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Relationship networks as strategic issues management: An issue-stage framework of social movement organization network strategies

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ABSTRACT

Social movement organizations (SMO) are important actors in affecting issue-related policy changes. To successfully manage an issue to achieve favorable policy resolutions, SMOs, like many kinds of organizations, not only use traditional public relations techniques, but also build networks to accomplish their objectives. Yet, an examination of the relationship between issue development and SMO networks is absent from the literature. This article therefore concentrates on the question: what types of networks should SMOs seek to build at different stages of an issue's development? Informed by public relations research on issues management as well as contemporary social movement scholarship and organizational network theories, the article proposes a framework of SMO network strategies that examines the kinds of relationship networks SMOs should maintain as they attempt to manage an issue through the stages of its life cycle.

1. Introduction

Modern social movement organizations (SMOs) may vary in the degree to which they are formalized and institutionalized, but they remain key actors in affecting issue-related policy changes. Indeed, many of the most significant policy changes in recent decades were made, in large part, because of the efforts of SMOs (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). However, not all issues will evolve in such a way that they achieve policy resolutions. Social issues must compete with one another for attention in crowded public arenas (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) and must successfully mature through a life cycle if they are to be considered in policy-making fora (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). SMOs must devote significant resources to the management of issues though their life cycles if they wish to see them favorably resolved through policy changes.

In this article, we follow the sociological tradition of social movement scholarship, and view the evolution of social issues as a contested process that can be influenced by the advocacy efforts of interest groups such as SMOs (Gamson, 1961). SMOs' advocacy efforts include, among other strategies, network building. There is a wealth of evidence that networks play a vital role in successful social movement activities. As Diani and Bison (2004) argued, "Networks and organizations are either the precondition or the outcome of a movement—or both… network processes… are the movement" (p. 303). The accomplishment of social movement issue objectives are thus in no small part driven by the creation of networks among SMOs. Issues and networks are two key concepts frequently discussed in contemporary social movement and activist research, yet an examination of the relationship between issue

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development and networks is absent from the literature. Indeed, public relations scholars have frequently noted the importance of networks and coalitions for activists and SMOs (e.g., Grunig, 1997; Smith & Ferguson, 2010), but have not devoted any significant attention to the strategy behind network building. As SMOs are capable of shepherding an issue from its nascence, to widespread social attention, to resolution in policy arenas (Heath & Palenchar, 2009), the inattention to role of building networks to abet the issue development process is problematic for the growth of both explanatory and prescriptive theory.

The goal of this paper is to address the lacunae in the literature on how issue stages and SMO networks are interrelated. We specifically examine the question: what kinds of network relationships should SMOs pursue to further an issue's development through its life cycle? Rather than examining the entire structure of contemporary activist or SMO networks, as much previous research has done, our focus herein is limited to why SMOs should build different kinds of network ties over the course of an issue's life cycle. To that end, we develop an issue-stage theoretical framework through which to examine and prescribe network strategies for SMOs as they seek or resist changes in public policy.

We primarily ground our rationale for studying networks as a component of strategic communication within the issues management literature. Issues management includes an organization's efforts to monitor, analyze, and manage issues to a resolution favorable to the organization and other stakeholders and communities affected by the issue (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Issues management is highly relevant to SMO practice (Jaques, 2006), but networks remain an afterthought in the issues management literature and the connection between issue stages and correspondingly strategic and advantageous network structures is unexplored.

To develop and explain our framework, we draw upon a range of theoretical literature. In addition to touching on work of traditional collective action theorists who emphasized the importance of formal organizations within social movements (e.g., Olsen, 1965), our framework draws on more recent work that emphasizes new forms of social movement organizations and networks enabled by digital communication technology (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012, Chadwick, 2007). We also use literature on the public arena model (e.g., Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), noting the influence of engaged "issue operatives" on issue development as a precursor to introducing issues management perspectives on issue life cycles (Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Finally, we borrow from network theory (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Monge, Heiss & Margolin, 2008) to explain how SMOs may strategically adapt their networks to help ensure the successful evolution of issues.

2. Social movement organizations and social issues

Social movement organizations are groups of individuals banded together, either formally or informally, to pursue or resist social change (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). While increasingly adopting varied organizational forms (Chadwick, 2007), SMOs direct their activities around certain social issues (e.g., civil rights, gun rights, abortion rights, etc.), and they strive to define those issues, propose solutions, mobilize issue-related collective actions, communicate issues to their supporters and the general public, and push for (or resist) legislative actions (Burstein & Linton, 2002).

Recognizing the significance of SMOs and their varied organizational forms, scholars from disciplines such as sociology, political science, and communication have studied SMOs in terms of their intraorganizational characteristics and rituals (Taylor & Whittier, 1995), patterns of strategic communication (Sommerfeldt, 2013), as well as interorganizational resource dependency and networks (e.g., Bimber et al., 2012; Burstein & Linton, 2002; Diani & McAdam, 2003). A number of prominent theories have emerged in the study of SMOs, including those intended to explain how SMOs mobilize social resources (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), advance their causes within existing political opportunity structures and the political process (McAdam, 2003), shape cultural framing or other interpretative processes (Benford & Snow, 2000), and organizational networks (Diani & McAdam, 2003). While these frameworks offer valuable insights on how resources, political structures, and cultural processes influence the effectiveness of SMOs' advocacy, none of them address how the evolution of social issues interact with SMO network strategies.

Our goal here is to advance a perspective that centralizes the concept of the social issue and its life cycle in the study of SMOs' network strategies. To achieve this, we first explain the concept of social issues and introduce the public arenas model (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988)—a framework that helps to link issue evolution with the practice of issues management by SMOs.

2.1. Social issues and the public arenas model

Social issues (also referred to as social problems) are contestable matters of concerns regarding facts, values, or policies, and may affect members of society and their interests (Young & Leonardi, 2012). Social issues are rarely objective phenomena waiting to be identified. Instead, the interpretation and parameters of issues are socially constructed, negotiated, modified, articulated, and de-constructed or reconstructed (Benford & Snow, 2000; Rogers & Ben-David, 2008). Strategic communication about social issues by SMOs is thus critical as it may affect the direction of social changes, the interests of groups involved, public policy, and the allocation of social resources.

Among competing theories of social issues, Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) proposed the public arenas model of social issues to examine the evolution of issues and how this process affects the social actors who make claims about them. The model essentially proposes that whether social issues advance into the center of public discourse depends, in part, on the strategic actions of "issue operatives" and the way issues are communicated in different public arenas (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Specifically, issue operatives are social actors, such as interest groups, politicians, and SMOs who actively formulate social issues to push for or resist social change. These issue operatives play a role that is different from media practitioners or other decision makers in the sense that they actively and strategically seek certain outcomes in the process of issue evolution. "Public arenas" refer to any communication venue where issues can be framed and communicated (e.g., mass media, digital media, books, etc.). The model highlights the fact that public