

A Community of Protests: Social Space as a Field Site

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Introduction and Methodology

Growing up in the heart of Washington, D.C., I have become accustomed to the substantial crowds that swarm the city - from countless Fourth of Julys and numerous presidential inaugurations to the copious amounts of tourists that plague my hometown throughout the summer. Despite all these events and happenings, none prepared me for the magnitude and atmosphere of the 2017 Women's March following the inauguration of President Donald Trump. Although it was on the same street I had driven to and from school on - in a car almost as old as myself and filled

with six teenage girls laden with heavy text books and weighed down with exhaustion - the march transformed the once familiar setting. The wide boulevard swarmed with people ranging in ages from infants to grandparents, and I was overpowered by the scent of pot, which is an uncomfortable experience to share with your mom. In all the hustle and bustle of the environment, it struck me that I had never been a part of such a wide-reaching event. As one person described the event: "it was like a Boston-based title party for a championship but raised to the tenth-degree." As crowded as it was in D.C., similar events were occurring almost simultaneously across the country and even across the world, connected by photos, tweets, and messages.

With no clear field site, I instead turned to the "social space" occupied by the numerous and wide-ranging Trump protests (Marston 2007: 45). Although the International Women's March did not occupy a single geographical space, and was not hindered by traditional borders and frontiers, the movement was and still is, I would argue, bounded by social attitudes. I considered the movement using multisite ethnography, "an attempt to approach our subject as it appears in various places, studying it in the multiple sites it emerges" (Davies 2009: 21). The Women's March defied the local-global dichotomy, occurring in multiple places simultaneously, as well as online. The increasing globalisation has made many formerly national issues global, necessitating the "transnational coordination among movement activists", (Roberts 2015: 153) exemplified by the Women's March and other protests aimed at the Trump presidency. Even looking at singular locations of the march, such as Independence Avenue in D.C., the protest occupied a "non-place", a space that exists but does not house an "organic society" (Auge 1995: 90). The march inhabited a public road, typically used by those getting



from point A to point B in cars.

To overcome the difficulty of studying a site spanning cities and continents, while only attending the Washington venue, I turned to interviewing people who had gone to the Philadelphia, London and D.C. marches. I found many participants via their social media posts, and then got in contact with them over Skype. For multisite ethnography, social media serves as an “entry point into larger and more complex worlds,” (Bonilla 2015: 7), such as protests. Due to my own age, the participants tended to be in their early twenties, and many from the D.C. area, which may have influenced my findings.

Finding Unity of a Mob: Symbols of a Protest

The inorganic creation of the community in the International Women’s March, forced members to seek a sense of unity through chants, clothing, posters and other protest paraphernalia. Symbols and iconic images serve to rally a crowd, incite support, and encourage the construction of a collective identity, especially important for a movement taken up around the country (Kharroub 2015: 1987). The International Women’s March employed the “pussyhat”

to serve as a counteracting symbol to the Trump “Make America Great Again” hats. The organisers also released official posters, designed by the same artist who created Obama’s 2008 election campaign poster; printing the images as full-page ads in the local papers. Both the organisers and individual participants worked to create a community through symbols.

Not only were there official images released by the organisers, numerous people and organisations were distributing posters to marchers. My mom, who went without a sign and attended mostly to chaperone me, was handed a sign printed up and handed out by NARAL (National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws) Pro-choice America instructing “Keep your laws off my pussy.” Although given to my mom, I took it back to school and hung it on my living-room wall. Word about the poster and march spread quickly around my friends. While just a piece of paper with words printed on it, the poster became a badge of participation and identity; the “previous collective action created an esprit de corps, a togetherness’ that continued past the moment of action itself” (Crane 1989: 409).

Amanda, a twenty-year-old student at the College of Charleston, which she describes as a liberal bubble within the conservative state of South Carolina, flew home to D.C.

for the weekend to attend the Women's March. Amanda, while not a "sign type of person" felt united when "some lady gave me a hat, you know one of those pink "pussyhats." Because the hat served as a physical, "conceptual representation of a group membership," carrying or not carrying a sign became a moot point (Butz 2009: 780). Although she never directly interacted with or befriended strangers in the protest, Amanda found unity in an accessory which provided "tangible evidence of belongingness" (Butz 2009: 784).

Similar to how holding a sign or badge allows the individual to become part of the whole, declining to take part in the use of collective symbols can enable a person, however present, to refrain from being a part of the collective. Meaghan Byrne agreed to be interviewed on the condition of anonymity, so I have given her a pseudonym. Meaghan has requested to be anonymous due to her job as a journalist for Bloomberg-BNA, a trade publication. A twenty-six-year-old Washington native, Meaghan was instructed by her superiors to refrain from partisan activities during the inauguration weekend. Meaghan attended the march anyway, believing it was "important to attend because of the rhetoric and unvarnished misogyny" of the Trump campaign. At the protest, however, she abstained from carrying a sign, or other symbolic paraphernalia, insistent on maintaining her journalistic, non-partisan, integrity. Meaghan said had she not needed to remain unbiased:

I definitely, probably would have carried one of the official signs of the march; and I think perhaps if I had gone into it knowing I would carry a sign, I probably would have tried to brainstorm something clever or topical ... and since I am clever and topical I'm sure I would have succeeded.¹

Acknowledging the symbolic importance of carrying a sign or wearing a "pussyhat," Meaghan adhered to her journalistic oath and prevented herself from joining into the international community of the march, allowing herself to publicly be just a body in the crowd rather than a member of the cause.

Ian, founder of the audio network Goat Rodeo which specializes in podcasts, says he was a "somewhat unwilling participant in the march." He decided that after a year of following the campaign, "when the circus finally came to D.C., I was looking forward to not having to participate or be a part of the sea of people." Due to the large size of the crowd all trains were re-directed toward the protest location, preventing Ian from leaving the city. Not planning on attending and without a desire to join in the collective identity, Ian declined to wear or hold items that symbolized the community, saying he had "many a button pinned on me, somewhat unwillingly." Rather than actively taking part in the march, Ian used the unplanned outing to record b-roll to sell to radio stations and other news networks. Ian's interview not only showed his preference of the word "unwilling", but also illustrates, that while a desire to partake in the group identity encourages use of symbols, an indifference to the unity results in a neglect and in some cases a dislike of participating in it.

The locations and backdrop of protests heavily influences the collective identity that develops from the civic engagement (Crane 1989: 396). Much of the interest in the International Women's March came from its ability to occur in multiple locations, both in the United States and abroad, with the main protest occurring in the capital inhabited by the new president. The location of Washington, D.C. served as a geographical symbol to those attending the main march. For Emily, a New York

native, protesting in D.C. “politically sent the message I wanted, of being a physical body in D.C., and personally it made it more meaningful”. Emily, absent from social media and unable to make a sign in the allotted time she had in D.C., looked to the symbolic nature of being at the central march as a way of promoting her own membership within the larger group. Emily emphasized the symbolism of being in D.C., pointing to the many celebrities who joined the same locale. Emily offered further proof of celebrities, saying, “I personally am of the belief that I saw Rosie O’Donnell ... I mean she hates Donald Trump so she was probably there”.² John Michael Roberts suggests monuments can “act as anchors for alternative public spaces of dissent to emerge in cities” (2015: 19). Protesting in the same geographical location the president was inaugurated in less than twenty-four hours earlier created a symbol of opposition to the regime and united a group with little else in common.

Finding Unity and Individuality in a Mob: The Use of Social Media

The use of social media served to unify the many locations of the International Women’s March and allowed individuals to promote their own identity and membership within the larger community. Using social media enables people to “engage with the larger social and political issues on an individual’s terms” (Kharroub 2015: 1977). Modern technological trends allow for the organisation and promotion of movements online and can create a cohesive identity promoted by individuals within the group.

Zoe, a second-year student at the University of St. Andrews and a native of New York City, attended the Women’s March held at Trafalgar Square. Zoe went to the event with her cousin, who helped with organising the protest and managed the social media presence. While helping her cousin, Zoe said,

“she had to be tweeting every few minutes ... photos or speeches ... [since] it was a really important part of getting people out there”. The popularity of a movement often hinges on the perceived attractiveness or averseness of the group, which increasingly relies on an online presence and reputation (Klandermans 1984: 586). Individuals are more likely to take part in and identify with social groups and movements as it becomes more popular, and the millennial age group more often than not looks to social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter.

Jubilee, a sophomore at Villanova University and founder of the school’s Feminist Society, organised a group, through the society she resides over, to march at the Philadelphia branch of the International Women’s March. Jubilee turned to Facebook as a means of coordinating those of her fellow students who were interested in attending the march, and she continues to use Facebook to remain involved in the continued struggle against the Trump’s residential regime. Jubilee is a member of a Facebook group named “Call Pat Toomey Every day.” The group encourages its members to call a notoriously unresponsive representative letting him know what they expect as constituents. Through Facebook, Jubilee relied on “collective efficacy,” keeping faith in the ability of a shared values and concerns to encourage individual and group action (Braun-Lewensohn 2016: 663). Although used prior to and following the protests rather than during, the use of social media bonded a group determined to take action and not forego their identity when their geographical community dispersed.

While social media can be used to organise and promote a group unity, it also serves to promote an individuality to those both inside and out of the movement. Max Weber presents the charismatic leadership

theory, encouraging the idea that a leader must “maintain recognition through ‘proving’ himself” (Weber 2013: 246). Weber’s ideas on the need to present oneself as simultaneously a part of the group and an individual apart from the group can be seen through the social media use of many attending the International Women’s March.

Amanda looked to Facebook to post articles about the march both before and after the event, using it as a platform to promote politically oriented articles about the Trump presidency and his actions. Amanda emphasises articles regarding the funding of Planned Parenthood and the president’s attempts to defund the organisation. She does so because of her own connection to the women’s organisation, stating the non-profit is more helpful than the on-campus medical clinic, which, in her experience, has been somewhat inept in their care. Amanda promotes her experience and group identity through social media because she thinks it is “important to show other people that they can and should be doing the same thing.” While her action could be deemed as political “slacktivism,” – political activism occurring online rather than in person – Amanda’s online movements serve to cement her identity within the protest against Trump and promote her individuality within the group. Like many others, Amanda proves her loyalty and the criteria fulfilments through outward signs online (Pettenkofer 2008: 268). Like Amanda, Jack, a sophomore at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., turned to social media, in particular Snapchat, to preserve his position in the march. Jack “posted on Snapchat a few times, partially to save the pictures for later and to give my perspective on the magnitude of the crowd.” He employed his social media presence to represent himself both within the masses as a part of the global community and distinguish himself from a faceless mob.

A social media presence can help create and re-enforce a collective boundary in opposition to the world, crafting a collective identity rooted in rejection rather than acceptance. The organisers of the International Women’s March tried to foster the intersectionality of feminism, to many women and men of colour it seemed to fail based on the final diversity of the crowd, and at times their own social media presence. Ebele, a first-generation Nigerian-American and Harvard graduate, who made last-minute plans to attend the march in D.C., expressing his

“reservations around the Women’s March was the fact that it seemed to reiterate once again another march that was ignoring the intersectionality of what it means to be a woman in the US, ignoring the blatant history of not recognizing the various challenges of what it means to be a woman of colour”.

Despite his misgivings, Ebele did attend the march and turned to social media to document his experience. However, when turning to Snapchat he says “I experienced something while using that medium that was quite disconcerting, that reaffirmed my reservations”. He asked me “any guess as to the personification of the Women’s March, as to what it might look like in a filter?” and being the teacher’s pet that I am, I answered correctly... “that’s right, a white, blonde, blue-eyed woman”. As Ebele explains “it was an ‘I told you so’ moment I didn’t want to have”. Despite tireless efforts to re-brand the march as an all-inclusive, intersectional women’s equality movement it failed to breach every platform of social media.

Modern technology has made an online presence and organisation all the more important in the formation of social movements. Social media enables easy distribution of information and communication of details, but also allows for a visual of the popularity, often encouraging more to join. Social media also

promotes the creation of a collective identity of community, breaching traditional and geographical boundaries. “Community formation lays in the foundation for an online politics of alliance that can overcome the limitations of postmodern identity politics” (Meuleman 2014: 52). Use of social media allows for the continuation of a community, like that found in the International Women’s March, that transcends its geographical and temporal limits. Online presence can also hinder the ability of a movement to reach individuals, as is the case of Ebele, failing to adhere to their rhetoric of intersectionality.

to be shrinking and conventional frontiers are breaking down. Protests present a community that, although only physically together for a short period of time, continue to take from and build a community spirit and interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion: Finding A Community

Many who attended the various locations of the Women’s March and other protests aimed at the President-elect and then President Trump looked for a collective identity from the marches, a community that would expand beyond the space and time of the events themselves. Being a member of a large and seemingly faceless crowd forces people to seek individuality while remaining within the collective identity promoted by the organising forces. The International Women’s March presented symbols taken up by those in attendance to create an artificial boundary, separating the movement. Attendees committed to and eager to join in the community zealously took up these symbols, wearing “pussyhats,” carrying posters, and other paraphernalia. Following the protest, many turned to social media to continue the spirit of the marches and entrench themselves within the community through a visual representation of their group membership. Those uninterested in the community of the protests, or apprehensive about the goals, shied away from publicly promoting their participation both online and at the march, declining to carry signs or wear pins. Protests present a captivating field in a time when traditional field sites seem

NOTES

1. At this point I believe it is important to say, Meaghan was being somewhat sarcastic at the end of her statement, but she does genuinely believe she is both “clever and topical.”

2. Emily was rather defensive of her celebrity spotting due to the fact all the friends she attended with refuse to believe it and frequently tease her about the encounter.

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