes that would allow employers to fire workers with little to no compensation. What made the los indignados so powerful was because of their lack of central organization, which allowed more people to feel as if they belonged to a larger group of like-minded people, which led to more than 2 million Spaniards participating in marches and protests.

By democracy's definition, it is the rule of the majority, but within governments that aim to isolate these groups in order to reduce their influence, or in extreme cases, attempt to quell any forms of rebellion, having a defined leader makes rallying to a purpose dangerous and easy to quell. However, when it is the people who are angry, enough to connect to each other in order to create the change they all believe in, such a movement is difficult or impossible to fully quell.

As of 2020, we have noted many groups relying on a sense of "us vs. them" in order to define themselves. With this, each group connects with other members, thereby creating stronger beliefs, which builds up that sense of "us vs. them" more. This has led to many conflicts, but overall depicts democracy at what it does best and worst, being the voice of the people. As Prof.

Michael Gorman helped to point out, connective action thrives from that conflict between groups, in order to help define the boundaries and difference between views. The flood of messages with different ideas of how to act all combine into a single act, but needs an opposing force in order to build up justification. Connective action is directly connected to modern day democracy, swaying how people view their world and the decisions they make around them.

Section 1: *Benefits (and thus, Failures) of Connective Action*

The biggest benefit to connective action is that it helps form groups, reminding them that they are not alone. However, this does often lead to groupthink. This, while not always a negative consequence of connective action, is still a common occurrence. While connective action has formed groups devoted to hobbies, some groups do form that often lead to negative outcomes.

One of Reddit's subreddits, or essentially forums, follows groups that connect within themselves in order to help reinforce their opinions and stances against the science community, called r/VaxxHappened. Though this tends to be a collection of the worst of the anti-vaccine groups, the fact remains that these groups exist, often feeding each other with more ideas and thus, consolidate and strengthen their own beliefs, much like how connective action works, especially when they start making demands and posting on the internet. Though it appears to be an attack on others, it is also a method in finding others who think similarly, thereby increasing the number of people. This is an example of the worst of connective action, in that anti-vaxxers are difficult to convince to listen to facts and often rely on each other to create new theories or methods to attack others. Though this isn't much for determining the power of the people, this shows the strength of connective action.

Section 2: *Connective Action and Technology*

As according to Bennet and Segerberg, a DNA event (Digitally Networked Action event) is an event that relies on people mobilized through online social media and few members are from outside/staging organizations. The reason why the term connective action wasn't used is because it was not a popular term at that time. Connective action relies on large groups of people, and the fastest way to communicate with most of them is through technology such as forums and such. However, more popular social media tend to have trends that often encapsulate what the rest of the world or people around you are talking about. For example, Twitter has a hashtag feature that describes or is used to describe a message's topic. If a hashtag is used very often in a short amount of time, it becomes a trending topic, which means more people are likely to view it.

Connective action and technology are very clearly connected in that it is difficult to gather large numbers of people that you would need in order to stage the same protests. For example, the Put People First group managed to gather more than 200,000 people for its protests throughout Europe during the recession since 2008, but the 15-M movement, which relied on connective action and interpersonal communication, managed to push more than 2 million Spaniards to participate in rallies and protests. What was interesting to note was that, according to data collected by Cristancho and Anduiza in 2013, one could see that there is a larger diversity in those who participate in connective action protests (DNA events). These would include younger people, those who are unemployed, and those who had low levels of previous participation in politics of all modes. This is somewhat necessary in order to gather the numbers of people such as the events of the 15-M movement. The majority of these people came from

digital networking, in order to ensure that they made a difference, even if they had never participated before.

Section 3: *Connective Action in Politics*

Spain's populace, in 2011, were indignant. With an economic recession since 2008, they were waiting for the government to finally turn things around in order to improve the state their country and people were in. A legislation was pushed in order to make it cheaper to hire workers, but within that legislation was also opportunities for employers to fire workers with little compensation, thus making it cheaper for them to fire workers as well. This created a sense of instability for workers and overall led to the populace of Spain to explode in anger. With this, the 15-M movement began, relying on social media to send messages to groups of people at a time, connecting each other within Spanish society. It grew from a grass-roots movement of people who were discontent with the government to having more than tens of thousands of people within 60 cities before its largest march (Huffington Post, 2016). With groups sending messages of others protesting in similar ways, phrases were formed that many adhered to, from "It's not a crisis: It's a scam" to a general, "they do not represent us", pointing towards the government and its failures to stick to the promises it made for the people.

Los Indignados, an alternate name for the 15-M movement, grew in usage on Twitter with multiple different hashtags gaining popularity during the movement. As according to Narseo et. Al. in 2012, patterns of Twitter activity closely followed the timeline of Spanish events, ranging from hashtags such as #acampadasol with more than 716 thousand messages to

#15M with more than 120 thousand messages from May 10th to May 24th. Surges within the frequencies of these tweets corresponded with the events that occurred.

Spain's government, as a consequence, lost its two-party system, and, in a way, has reset itself from the system that hadn't changed in 40 years. The parliamentary monarchy has remained, but there are now five major parties. However, what has become concerning for the people is whether or not this government can adjust as necessary to represent its people and regain the trust it had lost. Though all is not perfect, the system at least now is forced to try to appeal to the people for its decisions, relying on the frame left behind by the 15-M movement.

Hong Kong, compared to the other situations, is a current event, and so, is difficult to state conclusively of what is occurring. From what is known, China has been trying to encroach onto Hong Kong slowly, and the citizens are making it apparent that this is not a favorable proposition for them. Hong Kong had a degree of autonomy underneath China's One Country, Two Systems policy. When China began to tighten its grips over Hong Kong's Government, democratization and independence became much more popular for those in Hong Kong. The biggest point in question is Hong Kong's extradition bill which would force those who committed crimes in China, but fled to Hong Kong, be transported to China for prosecution.

The populace of Hong Kong took to social media in order to spread their message not only to others within, but to the rest of the world. Supporters were often silenced and protests were suppressed, often with blanks and violence, but the only thing that happened was that the people solidified under their demands and methods. This is mostly due to a leadership led

through connective action, where there is no major head in leading the protests. Even with multiple people found missing or having 'committed suicide', the protestors used any method necessary in order to make sure their message was delivered, no matter the consequence. A rally was made when the US fought to identify Hong Kong as an independent nation, and some Hong Kong social media sites left images of protestors holding American flags, claiming it was a parade thanking the United States, rather than a protest. It is difficult to make any statements on social media and what messages exist or have been sent due to China's fire wall, but it seems to be that very little progress has been made.

Conclusion: *Power of the People's Worth?*

Many factors exist on whether or not technology has made a difference in increasing the influence of connective action, and the people in general. The biggest difference seems to be visible in Hong Kong's example. When you have an authority figure that doesn't care about the populace that it rules, or it has no major connection, then it is difficult to see the results of connective action or even protests in general. Technology definitely made the world aware of the conditions in Hong Kong, but very little has been done in order to prevent further action from China to be taken. It has been effective in scales of governments such as in Iran and the Philippines, but there are also groups devoted to misinformation or devoted to conspiracy theories that have prevented necessary action. Technology has enhanced the human voice, but overall, as long as those in power can afford to ignore the people below them, the power of the people has not changed.

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