

Social Movement and Information Dissemination in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Social movements and their demonstrative display does not always attract the intended audience, and the problem lies within the social movement and their method as well as the audience with the conditions that are apparent in the modern society. The digital era both present challenges and opportunities.

Keywords: Social movements, society, activism, student movements, *gejayan memanggil*

Social Movements and Information Dissemination in the Digital Age

This article aims to gain insight into the relationship between social movements and the ever-increasing development in the information technology, particularly in the digital age the opportunity that medium such as social media present and also the challenges that the abundance of information produces. Born into the age of information we might take for granted the opportunities that the Internet and its subsequent product allow us to do. As digital natives it is within our nature to use the tools at hand such as social media, instant messaging, data storage and file sharing, when there is a sense of social discomfort to create and enhance our work for activism and organize social movements. It would be wise to take a look into the past when the civil rights movements in the United States and even the 1998 student protests in Indonesia was beginning to take shape, how does the people organize and how does people persuade. Persuasion requires information, and in the digital age there is an abundance of information, both in content and method of delivery and therein lays the challenge and opportunity. There are several stages to dissect whether an information is true or false, where do we get the information, who shares the information, who or what is the source, even the subject matter of the information itself can cause debates whether the information is legitimate or not. And in the subject of activism and social movements there is a recurring theme that we can observe, the spread of false information, conspiracy theories, and a questioning of motives.

Social movements emerge in a time of social discomfort, social movements often aim to present a narrative to the wider society that they have a voice and power that when organized and consolidated can be a powerful force of change. Governmental structures and institutions are, more often than not the opponent of these social movements. Social movements utilized a wide array of methods in the conduct of activism, some use non-violent methods and some may resort to violent methods depending on the circumstances. What we want to take a look at is before social movements conduct their social disobediences, their picketing, their boycotts and hundreds of other non-violent methods (Sharp, 1973). How does activists take advantage of instagram to spread posters and reach new audiences, facebook to plan events and make groups, and even Google drive to spread manifestos. Then when the materials reach the audience, how does the audience react when

presented with such information, do they blatantly consume the information at a glance, do they actively search for information concerning the subject matter, or do they simply close the tab or scroll away from the information. Here lies the question that we should try and seek the answer, how does social movements take advantage of information technology, how does the society react when they are presented with these information, and what are the factors that may influence the decision making process of both of these actors.

Gejayan Memanggil movement was a phenomenon that happened in Yogyakarta on the 23rd and 30th of September. The date was chosen due to the plenary meeting being held by the Peoples Representative Council on the same date in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia where there is also a movement consisting of university students and labourers as well. The movements was initiated by university students and due to them being digital natives, using social media was natural of them. They created social media accounts for their propaganda and information dissemination, they shared their demands online, they also used file sharing sites to share their research paper on their demand, and they also invited the collaboration of their supporters by opening a call for paper regarding the controversial People's Representative Council actions (Illmer, 2019).

Method

Literature Review

Tufekci (2014) analyzed how social movements and the government uses social media and information technology to their own benefit, but what we want to focus more here is the consumption of information rather than government as the challenge towards social movements. Tufekci mentioned shortly about the phenomenon of slacktivism, but also puts forward an argument for the impact of online only movements, of which I do not disagree with. Then (Morozov, 2011) established the dark side of Internet freedom as well us a historical philosophical analyses of the current society, and delve deep into slacktivism. As well as various articles and book that were used during the study in my university such as (Galtung, 1969) and (Sharp, 1973).

Participants

In addition to a literature review, 20 interviews were conducted for this study. The goal of conducting interviews was to find out the how individuals manage and organize social movements, how individuals react and absorb the information presented to them in relation to these social movements and how do they come across these information's, and to find the underlying factors that may influence consumption of information.

Gejayan Memanggil. Participants were selected based on their participation or non-participation to the *Gejayan Memanggil* demonstrations. Furthermore, participants were also selected based on whether they were university students and their affiliated faculty or a member of the society, their social class, and gender considering one of the law code put into question was the law code to abolish sexual violence in addition to several other demands.

Students. Participants were students of Universitas Gadjah Mada of various faculty and majors. University students were selected due to their acceptable literary rate and may give an insight towards the why they either participated or did not participated within the *Gejayan Memanggil* movement.

Procedure

Interview. Both offline direct interview and online interview was used to question the participants. The questions regarding the interview were centred on their participations towards the *Gejayan Memanggil* movement and why. Their interpretations towards the movement and its demands is also important to be asked, and also what do they think about the utilization of social media. And their experience in social movements either in taking to the streets or online campaigns.

The interview was held in numerous environments that are natural for university students such as campus, café's, and restaurants. These environment was chosen for the convenience for the participants and

Result

Friendly Mob Mentality. Out of the twenty people who participated in the interview, fourteen people participated in the first *Gejayan Memanggil* demonstration. Those who participated varied in terms of their rationale for participating in the demonstration,

and for the six respondents who did not participated their decision was influenced by their parents, their health, and fear for their own security. For those who participated in the demonstration their reasoning was that they wanted to feel what it is like to participate in an “offline” social movement. A curiosity of what Tufekci (2014) calls as “asphalt fetishism” and it directly impact their decision to participate. Seven respondents explicitly said that they wanted to participate in the demonstrations because they saw a lot of their peers also participating in the demonstration, whether it be their close friends, their classmates, and members of the same faculty. It reflects a mob mentality, but not just any kind of mob mentality but a “friendly” mob mentality. Friendly mob mentality means not just feeling the security and strength that is present in numbers, but the substance of that number consists of people that those participating in the demonstration can trust, thus mitigating what five of the other participants said was one of their concerns in participating within a on the streets social movement which was their safety.

Student activism and historical precedence. The twenty participants that were interviewed were university students, and in Indonesia there is a historical precedence because of the 1998 students activists movements. The 1998 student activist movement was one of the driving factor behind the resignation of President Suharto, one of Indonesia infamous president. Eight of the respondents expressed that they felt the obligation to represent the people of Indonesia, to challenge the injustice that they felt was caused by the troublesome plans for the new legal code. And all twenty of the respondents stated that the demands for the *Gejayan Memanggil* movement had sufficiently expressed the unrest of the Indonesian people. Though not all of the respondents can accurately mention all of the demand but they for the most part managed to convey central them of the *Gejayan Memanggil* movements demands.

The historical precedence does not always present a good image for the students to follow. There are cases where demonstrations whom ever the participants maybe, would end up in violence because of either their demands not being met or repression by the law enforcement officers. This created a sense of fear for some of the students and mostly for their parents, in Indonesia university students are not distant in their relationship with their parents and in some occasion may ask for permission. The parents of the participants that I interviewed were mostly already adults and are members of the working class during the

1998 students protests. Instead of the success of the movement itself, the parents remembered the police repression and the mob violence that followed the demonstration, hence why the parents restricted some of the respondents to not participate in the movement. All the respondents that said they were restricted by the parents said that if they were allowed they would participate in the demonstrations.

Social media and instant messaging as the new bulletin board. All twenty of the respondents stated that they knew about the *Gejayan Memanggil* movement because of either Instagram story posts or broadcast messages in their Line group chat. And nineteen of the respondents said that they know that *Gejayan Memanggil* had an Instagram account though not all of them followed the account. But out of those nineteen that knows *Gejayan Memanggil* had an Instagram account only seven actually followed the account, their reasoning being to be up to date with the technicalities regarding the movement itself and that they expected that the movement will not just stop at the current set of demonstrations. For the those that did not follow the account their reasoning is that their friends already frequently share the materials that the actual account share and that they trust their friends would not tamper with the actual information, hence they did not felt the urgency to follow the account.

All twenty of the respondents stated that the information provided by the social media account was sufficient enough that they are intrigued by the social movement and the issue that it brought. But five of the respondents did mention that the general population might not easily digest the information, that the information that was given lack context to the actual issue itself. The aesthetics or the design of the social media account was good, as in the decision to chose the black and white colour palate made the words or the content itself become the focal point of the account and not the overall design itself. Only one of the respondents stated that the design was not eye catching and that design did not matter in the context of social movement.

Research paper and the desire to read. Only three out of the twenty respondents stated that they don't know that *Gejayan Memanggil* had released a research paper, but out of the seventeen that does know only six have fully read the research paper and the two had read it but haven't finished, and the remaining nine did not read the research paper. Although all twenty of the respondents mentioned that a research paper is important for a

movement so that the participants and the general population can gain the information on the demands and also the arguments on what they are fighting against. Out of those that had read it only one stated that the research paper lacked the argument that advocated for the demands of the movement, but they all stated that the substance of the paper was good and informative. When asked why did they not read the research paper, the overall answer was that it was too long and they simply did not have the time to read it. And when asked what is their suggestion to increase the interest of the audience for a social movement to read a research paper their answer was make summaries and post snippets of the research paper on their social media and also include info graphics to make it more compelling to read.

The virtual and the streets. Only one out of the twenty respondents stated that they have not participated in a form of online “activism” if you can categorize it as activism. The other nineteen have at some point signed a petition, liked a post on social media, share it on social media, wrote a tweet expressing their interest in an issue. Only three of them stated that they have been “on the streets” participating in a social movement excluding their participation in the *Gejayan Memanggil* demonstration, two of them stated that *Gejayan Memanggil* was their second time on the streets, one of them mentioned this was at least the fourth or fifth time on the streets, and the remaining eleven stated that *Gejayan Memanggil* was their first time on the streets.

Knowledge demands action. When asked why do they participated in social movements, most of them answered because they were driven by the issue and that they felt that they have the urge respond to this unrest and at the very least spread the information about the issue. One of the respondents stated that “knowledge demands action” and another respondent stated that a university student have the social obligation to advocate for the general population, this might be referred back to the historical precedence that student movements have on the Indonesian people. Emotional engagement and other forms of personal motivation are also some of the respondent’s rationale for participating in social movements, and of course the urge to promote social justice for all.

Online action is no slouch. Slacktivism is the tendency to click on links rather than taking concrete actions or steps and it is different from actual digital activism, slacktivism could lead towards civic promiscuity (Morozov, 2011). However all but one of the respondents agree that dividing the social movement realm between online and offline

spheres misses the point of what a social movement is that is public demonstration that display worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (Tufekci, 2014; Mcadam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2004). The entirety respondents however agreed that an online action can reach an even wider audience than what an offline action could, but of course it remains to be seen the engagement rate of the shared online material might still be lacking. “Offline activism requires more commitment and energy” stated one of the respondents but “online activism tends to be more safe” said another respondent. The goal and motive of each participant of a social movement is of course different but some are still of course concerned with their own well being, maybe to continue the fight for a latter date. For the case of security sure it is physically safer but in terms of online presence and security we might see the case of identity theft and our digital presence of course leave footprints to be tracked.

DISCUSSION

A social movement as stated by Mcadam, Tarrow, and Tilly has the goal of being a demonstrative display of worthiness which is convincing the masses about the rightness of a cause, unity as a signal of determination, numbers that illustrate public support, and commitment that is indicative in the movements ability to persist and potentially disrupt. The challenge being that social movements more often than not is the underdog facing off against a leviathan government or a corporation, and when there is asymmetric power you most likely will require strength in numbers. In the digital age it is easier than ever to disseminate information through the various means available such as social media being the most prominent one, and then instant messaging platforms, and e-mail, and of course the traditional mouth to mouth communication, etc. and all of these tools are of course used by the current social movements of this generation. But why is it with the availability of these tools there are still social movements that cannot reach the same participation of at least a tenth of *Gejayan Memanggil*, for example on the 20th of September three days before the *Gejayan Memanggil* demonstration there was a climate strike demonstration in Yogyakarta which quite a little audience. I do acknowledge that for the Indonesian people politics, social justice, corruption eradication, and the criminal code is still above climate change in the priority list, even though on the second *Gejayan Memanggil* demonstration on of the demands added was to combat the forests fire such that in Karhutla but that demand was

more concerned with combating capitalism than with combating climate change. Why does some social movements can gain the momentum while other cannot.

The Audience

Slacktivism. As aforementioned above, slacktivism is a different phenomenon than digital or online activism. Slacktivism is when the result of a mad shopping spree of identity in social media platform such as Facebook and Instagram that makes online activists feel useful and important while having preciously little impact (Morozov, 2011). When we observe an individual sharing a particular issue on social media, liking the post, or deliberately sharing it on their Instagram story, we cannot determine their actual motives for sharing it. One motive might be that they actually care about the issue and they are using their online presence as a tool to disseminate information to those who might not know and even those might not even want to know about the issue. Another motive might be that they want to look like they care, they want to look like they are educated and well informed, while in fact they are sharing it just because it is the “trend”. During my research I found some of the respondents were impartial towards those who wishes to follow the trend or follow in the slacktivism footsteps as long as they do not temper with the information creating false information, but I also found those who are annoyed by those who week attention and furthering their social presence. Some of the respondents stated that they are reluctant to share issues that they feel like they don’t have enough knowledge about, or that they don’t have emotional attachments towards. I believe that worthiness might not only be about convincing people the rightness of a cause, it is also about convincing yourself the rightness of a cause.

Morozov reminds us of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) considered as the father of existentialism, which thought of the expansion of public sphere in Europe as part of the industrialization and age of enlightenment does not merely mean the leveling of democratization but also a decline of social cohesion. The observation was people was getting interested in everything and nothing at the same time, and that there were so few people that can understand the passionate distinction between silence and speaking. Individuals today are so eager to speak their minds, yes that is one of the fundamental rights of a human being but sometimes speaking just for speaking sake does not necessarily mean you are effectively implementing your rights. Kierkegaard’s observation of his era was used

to analyze the condition of the current day and age, where one could advocate that they are digital activists just by their tweet, or Instagram posts. That they have gone out of their way to type and think of an issue and tried to disseminate the information to wider audience. An observation towards the general population might gives us an idea that people are invested in their own world, they might only have a few hours a month in between their work, academics, and other projects to actually care and do something about the common good. Sure the Internet might give them a platform to donate or sign a petition on their few minutes of spare time, but that provides them with an easy way out. People might join activists groups just to make them feel good instead of actual commitment towards the cause just as people might support a particular political ideology not because they necessarily believe in it or want systematic change, but because they want to feel good. What is the difficulty of following an Instagram account for example of lets say *Gejayan Memanggil*, not to say that *Gejayan Memanggil* is the perfect mix of offline and online activism but one might argue that if you are authentic and committed towards the demands and aims of a social movement so far as you have joined their demonstration isn't a follow at least is justified.

I have mentioned above about “friendly” mob mentality, but there is another word to describe it might be peer pressure. You intrigue an audience by conforming to their most basic desires, and judging based on the respondent statements one of it is security. Another desire based on my observation is recognition either from your peers or from the bystanders, the bystanders being the general population, the media, the working class that you are supposedly fighting for, and the government that the social movement seek recognition from in order to respond to the demands.

Self-awareness. Being a member of the general population, we need to realize that we are the targets of some of the social movements. When there are climate strikes happening on the streets it is calling to use to lessen plastic use and demand systematic change in the way we consume and produce energy, plastic, water, and stop littering, of course along with other changes in our daily lives regarding carbon footprints. When we are sharing posts on social media, when are we going to stop thinking that raising awareness is enough and start thinking that action is needed. Yes sharing is action, and yes we might not

be able to stop genocides on our own, but Kierkegaard also said “only the person who is essentially capable of remaining silent is capable of speaking essentially.”

The Movement

Boring politics of our everyday lives. In Indonesia we are lucky that the historical precedence of university student activism has created a sort of standard, a standard that university students are sort of stereotyped or expected at some point of their time of study participated in a demonstration or a social movement. Thousands of potential volunteers and potential members of a movement just waiting for the opportunity to express their unrest towards the social injustice caused by the government. But when there are no massive demonstrations to be joined, university students and organizers of social movements have to realize that sometimes their politics is boring to the general population. Social justice, human rights, and gender equality are all important issues but when we use the repetitive repertoire of non-violent methods such as picketing and public demonstrations (Sharp, 1973) it has thought of it as predictable the general population and even the law enforcement. *Aksi Kamisan* (2007-) is of course still an important movement that not only keep the memory alive of the past human rights abuses made by the government of Indonesia, and also to (hopefully) develop new authentic relationships between individuals who are committed to the goals of the movement. But the bystanders that see the picketing have so little investment that they might be curious once then move on with their lives, but of course it is not entirely their fault that they don't have enough time to think about the human rights abuses and the solution for it as they are living in subsistence as it is as victims of structural violence (Galtung, 1969). When there is a separation between the daily experiences of individuals it becomes somewhat irrelevant to them, it will become the domain of the wealthy, comfortable intellectuals, who have the time to interact with such theoretical things (CrimethInc., 1997).

An article by CrimethInc released in 1997 stated, in order to make people interested in politics and in our social movements we need to make it fun, we need to make it that the general population can be invested in. A good political action is not only teaching Marxists theories towards construction workers, or introducing Emma Goldman towards every woman we meet. A good political action is observing everyday experiences of those suffering social injustice and enhance them, and then your social movement would be able

to gain the investment from these general population. Or as one of my lecturers Dr. Diah Kusumaningrum has said that an effective non-violent method is one that is unpredictable. Not that we should abandon already established social movements such as *Aksi Kamis* or Demonstrations, we just need to expand our repertoire of methods and be as creative as possible. And currently with social media and other tools of digital information dissemination we can create good political actions and be unpredictable online.

Truthiness and satire. Social movements have the goal to disseminate information and help create a social discourse on the status quo maintained by the established government and the state. Social movements use social media, and other tools to disseminate information such as facts, data, even entire research papers dedicated to establish a narrative that support the arguments and demands of the social movement. But given the variation of the literacy rate of countries, and short attention span of a majority of the population caused by the multiple streams of media (Mcspadden, 2015). It is quite difficult to maintain the interest and engagement of the audience, some may argue that the alternative to this phenomenon is the use of art. Through out history art has been used for propaganda and conveying messages all along the political spectrum, social movements of course has used art to convey their messages across. But in some perspective in this postmodern era we might need to use a new method and challenge the established metanarratives. *Truthiness* highlights the postmodern mash-up of discourses that are supposed to keep fact and fiction separate, and satiractivism that fuses and smears together comic and political speech in a postmodern fashion that replicates discursive integration and becomes a comic form of political speech (Caron, 2016). It seems absurd but through observation we might be able to locate where in popular culture today satire has become one of the most used by entertainers to convey a political message. When used by entertainers it might lose some substance due to the fact that they are not in activists in general, but when social movements can adapt this strategy in the its arsenal then surely the general population cannot lift their eyes of it. Of course it needs to be fit with context, along with short attention span today's society also suffers from a somewhat quite heightened sensitivity. Using satire when the substance and the context is not what the society deems as appropriate might backfire and harms the worthiness of the cause.

Mixing the virtual and the streets. At the end of the day social movements are aimed towards achieving the goals of the demands. Social movements might not just be a group of people that is organized and has a specific set of timeline, but also an individual sharing their thoughts and taking actions for the common good. At times the virtual might be good for spreading awareness and to gather the masses but at some point enough is enough awareness, then social movements need to take concrete actions. Concrete actions may not always result in the streets with demonstrations, it might result in strikes, it might result in giving flowers to police officers to commemorate International Day of Non-Violence (Social Movement Institute, 2019), and it might also result in a mass simultaneously sending of letter towards the government (Amnesty International, 2019). However it maybe it is in the best interest of the social movement itself to combine the tools available with social media, and instant messaging not just for information dissemination but also for logistics and sharing reading materials. The Anarchist Library for example hosts a vast amount of reading materials free to read such as that of Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman to name a few. In real life meetings is always useful to create an authentic bond between each member of the social movement, it is important to build the militancy and solidarity of the group. Social movements in the digital era cannot create offline movements without online presence because it would not be optimal, and online movements might still need offline presence to be seen as taking a concrete step.

Conclusion

I believe that in the digital era social movements have a lot of tools to be used and that it could be beneficial to use these tools to disseminate information. However there are many challenges that are being presented by both from the condition of the audience of modern society and the social movements itself must not be stagnant following the old norms of how social movements are normally conducting their operations. *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean Francois Lyotard stated that there are metanarratives that guide the modern society. And to insert the narrative that is optimal for social movements there must be a sense of creativity and unpredictability. It might be hard and it is easy to just conform to the basic fundamentals of social movements and there is essentially nothing wrong with that, because it is still an achievement to be able to sacrifice the time and energy in the sun for the common good. But it might be better to establish an alternative both in narrative that

can be given towards the society and in method to conduct activism. Slacktivism does not only apply to the audience in my opinion, social movements can also be subjected as slactivists, if they are reluctant to act and be comfortable with the ease of sharing information on the internet without essentially creating an authentic commitment towards the issue itself, then that I believe is also slacktivism.

There are of course various challenges and opportunities that are not further mentioned in this article. One of the challenges that the recent student movements in Indonesia had faced was the “*BuzzeRp*” accounts that always created counter narratives to the demands that was being made by the demonstrations, these accounts were even removed by Facebook (Al Jazeera, 2019) and they stated that these accounts were accused of “coordinated inauthentic behavior” and misleading users worldwide not even only I Indonesia but also in UAE, Nigeria, an Egypt. Another challenge is of course government surveillance and supervision in the digital era, as out Internet connections are of course still within the control of the government. For evidence in Indonesia we can see the case of Internet shutdown during the announcement of the result of the presidential and general elections, and now the lack of Internet access in West Papua has created a black hole of information coming out of West Papua. Polarization is always an issue when regarding politics, and now regarding information we have to ask the question of who to trust regarding information. But there are of course opportunity in what Kierkegaard regarded as a negative I would suggest that there is a positive towards the vast amount of journalistic works either by established news outlets, alternative media, or even independent journalists. These new kinds of news outlets can give more widespread publicity towards social movement furthering the goal of demonstrative display.

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