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Research Proposal- Rough Draft

The Accidental Social Movement: An Examination of Hybrid Social Movements Through the "It Gets Better" Campaign

SYNOPSIS

As new communication technologies that access the virtual realm become more dynamic, their role in and use during social movements is becoming more prevalent. It is the purpose of this research to examine the role of social networking sites (SNS) and online user generated content (UGC) in creating and maintaining social movements, especially those that did not start out as social movements per se. By hoping to further research on new communication technologies, the virtual public sphere, social movements and the influences of techno- and mediascapes on globalization, this project uses the It Gets Better campaign to better understand the role of the Internet in social movements; how these movements affect change at the local, national and global scale, and; what the potential is for essentializng identity through the use of UGC online. Both the uploaded UGC from the It Gets Better campaign and the demographics of uploading and downloading from around the global will be analyzed to further understand this "accidental social movement."

FRAMING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Castells' (2012) examined the role of new communication technologies, like social networking, and their impact on social movements around the world. Outlining several different social and political movements from around the world, Castells (2012) explored what he calls "the new public space"— that "…networked space between the digital space and the urban space…" (p. 11) which he sees as a space of autonomous communication. This new public space is ground for the coalition of what Castells (2012) saw as networks of outrage and hope. As he conceptualized it, social movements are often born out of outrage: outrage at oppression and hegemony, personal rights violations and abuses. These movements are sustained through hope: hope that these movements can and will illicit social and political change. His research demonstrates how these new social movements fluidly move back and forth between the virtual and physical realms and that while much of the social and political change happens in the physical realm, movements are sustained, organized and given a global audience in the virtual realm.

One kind of movement that Castells (2012) does not focus is on is what I am called "the accidental social movement." This phenomenon occurs when an individual or group posts content online that goes viral and thus becomes a movement. There has been little research done on not only movements that stay primarily in the virtual realm but also those movements that did not start out with the initial intention of being political or activistic in nature.

This study looks at the effects of these accidental social movements by analyzing the effects of the It Gets Better campaign. Specifically, this research hopes to shed light on the following questions: How does the "purely online nature" of the movement affect its

effectiveness at the global, national and local scale? How does the It Gets Better campaign's origins in the United States affect the effectiveness of the overarching message in countries where sexual and gender minorities are not tolerated? How does the It Gets Better campaign essentialize and/or de-essentialize the experiences of gender and/or sexual minorities?

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This research proposes to look at a particular sort of movement that has been occurring mostly in the virtual realm, with moments of uprising within the physical: the anti-bullying movement within the queer community as started by the "It Gets Better" campaign. It Gets Better was started by Dan Savage and his husband, Terry Miller. In September 2010, Savage, a journalist, and Miller, posted a video on YouTube in response to the recent spate of suicides amongst young people who had been bullied because of their presumed sexual and/or gender identity expression. Originally, the video was meant to be a "one-off," a one-time posting that gave hope to young queer individuals who were facing harassment in their lives. The message was simple: please don't kill yourself because it gets better. Within a week, the video went viral and soon more people were uploading videos to the official YouTube site with the same message: "It Gets Better." To date, there are over 50,000 It Gets Better videos uploaded to the Internet, there have been MTV specials recorded, a book has been published, and there are grassroots campaigns across the globe that are trying to change policy within communities and societies to legislate against homophobic bullying ("It Gets Better," 2013). The It Gets Better campaign continues to increase in salience, specifically in the United States, because even as gender and sexual minorities are given rights in some states, they are being taken away in others. For example, in 2011, Michigan passed an anti-bullying law that had a clause that allowed for bullying based on strongly held "religious beliefs or moral convictions" (Hirschfeld, 2011). This loophole in the law was widely considered to be permissive to anti-gay bullying, as individuals who are arrested for hate crimes and/or bullying against queer individuals can quote specific "anti-homosexuality" verses from religious texts and provide evidence of their faith or their moral conviction (Hirschfield, 2011). In addition, the media's recent overall attention on bullying and harassment predicated on homophobia has led to some individuals to fear for their safety—especially during the tumultuous period of the coming out process.

The It Gets Better movement, like the others that Castells' (2012) examined, was born out of outrage: specifically Savage's outrage at the seeming social apathy at homophobic bullying and suicides. Also, like the other movements examined by Castells (2012), this movement is sustained by hope: in this case, literal hope that if queer youth can just stay strong, it will eventually get better. However, unlike the movements outlined by Castells (2012), the It Gets Better campaign was not originally intended to become a movement, it was merely two people with power and cultural capital using the Internet as an outlet for their outrage. In essence, the It Gets Better campaign became an accidental social movement trying to spread a message of hope. While there has been vocal criticism of this approach, mostly that we as a society cannot really guarantee that it is going to get better for all queer youth, there is no denying that the movement has been a cultural

zeitgeist and that there has indeed been change in states like Hawaii and Michigan, which have added anti-bullying statues and states like Massachusetts which have broadened already existing anti-bullying laws to include bullying based on sexual and/or gender identity expression ("Bully Police," 2012). More importantly, however, is that the virtual network created by the It Gets Better campaign is giving life-sustaining hope to queer youth who are living in states where there is no legal protection against anti-gay bullying. This campaign, however, has not been a queer utopia of hope, and while it has been the subject of praise from the highest critics, it has also been subjected to some of the harshest critiques, especially within the queer community. It is because of this seeming contradiction that I am interested in studying the It Gets Better campaign and its efficacy at the local, national and global level as an accidental social movement.

IMPORTANCE AND TIMELINESS OF RESEARCH

a. New Communication Technologies

Media System Dependency Theory. Media system dependency theory (MSDT) was developed in 1976 by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) as a framework to explain the relationship between audiences, media and the larger social system (Pearce, 2009b, p. 979). This theory works at both a macro-level and a micro-level. At the macro-level, MSDT:

> …examines the mutual dependence between the media system, the political system, and the general public. According to this theory, each member of the dependency triad is dependent upon and has influence over the other two. Each has influence over the other, yet each needs the other to exist. (Pearce, 2009, p. 624)

Often, MDST is utilized at the macro-level to examine how media is used during times of disaster (Hindman, 2004; Pearce, 2009a). At a micro-level, Pearce (2009a) noted that there "…are a number of things that can increase or decrease dependencies on a particular medium including the individual's needs and motives, social conditions outside of the individual's control, and life attributes" (p. 979). To understand how and why individuals become dependent upon a specific form of media, a typology of each dimension of dependency was created. Altogether, there are three typologies consisting of six dimensions: social understanding, self understanding, interaction orientation, action orientation, social play and solitary play (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). Meadows (2012) defined the dimensions of micro-level MSDT as such:

> Social understanding is learning about the world around you, while self-understanding is learning about yourself. Action orientation is learning about specific behaviors, while interaction orientation is about learning specific behaviors involving other people. Solitary play is entertaining yourself alone, while social play is using media as a focus for social interaction. (p. 31)

Since the creation of these typologies, micro-level MSDT has been used to examine a multitude of media and communication technology and the different forms of communication that take place over them. For the purposes of this research, MSDT has been conceptualized at the micro-level, drawing upon the specific typologies created by Ball-Rokeach (1985).

Recently, MSDT has been often used to explore and describe use of the Internet and other virtual spaces. For example, in research conducted to look at cancer patients' dependencies on health websites, Tustin (2010) found that patients who were unsatisfied with their doctors were more likely to be dependent upon medical websites than those who reported a high satisfaction with their doctor. In a 2008 article, Jung (2008) examined how environment affects Internet use. Overall, individuals who have access to a computer at both home and work will utilize computers for a wider array of functions than people who just have a computer at work (Jung, 2008). Whether or not the Internet is being used at home or at work, dependency on the Internet is increasing at a rapid rate. According to Riffe, Lacy, and Varouhakis (2008), approximately 30-50% of participants surveyed stated that they "…valued the Internet more than magazines, books, or friends or families as a source for in-depth information" (p. 1).

It is interesting to note however, that MDST often measures an individual's dependency on a media based upon the content or the ease in which the content can be delivered. To date, very little has been done to research how individuals become dependent upon a specific form of media based on the unique attributes of that medium itself. Part of this can be traced back to when MSDT was originally conceptualized. When Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) first published on the theory in the 1970s, the flow of information from media to consumer was asymmetrical, meaning that "individuals have goals that are contingent on the information resources of the media, but media system goals are not directly contingent on the resources of any particular individual" (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984, p. 5). However, as communication technologies evolve in ways that allow access to and creation of information by individuals who did not traditionally have access to it (e.g.- SNS, UGC, Internet ready televisions; Murdock, 2010), the information flow between users and media systems is becoming more symmetrical. Now, specific individuals can have an effect on a whole media system—as can be seen by content going "viral" on the web—a drastic change from when MSDT was first conceptualized. This ability to control and manipulate content within the relative safety of the virtual realm seems to be unto itself a reason why individuals are becoming dependent upon online forms of media (e.g.- manipulating various facets of one's identity with control of text, pictures and posts that are shared).

As the flow of information between media users and the media systems become more symmetrical, how and why individuals use different forms of media is also changing. In regards to the Internet and the virtual realm it provides, there is a new freedom from geographical constraints. This, coupled with the ability to control much of the content on one's own profile page, has proven to be useful to members of minority groups who may not have contact with each other in traditional communication settings. This ability to breakdown geographical barriers is one of a myriad of reasons why different platforms on

the Internet, including SNS and UGC sites like YouTube are being used in ways like no other form of media before. Specifically, new communication technologies that allow access to this virtual realm are not only allowing individuals to transverse previously impervious boundaries, but they are also allowing users to challenge and reinterpret intellectual property rights.

New Communication Technologies and Intellectual Property. One interesting aspect of the It Gets Better movement is how it uses new communication technologies to not only demonstrate how media users can have as much impact on the system as the media system itself, but that it also demonstrates a reworking of what intellectual property is and how it should be regulated. Like the hackers studied in Coleman's (2013), ethnography, individuals who post It Gets Better videos are using new communication technologies to challenge the notions of traditional intellectual property rights. While Savage and Miller created the first video, they do not purport to "own the idea" and encourage others to post videos and disseminate the information found in the videos. In this way, it echoes Coleman's (2013) examination of creative commons and "copyleft" laws. Rather than trying to control the information and ideas expressed in the original It Gets Better video, Savage and Miller have opened it to the global virtual community. In essence, the It Gets Better campaign has done away with the idea of a romantic author within the project. Even as It Gets Better challenges traditional notions of copyright and intellectual property, it brings up concerns about equal access to the messages being disseminated. In other words, who has access to this virtual public realm and are the people who need to hear the message the most the ones who are receiving it?

b. The Virtual Public Sphere

The virtual landscape of the Internet is something that has been of particular interest to scholars across disciplines for almost two decades now. Often, this virtual public sphere has been modeled as the utopian ideal of Habermas' (1962) concept of the public sphere. The public sphere, Habermas (1962) argued, is a place where private individuals (originally of the bourgeois class) come together in public to engage in rational/critical discourse. In order to engage in this rational/critical discourse, an individual must be seen and act as an equal to all others in the public sphere. In order to do this, an individual must "bracket," or set aside, that which is different. The problem with bracketing, however, was that anyone who had a trait that could not be "made invisible" was denied access to the public sphere. This then included women, people of color, people with disabilities, individuals of lower classes and those of minority sexualities (Fraser, 1992). In Habermas' (1964) vision of the public sphere, minorities who were unable to access the public sphere found that they had no voice within society. Not only are minorities silenced within this concept of the public sphere, but because they are not equal to those who are granted access to it and are seen as belonging to a counterpublic (Warner, 2002).

However, with the advent of the Internet, individuals who were seen as unequal in society and/or of belonging to a counterpublic were able to effectively "bracket" all that made them unequal because of the relative anonymity that the virtual public realm could

afford them.   In effect, those in the virtual realm were using the Internet and their computer as a "prosthetic body." According to Warner (2002), artifacts like computers that access the virtual realm act as "public, prosthetic bodies that take abuse for the private person" (Warner, 2002, p. 164).   For example, individuals who are struggling with their gender or sexual identity, SNS profiles have become virtual bodies with which they can negotiate their identity. In her 2007 research on gender bending, Ross (2007) found that women were using the anonymity of the Internet to strip away the heuristic gender cues that usually accompany face-to-face interactions. By doing this, the women Ross (2007) interviewed described a more dynamic and unique communication experience. Ross' (2007) research supported research done by Turkle (1995) who found that in the realm of virtual role playing games that the player's assigned corporeal gender did not necessarily match the gender they assigned themselves in the virtual world of the game.

What is of particular importance to this research is the fact that much of the It Gets Better campaign has taken place within the virtual realm. This partially might be because cyberspace does provide an alternative space to expressive themselves or tell their own version of it getting better in a less threatening space than the physical world can often be.   Del-Teso-Craviotto found that SNS and UCG help individuals to negotiate the articulation of language that will allow them to express their sexuality in their own terms (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2008). Even though much of the communication and activism for this movement is taking place online, there are still instances where it makes a tangible difference in the real world.   Therefore, this "social movement" seems to exist "in between" the physical and virtual realms.   There are questions about how this liminal aspect of the It Gets Better campaign affects the effectiveness of its message and what the repercussions are when there is a friction caused by the meeting of these two worlds. Like Bhabha's (1994). concept of the "in-between," this place between the physical and virtual realms could be "…innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" (p. 2). How the results of this collaboration and contestation manifest in both the virtual and physical realms around the world are of particular interest to this research project.

c. Social Movements

Social Movements in Virtual Spaces. In *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Castells' (2012) examined the role of new communication technologies, like social networking, and their impact on social movements around the world. Outlining several different social and political movements from around the world, Castells (2012) explored what he calls "the new public space"—that "…networked space between the digital space and the urban space…" (p. 11) which he sees as a space of autonomous communication. This new public space is ground for the coalition of what Castells (2012) saw as networks of outrage and hope. As he conceptualized it, social movements are often born out of outrage: outrage at oppression and hegemony, personal rights violations and abuses. These movements are sustained through hope: hope that these movements can and will illicit social and political change.   His research demonstrates how these new social movements fluidly move back and forth between the virtual and physical realms and that

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The "It Gets Better" movement, like the others that Castells' (2012) examined, was born out of outrage: specifically Savage's outrage at the seeming social apathy at homophobic bullying and suicides. Also, like the other movements examined by Castells (2012), this movement is sustained by hope: in this case, literal hope that if queer youth can just stay strong, it will eventually get better. While there has been vocal criticism of this approach, mostly that we as a society cannot really guarantee that it is going to get better for all queer youth, there is no denying that the movement has been a cultural zeitgeist and that there has indeed been change in states like Hawaii and Michigan, which have added anti-bullying statues and states like Massachusetts which have broadened already existing anti-bullying laws to include bullying based on sexual and/or gender identity expression ("Bully Police," 2012). More importantly, however, is that the virtual network created by the It Gets Better campaign is giving life-sustaining hope to queer youth who are living in states where there is no legal protection against anti-gay bullying. This campaign, however, has not been a queer utopia of hope, and while it has been the subject of praise from the highest critics, it has also been subjected to some of the harshest critiques, especially within the queer community. What is of particular note in this project is the fact that the It Gets Better project did not start out as a social movement nor did it ever really move out of the virtual realm, but rather has moments of "rupture" in the physical realm. Moreover, the relative ease of both posting and viewing online UGC from the privacy of one's own home brings into question the efficacy of what is being called "slacktivism" or "armchair activism."

Generally thought of to have been coined by Dwight Clark, the term slacktivism is a portmanteau of the words slacker and activism (Christensen, 2011). Originally, Clark used the term positively as a way to "…refer to bottom up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale…" (Christensen, 2011, par. 17). Today, however, the term has a mostly negative connotation to describe individuals who are not willing or able to participate in a full-blown activist campaign. As Christensen (2011) pointed out, however, the use of the Internet in so-called slacktivist campaigns can actually be a useful tool to reach a wide potential audience and to affect change in innovative ways. For example, when advocating for slacktivist movements, Bill Gates was credited with saying: "I choose a lazy person to do a hard job. Because a lazy person will find an easy way to do it" (Voakes, 2012, par. 2). In this way, social movements that have moved to exist primarily in the virtual realm are not merely forms of activism for the uninspired or half-committed; they are movements of innovation and mass dissemination that often reach a global impact.

d. Appadurai's -scapes and Globalization

In "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," Appadurai (1996) conceptualized the junctures and disjunctures created within the simultaneous heterogenization and homogenization caused by the global flows of information through the process of globalization. Appadurai (1996) created a framework of five different

dimensions within which both discursive and material realities flow: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. Drawing upon the concept of a landscape, these –scapes of imaginary flow within globalization also follow contours and irregularities. In addition, Appadurai (1996) noted that, like landscapes these – scapes:

> …also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements…and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. (p. 33).

For the purposes of this research proposal, particular attention will be paid to the techno- and media- scapes, however, this research will keep in mind the other of Appadurai's scapes because of interconnectedness of the –scapes, where a change in one often creates a ripple effect in the others.

According to Appadurai (1996), a technoscape is "…a global configuration…of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and information, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries" (p. 34). Similarly, a mediascapes "…refer both to the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information…which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35). Often, these two –scapes work in tandem, with the technoscape working as the material vehicle for the discursive images and information provided through the mediascape. As information flow becomes more symmetrical, with media users providing content at an increasing rate through the virtual realm, these flows across countries and cultures can often create both conflicting and complimentary messages. For example, Tsing (2005) examined the friction that is caused between cultures in the face of globalism. Specifically, Tsing's (2005) ethnographic work in Indonesia uncovered how the physical landscape of the Indonesian rainforests was being fundamentally changed by capitalism and competing factions both within and outside of the country. This friction between different cultures and interests continued to play out for Indonesian citizens after the fall of the Indonesian financial system and the resignation of their president, Suharto, however, now it was playing out in both the physical and the virtual realm. According to Ong (2008), after the Indonesian financial collapse, the Indonesian Chinese population was scapegoated as being the origin for the country's financial problems and were subjected to many of the same human rights violations that other Indonesians had suffered under Suharto's regime. In an effort to document and fight the ethnic cleansing that was taking place in Indonesia, ethnic Chinese from around the world started the *Global Huaren* online (Ong, 2008). While the original intention of the Global Huaren was to shed light on the atrocities occurring in Indonesia against their ethnically Chinese population, the virtual movement inadvertently made the issue worse by confirming the difference between native Indonesians and the Indonesian Chinese. In other words, the Global Huaren effectively

essentialized the experience of "being Chinese" on a global scale when all the Indonesian Chinese wanted was to be treated like all other Indonesians and to not have their Chinese heritage highlighted and spotlighted.

The use of media to disseminate information through the flow of technoscapes and mediascapes can also be used to de-essentialize identity also. In his essay entitled "New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall (1996) engaged in a discussion about the essentialized black figure. Specifically, Hall (1996) stated that the term "black" had been come to signify "…groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities" (p. 441). However, in the 1980s, because of access to funding and equipment that was until that point inaccessible, young, black filmmakers are able to start creating films and art that reflect their own multifaceted cultural, ethnic and racial experiences. These filmmakers in Britain were informed and influenced by Third World cinema, Afro-Caribbean culture, aesthetics and traditions of Asia and Africa (Hall, 1996, p. 447). According to Hall (1996), this access to technology and media de-essentializes what it meant to be black and what it meant to be British in the 1980s. The end of the essential black figure in 1980s Britain also required the required the recognition of the intersectionality between different facets of identity—class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, to name a few. Unlike Ong's (2008) example of the Global Huaren and the Indonesian Chinese population, Hall's (1996) example provides evidence that technoscapes and mediascapes can be used to add texture and nuance to the flattened, essentialized minorities through the use of new communication technologies. What is of particular interest in this research proposal is what the It Gets Better campaign does to the experience of being a gender or sexual minority in the world today through the use of techno- and mediascapes. Specifically, does this campaign de-essentialize the histories and experiences of queer populations or is it, like Ong's (2008) example, inadvertently essentialize the queer experience, flattening it to a "one size fits all" solution to the problem of marginalization amongst sexual and gender minorities?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ$_1$: How does the "purely online nature" of the movement affect its effectiveness at the global, national and local scale?

RQ$_2$: How does the It Gets Better campaign's origins in the United States affect the effectiveness of the overarching message in countries where sexual and gender minorities are not tolerated?

RQ$_3$: How does the It Gets Better campaign essentialize and/or de-essentialize the experiences of gender and/or sexual minorities?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

This research will combine both a thematic and demographic analysis. The thematic analysis will be based upon Castells' (2012) framework for examining the various social movements detailed within *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. Specifically, Castells'

(2012) stated that: "…my theory will be embedded in a selective observation of the movements, to bring together…the most salient findings of this study in an analytical framework" (p. 17-18). Similarly, I am going to selectively "observe" different aspects of the It Gets Better campaign within the framework of Appadurai's (1990) "-scapes" of the social imaginary, paying close attention to how both the technoscapes and mediascapes are informing and are informed by the flow of information created through the It Gets Better campaign. To do this, a representative sample of the over 50,000 videos will be watched and analyzed for content (what is the message? Who is the intended demographic for the message?) and origin.

For the demographic analysis, particular attention will be paid to where the highest frequency of uploads versus downloads of videos are occurring. This information is usually readily available from Google Analytics. The purpose of this is to understand whether or not this is indeed a worldwide movement and to also understand the implications of a very Western, neoliberal ideal of "things getting better" being disseminated to a larger global audience where gender and sexual minorities are being violently oppressed.

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