

Review Article

Cyberactivism or Cyberbalkanization? Dialectical Tensions in an Online Social Movement

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Abstract: This ethnographic study takes an interpretive approach using grounded theory and interviewing to explain the varying experiences of members of The Zeitgeist Movement through dialectical tension theory. Structural dialectics were identified through contradicting statements expressing (1) the need for leadership or hierarchy vs. the need for equality or democracy and (2) autonomy vs. connection. Emotional dialectics were expressed as (1) emotion vs. rationality, and (2) hope vs. hopelessness. This study concludes by linking the presence of individual and structural dialectics to the inconsistencies in membership, participation, and efficacy of the online social movement.

Keywords: Organizational communication, cyberactivism, online civic engagement, dialectic tensions

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1. Activism and Alienation Online

Social movements are a driving force of change, mobilizing activists and spreading awareness for their cause. They can be a vehicle for both self-expression and significant reform. However, because social movements are characteristically opposed to the so-called *status quo*, tensions between idealism and real-world constraints inevitably create conflict for members. Through interviews with seventeen members of the global social movement known as The Zeitgeist Movement (TZM), this study explores the implications of “cyberactivists” who experience tensions being “torn” between the idealism of their experience within a social movement and the reality of their own participation in the “system”.

TZM, as it is often shortened to, is a global initiative that advocates resource-based economic reforms, using a federated structure of international grassroots chapters (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) and relying on computer-mediated communication to coordinate the central activities and communication of the organization. The movement boasts over 500,000 members as of 2014, and organizes hundreds of annual “Z-Day” gatherings around the world each March. Sites such as TZM are relevant because they serve as public “meeting places,” and for many people are replacing the routine face-to-face communicative environments more common to social organizing in the past.

As publicly observable participation in civic engagement shrinks, one area where civic engagement is thriving is in interactive online environments. The internet has played an increasingly important role in organizing human rights activists online, and has become an integral part of social movement strategies (Lebert, 2003). Although the swell in online communication and use of the internet is playing an increasingly larger role in public communication patterns and social activities, many communication scholars disagree on how the shift to online organizing has impacted the civic or political engagement of online citizens. Research indicates that frequent internet use is actually correlated with a higher level of public attendance, volunteerism

and social capital (Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino & Donovan, 2002; Kwan & Nam, 2009) and facilitates civic engagement in a variety of ways (Hwang, Schmeirbach, Paek, De Zuniga & Shah 2006; Wojcieszak, 2009; Vitak, Smock, Carr & Ellison 2009; Winfield, Lim & Leonard, 2008). However, some scholars advocate that the use of computer-based communication limits social engagement by allowing participants to withdraw from face-to-face political activities for various reasons, all related to technology (Putnam, 2000; Bimber, 1998; Rusciano, 2005). Bimber (1998) notes that, "at nearly every turn, the anticipated effects of expanded communication are limited by the willingness and capacity of humans to engage in a complex political life" (pg. 136). While research indicates contradictory findings regarding the role of internet and activism, few studies have been done that examine the discursive patterns and communicative environments that may facilitate activism or contribute to users alienation and stagnancy. We know very little about how members of online social movement communities articulate their participation and much less about the implications of tensions regarding the production and use of social capital.

Therefore, this article explores how discursive patterns of online members and their negotiations of potential tensions in this environment may determine the level of participation, which impacts the overall efficacy of the organization. Dialectical tension theory helps explain why online social movements facilitate cyberactivism or whether they break down into isolated cyberbalkans. We begin with a discussion of previous research on social movements, cyberactivism and dialectics. Next, we detail the ethnographic research methods used, and the interpretive analysis. We then offer a discussion of the findings, focusing on the ways that participants in TSM articulate and discursively navigate dialectical tensions within the social movement. Last, we engage in a discussion about the implications of this research, providing future considerations for better understanding the power and challenges of online social movements.

2. Cyberactivism

In an increasingly mobile and electronic communication age, online forums hold great potential for organizing people for social change. Atkinson (2008) defines new social movement organizations (SMO's) as "diffused power structures where participants pass information to one another through multiple channels of communication to coordinate temporary communities that focus on accomplishing temporary goals" (Atkinson, 2008). "Cyberactivism", or online activism, is one form of participation in new social movement organizations.

Vegh (2003) defines cyberactivism as any "politically motivated movement relying on the internet" (p. 71). He goes on to identify three different functions of online activism: awareness and advocacy, organization and mobilization, and action or reaction (Vegh, 2003). Similarly, Pepper's (2009) analysis of cyberactivists in the "Invisible Children" movement, reveals that even "spectator" cyberactivists, whose extent of action only includes watching a documentary online, create important political implications through their actions (Pepper, 2009). Pepper points out that participants can become "monitorial citizens," which "affords them a certain type of political efficacy previously unavailable to them" (Pepper, 2009, p. 3). Thus, online action can serve all three of Vegh's functions simultaneously (Pepper, 2009; Vegh, 2003), expanding traditional notions of engagement and activism.

Defining online activism in terms of a *movement* not only demonstrates how the concepts of online social movements and cyberactivism are intertwined, but also the important function of communication for organizing groups in an online environment. Examining the communicative aspects of activism and social movements brings into focus concerns about the isolation of cyberactivist communities and the potential implications that this holds for civic engagement and social change. According to Van Alstyne and Brynjolffson (1996) information technology can both bring people together as well as fragment interaction and isolate communication. This study contributes an understanding of how the negotiation of *dialectical tensions* generated through online organizing may produce engagement or detachment, depending on their discursive construction.

3. Dialectical Tensions

Similar to the tensions experienced in relationships, members of social movement organizations constantly negotiate their identity and attitudes between opposing concepts, such as individual and the organization or public and private communication. This process creates *dialectical tensions*, or seemingly contradictory forces in communication patterns (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). According to Mumby (2005), dialectics are "the dynamic interplay and articulation together of opposites" (p. 23). Although dialectical tensions may create feelings of dissonance, dialectical tensions are not competing physiological needs but a discursive phenomenon, as concepts are

held in tension through the processes of communication (Baxter, 2006). From this perspective, tensions are not a “problem” to be “resolved,” but rather dialectics provide individuals the opportunity to hold competing or opposing concepts, feelings, or actions in “constant play” (Adorno, 1973; Mumby, 2005).

Within organizations, including online cyberactivist groups, dialectical tensions are part of the organizing processes through which members make sense of the organization and define their identities (Rivera, 2010). From this perspective, meaning is generated within the constant interplay of opposing viewpoints (Kramer, et al., 2007), through the everyday communication and descriptions of experiences within the online community. For example, Kandath (2003) identifies a tension between domination and resistance, finding that organizations trying to institute social change have a tendency to overemphasize domination, or in other words, the accomplishment of their own objectives without addressing important forms of resistance that can threaten their success. Indeed, the ways that discourse operates “simultaneously as a means of control and resistance against other discourses” is a critical area of study in organizational communication (Norton & Sadler, 2006), and is particularly relevant for the exploration of tensions within social movements.

This study finds that dialectical tensions provide a useful heuristic for understanding the individual experiences of cyberactivists that determine their participation, organizational needs for hierarchy or equality, autonomy or connection and emotion and rationality.

4. In the Cyber-Field

In this study, we take an interpretive approach to communication research, using grounded theory to analyze the data for emergent patterns and themes (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002; Charmaz, 2001). Textually-based online social movements are a well-suited site for observing members’ discursive constructions of reality, and an important place for examining the ways that members discuss their experiences in the organization. Members’ responses reflect individual perspectives as well as broader discourses about democracy, social movements, and activism, all of which are equally valid and justify a qualitative, interpretive approach (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002).

The cyberculture, identity, beliefs, values, and actions of online citizens are largely unstudied from a qualitative or ethnographic perspective, with most of the literature taking a quantitative approach (Garcia, Standllee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009). While quantitative research helps us to understand the broad picture of how many people participate in online social movements and why (e.g. Stein, 2009; Passy & Giuni, 2001; Katz and Rice, 2002), research will benefit from an interpretive analytic approach aimed at better understanding internet users’ communication about and within a social movement environment. For example, Salter (2003) urges the use of qualitative approaches in online settings, stating that researchers need to begin going “beyond media-friendly sound bites” and “venturing firsthand into the culture and its participants” (p. 122). In this way, interviews and first hand observations of the communication within the movement help explain online activism and the ways in which cybercultures are created (Salter, 2003; Silver, 2003).

In this section, we discuss the site where data was obtained, the process of data collection, and the role of reflexivity in this study. Last, we discuss our data analysis and the cyclical or “seasonal” processes that lead to the findings of this research (Gonzalez, 2000).

This research is drawn from The Zeitgeist Movement’s website, found at: (www.thezeitgeistmovement.com). The Zeitgeist Movement is an online social movement whose members communicate almost exclusively online in order to promote equitable and sustainable living through the adoption of a resource based economy. In total, the first author conducted 45 hours of observation and interaction with members on the site. The movement’s global website features content translated into twenty-seven different languages, and the authors focused only on the English forums. You do not have to be a member to read essays published by various supporters, view videos and documentaries advocating for the social and political change central to the movement, listen to radio broadcasts, or read discussion posts by other members. However, in order to participate in the online discussion forums by writing comments, you must pass a twenty-question quiz with no more than three incorrect answers. Passing the quiz requires attentive reading through hundreds of pages of literature outlining the underlying belief system of the movement and the research that informs it.

4.1. Participants and Collecting Interview Data

In addition to the participant observation and analysis of the website, the first author conducted

in-depth asynchronous interviews with seventeen participants from various locations around the world, including citizens primarily from the US, but also one participant from Turkey, another from Germany, and one participant from Tunisia. Those who agreed to participate were then engaged in an asynchronous interview with the first author, and pseudonyms were assigned.

Asynchronous interviews, or time-delayed computer mediated interviews are an effective way of gathering detailed "thick description" from online participants because they provide an opportunity for question-answer sessions in which participants have time to consider their answers and write detailed responses, as well as time for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions as needed (Garcia, et al., 2009). Participants were asked eight questions, utilizing a blend of topical and narrative questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Participant responses yielded thirty-four pages of single spaced textual data.

4.2. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed utilizing an iterative process in which the researchers moved between data collection, review of relevant literature, and analysis. Patterns and themes became relevant as they emerged in the data as either repeated by participants or as emphasized by participant description.

In the final stages of analysis, both authors conducted a close read of the data. Next, the first author conducted line-by-line coding of the interview responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), and generated initial codes and themes. Discussion forums, website documents and field notes were not included in the analysis for this essay, but provided important contextual information relevant for understanding participants' experiences. Both authors worked together to create a final code book, which included descriptive codes such as member motivations, member communication, relationships, displays of emotion, leadership, initial involvement and problems or challenges. The code book also included analytic codes, such as locus of control, collective identity, elitism, task and socio-emotional oriented intent, opposition, and shared definitions and advocacy. The first author then re-coded the entire data set, and the second author then reviewed and confirmed the coding. The analysis revealed several tensions experienced and communicated by TZM members. Organizational dialectics were identified through contradicting statements expressing (1) the need for leadership or hierarchy vs. the need for equality or democracy and (2) autonomy vs. connection. Individual dialectics were expressed in communication highlighting (1) emotion vs. rationality, and (2) hope vs. hopelessness.

5. Social Organizing Amidst Tensions

Participant responses reveal a complex and tangled set of tensions. One member, Alex, states, "the cognitive dissonance associated from holding a set of beliefs that conflict with the existing reality...it's tough. But that contributes toward self doubt and encourages me to continue building up scientific evidence for/against the propositions of TZM." Indeed, members consistently admitted that they felt tensions between more than one seemingly conflicting idea or ideal, but then articulated the ways that they productively negotiated or even embraced those tensions.

5.1. Describing Cyberactivism and Motivations

In response to the interview questions, participants provided their own definitions of cyberactivism and their motivations for involvement in TZM. These definitions are important because scholars continue to debate the nature of cyberactivism and what constitutes engagement (McCaughy & Ayers, 2003). Furthermore, these descriptions help to contextualize the experiences of TZM members, and provide us with important qualitative understandings of what constitutes online engagement.

Cyberactivism or membership in an online social movement organization implies a number of beliefs, actions and characteristics that help shape the identity of each new member (Shumate & Pike, 2006). The Zeitgeist Movement is no different; their members share specific ideas about what constitutes true "membership". Membership in TZM seems to imply two things; belief and action. When asked, "what do you think qualifies yourself or anyone else as a 'member'?" Keenan explains that you must "BELIEVE it is the right thing" (capitalization from original text). Similarly, Dawn explains belief in terms of "faith." "To me," she states, "being a member means a lot because it gives hope, I guess in a similar way to religion for religious people." Like a religion, faith is the most basic qualification for membership.

In addition to belief, participants described membership as providing a pathway to action that contributes towards social change. Being a member of TZM not only instills a sense of purpose and

hope, but the movement also provides what one member described as a “clear path to follow with a clear end-goal and a direction in which to further develop myself”. For others, their experience may be similar to Chad, who although he was a social activist prior to his involvement in TZM, after learning about the movement he found the goals of TZM to be a much more “worthy” cause to devote his time towards. However, the actions taken by the participants were focused on awareness, including distributing material, translating content, and publishing documents to help new members familiarize themselves with the movement. In this way, awareness raising activities are not action oriented in the sense that they do not contribute funds or other material resources towards the actualization of sustainable model communities. In fact, the “actions” were largely a step toward moving others into faith or belief.

Kris differentiates between “inactive supporters” and “active members”. “Active” members reported doing various activities, both online and offline. Some online engagement included creating a guidebook for new activists, posting on the discussion forums, writing exploratory essays on informative topics, designing website material, and transcribing codes for collaborative projects using BOINC, AQUA@home software, among other things. Offline, participants described their own experiences leading or attending chapter meetings, giving out CD’s to strangers, organizing regional groups, and taking “every chance to talk about the movement” with others. Members’ descriptions of both belief in the ideals of the movement as well as engagement in actions leading toward change reflected a socially reinforced norm that “real members” must take “real actions,” whether it occurred online or offline. Members showed signs of embarrassment and seemed apologetic about their “lack of action”. When Hunter was asked “can you describe a memorable experience/interaction you’ve had participating in “member activities”, he responded “haven’t done any yet, ask me in a few weeks hehe”. While members do not always play the role of activist, they still find it rewarding to participate in the social forums. This may explain why online SMO’s with large memberships like TZM, are less visible than traditional political organizations within mainstream media.

The Zeitgeist films, produced by Peter Joseph, one of the organization’s unofficial “leaders,” overwhelmingly generated the most interest among the participants we interviewed. Pepper (2009) argued that online social movements based on a documentary could spread awareness through “convergence culture” or their combination of online social networking and emotionally provocative films (Pepper, 2009). However, participation and social inclusion through similar beliefs and shared mediated experiences does not guarantee viable organizational goals and tactics. For example, the Kony 2012 film seemed to rally support because it went “viral” with over 100 million views, however the campaign was critiqued because it had little actionable outcomes (Madianou, 2013). In the same way, TZM appears to have produced a community of impassioned individuals with little direction beyond consciousness raising and media sharing.

5.2. Structural Dialectics

Analysis revealed dialectics in the participant interviews that helped describe the organizational dynamics of The Zeitgeist Movement. Structural tensions describe the configuration and tendencies of the organization at large, while individual dialectics position the experiences of members within this network. Therefore, dialectics provide a better understanding of the formations and arrangements that characterize the organization as well as the discursive tensions that describe the experiences of the members themselves (Bergesen, 1993).

First, participants described feeling tension between autonomy and connection. Participants both identify with and distinguish themselves from the organization in important ways. First, the language of the participants implies collective thinking, but also emphasizes the role of the individual. Two members used similar metaphors, describing the organization as a “body” in which they are a “cell.” Levi describes people who find truth in the movement as a “proactive cell within the body of the species, prepared to take action against the cancer”. He continues stating, “I’m a member of a developing immune system that is taking action to rid itself of the cancer that threatens the very life of every cell within the body.” Thinking and talking about humanity as a “species” or one “body” reflects organizational values of equality and impartiality, at the same time it also acknowledges the importance of its individual parts. For example, Chad describes himself as “just another link in the chain”, emphasizing connection. Yet there can be no chain (collective) without each individual link (autonomy).

Other members view the organization as a primary source of information, rather than collaborative action. Kris describes his role in the organization, saying, “being a member provides me an invaluable resource for finding new ideas, discussing new ideas, distributing new ideas, and organizing activist activities. Outside of these logistical processes, I might well be a silent

supporter of the movement, developing my own materials and discussing my own ideas completely independent of the movement". Shelley responds to the question, "How would you describe your role in the organization?" by stating that "I can't describe myself in the organization. Because I act in individual way [sic]." Some members therefore negotiate the dialectical tension between autonomy and collective organizing by utilizing separation or silence within the organization. This separation strategy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) compartmentalizes tensions in order to negotiate comfortable spaces for both their own autonomy within a collective organizational identity.

Members also discussed the structural dialectic of hierarchy and equality. Participants described these tensions as the simultaneous need for leadership, direction, and bureaucracy in opposition to the desired ideals of equality, consensus and decentralized organization. Considering that the movement's website and informational materials explicitly endorse a "leaderless" egalitarian organizational structure, members are left to negotiate local chapter proceedings largely on their own. Kris observed that there is "no enforced hierarchy or authority for any of us to refer to", but that most people agree this is one tenant that "needs to be the foundation for all other discussion or projects to stem from". Dawn states, "I have never really felt like someone in the movement had a higher status than me or anyone else". Questions about other member's status were often deflected with a short "we're all equal". At the same time, Dawn admits that interaction is not always productive "since most people prefer to discuss things and seem to need some kind of leadership. Otherwise they can't motivate themselves to do anything on their own". Shelley describes initial confrontations with other members on the forums who criticized her for "wanting a leader or an advisor. It was a little disappointing", she admits. Indeed, even as members espoused the ideal of equality, they expressed their desire for or the "need" for hierarchical leadership that would help direct the activities of members. The needs for hierarchy and equality are particularly important tensions in a social movement environment such as this because the ideals of the organization (equality) may be at odds with the way most members are accustomed to organizing people toward action (through a hierarchy and dynamic leadership).

From participant interviews, it seems that the ideal of equality may obscure the ways that members are, in fact, *not* "equal" in every sense. For example, after our interview, Dawn referred me to Peter Joseph, who has the ability to send out a "global mail" with our interview questions attached. Clearly, Peter Joseph is afforded certain administrative resources and is generally seen as a "leader". Despite the fact that the *Zeitgeist* films required immense private resources on the part of the producer, the egalitarian structure places little to no responsibility on the part of any leadership to continue these investments, while transferring the onus onto its members. Overall, the diffused hierarchical structure is a source of both empowerment and confusion for members.

5.3. Structural Dialectics

The first individual tension that emerged from the participant's interviews is emotion and rationality. Statements or language that prioritize or emphasize the importance of either emotion or rational reasoning characterized this tension. The objective of the movement is to use the scientific method to solve social problems by developing a technologically advanced state. At the same time, emotion is a powerful recruiting tool. Members connected their sense of happiness with their involvement in TZM. Corey explains, "nothing would make me happier than if i [sic] played a part in helping us achieve freedom". Within this context, members have a difficult time articulating appropriate ways for expressing their emotional involvement in the organization, while balancing their commitment to rationality.

First, there is an important relationship between emotion, rationality and the methods of the organization. As Kris states, "the application of scientific principles are the only objective means known to us, that can answer the detailed questions and technical aspects of how to develop and implement a new social design". Hunter explains that being a member means "being a scientist at all times and in all things" while Josey states that members must "commit to rationality". Thus, membership entails the prioritization of logic and rationality before all things, including emotion.

However, many of these same members are inspired, motivated and drawn to the organization for emotional reasons. This is clearly illustrated through participant's widespread use of religious metaphors. Dawn discusses her success "converting" others into cyberactivist supporters of TZM and John describes himself as a "fervid zealot" willing to "sacrifice limb" for the movement. This tension must often be negotiated when participants discuss their approach to instigating change. For example, one member selects rationality in all instances, stating that his goal is to "educate others" with "factual information" and "logical conclusions". Other members realize that "logic" does not always compel action or inspire change and prefer to embrace the emotionality of the

message instead. As John explains, "How do we teach the blind to see? We do not, we make them feel". This strategy of dealing with the dialectic between emotion and rationality is best classified as the *separation* strategy, where members compartmentalize their experiences with emotion and "separate" this from their commitment to rationality (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). This strategy functions to hold the dialectics apart in participants' minds, but still provides a space where they can choose to see the value in both, utilizing them as necessary. In addition, because participants communicate that both emotion and rationality are experienced (even if not equally valued), they may benefit from learning to hold both in play simultaneously, rather than creating a false dichotomy that may cause discomfort for organizational members.

The second tension is between hope and hopelessness. This dialectic is important because it expresses attitudes towards the feasibility of the movement's undertakings and objectives, as well as members' motivation for participating. Members like Chad describe their hope as aspiring to "change the whole word", while others like Levi discuss their hopelessness, believing they could be "wasting time and effort". The negotiation of this dialectic is closely related to the individual's personal locus of control. This is a particularly important dialectic to negotiate in a social movement organization because when activists constantly vacillate between feelings of hope and hopelessness, their ability to deal with this tension can have a significant impact on their willingness to contribute or participate. For example, Steve reports that he was going to distribute "propaganda" but then decided against it because "it didn't work in the 60's so why should it work now?" Additionally, John explains, "I tend to develop an exaggerated sense of optimism during the meetings, and this tends to protract for a couple days following the meeting. The optimism wears off quickly, when members stop participating. And the vast majority stop participating". This statement helps explain how participation is linked to a consensus of optimism that may falter when attempts at organizing fails.

For some, hope is their sense of motivation, inspiration and purpose, which is closely tied to their reasons for participating. When asked, "What would you like to accomplish as a member?" John replied that he would like to either "discover that I am absolutely wrong and as soon as possible" or "to meet another soul that will motivate me to the extent that I will pursue this enterprise with greater ardor, for at this moment I feel so very uninspired and hopeless". In this statement he is expressing his desire for the negotiation of this tension through *selection* of one over the other.

Of course, members negotiate dialectics in different ways. Some participants use metaphors for hopelessness such as "drowning" or living like a "slave" to consumerism. Other members use the strategy of integration to balance the tensions productively (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Referring to the institution of a resource based economy, Josey states, "I think even if this never happens, people should at least be more educated of the functioning of the system they live in. So I think we will at least accomplish this much, make people more aware. That's a first step and a very important one". Josey avoids adopting one tension over the other, while still acknowledging both the hope and hopelessness that she experiences. Although members will always feel the bidirectional pull of hope and hopelessness, negotiating a space they can comfortably operate in between these two extremes is a critical step in developing a productive identity within the organization. What's more, viewing the tensions not as a problem to be resolved but as tensions that can be held in play, members can learn to find cyberactivism to be more personally rewarding.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study make three important contributions to the study of online communication, organizing and cyberactivism. Cyberactivists communicate for primarily social and emotional reasons, meaning that their participation will always fulfill personal needs but does not guarantee efficacy or progress as a result. However, participation may lead to "real-world" action, and negotiation of dialectics may help members move past ambiguity and inactivity toward changes in their lives and actions.

First, personal, social or emotional fulfillment is a prerequisite to cyberactivism. Members of TZM function as an important source of social capital, in a way that extends beyond acting as the "monitorial citizens" identified by Pepper (2009). In each tension, members participate for social and emotional reasons, such as support and collaboration, connection to an organizational identity, passionate feelings of pursuing a worthy cause, and as a source of hope for the future. Participants use religious metaphors to symbolize their faith in the cause and motivation to participate. Even within SMO's that prioritize rationality above all things, such as TZM, emotions and social support play a key role in the wellbeing of the community and their motivation to participate.

However, collaborating within cyber communities that reaffirm a particular set of beliefs while shunning outsiders and internal resistance can hinder the collective ability to actualize organizational goals, creating isolated “cyberbalkans” that do not interact effectively with other social movements and political actors. In order to effectively mobilize enough support and resources, SMO’s should utilize hybrid identities that “traverse the boundaries of multiple social movements” (Heaney & Rojas, 2014, p. 1049). We argue that alienation can result from both individual and structural tendencies.

Emphasizing equality and autonomy over hierarchy and connection can create structural disadvantages for the movement that fails to facilitate cooperation among members and discourages intra-organizational collaboration. When the organization has an exclusive and singular collective identity, it becomes difficult to partner or network with other political actors, and individually; this level of responsibility on single members to orchestrate social change becomes discouraging. They experience hopelessness when others do not participate, when they challenge the collective identity and when their methods have proven ineffective (i.e. talking to strangers and handing out “propaganda”). Although Geunther and Mulligan (2013) point out that permeable boundaries that are open to the acceptance or indoctrination of outsiders may facilitate a strong collective identity, this study notes that a robust and well-defined collective identity does not necessarily translate into political or social advances. In the case of TZM, members learn to promote the organization in very individualistic and isolated ways that can be difficult to measure or observe, such as translating content, posting material for new members, or showing the video to a friend. While participants express that individual activism can still be rewarding, it is not always effective. Due to a lack of leadership, members like Steve learn they cannot rely on collaborations with others, and resort to individual ways of contributing that neglects the potential advantages of participating in large online communities such as TZM. The benefit of hybridity is that more people may be included in directed organizational efforts that can yield both rewarding and effective outcomes. In this way, online SMO’s would do well to facilitate a more loosely defined identity and establish a structure that rewards some degree of hierarchy to promote collective efforts.

Last, this study offers a unique theoretical framework for approaching and understanding the complexity of organizing for social change in the digital era. Dialectical tensions provide a more nuanced consideration of the SMO’s formation without relying on dichotomous prescriptions for organizational structure. Although online forums and networks appear to facilitate self-directed organizing and independent chapters, participants expressed tension between needing both hierarchy and equality. Indeed, simply providing space for collaboration may work when the political objectives are clear, such as when protesters organized demonstrations via Facebook in Tunisia and Egypt (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013). However, achieving a sustainable, science based society is a much more ambitious and complicated endeavor, suggesting some degree of leadership is necessary. While members describe a leaderless organization, the beliefs that make up the movement are prescribed in a top-down way. Peter Joseph and Jacque Fresco have produced documentaries, books, and films that outline the rational, scientific doctrine of the organization and interviews confirm that resistance to these ideas often results in public condemnation and exclusion. It is no wonder that some members are left wanting direction when it is left up to them what they should do with this material. Although members are empowered by feelings of equality, degrees of leadership may provide direction and more effectively facilitate action without undermining the importance of equality. Although the “flattened” or non-hierarchical aspects of online communities can be productive, a dialectical approach recognizes extant needs for leadership that may go unmet and become problematic for social movements organizing in an online environment.

Moreover, a discussion of online social movements and activism through the lens of dialectical tensions guides an understanding of how interdisciplinary scholars could produce a legitimate, yet contradicting set of conclusions on the nature of cyberactivism. The research reflects the dialectical tensions experienced by cyberactivists themselves. Previous findings are not simply rendered useless, rather they might be more productively positioned as counterpoints in a web of tensions, which are inevitably temporally and organizationally contingent. Through interviews and ethnographic immersion in the Zeitgeist Movement, we can view online activism and organizing as a dynamic, multifaceted and constantly changing enterprise. Unless our approach to cyberactivism can abandon the search for a singular and fixed nature of online engagement, the productive value of an entire body of research may remain unutilized and in question.

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