

STS Thesis Proposal

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Social Media and the Power of the People

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Grant Kim". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'G' and 'K'.

General Research Problem

How are the voice of the people and technology related?

Introduction: The Power of the People and Voice

Democracies are built upon two things: checks and balances and people. For an example, the United States Constitution's first amendment allows "the right to peaceable assembly". This aligns well with the idea that all humans have the freedom of speech and free press, for violating any of these three would "violate fundamental principles which lie at the base of all civil and political institutions" (Mauro, 2019). This is convenient as it is clear to see that an assembly has a guarantee for both speech and press, or collectively, a voice. The power of a group (otherwise called the power of the people) is remarkable, but even more so, it is possible that the voice of a loud minority can overcome the general ambivalence of a larger minority. The power of the people is sourced from their voice, and how effective this can be would depend on who is listening, and how many people speak up. This voice and congregation of people is important in registering a response to decisions often made by those in higher up positions, as these voices are the main dissenting force.

Introduction: The Voice of the People and Technology

"Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk." A simple message on Twitter was enough to gather over a million people down to the capital of the Philippines, in objection to a ruling to set aside evidence against the president, Joseph Estrada during an impeachment trial. This assembly of the people and the cry of millions of people couldn't be quieted, as the populace was 'gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to

undertake collective action” (Bennett, 2019). Platforms such as Twitter see connective action, where mobilization and action can occur with a single message, or create reactions of large magnitudes with streams of responses.

With both technology enhancing to support conversation and reducing the difficulty of distribution of information and voices pushing for change, it can easily be assumed that technology has enhanced the power of the people. However, as recent events have surfaced, such as EA’s choices to mostly ignore the complaints from its gaming community, it can be argued that other values may be more important/appealing than listening voices that call for change. Especially with the agency to fix what larger communities believe is a problem, how much power does the voice of the people have, even when it is magnified by technology?

Technical Question

How much power do the voice of the people hold in this time period, with communication technology expanding, according to ‘connective action’ theory?

The STS framework I seek to use is connective action theory, as described by Dr. Lance Bennett, rather than collective action theory.

First off, what is connective action theory? We have often heard of collective action theory, and while the two are similar, both have a critical difference. As recommended by Prof. Gorman, political issues and other social media groups were added into the discussion, for they have relied on both connective and collective action.

Political Uses of Voice:

Put People First, otherwise known as PPF, was an organization that had a website in 2008 with the global recession, standing up for people by demanding better living conditions, more reliable jobs, and a cleaner future by organizing others to protest in major cities. This organization managed to get 35,000 people in London to protest when many governments were meeting in order to discuss policies on how to improve the economy. This is a simple example of collective action, where a central group organizes people under a similar mantra, much like how a representative would. The PPF provided a central message, demanding governments provide people with a carbon free future, along with decent jobs and livable wages. Of course, this was a good showing, but in a way, shows a limitation of collective action. The central organization needs to be influential and spread itself as far as it can in order to reach people, in order to create a body of support.

Meanwhile, an example of connective action would be the indignados, or the indignant ones. In 2011, Spain was hit with an economic crisis, and the government passed a bill where employers would find it cheaper to hire workers. While this sounds like a positive change, the bill contained more methods where employers could fire those same workers for cheaper, overall increasing instability in employment for the populace. As expected, none were excited for this to pass in the government, and so, the indignados began to form. Major groups and organizations wanted to become the central figure for this movement, but none were successful, for the action that the indignados were taking was connective action. These organizations were allowed to assist, but that action would often be kept to the sidelines, as people messaged each other on social media, organizing protests and movement with each other. By the end of 2011, more than 21000 protests were organized, and the government was shifted heavily. Today, many of the

consequences of these events are felt within the Spanish government, especially as the two-party system within was destroyed. Compared to the PPF, this organization's magnitude and ability far surpassed the capabilities of collective action.

Of the two choices, only one stands out as more valuable and prominent in social media in 2019, which is connective action. Compared to collective action, one can clearly see the people involved, and how each of their voice adds to a larger discussion in order to create a voice of the people. Of course, an organization can form and send out a message. However, it is best to visualize this as each voice being within a vector field. The collective action has one direction, and the magnitude behind it is the number of those who agree to the central organization's policies. However, connective action acts more as a flow of smaller vectors that when added all together, can become larger and react easily to changing events, possibly even creating a larger impact on the opposing force.

A contemporary example of connective action would be Hong Kong. In summary, Hong Kong has been under pressure by the Chinese government, especially when the Hong Kong government pushed an extradition bill, which would allow China to extradite suspected criminals from Hong Kong. This infuriated Hong Kong's populace, as it would likely allow China more control over Hong Kong, which is considered by many as independent from China through the "one country, two systems" arrangement ever since Britain occupied Hong Kong. Twitter and Instagram users in Hong Kong have been spreading messages as protests began to grow, increasing contact and information of protests even to the world outside. Protests have become more violent, but for those within Hong Kong, the information flow has solidified supporters and their positions. Of course, directly reading these messages would be beneficial, especially portrayed against specific events that occur, such as people increasingly being found deceased

and the cause of death being labeled as ‘suicide’. With this connective action, the election that occurred led to a sweeping victory for those who support Hong Kong independence, with 17 out of 18 councils being taken by pro-democracy councilors (BBC 2019). However, it is difficult to see the results of their actions, for the Chinese government has warned other countries to stay away from this situation, along with Hong Kong residents seeking other governments to accept their independence from China. The Chinese government has visually not backed down from trying to increase surveillance on its own people, and seeks more control over Hong Kong.

Non-Political Uses of Voice:

The voice of the people applies in many locations, but as of recent, is very obvious within certain communities, especially of those within video game communities and conspiracy theory groups. A recent event that ‘planned’ on raiding Area 51 started off most likely as a joke, but gained notoriety/popularity as people decided to press the button to join in on the raid. The number grew large, surpassing more than a million people claiming that they would join on the raid and the United States military released a statement that it would be incredibly dangerous to attempt forcibly entering the military base.

Incredibly enough, video games have large communities that help to exemplify connective action. Connective action is a voluntary action of self-expression which is shared to form larger networks. This is important, especially for video game companies, as their fans are their source of income, for video games are objectively unnecessary for life. So, their voices should be the ones to help influence the future of the games they play, right?

A Sense of Pride and Accomplishment

Electronic Arts is one of the biggest video game companies in the world, boasting a net revenue of \$1.238 billion dollars last year (EA, 2019). This is due to the many franchises that have lasted throughout the years, from sports games such as FIFA to new independent projects such as Apex Legends. However, in 2017, Electronics Arts had the second chance to create a Star Wars game for the Battlefront series. The first game had done relatively well, but fans weren't exactly happy with the state of the first game due to disappointed reception compared to the original games. At the same time, Overwatch, a game developed by Blizzard, helped to introduce loot boxes to the mainstream gaming community. These loot boxes provided players with cosmetics that were distributed between ranks that had different chances of appearing, ranging from common to legendary. These rewards could be earned through progression that slowed over time, but could also be purchased for a small price.

Overwatch's explosive success only drove home the idea that people would be willing to pay to essentially gamble, for the odds to receive such rewards was often not stated. Not only that, but these games were made available to children under the age of 18. So, Star Wars Battlefront 2 was released to the chagrin to many people, filled with loot boxes as the main problem. However, these loot boxes did not contain any cosmetics, but equipment that would enhance the stats for a character. This would mean that a person could pay exorbitant amounts of money to get the chance for powerful equipment that could utterly defeat an opponent. As I had said, this was only a mere chance, as there was no guarantee that \$2000 would get anything great from these loot boxes, which is similar to gambling. Furthermore, characters connected to the world of Star Wars such as the main protagonist and antagonist were available to play, but often locked behind paywalls of up to \$80 in real money or about 300 hours of gameplay worth of an in-game currency. This led to a general state of outrage for the community as the game was

extorting players for money for content that was expected to be free or reasonably obtainable. EA decided to release a statement that supported their reasoning behind all of their monetization of the \$80 game: “The intent is to provide players with a sense of pride and accomplishment”. More reasonably, this comment became a Guinness World Record as the most disliked comment on the internet, with more than 667 thousand votes against this message (Leskin, 2019). This occurred mostly due to a series of problems ranging from no communication between EA and the player base to simply ignoring pleas from the community for changes. After a month of lawsuits against EA, many of the community’s problems were solved, and the loot boxes were mostly removed and thresholds to unlock characters was lowered, a clear sign that the community had been loud enough, and heard from many different outlets that this was too far.

Years of Trust

Bethesda Games, with the release of *The Elder Scrolls Skyrim*, was seen as a great studio to buy games from, for each game within the *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* universes were consistently great experiences to play, along with wonderful worlds to explore. The games were run on similar engines that had similar bugs such as missing textures, horses/enemies who would glitch through floors, or even performance issues. However, most of these were solved by the community, who would use software to create patches and distribute them amongst those who wanted to run them. These bugs became a running joke as merely being features, not errors within the code. These games were well loved for the depth of their gameplay and the hours possible to sink within this universe of a role-playing game.

Bethesda Games then decided to push for a new kind of experience, based upon one such modification that users had created. So far, their worlds had only non-playable characters and

only one player in a vast world. Why not create a world without NPCs, and just have players interact with each other? This kind of world would have many different experiences, and players could create their own world, with less work from the development team. Thus, Fallout 76 was born.

However, when this idea was first pushed through, the community feared Bethesda would monetize in a similar fashion to how EA had done so. Bethesda released a statement promising that all monetization cosmetic and the experience would be seamless. Within a few weeks of release, the game reported multiple crashes and bugs unlike any other game from before. Not only did some enemies not have attack animations, rivers would have cracks within them due to poor textures. Furthermore, in-game code revealed a monetized equipment that would randomly give a powerful buff. These bugs and decisions led to the game becoming half priced about a week after the game was released, damaging sales and ruining the years of trust that Bethesda had built. These complaints and fears went unheard and ignored, and Bethesda's current sales dropping more than 90% is an example of the Power of the People.

Other Communities

Outside of video games, connective action brings unusual people together, creating and solidifying ideas that can even defy science. Conspiracy theory groups, such as those of the anti-vaccine groups and flat earthers. Of course, this makes some sense, mostly because no major group will likely support these groups that have very little standing in terms of size and science. This makes it almost necessary for these groups to rely on connective action in order to justify their beliefs, as others around them do believe similar ideals, even if they are not widely accepted.

Conclusion:

Connective action is important when looking at the response from the community, as it is a voluntary act of speaking up and representing a voice. As one could see from a general viewpoint from connective action, technology has brought people together that often would have never met. By creating venues of social media where they could interact and spread ideas, like minded people join up and create connective action by stating their views or beliefs on forums where others may interact. Such a discourse displays democracy at its finest, where people will decide upon the best course of action. On whether or not this conglomerate formed from democracy and technology has led to the Voice of the People becoming more significant is difficult to state. For many cases, the Voice of the People is influential and leads to dramatic change. However, especially in cases where the higher power is in a state where it does not care of the Voice of the People, either because it has no effect, or is of no significance, the Voice of the People, no matter how loud the voice becomes through technology, can be trampled upon. One resource that the writer would love is access to a timeline of messages/trend of messages especially of that of the Hong Kong situation currently going on compared to events going on. This would help to solidify how connective action grows and develops to challenges.

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