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## ARTICLE

# The Existence of Social Movement Organization (SMO) & Comparison of Collective and Connective Action in the Digital Era - an Analysis of 15-M Movement in Spain

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | Social movement organizations (SMOs) have been performing a significant role in terms of gathering like-minded civil individuals with common interests during social movements. Stepping into the digital era, the social media becomes prevailing in transforming people's lifestyles. This essay will discuss the 15-M Movement in Spain to explore the transition of SMO's position from conventional social movements to those in the digital era in the light of collective action logic and connective action logic. With the phenomenon that SMO itself sometimes is the original source of problems to trigger social movements, it is reasonable to see the decreasingly important SMO with the successful example of the 15-M Movement to engage over 60 cities in Spain and avoid the "free ride" problem via completely excluding brick and mortar organizations. |

## 1. Literature Review

Scholars have been exploring on how the social media changes protests in different aspects in the digital era with the comparison of that in conventional social movements. Previous protests have shown us that the appearance of social media successfully provided a new way of mobilizing participants during contemporary social movements.

As a vital factor to generate and develop conventional protests, social movement organizations (SMOs) have always been focused on with being questioned about its relevance in the digital era. Originally, experts attached great significance on social movement organizations and related actions were believed to be concentrated within formal organizations. Under the traditional well-accepted theory frame, the reason why SMOs are put an emphasis on is that they are usually the only segment which is able to offer resources and mobilize participants via establishing collective identities for a successful protest. According to resource mobilization theory [1], resources are seen as the central factor to shape the establishment, development, and outcomes of social movements. Organization which refers to the interaction and links among different social movement organizations is more important than resources since efficiency of the organization infrastructure itself is a key resource. For instance, Morris [2] proposes that African-American churches were the central organizations, together with the coalition consisting of ministers and college students, to develop the Southern civil rights movement. Nevertheless, with the involvement of digital media in contemporary protests, opinions on the existence of

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social movement organizations vary from scholars. Bennett and Segerberg [3] point out that those formally formed organizations are functioning as less centralized actors with cooperation with other organizations to make use of technology. In some particular cases, conventional organizations are even completely excluded as political parties, unions, and other organizations with resources are treated as the main problem [3]. Generally speaking, the existence of social movement organizations in contemporary protests with the digital media is studying on the necessity of its function to mobilize and gather individuals for political participation.

Studies before the digital era have been focusing on the logic of collective action to explain the behaviour of individuals in social movements. It points out the concern about the "free ride" problem from individual participants in terms of group behaviour. Because when a group is attempting to behave for public goods which is expected to benefit all the members, in spite of the existence of common interests, people tend to free ride and do nothing without selective incentives to motivate participation, which leads to the situation where collective action is unlikely to happen. In this way, large groups are facing relatively high costs to organize while small groups are facing lower expenses [4]. Besides, individual in large groups will benefit less per capita from a successful collective action.

Nevertheless, with the appearance of contemporary protests such as Arab Spring and Put People First with different formats, some scholars are inspired with the logic of connective action on how digital media functions in modern protests and another way of explanation on social movements globally [5]. Therefore, the logic of connective action is raised with the involvement of social media and a new form of participants' connection. New concepts such as "networked social movement" "digital networked action" are raised to describe actions triggered spontaneously by the desire for cultural changes or economic justice via online and offline networks with cooperation and solidarity. Similarly, "crowd enabled actions" is raised by Bennett and Segerberg [3] to define the action logic in contemporary protests where individuals are gathered through social media networks.

## 2. Research Questions

Recent large-scale social movements with new pattern have shown us that the functions of digital media have been far beyond sending and receiving messages only. Since people are becoming more and more relying on social media in their daily lives, the crucial position of social media appears to be unexpectedly contributive in contemporary social movements. It is not appropriate to completely apply traditional theories and explanation to modern protests with less participation of formal organizations and a fresh channel to mobilize individuals.

This essay will put the focus locus on the 15-M movement in Spain (the Spanish "Put People First" protest) and mainly explore the answers to these two research questions:

(1) Are social movement organizations (SMOs) less relevant in the digital era?

(2) Has the logic of collective action been replaced by the logic of connective action?

## 3. Social Movement Organization (SMO)

To explore the difference in terms of the functions of social movement organizations in modern protests, we have to compare its existence in both conventional and contemporary protests with different formats to proceed.

### 3.1 Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) in Conventional Social Movements

In conventional protests, the social movement organization plays a necessary role during the whole process to gather the people with common interests. SMOs are highly relied on to target and connect people with similar stances in the society. In conventional social movements, it is relatively difficult for individuals to find out those similar-minded people and gather with them to behave collectively. Therefore, the existence of those social movement organizations is of great significance since they are the group where people directly head toward when they are intended to be with fellow citizens while avoiding the process of locating others. They are experts at the establishment of collective identities to attract and motivate individuals with mutual benefit to participate, through which solidarity is generated to enable people to act collectively. This contributes to driving people to devote their individual relevant resources such as communication skills, leadership, or team spirits for the success of a protest. Another significant point is that social movement organizations operate during protests to secure the resources including social, political, economic asset, or other related capacity.

Generally, during the three issues defined under the resource mobilization theory, social movement organizations usually function in the second issue --- organizational processes. They are believed to work as professional actors with paid full-time staff while enjoying less support from the grassroot or volunteers. Therefore, at a primary phase or even before the outbreak of a protest, they are expected to be in charge of planning and setting ultimate

goals. They can serve for a protest to provide effective analysis and suggestions as the movements evolves and develops rather than depend on individuals with common interests but no professional expertise and experience to draw unpredictable paths. From this perspective, SMOs are usually the one which provides creative resolutions systematically after identifying the existing problems. Another important function is that these social movement organizations sometimes cooperate with each other to guarantee that they are able to attract as many potential participants as possible with frequent relevant content updates since the scale to a large extent decides whether a protest could gain ideal outcomes since the very primary stage. This function is contributive not only in mobilizing people, but also in resource mobilization afterwards in a protest to persuade participants to share their individual resources beyond group resources offered by external organizations. Besides, we should not ignore its function in terms of the proper conversation with groups and individual with professional strategy which is quite important in the final phase.

### 3.2 Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) in the Digital Era

Social movement organizations seem to be less important in modern protests. After the G20 Summit in 2008 with political leaders' ideas about the adjustment on both the financial policy and climate change, it was being against by segments with different claims including anti-capitalists, environmental protectors, and non-government organizations. It cannot be denied that NGOs like World Vision and Oxfam participated in the global Put People First protests. However, the protest in Spain, the 15-M Movement, almost did not involve formal organizations except for some civil society organizations. But those civil society organizations were supporting in a way the same as those displaced people who have suffered economic and political crisis and they did not work as professions as expected. The sustainable Indignados protests with a large scale in Spain since 15th May 2015 have been famous for successfully excluding all political parties, labour unions, and other powerful organizations. One of the main reasons was that the local political power itself was the problem that triggered the protest in essence. Technically speaking, the most formal organization during the 15-M Movement was a website called Democracia Real Ya! which has successfully connected more than 60 local Spanish cities and many international networks to be involved.

Even though there was no brick and mortar organization, the Indignados movement successfully managed offline activities including marches across the entire country via online media, setting up camps in city centers, through which participants established a leaderless collective identity to exclude those political parties and labour unions. This showed us the difference of the existence of social movement organizations in the digital era.

### 3.3 Comparison of SMOs in Conventional Protests & Modern Protests

Compared with conventional protests where people are usually gathered under an umbrella and led by organizations with membership systems and consolidated by collective identities, modern social movements in the digital era tend to be featured with individualism while digital media allows collective actions to be more widely spread with less time. They were also able to adjust to the developing political goals with flexibility and resolve conflicts among different issues. During the process, digital media like Twitter, Facebook has even been used as sources of conventional communication methods. The absence of formal social media organizations in the 15-M protest did not lead it to a failure. It did not attach labels to participants which is a frequent approach within social movement organizations to establish a sense of identity or group belonging. On the contrary, 15-M movement made itself accessible to everyone in the public to attract them to participate. The protest ultimately attracted and approached about six to eight million people in the country with a population of about 40 million. The survey conducted by Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo shows us that compared with conventional protests like strikes or demonstrations, the relationship between individuals and organizations differs. Firstly, only 38% participants believe the function of brick and mortar organizations in a protest while almost all the people in a conventional protest agree on that. People attach less significance to social movement organizations in the digital era. Secondly, although most organizations in conventional protests have a membership system, only 13% of the involved organizations had such policies. Thirdly, organizations in conventional protests like political parties and labour unions mostly enjoy a history between 10 years and 40 years respectively; while the average level of the 15-M movements was less than three years [6].

However, generally speaking, both conventional and modern protests are following the "WUNC" format proposed by Tilly [7]. Specifically, "W" the worthiness can be found through the support from over 160 civil society organizations and the recognition of the demand for protesters from governmental officers. "U" unity was reflected in those offline activities with order. "N" number has been proved by the number of participants in this move-

ment which accounted for about one fifth of the entire population in Spain. "C" commitment was reflected by the participants' desire for different claims including anti capitalism and environment protection.

## 4. The Logic of Collective Action & The Logic of Connective Action

Before the digital era, studies on social movements have been mainly depending on the logic of collective action to explain the behaviour of participants. With the cases of modern protests, some points under this frame have been challenged with the logic of connective action involving digital media in protests. To explore the application of these two theories, we here are going to discuss them one by one.

### 4.1 The Logic of Collective Action

The logic of collective action was originally to challenge some previous assumptions that people would act collectively within a group as long as they have interests in common, which meant the biggest problem in a democracy was the exploitation on the minority. However, the logic of collective action supports that people tend to free ride in an organization as it is possible to achieve benefits even if they make no efforts at all. This problem would be more serious for a relatively larger group as the individual contribution under a large group could be ignored, while it is not that easy for people to free ride in a small group with the lack of extra resources. Under this system, the existence of formal organizations is important in terms of communication and promotion to approach more potential participants. It holds a higher requirement for individuals, that is to say, they need to establish collective identity recognition or political demand. In this way, there are more limitations on participants in a conventional protest under the logic of collective action including having received higher education and suffering more pressure. As rational people are supposed to be a free rider which is the best alternative under whatever situations. However, this also leads to the problem when there are no enough members contributing and the common goals will not be achieved. This explains the attitudes on the establishment of collective identities and its solidarity from organizations as these are keys to secure enough participation from its members.

Valid and effective collective actions depend on different organizations' capacities on resource mobilization and leadership, to frame the structure of collective actions as well as resolve the conflicts within organizations. Therefore, to find out possible strategic promotion among peo-ple with different stances and various other organizations to achieve consensus.

### 4.2 The Logic of Connective Action

As the actions based on the logic of collective have not been changing with the involvement of the digital media, we shall focus on that how do participants take use of digital media to finish something that they did before? How did those people not likely to be approached and those personalized community who could not be gathered in the digital era make the protest in Madrid happen? While people care more and more about themselves, organizations have to pay higher costs but gain fewer revenues. Under such a circumstance, to organize those people who have nothing to do with each other, help them to form a sense of collective identity, as well as eliminate the "free ride" problem, seem to be an impossible picture. As people depend more and more on digital media in daily life, they start to seek for more personalized path to cooperate, following the logic of connective action. Digital media provides a fresh channel as the agency for organizations which is the key to the logic of connective action.

When the cost for communication and spread becomes lower, the free ride problem raised by Olsen would lead to different outcomes. As ubiquitous digital media has blurred the boundary between private and public, the personalized expression and contents are likely to be recognized, share, and even repeated. People thus have the access to the self-incentive system [8]. Modern protests with the perspective of the logic of connective actions usually consist of three main components, groups with loose links, usage of digital media, and the frame of personalized actions. In the 15-M Movement, individuals were linked loosely with informal organizations like Democracia Real Ya!. Meanwhile, the digitalized media networks involved the public into discussion on contentious political issues like economic justice and environment protection. During the entire process, there has never been any measure to promote particular organizations, manage information, or unify opinions.

### 4.3 The Logic of Collective & Connective Action

Therefore, with the analysis of the 15-M movement, it could be concluded that both the logic of collective action and the logic of connective action are able to function in a social movement independently. However, this is not saying that these two types of logic are incompatible since we have analysed only the 15-M movement. With the popularization of digital media in daily life, the logic of connective action is becoming increasingly

prevailing while the logic of collective action also has its own strengths though not mentioned in details here. The logic of connective action to some degree is the extension of the logic of collective action in certain aspects. Although these two kinds of logic might have certain conflicts in some contexts, the "free ride" problem for instance, there is still a possibility that they can function together in a social movement. Thus, it would be too arbitrary to draw the conclusion that the logic of collective action has completely been replaced by the logic of connective action.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the context of the 15-M movement, social movement organizations, which is a key factor in conventional protests, are becoming less and less important and are even excluded as some political parties and labour unions are problematic themselves. However, with the comparison involving the existence of social movement organizations in conventional protests, we could tell that the significant functions of SMOs such as approaching potential participants, contributing to the establishment of collective identities, as well as providing leadership and resources are less important, or say, becoming not that necessary in modern protests with the increasing usage of digital media. In the digital era, even if brick and mortar organizations are absent from protests sometimes, with the existence of informal organizations like websites, participants may also be able to manage activities successfully.

The traditional logic of collective action points out that the "free ride" problem resulted from rational participants which is more serious in relatively larger organizations may potentially lead to failures. With the digital media functioning in social movements, although it is not possible to gather people with common interests as a formal group, the "free ride" problem could be easily solved in essence. Besides, the popularization of digital media blurs the boundary between private and public parts in daily life while personalized expression is likely to be recognized. In addition, the alleged self-incentive system successfully tackled the "free ride" issue under the logic of collective action, proved by the 15-M movement.

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