Strategies for forging and sustaining social movement networks: A case study of provincial food networking organizations in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Social movement organizations (SMOs) play an important role in movement building, however, the particular context and structure of a SMO has a direct impact on its ability to foster and sustain collaboration. In this paper I investigate the unique positioning of provincial networking organizations (PNOs) in Canadian food movements and document their efforts to support alternative food initiatives (AFIs) to interact and act collaboratively for food system change. The research draws on a network survey, over 35 in-depth interviews, site visits, and background information collected in three Canadian provinces to explore the ongoing work necessary for linking together heterogeneous elements without central coordinating mechanisms. I describe the ways that PNOs have established a series of common networking strategies to bring AFIs together across sectors, scales and places: (1) the creation of physical spaces that involve direct contact in particular places; (2) the development of virtual spaces where connections are mediated through digital technologies; and (3) the use of scalar strategies that scale-up local projects to address provincial level policy. I conclude by identifying key areas of contention that arise within the networks, and show that the different structures of the PNOs impact their ability to establish and implement networking strategies. I argue that addressing these challenges must be a preemptive focus in order to sustain networking activity. My contention that contemporary structures of social mobilization require novel strategies and support from networking organizations provides insight for studies of SMOs and movement building more broadly.

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Introduction

Social movements that aim to challenge dominant systems of power are not new, but the ways that they are mobilizing across sectors, scales and places have changed significantly in recent decades. Rising public concern about social injustice and ecological sustainability have been paralleled by an increase in the accessibility as well as the form and function of digital communications. Scholars have observed that, like the Internet, contemporary structures of mobilization are highly connected yet increasingly diverse and decentralized (Juris, 2008; Castells, 2012; Saunders, 2013). This is evident in the activities of social movements that bring together a wide range of actors and do not propose a concrete set of demands nor a specific target in any singular sense (e.g., global justice, Occupy, autonomous media, etc.). These kinds of mobilizations raise important questions about the ways that seemingly disparate, placed-based initiatives are able to form a cohesive social movement that challenge contemporary structures of power.

In this paper, I examine these strategies by drawing on research of the growing food movements in the global north. These movements have been described as a "network of networks" – a decentralized collaboration among diverse alternative food initiatives (AFIs) in response to increasing concerns about the ecological, socio-political and economic implications of the corporate led industrial food system (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Levkoe, 2014). Specifically, I focus on the strategies developed within three provincial AFI networks in Canada: British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario. Canada is an important case study because while there is a long history of sector-specific mobilization (e.g., farmers, fishers, consumer movements), there have been substantial efforts to bring together diverse AFIs across cultures and geographies to develop a more socially just, healthy and ecologically sustainable food system (Koc et al., 2008; Kneen, 2011). Since 1989, provincial networking organizations (PNOs) have been established in almost every Canadian province with an explicit mandate to support the work of AFIs and to foster and sustain collaboration. Acting as a broker within the networks and focusing beyond the local scale, the PNOs have a wider reach and broader perspective than most place-based actors.

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Through an analysis of the three case studies, this research draws particular attention to the ongoing work necessary for linking together diverse individuals and groups in the absence of centralized coordinating structures. Specifically, this paper explores the kinds of networking strategies that have been developed through deliberate efforts by the PNOs. I argue that contemporary structures of social mobilization require novel strategies that benefit substantially from the support of social movement organizations (SMOs). Further, I suggest that PNOs must engage and negotiate tensions, to enhance the power of networking strategies over the long-term. The next section begins by pointing to scholarly literature focusing on these kinds of networking strategies and highlights the roles SMOs have typically played in sustaining social movements. I then draw on a network survey, over 35 in-depth interviews, site visits, and background information (e.g., websites, annual reports, publicity materials, and published documents) to examine the strategic roles of the PNOs in each of the provincial food networks. This analysis builds on Stevenson et al.'s (2008) concept of network weavers to explore ways that the PNOs have established networking strategies that bring together AFIs from across sectors, scales and places, while at the same time supporting the decentralized network structures and encouraging difference. I identify three of the most common strategies being used by PNOs across the case study provinces: (1) the creation of physical spaces that involve direct contact in particular places where AFI representatives meet face-to-face; (2) the development of virtual spaces where connections are mediated through digital technologies; and (3) the use of scalar strategies that scale-up local projects to organize around and impact provincial level policy. The paper concludes by identifying key areas of contention that arise, and shows that the PNOs' different internal and external structures have a substantial impact on their ability to establish and implement networking strategies. I argue that addressing these challenges must be a preemptive focus of the PNO's efforts in order to sustain networking activity.

Social movement networking strategies

Social movement networking spaces

Many analysts have studied network relationships within bounded spaces. Rather than conceptualizing network spaces as closed and contained, I consider network building as the construction of relational space through *processes of interaction* between multiple actors, events and activities. This approach follows from Harvey (1996) who describes space as constituted by various (physical, biological, social, and cultural) processes that combine to create semi-permanent assemblages. Building on the work of Massey (1991), networking spaces can be conceived of as *meeting places* where multiple relations interweave. As these relations meet, new relations are formed and new spatial identities come into being.

Following from this relational notion of space, social movement networks are well positioned to engage in a strategic politics of scale. Human geographers have described the concept of scale as socially produced through struggle and as the outcome of activities and processes that contribute to spatially uneven and temporally unfolding dynamics (Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000). Brenner (2001) writes that a politics of scale that refers to "the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies *among* geographical scales" (512, emphasis in the original). As socio-spatial relations change, they produce a nested set of related spatial scales that define an arena of struggle where conflict is mediated and compromises are settled (Smith, 1992; Swyngedouw, 1997). Social movements that reflexively consider their actions as a politics of scale may discover new opportunities to create and renegotiate activities in relation to different scales of action (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Miller, 2000). The politics of scale has been a central focus for scholars analyzing AFIs (Allen et al., 2003; Hinrichs, 2003; Born and Purcell, 2006), and specifically, the need to scale-up their activities to address structural concerns (Johnston and Baker, 2005).

Social movement networking spaces have the potential to provide the infrastructure necessary for disparate AFIs to collectively engage in a reflexive politics of scale. Some scholars have attempted to show the way that these kinds of spaces can become strategic meeting places constructed through processes of interaction between actors, events and activities. For example, Nicholls' (2009) argues that the geographical constitution of social movement networks plays a key role in coordinating a movement's activities. He describes the way that sustained interaction between distant allies embedded in place come together to form a distinct social movement space. Nichols points to key mechanisms that facilitate the development of relationships between diverse activists including mediation by a third party broker, meetings and events that serve as important contact points, and communication technologies that support ongoing contact between distant allies. In a similar vein, Routledge (2003) describes how networking spaces can facilitate a "diverse, contested coalition" of place-based organizations "on a variety of multi-scalar terrains that include both material places and virtual spaces" (334). Within these networking spaces, activists embody particular experiences that have been formed and nurtured within the particular places they originate and have an opportunity to share their experiences, learn from others and undertake collective action. Recognizing the conflicts that can arise as organizations articulate different goals, ideologies and strategies, Routledge argues that the interactions and negotiations within the networking spaces prefigure "a participatory way of practicing effective politics, articulating the (albeit imperfect) ability of heterogeneous movements to be able to work together without any single organization or ideology being in a position of domination" (345).

Food networks are constituted by a disparate range of place-based organizations that have emerged to create viable solutions in response to the dominant corporate led industrial food system (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009; Winne, 2010; Wittman et al., 2011). Studying the relationships between AFIs, recent studies have shown that they are increasingly becoming connected through robust networks (Goodman et al., 2012) and that their sustained mobilization may be constitutive of a new social movement (Allen, 2004; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Levkoe, 2014). Research in Canada has indicated that while the food networks are highly connected, they are extremely decentralized and the participating AFIs hold a wide diversity of approaches, objectives and goals (Levkoe and Wakefield, 2013). Although a decentralized structure suggests that no single organization holds substantial control, networks do not just happen. The work of bringing autonomous actors together, forging connections and sustaining the networks requires a significant amount of work and resources (McFarlane, 2009). Li (2007) suggests that we must find ways to recognize "the situated subjects who do the work of pulling together disparate elements without attributing to them a master-mind or a totalizing plan" (265). Put simply, an immense amount of energy is required to sustain network coherence and function, but it needs to be exerted in a way that recognizes and works with the actors' diverse perspectives and the network's decentralized structure. The PNOs in Canada evolved from a perceived need to strengthen the networks by bringing together place-based AFIs and to foster and sustain collaboration. Studies examining the development and continued activities of SMOs illuminate the strategic role played by the PNOs in the food movement networks.