

### **What explains the success or failure of particular social movements?**

In this essay, I argue that the rise of the internet and social media has reshaped the determinants of social movement success. While historically, centralised leadership and hierarchical organization were crucial for success, digital platforms now enable decentralised, rapid mobilisation. However, this shift comes with new challenges, including fragmentation, short-lived activism, and government countermeasures. First, I will adopt Tarrow's definition of social movements and Gamson's definition of movement success. Then, I will examine which factors used to make social movements successful before the internet was so widespread. Next, I will argue that the dawn of the internet has fundamentally changed social movements and the determinants of social movement success. Finally, I will analyse the Black Lives Matter, Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street protests as examples of the successful application of the internet for social movements.

**Met opmerkingen [MOU1]:** You are not explaining why BLM was then more successful than the civil rights movement.

More theory before you talk about the internet.

This is a good essay, but in an exam you have to probably be more broad etc..

#### *Social movements and their success*

Tarrow bases his definition on Tilly and defines social movements as “*collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities*” (2011, 9). There are a few factors which determine whether this ‘sustained interaction’ is possible. Certain ‘powers in movement’ such as political opportunities/constraints, cultural artifacts and frames, or networks and organizations determine the outcomes of the social movement (Tarrow 2011, 120–21). Although Tarrow examines a variety of factors, this essay will focus primarily on networks and organizations as that factor has changed the most with the emergence of the internet.

**Met opmerkingen [MOU2]:** This is all empty, be more specific!!!

It is difficult to assess whether a movement has been successful. Movements have different goals. The women's and gay movements, for instance, had as one of their primary goals to shift public opinion instead of just challenging political opponents (Koopmans 2007, 701). Conversely, other social movements focus on specific policy issues. Gamson takes a two-dimensional approach to define the success of social movements. The first dimension is the *acceptance* of a challenging group by the political opponents. The second dimension is whether the social movement gets *new advantages* (Gamson 2015).

**Met opmerkingen [MOU3]:** You have to justify that organisations are important then, you cannot just focus on it because you decided to talk about the internet.

#### *Networks and organizations*

Historically, social movements have been on a spectrum between two extremes. On the one hand, there is complete *centralisation*. An example of this is the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The relationships between the

**Met opmerkingen [MOU4]:** Specify this more. Use this more later in your essay instead of just moving on.

**Met opmerkingen [MOU5]:** Clarify what you mean with centralisation.

leadership and the base were very formalised, which led to a very hierarchical organization. On the other hand, there were the anarchist movements in Eastern Europe where there was no hierarchy (Tarrow 2011, 124–26).

Gamson found in a study of 53 American groups that, using his definition of success, centralized and hierarchical organizations were more successful (Gamson 1990). The “resource mobilisation” school also argued that well organized organizations are instrumental to movement success (Koopmans 2007, 697). However, I argue that because of the emergence of the internet, this is no longer the case. Gamson’s study, for instance, only used social movements from 1800-1945 and does not consider modern social movements which more heavily rely on decentralised networks and digital tools for mobilisation.

**Met opmerkingen [MOU6]:** You do not expand on this, it would be more interesting to talk about this. The internet itself affects the resources and the mobilisation.

#### *How the internet transformed social movement organizations*

In 2011, protesters occupied Zuccotti Park in New York to protest inequality and corporate greed after the 2008 recession. Afterwards, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests spread around the world. The OWS movement did not rely on centralized organization. Rather, “OWS’s nonhierarchical structure enabled activists, some of whom had expertise in media platforms, to participate in content creation, curation, and proliferation” (Caren, Andrews, and Lu 2020). The internet and social media were instrumental for the OWS movement.

**Met opmerkingen [MOU7]:** But the OWS movement was not successful?

The internet has allowed for fast mobilisation on a large scale without the need for hierarchical structures. Because of the internet, several requirements which are necessary for successful social movements became easier to meet: rapid communication, decentralised coordination, and many-to-many interactions. This allows spontaneous and decentralised social movements to emerge without formal leadership (Caren, Andrews, and Lu 2020).

Another example of this is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. After a police officer shot to death black teenager Michael Brown, protests emerged against racism and police brutality. The movement started online with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which makes it another example of a spontaneously emerging movement that shows the mobilising effect of online activism.

#### *Challenges of internet-based movements*

However, although the internet enables rapid mobilisation, it also introduces challenges. The first challenge is that it is difficult to sustain momentum. Because many of the modern decentralized movements had no central organization, they struggled

with longevity. Although the OWS movement was to a certain extent successful as politicians were more likely to talk about economic equality afterwards (Caren, Andrews, and Lu 2020), the movement did not last. Because of the lack of leadership and organization, OWS was not able to transition from protest to policy change (Tufekci 2017). Garza also highlights that although online activism was important for the emergence of the BLM movement, the BLM movement did not occur because of a spontaneous hashtag but because of long-standing organization efforts (2020; Taylor 2019). She emphasises that movements are not just built by viral movements but by people and collective action.

Therefore, Tufekci underlines the fragility of networked movements (2017). Unlike movements such as the US civil rights movement, which spent years building networks and strategies, modern protests struggle with sustainability. The decentralisation also causes the problem of fragmentation. During the Arab Spring in Egypt, for instance, social media facilitated weak-tie connections which allowed for large-scale mobilisation. In the aftermath, however, after Mubarak was toppled, Egypt struggled to transition into stable democratic governance because of the fragmentation in the social movement. Consequently, the military reclaimed control by utilising the power vacuum.

The last challenge is the ability for governments to adapt and utilise social media. Authoritarian regimes learn how to use the same digital tools that activists use to do surveillance, spread misinformation, and flood social media (Caren, Andrews, and Lu 2020). Tufekci argues that digital platforms can be manipulated by states to maintain control: "Rather than a complete totalitarianism based on fear and blocking of information, the newer methods include demonizing online mediums, and mobilising armies of supporters or paid employees who muddy the online waters with misinformation, information glut, doubt, confusion, harassment, and distraction, making it hard for ordinary people to navigate the networked public sphere, and sort facts from fiction, truth from hoaxes" (Tufekci 2017, xxviii). China has adopted a measure of mass censorship and thoroughly regulates what is available on the internet, and Russia has been quite successful at misinformation and foreign intervention in democratic elections.

All of this shows that, in the modern age, the factors that determine social movement success have dramatically changed. Social media now plays a key role in mobilisation. Although some centralisation is still required to achieve the *new advantages* (as Gamson argued), it is no longer needed for mobilisation. This means that the success of social movements now depends on social media algorithms (Caren, Andrews, and Lu 2020). Activists have to master digital storytelling, hashtags, and media cycles and are no longer as dependent on traditional media as they were.

In conclusion, I have argued that the internet and social media have completely reshaped social movements. It has been both advantageous and disadvantageous at the same time. On the one hand it makes mobilisation easier, but on the other hand it makes it more difficult for movements to organize a central leadership. It has also become a tool for authoritarian governments to spread misinformation and maintain power. Ultimately, while traditional methods of organization may still play a role, the internet has reshaped the very fabric of social movements, making them more dynamic, decentralised, and unpredictable.

Met opmerkingen [MOU8]: You argue that the internet can cause both directions.

### Bibliography

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