Online Collective Identity: The Case of the Environmental Movement

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Abstract
A social movement consists of organisations that are linked together by a common purpose or issue (the protection of the natural environment, in the case of the environmental movement). Competition between social movement organisations for members, resources and attention can be conceptualised using multi-organisational fields, and the explicit incorporation of network theory enables an understanding how the structural position of actors in the field might influence their actions, for example, their response to an exogenous shock such as an emergent issue of concern. In this paper, we extend the “social movements as organisational fields” framework to take account of the fact that social movements such as the global justice movement and the environmental movement are bypassing the mass media, which tend to highlight mainstream views, and are making extensive use of the Internet for communicative purposes. We present a model where online social movement organisations use hyperlinks and website text in collective identity formation, and we provide a network-theoretic approach for empirically determining the “structural signatures” of online collective identity. We empirically test our model using web data for over 160 environmental activist organisations.

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