Research Proposal

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COM 350

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Section One - The Problem

I. Introduction

Climate change is "the most systemic threat to humankind", Secretary-General of the

United Nations, António Guterres, declared during a press conference addressing the 2017 Paris

Climate Agreement and the recent World Meteorological Organization's report that extreme

weather events linked to climate change caused an estimated $320 billion in losses (Sengupta,

2018). With the Trump administration's announcement of its intent to fully withdraw from the

Paris Agreement, reports of the situation have grown grave. In response to the global crisis

claims, Swedish 15-year-old Greta Thunberg sat down outside of the Swedish parliament with a

sign that said: "Skostrejk För Klimatet" (School Strike for the Climate). Her protest resonated

with young people around the world, and the Fridays for Future movement began to spread far

and wide. Within a year, hundreds of thousands of people were skipping school and work every

Friday to protest. Thunberg gained popularity for her direct speaking manner and ended up

giving a series of speeches in front of the United Nations General Assembly.

Extensive research has been conducted into the foundations and functions of social

movements, but Thunberg's success is unlike any other. Climate change is an existential threat,

and while it has been thoroughly researched, the rhetoric used to promote climate activism has

not been. There is a gap, therefore, in general understanding of the dynamics of communications

that allowed the Fridays for Future movement exponential growth. An understanding of the

messages that engage students in the Fridays for Future movement could have positive impacts

ranging from young voter engagement to improved learning in the classroom.

II. Literature Review

In the modern age, the Internet is a vital public sphere for engaging in politics, especially

for young people, but it is vulnerable to restriction and manipulation by both independent actors

and governments. Castells described this new age activism as a "network social movement"

(Castells, 2015). Network social movements are horizontally structured, motivated by systematic

issues rather than a single catalytic moment, and working to shift public perception around a

social issue. Following the introduction and widespread adoption of social media services,

Castells demonstrates a distinct shift from activist movements based around marked leadership

and defined moments of action to longer standing occupations of public space, both online and in

real life.

Casemajor et al. (2015) explain that with the occupations of Internet space, it is near

impossible for users of social media to avoid participation in political issues. The act of complete

non-participation can be as impactful as total investment in an issue, as is demonstrated in the act

of radical passivity in the face of violence from the opposition (Casemajor et al. 2015). In the

realm of climate change activism, refusal to engage in certain arguments has an interesting

potential to be a vital tool for solely online movements, just as refusing to demonstrate violently

discredits aggressive action against the group. As Casemajor et al. (2015) suggest, digital

participation in certain debates requires acceptance of and deferral to a goal or set of norms that

the individual would not have independently advocated. Platforms themselves can be points of

concern for carrying the bulk of productive debate in activist movements. Studying digital

journalists in Morocco, Zaid (2016) notes a growing concern about government surveillance

measures and the possibility of interference from the home countries of social media companies.

In delicate political situations, particularly when citizens of a country have no guaranteed right to

privacy, drawing the attention of the government to communication platforms can mean the

death of the movement. The Internet in Morocco is used as a public sphere to engage in lively

debate and networking for social movements in the interest of democracy because it has been

spared the strict regulations of other countries (Zaid, 2016).

In a study of the use of Twitter in political conflicts in Iran, Moldova, and the G-20

Summit in Pittsburgh, Ems (2014) argue that a breakdown in connectivity is highly symbolic of

the intentions of a government during a protest. When demonstrators in Iran were using Twitter

as a medium for organization, the United States government directly asked the CEO of Twitter to

leave the website operating, but in the same year in Pittsburgh, Elliot Madison was arrested for

using Twitter to direct protestors (Ems, 2014). Ems asserts that this clearly shows a lack of

concern for freedom of expression, rather an alternate motive in encouraging the demonstrations.

Regardless of the nature of the government and the rights of the citizens, governing bodies

removed portions of communication infrastructure to stifle protests in all three situations (Ems,

2014). Twitter is a powerful tool for organizing and mobilizing large groups of people, but its

high visibility is a double-edged sword, as it is left vulnerable to government surveillance and

interference.

Khazraee and Losey (2016) also argue a more complicated relationship for protests and the Internet in Iran. Due to the more contentious nature of the debates, and the paranoia of the government toward foreign interference, communication is carried out across a variety of messaging, blogging, and social media services. Mainstream social media, however, does not cover a majority of the scope of networking for activism movements in Iran. Khazraee and Losey agree with Castells in the complex horizontal organization of network social movements. They maintain that to understand how activism spread in Iran, scholars need to consider the full scope of the histories of demonstrations, and communication across all media platforms, including broadcasting and print (Khazraee and Losesy, 2016). Following this method in the context of climate activism, it is important to consider the impact of more traditional forms of media on social media content.

Demographics of the social movement also have a considerable impact on the spread and functioning of the movement. Youth have emerged as a new group of political actors, according to García-Peñalvo and Kearney (2016). Underrepresented in policy writing and decision making, youth are a distinctly separate social group that is increasingly engaged with and impacting social issues (García-Peñalvo and Kearney 2016). Investigating youth participation in online activism in Cambodia, where state surveillance is heavy and many services are subject to censorship, Lee (2018) suggests that young people in Cambodia use a unique system of hidden tactics to express their opinions on contentious issues through the Internet. Most of their conversations are carried out in plain sight, but they are cryptic and unable to be understood without the context, showing that young activists are able to adapt to the restrictions imposed on

them by the state, but also showing that a certain level of prior knowledge is required to engage

with the movement (Lee 2018).

College students are a key example of activist engagement on social media. Ahmad, Alvi,

and Ittefaq (2019) note that the majority of students in rural Pakistan at the University of

Narowal use social media to engage in politics both through information gathering and

organizing real-life demonstrations. They also explain that online political engagement had a

significant influence on political effectiveness and that the students actively shared political

content with their peers (Ahmad et al. 2019). Indeed, online media has a notable impact on

college students, both in informing and mobilizing for real-life action. Tsatsou (2018) also notes

the importance of social media to college students when organizing the Sunflower Movement in

Taiwan. Facebook is vital to the informal organizational elements of the movement, with

participants making use of the information-sharing functions more than the networking functions

to recruit new activists and to coordinate offline activities (Tsatsou, 2018).

The Sunflower Movement was aiming to "awaken" other activist groups and to spread

attitudes of civic engagement throughout the general public, reflecting Castells' theory that

network social movements will tend to be more focused on changing perceptions than on

changing policy. Tsatsou concurs with Castells in that the decision making processes of the

movement is far more complex and multi-layered than it has been in past movements, but

Tsatsou disagrees with Castells' observation that there are no leaders in a network social

movement (Tsatsou, 2018). According to Tsatsou, the study of the Sunflower Movement shows

that leadership structures still exist in technology-based activism groups, but those leaders are

often challenged by other activists.

Examining the motivating factors that lead youth to enter activist spaces, particularly in the context of the Arab Spring, Dutta (2013) explains that many were driven by frustrations with a lack of economic opportunity and fear of violence, which progressed to mobilizing anger when youth connected over social media. Grassroots activism organizations grew quickly because they were driven by heightened emotions, as Castells predicted; the outrage that young people felt toward their situation turned to anger at the violence they witnessed, and eventually, to hope when they encountered online communities with similar feelings (Castells, 2015). In the context of climate change, it will be important to assess how the emotions expressed by activists have changed to attempt to predict how the movement will progress and who will become engaged.

Established social structures for discussing activism also impact the success of social movements. Investigating the way young people in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States engage in politics, express their own opinions and take action, online, Vromen et al. (2016) suggest that contrary to the other, often more contentious, countries studied, most of the young people surveyed were reluctant to take direct or overt political action on social media due to conflict within their social networks (Vromen et al. 2016). Because this study was conducted before the 2016 election, these results would likely be different in the United States now. Based on the results of this study, it is likely that social media is used more thoroughly to discuss matters of climate change in countries where there are already social networks established for activism.

Motivating youth in the Philippines to engage with climate change through participatory videos, Haynes and Tanner (2015) assign video projects to communities based around mitigating the impacts of climate change, and their results indicate that youth can effectively research and

advocate for methods of disaster risk reduction. Media technology projects can energize and

excite young communities about taking action on issues like climate change. Francescato (2019)

suggests that the Fridays for Future movement gained traction due to the direct leadership of

Greta Thunberg. This is different from the typical network social movement that Castells

envisioned, where it is structured horizontally with no distinct figurehead, and with a distinct

goal centered around tangible policy change. Clearly, Greta Thunberg has defied the new

archetype for activism and become a rallying point, but researchers have yet to discover the

reason.

Lim (2018) provides a structure to study how social media interacts with the human and

non-human actors in the new Fridays for Future movement, through a three-part frame for

understanding communications and media in contemporary social movements. Lim uses "roots"

as the broad frame to study the multifaceted roots of global movements, finding that although

digital media are neither a driving force nor a cause of protests, these media nevertheless enable

the spread of protests (Lim, 2018). Next, "routes" are used to trace how social movements

develop and people form networks, all creating a non-linear path of development. Finally,

"routers" to explore the non-human factors impacting social movements, which reduce

communication inequality in networks and between networks (Lim, 2018). All three frames are

intertwined and provide a way to understand the various moving parts of social movements,

which can be applied to the unusual situation of the Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future

movement — neither a classic protest, with catalytic moments of violence and powerful adult

leaders, nor a network social movement, with a purely horizontal structure and soft goals. How

has Greta Thunberg communicated the complex and contentious issue of climate change to

young people on a global scale in a way that has mobilized them into action?

III. Purposes and Objectives

       This study will look at the messages used by Greta Thunberg in her speeches and public

statements, and the reactions to these messages as posted on Twitter. It will seek to understand

how young people perceive Thunberg's style of communication and to evaluate the effectiveness

of her messages based on her intent. Thunberg is transparent with her goals during her

statements, so this study will be able to weigh reactions to her rhetoric against the intentions she

outlines during her appearances. This study will not evaluate Thunberg's success in impacting

climate change legislation or research. It will also not investigate responses from traditional news

media sources or celebrities. The purpose of this study is to understand Thunberg's success in

motivating other young people to act through the Fridays for Future movement, not to make

sense of responses from individuals or media companies in positions of power. It would be

interesting for further research to investigate these responses and their impact on the movement.

However, to understand the intricacies of youth engagement in contentious issues from a

communications perspective, studying direct responses from youth will lend a more complete

image.

IV. Hypothesis or Research Question

In the context of Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement, what messages and methods of persuasive communication are most effective at engaging youth in climate activism?

V. Summary

This study will aim to generate a deeper understanding of youth engagement in social issues. Scholarship on this subject focuses heavily on college students as actors in social movements, but the Fridays for Future movement has been uniquely driven by school-aged children, as the leader herself was only 15 when she began. This age demographic has not been engaged in major protests of the past, therefore there is a lack of research towards their motivations and impacts. Greta Thunberg is a unique leader for the movement, both due to her age and her direct communication style. Previous communications research into social movements suggests that successful modern movements are horizontally organized with no distinct leaders. This theory makes the Fridays for Future movement a clear outlier, as Thunberg's speeches seemingly form the backbone of the movement. Further research is needed into her messages and their reception among young people to understand the patterns of social movements in the digital age.

Understanding the rhetoric of the Fridays for Future movement and how it has catapulted the movement into global popularity will allow communications scholars insight into the motivating forces of communications in the digital sphere. A deeper understanding of how Greta Thunberg's speeches have engaged youth on a wide scale will also yield interesting ideas for communication in an education setting, especially when discussing contentious issues that have been previously limited to college students. Youth activism has previously yielded little tangible policy change due to infrequent direct engagement with governing bodies, but Thunberg has consistently addressed her messages to those in positions of power, and those messages have generated strong responses among youth. This pattern suggests that adult patterns of communication may be more effective in young populations.

Section Two - Method

I. Introduction

Having determined the value of research into the Fridays for Future movement, specifically the rhetoric that Thunberg uses to spread her climate activist messages, this study will seek to analyze her speeches and responses from youth. This will be accomplished through an in-depth rhetorical analysis of Thunberg's speeches and posts on Twitter in response to those speeches through a narrative lens of analysis. News media and celebrity responses will not be analyzed, as this study seeks to understand the relationship between her communication style and the engagement of youth in the movement. Due to the findings of previous research into social

media and activist movements, suggesting that Twitter is the primary platform for global activist

discussion, this study will specifically focus on Tweets related to Greta's speeches, both positive

and negative in nature.

II. Description of Methodology

   This paper will seek to understand how youth are motivated to join activist movements

through communication over social media, specifically within the Fridays for Future movement,

through an in-depth textual analysis of tagged posts about the movement on Facebook, Twitter,

and Instagram. The research will be conducted through rhetorical analysis, which will attempt to

understand the influence, context, and outcomes of messages through describing, interpreting,

and analyzing text and media. It will specifically look at the type of language used in the posts

that generate the most passionate responses, both positive and negative.

   While it would yield interesting results to conduct an ethnography with rich thick

description of the young groups that are conducting Fridays for Future movements, those groups

are not easily accessible as they mostly exist within the confines of media platforms, only

emerging to the physical realm for protests. Protests are routine, and it would be valuable to

attend some of them to study how interpersonal communication changes between social media

and physical spaces. It would be interesting to study a contained group of activists to see the

extent of the movement in their lifestyles in further research, but that study would require travel,

as most vocal established environmental groups are based internationally. Overall in this study,

though ethnography is not a viable primary method for studying activist communication within

the Fridays for Future movement because there is little potential for full immersion in the field.

Using rhetorical criticism will allow a qualitative understanding of the impact of posts on

the success of the Fridays for Future movement because the research method allows input and

reactions from the researcher. The texts that are being distributed by the movement are meant to

evoke reactions in the consumer, with the ultimate goal of shifting their perceptions and move

them to act. Rhetorical criticism will allow for close evaluation of the impact of these messages,

and for speculation about why certain messages generate different responses than others.

Khazraee and Losey (2016) used this method to explore how protest in the online realm

differs from physical moments of protest in a historical context, showing that in-depth textual

analysis can allow for a greater understanding of how the subject of study functions in a more

complete context. Immersing herself in the heavily censored activist communities of Cambodia,

Lee (2018) explores how messages are conveyed by images and cryptic captions through textual

analysis, showing that the method can provide insight into covert activism on social media. This

style of research also allows a variety of texts to be analyzed, which will be valuable because

messages are spread on social media through written text, videos, images, and graphics.

III. Research Design

This study will review posts across the platform of Twitter that are tagged with the

keywords "Fridays for Future" or "Greta Thunberg", specifically those featuring reactions to her

public appearances. As Ems (2014) and Castells (2015) suggest, Twitter is the foremost platform

for political discussions on an international scale between youth, therefore it will provide access

to a diverse sampling of reactions to the movement. Videos of significant speeches delivered by

Greta Thunberg will also be analyzed along with reactions to them on social media. These

responses will be weighed against direct replies made on uploads of the speeches to show how

messages are perceived differently by members of the group and critics of it.

A sampling of posts will exceed 1,000, selected by the search function on the platforms

and sorted by the most popular/most relevant algorithm. In order to reduce bias caused by

algorithms, a new Twitter account linked to a new email will be created to view posts. The

Twitter account will only be accessed through a private browsing extension to prevent skewed

messages due to browsing history. Videos of Greta Thunberg's speeches will be accessed in their

original form from official sources. Transcripts will be taken directly from the source material by

the researcher, and portions of the speeches quoted in secondary sources will be cross-checked

with the primary source for accuracy, as correct transcription is vital to understanding messages.

Further research could weigh the messages yielded by the algorithms against messages

received in a chronologically. For this study, though, it is most useful to analyze messages that

are being widely received to understand their impact on the movement. This study will include

messages with positive and negative intent, as negative messages have been found to be a

motivating force in prior studies on social media based activist movements. Negative responses

will also allow for a more accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of the messages being shared.

Each text will be approached through a narrative lens of rhetorical criticism, allowing for

their effectiveness at shaping the audience's perceptions of the issue through storytelling to be

evaluated. Narrative lenses will provide an interesting perspective, as prior research on the

spread of activist movements through social media has shown stories to be a valuable resource. Many social movements rely on empathy from the audience and the sense of shared experiences to recruit new members. It will be interesting to interpret narrative messages from the Fridays for Future movement to weigh against engagement discussed in the scholarship of prior global network social movements.

IV. Summary

In order to understand the changing patterns of social movements in the digital age, extensive research must be conducted into the Fridays for Future movement, which has defied all patterns previously identified by scholars of horizontally organized movements without a clear leader. Greta Thunberg is a powerful speaker and a mobilizing force for youth. This study will explore the patterns of communication she uses to convey her messages and how youth perceive them. It will accomplish this by an in-depth rhetorical analysis of Thunberg's speeches from a narrative lens. Then, it will analyze Twitter posts tagged with relevant phrases for reactions to the communication elements of Thunberg's speeches. This study will take measures to ensure that algorithm bias does not impact the posts selected and that a sampling of both positive and negative responses are analyzed. With an understanding of Thunberg's rhetoric and its impact on her young audience, advances in engaging youth in social issues can be made, leading to better education processes and possibly tangible policy change.

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