

Movement–Media Relations in the Hybrid Media System: A Case Study from the U.S. Transgender Rights Movement

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Abstract

Whereas social movement–media relations were, in the era of mass media, a dialogic relationship of mutual, albeit asymmetric, dependency between news makers and social movement organizations, the hybridization of the media system has complicated matters considerably. The dialogic tensions that drove organizations’ access to the political information environment have been supplanted by new tensions—tensions that have transformed organizations’ media work routines. Organizations must now manage tensions over the temporality of issue emergence, tensions between identity and policy knowledge as sources of expertise, tensions between emotional charge and informational novelty as criteria of newsworthiness for journalists, and tensions between policy demands and media demands in the formation of communications strategy. And these new tensions demand new work practices oriented toward addressing multiple audiences concurrently and via multiple media streams. Because the discourses of social media influence the press to such an extent, the successful management of press discourse requires both direct influence via routine media work targeting journalists *and* indirect influence via steering digital media discourse—the combination of which presents significant resource costs to movement organizations. This article draws on an ethnographic case study of media work in the U.S. transgender rights movement to extend theorizations of movement–media relations to account for the structuring influence of the hybrid media system, illustrating these new tensions in the context of the panic over transgender passport policy that erupted in the summer of 2018.

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In his foundational work on movement–media relations, Todd Gitlin (1980) portrayed a media system that could easily be confused for our current one. The media system had recently been transformed by technological changes and institutional consolidation, which increased the speed and efficiency of communicating messages to the broad public. Suddenly “floodlit” (Gitlin 1980: 15) by this new system, movements needed to change their means and modes of communication to succeed in affecting the social and political order. Gitlin was discussing broadcast television though, and for him the commercial nature of mass news media and the attendant profit-oriented practices of newsmaking precluded certain types of visibility for social movements. Mass news media would never carry social movements’ critical messages about the dominant order, but rather would always marginalize them and portray them as dangerous. They would engage in “ideological domestication . . . taming and isolating ideological threats to the system” (Gitlin 1980: 13), only incorporating the critiques of movement actors who betrayed their core radical identities to be more palatable to the system mass media worked to protect.

This understanding of movement–media relations, which Bernadette Barker-Plummer (1996) aptly called the “strong hegemony” model, dominated critical studies of media and political activism for decades (e.g., Entman 1989; Gamson 1995; Herman and Chomsky 1988). However, its empirical and theoretical foundations were weak and, though Gitlin justified this model through an extended case analysis of the New Left, subsequent case-based research in a number of movements showed that movements held far more power than the strong hegemony model suggested (e.g., Andrews and Caren 2010; Barker-Plummer 1995, 1996, 2002; Benford 1993; Carroll and Ratner 1999; Rohlinger 2014; Ryan 1991, 2004; Ryan et al. 1998). Accordingly, Barker-Plummer (1995, 1996) offered an alternative “dialogic” model to account for the sustained patterns of collaborative interaction among movement actors and media actors that formed movement–media relationships. Per this model, social movements and mass media entered into strategic relationships in which they sought to understand and employ one another’s discourses. Over time, they developed mutual dependencies such that journalists became dependent upon social movements for newsworthy information, while social movements became dependent upon journalists for the transmission of their messages to the public (Barker-Plummer 1995, 1996; Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Thus, if social movements succeeded in building dialogic relationships with the press, they could (contra Gitlin) affect media discourse in ways that advanced their own critical objectives, shaping how journalists framed stories pertaining to their issues and ensuring coverage of stories that would otherwise have gone unreported.

Most research on social movements and media activism has produced findings consistent with this dialogic model. Across a variety of contexts, scholars have shown that so long as movement actors abided the dominant logics and routines of the news-making process, they could succeed in shaping news content (e.g., Andrews and Caren 2010; Rohlinger 2014; Ryan 1991, 2004). Doing so entailed understanding the criteria of “newsworthiness” held by journalists and editors (e.g., pseudo-events, research reports), learning journalists’ work routines and informational needs (e.g., print deadlines, press release styles, statistical information), designating well-trained spokespersons or media “principals,” and establishing trusting relationships with sympathetic journalists (Andrews and Caren 2010; Barker-Plummer 2002; Rohlinger 2014; Ryan 1991, 2004). Then, when movement actors constructed messages in ways that resonated with the existing cultural and political environment and actively responded to the maneuverings of competitor actors and institutional elites, they could establish themselves as legitimated political agents with influence on press discourse (Evans 1997). To borrow language from media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach 1985), at this point the movement–media relationship became one of mutual dependency to the extent each side of that dialogue had access to the resources necessary for the attainment of the other’s goals. And this was true at both the individual level of activist-to-journalist and the system level of movement-to-media (Barker-Plummer 1996; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993).

However, the introduction and proliferation of digital technologies disrupted this dialogic relationship by altering the balance of dependency between movements and mass media. Movement actors now have both direct and indirect access to the broad public (albeit limited) outside of mass media (e.g., Bennett et al. 2018; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014; Tufekci 2013), while the press is even less dependent on institutionalized movement actors for access to movement-relevant information (e.g., Papacharissi and Fatima Oliveira 2012). Though it remains true successful movement media work requires operating within the dominant media logic, the dominant media logic of Western democracies has fundamentally shifted. As Andrew Chadwick (2017) has argued, older and newer media logics have blended into a “hybrid media system” (HMS), replacing news cycles (and their attendant rhythms and routines) with “political information cycles.” In distinguishing political information cycles from news cycles, Chadwick (2017: 73) defined the former as “complex assemblages in which the logics—the technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms—of supposedly ‘new’ online media are hybridized with those of supposedly ‘old’ broadcast and newspaper media.” While the logic of the older mass media was characterized by the selection and packaging of information by professional journalists in accordance with dominant news values, the logic of newer media is characterized by the selection and packaging of information by laypersons “according to their individual preferences and attention maximizing” (Klinger and Svensson 2015: 1246). In the hybrid system of political information; however, these boundaries blur such that mass media often act in accordance with new media logics and new media act in accordance with mass media logics (Chadwick 2017; Jungherr 2014). As a consequence, digital media—and, in particular, social media—form a discursive field that

influences the press, turning the dialogic relationship of movements and media into a triadic relationship at best and more often a completely networked one (Guggenheim et al. 2015; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Jungherr 2014; Papacharissi and Fatima Oliveira 2012). This transformation has displaced the dialogic tension between movements and media, between activists and journalists, and brings new tensions to the fore that govern movements' ability to shape media discourse on their issues.

This article draws on a case study from the U.S. transgender rights movement to extend theories of movement–media relations to account for the structuring influence of the HMS. Specifically, I illustrate how the supposedly dialogic relationship between movement actors and media actors has unraveled as social media discourse has become an important site for newsmaking and issue emergence. I further identify four new tensions produced by the HMS that social movement organizations must contend with as they seek to control (and, failing that, to capitalize on) digital discourse's influence on the press and, in so doing, maintain their privileged relationship with journalists. Finally, I demonstrate how, due to digital media's influence on the press, the successful management of press discourse requires both direct influence via routine media work targeting journalists *and* indirect influence via steering digital media discourse.

Methods and Case

Fieldwork: The National Center for Transgender Equality

The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in Washington, DC is, in the words of Anthony Nownes (2019: 40), “the dean of transgender rights organizations.” NCTE operates alongside broader LGBTQ rights organizations, but is unique among them for several reasons, including its sole focus on transgender concerns and its transgender leadership.¹ Since its founding in 2003, NCTE has emerged as the leading organization for the transgender rights movement, and its media placements and policy achievements evidence that fact. For these reasons, among others, NCTE was the site I chose to study the relationship between media and the transgender rights movement.

During my time in the field, work at NCTE was divided into five departments, all of which were overseen by the executive office, led by executive director Mara Keisling. Those departments were: Communications (Comms), Development, Operations, Outreach and Education (O&E), and Policy. Policy was the largest division, with five staff members, while Comms and O&E each had four staff members. However, the Comms and O&E departments together comprised the media work of the organization, bringing the total number of media workers at the organization to eight compared to Policy's five. Even these numbers are somewhat misleading, though, as most work was project-based and completed by cross-divisional teams. Like most social movement organizations (see Armstrong and Bernstein 2008), NCTE sought long-term policy change as a means to political equality, but public education and cultural change were just as central to the organization's mission. And while policy priorities often determined the focus of the Comms and O&E staff's media work,

Comms and O&E just as often set priorities for the Policy team based on the issues (both cultural and political) circulating in media.

My core research methods consisted of participant observation and interviews at NCTE over the course of 2017 and 2018. I approached the participant observation portion of this work guided by Richard Swedberg's (2014) conception of the research process, dividing the project into two phases. The first phase, the "prestudy," consists of early field observations during which the researcher identifies a phenomenon inadequately explained by existing theory. The prestudy for this project was conducted as a Consortium on Media Policy Studies (COMPASS) fellow at NCTE over three months in the summer of 2017. In this role, I worked for both the Comms and O&E departments in an intern-like capacity. This pilot study indicated striking disjunctures between the types of movement-media relations described in prior models and the emerging models of relations I observed suited to an evolving media system with new organizing logics.

The second phase of Swedberg's research process, the "main study," consists of a more focused research design oriented toward answering the research questions raised by the prestudy. My main study consisted of seven months of participant observation at NCTE from June to December 2018. Throughout these seven months, I was in the office at least eight hours per day, five days per week. My observations again focused primarily on the Comms and O&E teams, though I was present at many meetings with and of Policy team members, as well. I took field jottings during meetings, trainings, rallies, staff interviews with journalists, and various other relevant events, and later expanded those jottings into complete fieldnotes. Per Paul Lichterman's (2002) approach to theory-driven fieldwork, I analyzed fieldnotes via the constant-comparative method (Corbin and Strauss 2008) as they were collected, memoing emerging theoretical insights to inform subsequent observation decisions. This process also informed the generation of interview protocols. Each Comms staff member was formally interviewed twice, as was each O&E staff member except the director, who was interviewed once due to scheduling constraints. Additionally, two Policy staff members were interviewed. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and were transcribed and then analyzed alongside fieldnotes. (For a more thorough discussion of reflexivity and positionality within the field site, see Billard 2019)

Case: The Panic over Transgender Passports

Over the course of my fieldwork, NCTE often found themselves decentered in ways that disrupted their supposed dialogic relationship with mass media. I isolate one specific case in order to illustrate the nuanced dynamics involved in such cases. The case began in July 2018, when the online transgender community became aware of two instances in which prominent transgender women were denied passport renewal. Both women claimed in viral tweets their denials were discrimination by the Trump administration, which had been openly hostile to the transgender community.² NCTE became aware of these cases through Twitter but, after determining both instances were anomalous and did not reflect any change in policy, declined to comment publicly in hopes

of mitigating public attention to a non-issue. However, the same day NCTE decided against commenting, *them*, Condé Nast's LGBTQ-focused digital news platform, published a story based on both women's tweets, claiming the State Department was "retroactively revoking" transgender citizens' passports.³ This report was then picked up by other (non-LGBTQ-focused) news outlets and circulated for a number of weeks, despite NCTE's efforts to minimize the story and correct widespread misunderstandings about the passport policy. Then, in mid-September, NCTE learned (again via Twitter) of concerning-seeming (albeit substantively negligible) changes to the State Department's webpage dedicated to passport gender marker changes.⁴ This time, NCTE got ahead of the story, using social media and relationships with journalists to steer the narrative on transgender passport policy, even pressuring the State Department to reverse course.⁵ In both iterations of the passport crisis, NCTE contended with social media as a site of newsmaking as they worked to maintain a privileged (but no longer dialogic) relationship with the press, while controlling the narrative on transgender issues.

My analysis of this case revealed four new tensions at the heart of contemporary movement-media relations. First are tensions over the temporality of issue emergence: movement organizations must adjust the temporal rhythms of their media work in order to preempt individual actors who are empowered to influence media discourse by their public digital presences. Second are tensions between *identity* and *policy knowledge* as sources of expertise: movement organizations find themselves in a position where competing criteria for expertise must be met to ensure their voices are represented, while striking a balance such that appeals to one criteria of expertise do not jeopardize their appeals to the other. Third are tensions between *emotional charge* and *informational novelty* as criteria of newsworthiness for journalists: movement organizations must balance the affective communication styles that make representations of events attention-grabbing in the social media sphere with the veracious communication of novel information that traditionally makes representations of events newsworthy to professional journalists. Finally are tensions between *policy demands* and *media demands* in the formation of movement organizations' communications strategy, which often need to balance the fact their public communications simultaneously reach multiple audiences, including mass media, the public, their constituencies, and their movement field competitors, but also the political institutions they work to influence. Of course, these four tensions are highly interrelated and the case at hand makes clear these complex interdependencies.

I argue, accordingly, we must reconsider extant models of how social movement organizations and journalists interact in the HMS. Movement organizations have both direct and indirect access to the public outside the press, while journalists are less dependent on organizations than before for access to movement-relevant information. The digital media sphere—in particular, social media—form a discursive field that influences mass media, and so maintaining influence over mass media content requires maintaining influence over digital media content. Maintaining influence in the digital sphere, in turn, requires communicating according to the logics of "new" media. Thus, though features of an older dialogic relationship between movement organizations and

journalists persist, they have largely been supplanted by the new tensions produced by the HMS that determine the ability of organizations to influence the press.

“Is the US Government Revoking Passports for Trans People?”

On June 29, 2018, Danni Askini, a prominent transgender activist then based in Seattle, Washington posted to her Twitter that she was denied renewal of her U.S. passport pending proof both of U.S. citizenship and of gender transition.⁶ The tweet went out to her roughly 3,500 followers but quickly spread beyond this network. By July 2, her post had been retweeted almost 10,000 times, liked almost 17,000 times, and was being discussed by almost 11,000 people on Twitter alone. This discourse suggested that, as a prominent trans woman, Askini was being targeted by the government. Though there was no evidence to support this interpretation, it produced real fear among trans people, fueling the spread of her tweet. Then on July 25, another prominent trans woman shared a similar story: Janus Rose, a New York-based technologist and writer, posted to her over 5,000 followers her passport was “retroactively invalidated” by the State Department.⁷ She even quote-retweeted Askini’s original tweet, explicitly linking their situations.

By Friday, July 27, social media attention to the issue had reached critical mass, and NCTE’s media relations manager, Gillian Branstetter, raised the mounting tension on Twitter for discussion in the morning Comms check-in. Comms staffer Laurel Powell seconded, noting several people had tagged NCTE on Facebook and Twitter regarding the issue. Laurel suggested releasing an unofficial statement—“just something on social saying, ‘hey, we’re aware of these reports. We’re looking into it and we’ll share more as we get it.’” Then-interim Comms director Dave Noble asked how many people had tagged NCTE to gauge whether attention was low enough to avoid commenting. Gillian highlighted that the number of people tagging NCTE was much smaller than the number seeing the information. NCTE had an opportunity to calm their fears, assuring everyone there was no change in policy and they were looking into the reports. With trans people’s fears quelled, hopefully attention to the issue would die down and it would escape the notice of either journalists or, worse yet, the Trump administration. The decision, per leadership, was to not shine a spotlight on a “non-issue” for fear of turning it into one.

By the end of the day, however, *them*, Condé Nast’s LGBTQ-focused digital news platform, published a story on the women’s experiences, amplifying social media discourse. The article, written by Mary Emily O’Hara, claimed the State Department was “retroactively revoking” transgender citizens’ passports.⁸ While O’Hara’s story included exclusive interviews with both women, the sources of the story were their tweets, which were embedded throughout the story. Indeed, O’Hara’s framing of the issue came directly from the tweets, linking the two cases together in the same manner Rose had done on Twitter. As trans people, Rose and Askini were accepted as experts on the issue even though they lacked any specific policy expertise. NCTE was not

contacted for the story, despite their longstanding positive working relationship with O'Hara and their expertise as authors of the passport policy. As such, no alternative explanation for these isolated experiences was offered. The article turned Askini and Rose's isolated personal experiences into a transgender rights issue and further fueled panicked discourse on social media.

Within twelve hours at least six other news outlets picked up O'Hara's story, including Washington-insider darling *Axios*, online women's magazine *Bustle*, progressive Univision subsidiary *Splinter* (aggregated by *MSN*), and queer online news magazine *LGBTQ Nation*, among others.⁹ These outlets amplified the issue further, and each both pointed to the original tweets as the source of the story and reflected their unchallenged framing. In fact, most news outlets that picked up O'Hara's story replicated the quotes in the original story, providing no secondary verification or additional sources.

NCTE at this point realized the story would not be contained, and they needed to respond urgently. Media relations manager Gillian convened the Comms and Policy teams to draft a response and by Saturday, July 28 the response was posted to Twitter, where it could circulate among the news-making tweets, in addition to being emailed to journalists.¹⁰ As Comms staffer Laurel explained, the statement "was just put out under social media [rather than as a formal press release] because that was where the concern was coming from."¹¹ Like much correction to misinformation, however, NCTE's statement hardly spread as fast or as far as the original story, both in news media and on social media (it was retweeted a mere 175 times and liked only 205 times).

NCTE's statement ultimately provided a counter-frame for the original accounts, but it was hardly as compelling. The statement simply stated the policy had not changed and that Askini and Rose's cases involved "unusual circumstances and bureaucratic mistakes."¹² Though the statement was technically correct, it relied on people trusting NCTE as policy experts more than they trusted Rose and Askini as affected people, and in the midst of a fear-driven panic the calm tone of the statement was less noteworthy than the frenzied tweets of community members. This meant it received less attention from both journalists and civilians alike. While several members of the trans community with upward of 10,000 followers each retweeted NCTE's statement, as did the largest LGBTQ rights organization in the United States, HRC, few news outlets updated their stories or ran new stories about the statement. The counter-frame of the reported events offered by NCTE failed to meet the criteria of newsworthiness that would ensure press attention to it because, in Gillian's words, "our statement poured water on the fire they were building, and they couldn't say, 'This thing you just read 600 words on actually isn't happening.'"

From NCTE's perspective, the framing they offered was best because, though they of course wanted media discourse to change, NCTE's role was to step in as a policy authority to ensure trans people they could still change the gender marker on their passports. As media relations manager Gillian commented in an interview, Askini and Rose were "taken as an authority because of their following."¹³ Where this authority is presumed to apply to policy, it can present major problems:

if there's a bunch of headlines out there about the State Department turning trans people away when they go to renew their passports, then most trans people just won't renew their passports. They aren't going to look up the line and letter. So, we needed to do that.¹⁴

Policy staffer Arli Christian was sympathetic, in particular, to Askini choosing to go public with her story. Nonetheless, they regretted the consequences of her and Rose's publicity, saying, despite the fact that "by Department of State policy, it was nothing new," there was a large amount of "community attention that came on these stories" because they each had a "very large platform."¹⁵ The end result was widespread fear. Gillian felt this was especially true because "to most people, two points make a line."¹⁶ At the same time, Gillian saw this as further evidence of a point she had been making to her colleagues: "we don't drive the public conversation in the way maybe we would hope . . . when NBC and CBS are calling, it's too late."¹⁷ For people used to fighting to convince journalists to cover their issues at all, as veterans at the organization were, clamoring to respond to mass media attention driven by others was a new and uncomfortable task.

At the Monday morning Comms check-in media relations manager Gillian thanked everyone for their work over the weekend on the passport crisis, remarking there was "a surprising amount of press on the story." She continued with a soft reprimand:

It's been numerous times since I've been here that we've said, "Well we don't want to talk about X. We don't want to talk about X because it will make noise about it." But we need to start recognizing when the water breaks that we risk not looking like leaders in our community by staying silent.

In trying to serve their policy interests by remaining silent, they ended up both failing their interests in controlling media discourse *and* undercutting their policy expertise. Policy director Harper Jean agreed and apologized for encouraging NCTE's silence. Gillian made clear she was not looking to assign blame, but she wanted to use this as an example. Indeed, it did become an example, and NCTE made reference to this incident when considering the timeline of their future actions. As Policy staffer Arli mentioned to me in an interview, "I wish we had said something a little bit earlier because I actually do think if we cut this a couple days earlier, we could have nipped a lot of the panic."¹⁸ NCTE had learned the cost of finding themselves at odds with the logics of the HMS.

The dynamics of the passport crisis, while hardly new to NCTE, stood in sharp contrast to the dynamics of their other work on ID document issues. The passport story was published quickly and, perhaps ironically, by a journalist with whom NCTE had a longstanding relationship. But the story broke while NCTE was in the midst of a long-term collaborative project on ID documents with journalists at *Vox* and *ProPublica*, with whom NCTE was eager to build new relationships. NCTE's involvement with these journalists—Lucas Waldron and Ken Schwencke—began in April 2018, when they interviewed Policy staffer Mateo De La Torre.¹⁹ Waldron and Schwencke kept in touch with NCTE over the following months, and on July 30, the same day NCTE's

statement was finally beginning to be picked up, Policy staffer Arli was interviewed from *Vox*'s DC offices. The interview covered the patchwork of gender marker change laws and policies in the United States and their consequences, but to Arli and Gillian's relief, did not include questions on the passport issue. As the interview concluded, Gillian asked the on-set producer when and where the final video would appear. He said he didn't know, but it would certainly be on social media, YouTube, and the *Vox* website. The article finally appeared on August 16, *five months* after first contacting NCTE.²⁰ In the midst of a slow-burn project working directly with journalists to serve as a resource and shape their narrative, the instantaneous emergence of the passport crisis over Twitter was a major disruption to NCTE's media work. Put another way, in the midst of a traditional dialogic relationship with journalists, NCTE was caught off guard by how relationships with other journalists could work in a new media system.

Gillian had expected O'Hara would contact her prior to running a story like the passport one but she didn't; the dynamics of their dialogic relationship broke down. In response, NCTE found an alternative mode of influencing discourse on the issue: serving as a resource for Askini and Rose. Since the press was attributing their expertise on the grounds of their trans identities—and denying NCTE's policy-based expertise—NCTE decided to influence Askini and Rose's communications and thus, indirectly, the press's framing. As Arli told me, Rose "had qualms about the fact her story got so much publicity," so Arli talked her situation through with her and explained the common policy reasons behind her seemingly uncommon situation.²¹ NCTE similarly made itself a resource to Askini. As Gillian noted, Askini was really only aiming to have her specific issue resolved and she was being inundated with interview requests she didn't want to deal with. Though NCTE preferred journalists had come directly to them, since they didn't NCTE found a way to capitalize on their sourcing routines. NCTE offered to help Askini with the policy and getting her issue resolved and had her redirect interview requests to them. Askini went on to make a public Facebook post scaling back her claims and noting her case was unique, and this post was even picked up alongside NCTE's statement in *LGBTQ Nation*.²² By the end of the week, the passport issue seemed resolved and NCTE was once again in control of the public narrative on transgender ID documents.

“The State Department Has Responded to Your Concerns . . .”

The initial passport crisis recalibrated NCTE's responsive dynamics. When news began circulating the passport crisis might not be over on Wednesday, September 12, NCTE took immediate action, lest journalists again source the story from Twitter. Around 8 p.m., media relations manager Gillian sent an email to the Comms and Policy teams reporting folks on Twitter had noticed concerning changes to the State Department's website offering instructions on changing passport gender markers. She outlined the major changes, the most concerning of which was that "a U.S. passport does not list the bearer's gender identity" and the sex marker on a passport requires "medical certification of sex change" to alter.

O&E director Raffi Freedman-Gurspan responded, “Not good. Let’s discuss tomorrow.” Almost immediately thereafter, Comms staffer Laurel replied, as well: “I’m curious if someone from Policy can review. If this is as significant as it sounds, we may want to respond ASAP.” Policy director Harper Jean responded later, noting the actual Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) State Department employees use to process passport applications had been “renumbered and very slightly revised,” but, compared side-by-side, the policies and procedures had not changed. The changes Gillian noted were to the “information for travelers” page. She added that she or Policy staffer Arli should call the State Department in the morning and ask what prompted the FAM and travelers page changes. Beyond that, she advised monitoring the conversation on Twitter and, at some point, perhaps “repeating or refreshing our previous statement” that nothing had changed.

The Comms team members were less willing, after the Askini/Rose case, to treat this as nothing new. Laurel and then-deputy Comms director Jay both expressed an urgency to responding substantively, with Laurel writing, “while I trust your reading of the policy more than some random person on Twitter, it’s going to be significantly harder to tamp this down than it was before.” Even if NCTE was right about the policy, they needed to think about how it would look to journalists and the digital public. While Laurel may have trusted Harper Jean’s analysis more than “some random person on Twitter,” others likely wouldn’t. Gillian instructed everyone to “jump on the Comms line” to discuss.

On the line everyone agreed an immediate response was necessary, but the team debated the balance between ensuring policy accuracy and specificity and managing the fear and outrage of the community. There was clear awareness the framing needed to reflect truth *and* be compelling, that it needed to speak to the press *and* to the community on social media. Policy director Harper Jean expressed the important thing was to let everyone know the policy hadn’t changed even if it looked like it, and they shouldn’t worry. Laurel and Gillian were more insistent it didn’t matter the policy hadn’t changed if the way the public receives information about, interprets, and behaves in relation to it had.

There was then a secondary debate about if the website changes were a deliberate attempt by the State Department to make acquiring accurate passports harder for trans people. The community would think so, everyone agreed, and, as NCTE had previously denounced, the Trump administration had already deliberately erased information on LGBTQ resources from government websites in other instances. Media relations manager Gillian asserted confidently “they’re trying to obfuscate policy and confuse people”—and that framing would grab journalists’ attention. Policy director Harper Jean more conservatively countered the public page to explain the policy was revised to “emphasize restrictions and deemphasize trans people’s rights.” She urged quite strongly NCTE could not attribute ill motives here, because NCTE still needed a productive working relationship with the State Department at the end of this. The team settled on her framing of the issue, as it struck sufficient balance between those circulating in social media discourse and technical accuracy. The end conclusion was, in essence, to note what the changes were, note this was suspect (without specifically

assigning intent) because it fit the trend of erasing LGBTQ resources, and urging people to exercise their rights nonetheless and not fear any changes in policy.

By 11:47 p.m., the statement was drafted by Gillian, approved by leadership, sent out to journalists, and posted to NCTE's social media accounts. The statement tagged the Twitter user who first noted the changes to ensure the statement would circulate among the burgeoning discourse. It also included a quote from executive director Mara Keisling that described the changes as a move that seemed "designed to frighten, confuse, and keep trans people from exercising their full rights under the current policy," deliberately emphasizing an emotional reaction to the news trans people would identify with and journalists would find compelling, while also including truthful information assuring trans people they could still update and renew their passports.²³

The next day, several news outlets picked up NCTE's statement, including *The Advocate*, *Rewire.News*, former *Newsweek* conjoint *The Daily Beast*, and culture and politics magazine *Rolling Stone*.²⁴ Not only did each cite NCTE as the source of the story, they also stuck closely to NCTE's framing. Each article led with the newsworthy hook the Trump administration had made changes to government websites indicating potential targeting of the transgender community, but subsequently presented NCTE's point that trans people could still update and renew their passports. Moreover, because NCTE had incorporated the discourse circulating on social media, only one of the published articles included social media actors as additional sources.²⁵

However, NCTE did not limit their messaging activities to the initial statement or interactions with the press. They circulated their message further through social media, where they could continue to speak to multiple audiences, as well as control the discursive field, thereby limiting the emergence of counter-frames over time. In the Comms team check-in on September 13, media relations manager Gillian mentioned she tagged the "usual suspects" of journalists in the statement on Twitter and Comms staffer Laurel suggested doing Facebook Live with executive director Mara basically rearticulating the statement, followed by a live Q&A with Policy staffer Arli. Then later, Laurel added, they should do a "Twitter chat" with Arli. These social media activities let NCTE simultaneously put trans faces (and not just an organizational name) to the issue and ensured accurate policy information would circulate online.

Later that day, Gillian exclaimed from the Comms office "State backed down!" Once the Comms team and Mara were all in the office, Gillian explained Kate Sosin, a journalist at *Into* with whom NCTE worked frequently, had forwarded her an emailed statement a press officer in the Bureau of Consular Affairs sent them walking back the changes, with instructions it "may be used on background, attributable to a Department of State Official." The statement confirmed the policy had not changed, apologized for "any confusion" and "inadvertently including some language which may be considered offensive," and promised to immediately reverse the changes made to the website. Mara thanked "everyone who hopped on this" because the rapid response secured enough press attention and consequent pressure to change the State Department's actions, earning NCTE both a media win *and* a policy win in one fell swoop.

The assembled group drafted NCTE's statement announcing the State Department's apology. Policy staffer Arli was particularly excited to frame the apology as a win for

NCTE, while Comms staffers were less convinced. As Gillian said, “It’s a win for us because we are nerds and because this is our job.” For everyone else, this was a momentary relief that the worst had not happened *yet*, though it still could. Laurel asked, then, if NCTE wanted to reconsider doing the Twitter chats and other social media activities. Mara immediately replied, “No.” As she said later, “this an ongoing problem. This is like our fourth fire alarm.” Doing the Facebook Live and Twitter chat would offer an opportunity to shut down and redirect the “chatter,” as Laurel called it, on social media by taming the community’s emotions. The end result was a statement that spoke directly to the trans community via Twitter, while obviously addressing the press, as well. By 12:27, NCTE had posted the update to Twitter.²⁶

That afternoon, *Rewire.News* and *The Daily Beast* updated their stories to include the State Department’s statement after receiving confirmation of the apology directly from the Department by email.²⁷ Following those updates, *Bustle* published an article headlined “Passport Language for Trans People Changed Overnight—Then was Reversed after Criticism,” detailing the events of the preceding 24 hours.²⁸ The next day, *them* published an article on the events, but this time the article was written by John Paul Brammer and centered solely on NCTE’s statements, even directing readers to NCTE’s recent Facebook Live and the upcoming Twitter Q&A.²⁹ Again, the issue of passports had finally subsided, but this time NCTE had, throughout the crisis, retained control of the public narrative on transgender ID documents.

Discussion

NCTE’s management of the panic over transgender passport policy makes clear the complex ways the HMS has transformed how social movement organizations work to influence the political information system. Clearly Gitlin’s (1980) “strong hegemony” model of a movement-suppressing mass media fails to describe the current media system, as a greater number of actors with lesser institutional power find themselves nonetheless capable of driving news media discourse. At the same time, the “dialogic” model described by Barker-Plummer (1996) and evidenced by much of the past literature on movement–media relations in the era of mass media no longer holds either. In the current HMS, this dialogic relationship of mutual exchange between journalists and movement actors has unraveled as the digital sphere has emerged as a key site of newsmaking and issue emergence. The dialogic tensions that once structured movement–media interactions have been replaced with four new tensions produced by the HMS, which have in turn caused movement organizations to develop new means of influencing the press agenda.

The first tension is over the temporality of issue emergence. The digital news environment is driven by the news value of immediacy, which has emerged as a demand of the network logics of social media (Klinger and Svensson 2015). The temporal logics of social media drive those of news making and, as a result, the content of social media often informs the emergence of issues and their coverage as issues of political significance. Further considering that social media provide journalists with immediately-available sources, the discourses of social media become the discourses represented in

mass media (e.g., Chadwick 2017; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Klinger and Svensson 2015). This was clearly evident in the first emergence of the passport crisis: Askini and Rose posted tweets that quickly reached a mass circulation and within two days of Rose's tweet, O'Hara had written and published a news story about them, sourced entirely from those tweets. Once that story was published, it took less than twelve hours for another half dozen stories to appear from other outlets. For movement organizations to succeed at influencing the political information environment under these conditions, they must adjust the temporal rhythms of their media work to suit those of social media. Accordingly, when word of changes to the State Department website reached NCTE, they worked quickly to preempt any individual actors with large digital presences from drawing attention to the issue, getting their own statement out over social media within a number of hours. The tweets containing that statement then became sources for the number of news outlets that reported on the changes.

The second tension is between *identity* and *policy knowledge* as sources of expertise. Organizations' impulse to use policy expertise to validate their claims comes both from their role as political actors who must be taken seriously on matters of policy in order to be legitimated as such and from their traditional relationships with journalists as subject matter experts (e.g., Barker-Plummer 1995; Horn 2000). Only secondarily do organizations validate their expertise on the grounds of their individual identities as constituents of their movement (Carroll and Ratner 1999). NCTE was no exception, expecting their analysis of policy to drive how journalists and the public perceived the passport issue because they were "the experts." However, in the contemporary media system, expertise is often "crowdsourced" from figures with digital prominence regardless of the "factualness" of their commentary—though their commentary is usually presented as factual "news" (Papacharissi and Fatima Oliveira 2012). The basis on which these figures are deemed legitimate commentators is that their identity or their individual experiences relate to the topic being reported (Castells 2015). Such was the case with Askini and Rose's tweets, which overrode NCTE's analysis as the dominant interpretation of events. Like other movement organizations, NCTE thus found themselves in a position where competing criteria for expertise had to be met to ensure their voices were represented. When the passport issue reemerged in September, NCTE adjusted course, putting the faces of transgender staff members out over social media to discuss the issue. These staff members could speak simultaneously *as* trans people and as experts, while striking a balance such that appeals to their transness as a source of expertise did not jeopardize appeals to their policy expertise.

The third tension is between *emotional charge* and *informational novelty* as criteria of newsworthiness for journalists. In the traditional relationship between movements and media, movement organizations provide journalists with novel and trust-worthy information that meets their criteria for coverage (Andrews and Caren 2010; Barker-Plummer 2002; Rohlinger 2014). In the new communication system, however, news is more often *affective*, and what makes an occurrence newsworthy is the emotional charge of the event as represented by the source, regardless of its veracity (Papacharissi and Fatima Oliveira 2012). The fear that drove social media discourse surrounding Askini and Rose's situations, for instance, made their situations newsworthy. NCTE's

calm-voiced assurance everything was fine was hardly as newsworthy, and thus failed to command journalists' attention. However, movement organizations are conventionally more restricted in their ability to communicate with affective charge than private citizens with large digital platforms, much less to such a degree that the news story centers on the emotiveness of their communications. Yet, when informational novelty is insufficient to steer press attention, organizations must balance these two competing criteria of newsworthiness in ways that appeal to journalists *and* the social media sphere. Accordingly, when the passport issue reemerged, NCTE grappled with how to represent the trans community's rightful fear in a way that would make their statement newsworthy, while still ensuring attention was paid to the new information about the policy they wanted conveyed.

The final tension is between *policy demands* and *media demands* in how movement organizations craft their communications, which they must do with an eye toward the multiple audiences their public communications reach simultaneously. These audiences include mass media, the public, their constituencies, and their movement field competitors, but also the political institutions they work to influence. Moreover, they address these multiple audiences via multiple streams, including mainstream digital news publications, community-focused news publications, and social media platforms. As a result, organizations must be strategic in how they communicate so as to fit within the media logics of the contemporary communication system, while still ensuring they have not, in the process, precluded the possibility of affecting change within the political system. When the passport issue first emerged on social media, NCTE made the policy-driven decision not to comment because they didn't want to draw public attention to the Obama-era policy that the antagonistic Trump administration could overturn and because they didn't want trans people to become aware of these isolated incidents and think they couldn't update and renew their passports. However, they made this decision at the expense of controlling media discourse on the issue. When passports reemerged as an issue, NCTE knew they needed to be the ones steering media discourse this time. Nonetheless, they needed to maintain positive relationships with the State Department to protect their access to policymakers and the status of the passport policy under a hostile administration, so their public statement was carefully crafted to be effective at gaining press attention without damaging their political standing.

These four tensions combine to produce a form of movement-media relations that is much more complex and dynamic. Because the discourses of social media influence the press to such an extent, the successful management of press discourse requires both direct influence via routine media work targeting journalists *and* indirect influence via steering digital media discourse. Above all else, this article illustrates with nuance how organizations navigate these tensions, contributing new empirical depth to our understanding of the dynamics of movement-media relations in the HMS.

Beyond this primary contribution, this article offers a number of important theoretical insights. First, much work on the HMS has maintained a dichotomy of elite political actors (almost always conceived of as journalists and elected officeholders) and non-elite actors (usually bloggers, social media influencers, and similar) who interact to

produce political information (e.g., Chadwick 2017). Where social movements have been considered, they have generally been conceptualized as decentralized networks of often on-the-ground protestor-activists (e.g., Occupy, *los indignados*, etc.) whose social media communications succeed in influencing press agendas because of the hybrid logics of the contemporary media system (e.g., Bennett et al. 2018; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014; Tufekci 2013). My research intervenes to reassert the significance of institutionalized movement organizations in contemporary social movements and to recontextualize decentralized networks of actors as existing in competitive collaboration with organizational actors. The effects of these networks, as my case study demonstrates, are seen not only through their direct influence on the press but also through their influence on the discourses and framings deployed by movement organizations. At the same time, when organizations work according to the same logics as those decentralized actors, they can prevail over them in shaping both digital and mass media discourse, offering both direct and indirect influence over the press.

Second, and relatedly, my research caveats the sanguine view that social media have enabled movements to mobilize supporter bases, bypass news gatekeepers, set public agendas, and increase visibility for their causes. While this is sometimes true, social media discourse is at times more costly for movements than it is beneficial. In line with resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977), media can be understood as a strategic resource for movements, but one that, per Barker-Plummer (2002), requires the mobilization of significant organizational resources to attain. From this perspective, the need to contend with social media-generated nonissues and misinformation just to maintain influence over the press represents a significant cost to movements as organizations are required to redirect their finite resources away from substantive issues. At the same time, failing to do so represents a significant cost to organizations' ability to effectively influence the political system, as they lose control over their movements' public agendas. In short, the HMS has created more resource-intensive media work for movement organizations. As such, the transition to the HMS has had undertheorized consequences not only for movement-media relations, but also for the efficacy of movement organizations more broadly. Future research into movement-media relations (and media activism more broadly) should endeavor to better understand these organizational costs, as well as to understand the complex interrelations of different communications spheres (national/mass, local/community, and social network/digital) as it relates to the development of movement communication strategy.

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Notes

1. NCTE is one of three transgender rights organizations that operates nationally as of the time of writing. The other two are the Transgender Law Center (TLC) in Oakland, California and the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund (TLDEF) in New York City. However, both organizations differ from NCTE in focus; TLC and TLDEF both focus primarily on litigation, rather than advocacy, and TLC focuses heavily on California politics, though it operates outside the state occasionally. Moreover, neither TLC nor TLDEF has as extensive connections to broader civil rights movements or as robust public communications programs as NCTE.
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5. National Center for Transgender Equality (TransEquality), Twitter post, September 13, 2018, 12:27 p.m. <https://twitter.com/TransEquality/status/1040275698022330368>.
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 15. Interview with Arli Christian, September 6, 2018.
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