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Deciding what's (sharable) news: Social movement organizations as curating actors in the political information system

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ABSTRACT
News is often sourced not directly from journalistic outlets, but from various actors that "curate" content into individuals' information networks. Although these curating actors impact the news individuals receive, little is known about their behind-the-scenes curatorial decision-making. Addressing this gap, I isolated one kind of curating actor in the flow of political information: social movement organizations. Drawing on an ethnographic case study from the U.S. transgender movement, I analyzed the "logics of curation" at play in organizations' social media practices. These logics included the internal criteria by which they decided what news stories to share, how they decided when and by which media each story should be shared, and what they hoped to achieve as the end result of curation.

The common means of producing, distributing, and consuming political information have changed in recent decades as social media platforms have become ubiquitous tools of daily communication. A greater number of actors have become involved in the processes of gathering and spreading news beyond professional journalists, who traditionally held a near-monopoly on the flow of political information, or even so-called citizen journalists, who emerged with the rise of blogging in the 1990s (Allan, 2009). Many people now receive their information on important social and political issues not from journalists but through the public (and sometimes private) communications of what Thorson and Wells (2016) called "curating actors." These actors engage in various activities that "curate" the content that flows into individuals' personal information networks, including "the production, selection, filtering, annotation, [and] framing of content" (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 310). And they include both human and non-human entities, as well as audience members themselves, who often employ the affordances of social media platforms to curate their own individualized informational experiences (Merten, 2021).

One key, but under-considered category of curating actor is social movement organizations. These organizations have always, by definition, worked to influence the political

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information system in ways that support their desired definitions of sociopolitical problems and endorse their proposed solutions. However, whereas social movement organizations historically achieved influence in the political information system through building relationships with professional journalists (Barker-Plummer, 1995; Billard, 2021) and/or producing their own alternative media (as they still often do; Costanza-Chock, 2014), they have increasingly relied on social media platforms to gain such influence, engaging in the kinds of curatorial labor Thorson and Wells (2016), among others, described.

Although past research has demonstrated that curating actors have a significant impact on the political information environment in general, and on individuals' personal political information networks specifically, most researchers have asked what content finds its way into individuals' media feeds and with what effects, drawing on frameworks centered on selective and incidental exposure (Anspach, 2017; Kaiser et al., 2021; Kümpel, 2019; Merten, 2021; Thorson, 2020; Wells & Thorson, 2017) and algorithmic filtration (DeVito, 2017; Diakopoulos, 2019; Thorson, 2020; Thorson et al., 2021; Trielli & Diakopoulos, 2020). Missing from the literature is a robust account of the actual curatorial activities curating actors engage in (cf. Merten, 2021; Trilling et al., 2017). What decisions do curating actors make behind the scenes, how do they arrive at those decisions, and why are those decisions the ones that prevail? This article moves to fill that gap, taking the National Center for Transgender Equality, the leading organization of the U.S. transgender rights movement, as a case study to investigate how social movement organizations (as one category of curating actor) engage in curatorial work over social media and what logics underpin their curation of political information.

From "news" to "political information"

Traditionally, "the news" has been conceptualized as an informational product produced and distributed by professional journalists working for (often corporate) mass media organizations (Bennett, 2016; Carlson, 2020). A variety of perspectives in political communication and journalism studies, however, have noted the importance of decoupling "the news" from this traditional definition and reconceptualizing it as a product of numerous interacting actors across a variety of media (Chadwick, 2017; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). As Wells (2015) argued, the current media environment is far too complex to only consider professional journalism in how we think of individuals' "experiences of political communication" (p. 7; see also Chadwick, 2017; Wells et al., 2020). The contemporary media system is characterized by new sources of non-professional journalistic content (such as blogs, social media, etc.), new means of distributing and consuming this content (including receiving content directly from elites and having content passed along and reframed by social contacts), and new orienting logics. These logics center on the selection and packaging of information by private citizens "according to their individual preferences and attention maximizing" (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1246), rather than by professional journalists according to widely shared news values (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2021; Richardson, 2020). These changes make journalism *an* institution of news, but not *the* institution of news.

Accordingly, a growing literature has argued it is helpful to think of news not as the product of journalism, but as "the continuous flow of facts, opinions, and ideas that help

citizens understand matters of potential public concern and identify opportunities for action" (Wells, 2015, p. 7; see also Chadwick, 2017; Rossini et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2020). Citizens receive these facts, opinions, and ideas through complex networks of often highly individualized communicative resources that include – and sometimes even center on – the products of journalism, but that extend to include a variety of actors imbued with discursive power by the contemporary media system (Chadwick, 2011, 2017; Jungherr et al., 2019). In articulating many of these changes, Chadwick (2011, 2017) argued for a shift away from the common concept of "news cycles" to a new concept of "political information cycles." Whereas "news cycles" consist of the temporally rigid routines of elite interaction that produce regular news products like morning newspapers and evening broadcasts, "political information cycles" consist of "complex assemblages in which the personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities of supposedly 'new' online media are hybridized with those of supposedly 'old' broadcast and press media" (Chadwick, 2011, p. 7). Importantly, political information cycles involve new flows of news content, as numerous loosely connected individuals, groups, and institutions interact in highly interdependent ways to attract and maintain attention to certain facts, opinions, and ideas, and to assert grounds for their significance (e.g., Billard, 2021; Karpf, 2017; Lee, 2018). Taken together, these ideas bring us to a "political information" perspective that attends to "news" in ways that center non-journalistic actors and privilege information flows over information consumption.

The curated flows of political information

In articulating their concept of curated flows, Thorson and Wells (2015, 2016) took as a point of departure the idea of *gatekeeping*. Within the study of political communication, gatekeeping is the term applied to the curatorial activities of news editors, who decide which information will be presented as news items and which will not – a decision driven by news values (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In line with a political information perspective, however, Thorson and Wells (2016) argued gatekeeping practices are no longer elite-driven, and "comparable processes of 'curation' are undertaken by a variety of actors" (p. 309). These actors include (1) journalists, who individuals are already accustomed to thinking of as curators of political information; (2) strategic communicators, such as politicians, interest groups, and advertisers, who bypass journalists to communicate directly with publics; (3) individual media users, who both deliberately and inadvertently decide which kinds of content they want to engage with; (4) social contacts, who share information into their social network feeds for friends and followers to see; and (5) algorithmic filters, which use personal data on past behaviors and stated preferences to "decide" which content to show individual platform users (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Of course, these categories of curating actors are not mutually exclusive. For instance, algorithmic filters use an individual media user's personal curation behaviors as input to determine which content to show them in the future (Davis, 2017; DeVito, 2017; Thorson, 2020; Thorson et al., 2021). Likewise, social contacts often share content curated by journalists with friends and followers (Anspach, 2017; Kaiser et al., 2021; Kümpel, 2019), and their friends and followers are more likely to see that content because it was shared by a social contact due to the algorithmic prioritization of friend relationships (DeVito, 2017). Accordingly, the spread of political information involves

multi-step flows of curation involving numerous actors from original content creators to ultimate content consumers.

Since the publication of Thorson and Wells' framework, various scholars have investigated how political information is curated by different actors. Most of these scholars have focused on individuals' practices of "self-curation" (Merten, 2021), curation by social contacts (Anspach, 2017; Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Kaiser et al., 2021; Kümpel, 2019), and curation by algorithms (DeVito, 2017; Diakopoulos, 2019; Thorson, 2020; Thorson et al., 2021; Trielli & Diakopoulos, 2020), as well as how these three forms of curation intersect (Davis, 2017). It is important to note, though, that although the curated flows perspective emphasizes the capacities of non-journalistic actors to produce and distribute novel political information, most research employing this perspective has specifically considered the flows of journalistic news content (cf. Marquart et al., 2020). That is, these studies have investigated how different actors curate the flows of news articles produced by journalistic actors (both mainstream and alternative), (re)directing attention to those articles through sharing practices, and reframing or otherwise annotating them in ways that shape whether/ how the information they contain is received and interpreted (Anspach, 2017; Kaiser et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2020; Kümpel, 2019). As such, the study of the curated flows of political information is, at present, largely an endeavor to understand how curating actors engage in informational communications vis-à-vis extant news content.

Social movement organizations as informational actors

Of Thorson and Wells' (2016) five categories of curating actors, the least considered in the literature thus far has been strategic communicators. Where strategic communicators have been considered as curating actors, they have primarily been conceived of as politicians, who can use digital media to bypass traditional news gatekeepers to communicate political information directly to their desired publics (Marquart et al., 2020; Sobieraj et al., 2020), or (less frequently) as advertisers who can micro-target persuasive appeals directly to their desired market segments (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). One of the most important sets of strategic communicators in the contemporary political information system, though, is political advocacy organizations. These organizations – variably called "social movement organizations" (Billard, 2021; Etter & Albu, 2021), "interest groups" (Crowder, 2020), "civic organizations" (Wells, 2015), and "nonprofit advocacy organizations" (Guo & Saxton, 2014, 2018; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Svensson et al., 2015) in the relevant literature – are responsible for providing people with much of the political information they receive through digital media. These organizations differ from other strategic communicators like politicians and advertisers in that they function more like social contacts individuals have opted into following because of shared identities and/or political orientations (Crowder, 2020; Wells, 2015). At the same time, these organizations are distinct from social contacts in that their communications are rarely "personal" and are easily identifiable to followers as organizational in nature (Guo & Saxton, 2018; Wells, 2015).

But what kinds of content do these organizations actually curate into their followers' feeds? Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) provided a widely cited typology of how nonprofit

organizations use social media that may hold: the "Information-Community-Action" scheme. First, organizations post *information* content that aims to provide "news, facts, reports or information" relevant to their constituents and to the organization's everyday activities (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 343). Second, organizations post *community* content that aims to create dialogue among constituents and/or between constituents and the organization, with the ultimate aim of producing a sense of community. Finally, organizations post *action* content that aims to mobilize constituents to take some kind of action, ranging from donating to the organization, making purchases from the organization, and attending events, to engaging in advocacy. Across numerous studies covering a variety of nonprofit organizational contexts, information content has been consistently found to be the dominant kind of content shared by organizations (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Svensson et al., 2015). Thus, social movement organizations' use of social media evidences their role as informational agents in the contemporary media system to a significant degree.

This study situated itself against this general context, asking the following research questions:

RQ₁: What decisions must social movement organizations make when determining what political information to curate into their followers' feeds?

RQ₂: How do social movement organizations make such curatorial decisions?

RQ₃: What logics underpin social movement organizations' curatorial decisions?

Case and method

To address these questions, this study drew on extensive ethnographic fieldwork at the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in Washington, DC over the course of 2017 and 2018. NCTE is, in the words of Nownes (2019), "the dean of transgender rights organizations" in the U.S. (p. 40). NCTE advocates to change policies and society to increase understanding and acceptance of transgender people. It operates alongside broader LGBTQ rights organizations like GLAAD, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and the National LGBTQ Task Force, but is unique among them for several reasons, including its sole focus on transgender concerns and its transgender leadership. Since its founding in 2003, NCTE has emerged as the leading organization for the transgender rights movement – and a respected progressive coalition partner in DC – and its media placements and policy achievements evidence that fact (see also Billard, 2021; Nownes, 2019).

During my time in the field, NCTE was an exemplary case of strategic actor curation in that they were a moderately sized social movement organization operating in a context of increasing visibility, but with a still relatively small amount of public attention (Billard, 2021). That is, NCTE was operating in a context in which most people would not receive much transgender political information in their daily media routines, but in which many people were increasingly aware of, and interested in, trans issues. Accordingly, NCTE had the opportunity to shape in a significant way the political information people received about the trans community by serving as a reliable channel for transgender news. When I left the field in December 2018, NCTE boasted almost 91,000 followers

on Twitter and over 87,000 "likes" on Facebook – numbers that quantitatively reflected the organization's high public regard as both policy experts and prominent media figures with strong relationships to the press (see Billard, 2021).

I undertook my ethnographic fieldwork first as a Consortium on Media Policy Studies Fellow at NCTE over three months in the summer of 2017 and then as an Archival Fellow for seven months from June to December 2018. Given my specific research interests, my observations focused primarily on the Communications (Comms) and Outreach & Education (O&E) departments, which together comprised the media and communications work of the organization. I participated in and took field jottings during the daily Comms team morning check-ins, the weekly Comms operations meetings, the weekly O&E department meetings, the weekly messaging meetings, standing meetings for various campaigns and special projects, general staff meetings, and *ad hoc* strategy meetings, as well as at trainings, rallies, and other relevant events. I then expanded these jottings into complete fieldnotes. Following Lichterman's (2002) approach to theory-driven fieldwork, I analyzed fieldnotes via the constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) as they were collected, memoing emerging theoretical insights to inform both subsequent observation decisions and 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 (see Online Supplemental Appendix for demographic details about each interviewee). Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were transcribed and then analyzed alongside fieldnotes.

In line with Burawoy's (2009) extended case method, this approach to ethnographic fieldwork aimed not to generate novel "grounded" theory, but rather to "extend" existing theory by illuminating how social macroforces manifest in the microprocesses of daily life in the field site, which in turn "reconstructs" our understanding of those macroforces. This is how such case-based research approaches the generalizability of ethnographic findings; as Gobo (2004) wrote, "The ethnographer does not generalize one case or event that … cannot recur but its main structural aspects that can be noticed in other cases or events of the same kind or class" (p. 453). Of course, that rests on the assumption that this case belongs to a particular class. The class to which NCTE belongs is that of professionalized social movement organization. This is a class with a high degree of institutional isomorphism (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which allows us to trust that the structural aspects noticed at NCTE will be noticeable in other such organizations outside the transgender movement.

In this case, I sought to illuminate how the macroforce of the contemporary political information environment shaped the microprocesses of everyday social movement strategy. While in the field, I came to realize how recent transformations in the political information system were evident in NCTE's strategically peculiar decision to operate their social media feeds as *de facto* media channels of curated news content. This realization directed me to pay particular attention to how staff arrived at their curatorial decisions in future observations, to pose interview questions to staff members inquiring about the decisions I observed, and – importantly – to revisit earlier fieldnotes to identify long-standing patterns of decision-making. As a result, the present analysis focused quite narrowly on data from the Comms morning check-ins, in which curatorial decisions about social media content were usually made, as well as from other meetings and email

conversations in which these discussions were also carried out. Moreover, my analysis focused specifically on decisions about the curation of content for social media, bracketing consideration of the other kinds of work NCTE engaged in to influence the political information system, such as work with journalists, public demonstrations, etc. (see Billard, 2021). Although this other kind of work, including efforts to create original political information content (such as staff-penned articles posted to Medium.com, Facebook Live broadcasts, etc.), was important to NCTE's strategic mission, it was far more resource intensive, and thus generally reserved for issues of special importance beyond the routine churn of daily communications (for which social media curation was also employed). For a more thorough discussion of reflexivity and positionality within the field site, see Billard (2019a).

The case: NCTE's social media as the "Transgender News Network"

Early in my second round of fieldwork at NCTE, director of external relations Raffi Freedman-Gurspan, education program director Rebecca Kling, and I were leaving the office they shared, where the weekly Outreach & Education department meeting was held. Raffi and Rebecca were still discussing their plans to increase the involvement of fathers of transgender children in advocacy, since mothers were dramatically overrepresented in the organization's Families for Trans Equality program. With Father's Day coming up, it would be a good time to shine a light on the fathers who were actively involved as a way of encouraging more paternal participation. Rebecca said she had a list of dads who were willing to be profiled on NCTE's social media pages on Father's Day Sunday. Raffi quipped, "I'll check with Comms and see if they can schedule time for broadcast on TNN." Rebecca laughed. I looked at Raffi quizzically; I didn't get the joke. "TNN?" I asked. "Transgender News Network," she replied drily. "Surely you've noticed that's what our social media pages are. All the news that's fit to tweet!" Though Raffi's joke was laced with derision, it wasn't an inaccurate characterization of the organization's social media practices. Like the social media feeds of many organizations, NCTE's "socials," as they were often called, served as their own kind of media channels, but ones that didn't distribute (wholly) original content. They offered curated channels of often externally sourced, but nonetheless highly selective and strategically repurposed political information.

During my time in the field, NCTE managed profiles on four social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Of these four profiles, only two were of relevance to the present study – those on Twitter and Facebook – since the organization's Instagram profile was only infrequently updated with infographic calls-to-action and their YouTube profile was only used to host video content for sharing on other platforms. Twitter and Facebook were also the only social media discussed in the daily Comms team morning check-ins. In each of these meetings, which were regularly held at 10am, interim Comms director Dave Noble, deputy Comms director Jay Wu, media relations manager Gillian Branstetter, digital campaigns manager (and primary social media manager) Laurel Powell, director of external relations Raffi Freedman-Gurspan, and Policy director Harper Jean Tobin convened in the Comms office to discuss the pressing communications needs for the day. The first order of business was always to review news stories gathered first by Google News and then, as of September 2018, Cision, a premium media tracking

software. These stories were flagged either because they mentioned NCTE, the U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) NCTE conducted in 2015, or one of NCTE's staff members, or because they discussed transgender social or political issues. The meeting attendees then decided, case by case, which of those stories should be shared over social media. This process of story aggregation, evaluation, selection, and sharing was clearly – and consciously, as Laurel noted in two separate interviews – a curatorial enterprise.

The format of these discussions was fairly consistent. First, the team discussed whether to share the article or not. In these discussions, staff members relied on a set of implicit criteria for "shareworthiness" (Trilling et al., 2017). When they decided an article should be shared, the team made crucial decisions about what to say in the preambulatory text of the post in which the article would be shared. This text would (re)frame, (re)position, or (re)contextualize the information contained in the linked news article in a strategic manner that rendered the information both relevant to NCTE's mission and useful to their constituents. Third, the team decided whether the post should be shared to Twitter, to Facebook, or to both. Given both the different audiences likely to be reached and the different content norms on each platform, not all content was deemed appropriate for both. Finally, the Comms staff decided when each post would be shared. NCTE used Hootsuite, a social media management dashboard, to schedule posts for automatic sharing at designated times. Certain posts had strategically necessary timing because of proximity to some external event (e.g., the opening of a public comment period on some policy initiative), whereas others were used to fill otherwise "dead" time on the newsfeed, such as on weekends and holidays. Posts were scheduled to share consistently throughout the day, though on-the-fly changes were often made to accommodate breaking news and unforeseen events.

In many ways, this curatorial process mirrored the editorial processes observed in digital newsrooms (e.g., Usher, 2014), and the joke of calling NCTE's social media feeds "TNN" evidenced an internal awareness of the mock-newsroom process going on each morning. Indeed, the "gatekeeping" of stories to share was a deliberate effort in making the news, or at least deciding what was (or what should be considered) news (Gans, 1979). And, much like in newsrooms, there were clear, albeit unstated – and largely unrecognized – logics that guided the curatorial decisions being made. The effectiveness of this mode of working was also evident from media tracking metrics of press attention and social media engagement statistics, which internally justified NCTE's continued reliance on these tactics, as well as the steady growth of the organization's Comms staff.

Findings: The logics of curation

Various factors were considered in the curatorial decision-making processes I observed at NCTE. These "logics of curation" centered not only on the criteria staff used in deciding which stories to select and how to annotate them for sharing, but also on considerations relating to platform appropriateness, temporality, and the navigation of intervening technologies. Moreover, staff were guided by an undergirding understanding of why curation was an important strategic activity, even though it was rarely articulated in everyday discussion. The following analysis addresses each of these factors in turn.

Internal criteria for sharing

Discussions about press clips in the Comms morning check-ins were guided by an implicit set of internal criteria that helped evaluate the "shareworthiness" (Trilling et al., 2017) of each story. Importantly, staff evaluated the shareworthiness of individual news stories, not the events the stories conveyed. Indeed, the same events were often reported by multiple news outlets, each taking different approaches to their reporting; in deciding whether to share, staff evaluated how each story reported on the relevant events. At the same time, staff did not consider each story in isolation. Rather, they considered each story in relation to what they could make it mean through their annotation or commentary. Different approaches to annotation made different criteria salient.

There were three primary internal criteria that guided decision-making: (1) *authority*, or whether the news story represented NCTE as an authoritative source of information or commentary on transgender social and political issues; (2) "*on message*," or whether the news story presented a perspective on a particular issue that was consistent with NCTE's own strategic communications on that issue; and (3) *out of bounds*, or whether the news story covered an issue area that NCTE deliberately refrained from communicating about. These criteria frequently came into conflict, however, driving NCTE to develop an implicit hierarchy of criteria that helped decide which would predominate in instances of conflict.

Authority

The first criterion that would justify sharing a news story was that NCTE featured prominently in the story as an authority on transgender rights issues and/or the trans experience writ large. In one typical example, racial and economic justice policy advocate Mateo De La Torre was quoted extensively in an *NPR Weekend Edition* article published on 1 September 2018. The story covered recent calls for police reform in Jacksonville, Florida in the wake of a fourth trans woman being shot in the city. Not only did Mateo offer commentary on the specific situation in Jacksonville, but the article repeatedly referenced his work at NCTE on a "police scorecard" evaluating transgender-relevant policies in police departments across the country. From NCTE's perspective, the article promoted their work holding local police departments accountable and portrayed them as leaders on the issue. Staff decided to share the article with little discussion. Following a similarly short deliberation, NCTE decided to share an op-ed about the need for the Senate to vote against Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court published on 21 September 2018 in *The Advocate*, the oldest and largest LGBTQ news outlet in the country. The op-ed was penned by NCTE's policy director Harper Jean, thus ensuring it simultaneously advanced the organization's strategic messaging and confirmed their position as the foremost transgender authority on national politics. Furthermore, in both cases, sharing these stories reaffirmed NCTE's value to the individuals who followed them and reinforced their authority to serve as a curating actor in their personal political information networks. As digital campaigns manager Laurel noted in an interview, "we are seen as policy experts and we want to have that come through" to followers.

In a contrasting example, on the morning of 26 July 2018, staff discussed whether to share a news article published the previous day in North Carolina's *Charlotte Observer*. The article told the story of Maxine Arbelo, a 15-year-old trans girl who was refused

Communion during Sunday Mass at St. Vincent de Paul, a Catholic church in Charlotte. Immediately, interim Comms director Dave said the organization should not share the story; it was not of sufficient relevance to NCTE's strategic aims. Digital campaigns manager Laurel and director of external relations Raffi countered that Debi Jackson, one of NCTE's family organizers in the O&E department, was quoted in the story, so they should consider sharing it. Dave said he would read the story and consider whether NCTE should share it. Ultimately, he decided that even though Debi was quoted, the article did too little to advance NCTE's authority; she was only quoted as saying experiences of discrimination in faith communities were unfortunately common, and her affiliation with NCTE was not represented clearly in the text of the story. Thus, it failed to fulfill the authority criterion that would warrant sharing.

"On message"

The second criterion that would justify sharing a news story was that it was "on message" for NCTE – that it presented perspectives aligned with NCTE's own strategic aims. For such stories, NCTE would first decide which news events were significant enough to warrant posting about and then, in instances where multiple stories about the same event were available, which was best to share, since not all would necessarily be "on message." Discussions about these stories would also, necessarily, involve deciding if, and if so how, NCTE could make stories "on message" with their annotations.

In the Comms check-in on the morning of 11 June 2018, for example, digital campaigns manager Laurel raised an incident in which an orchestra teacher at Brownsburg High School in Indiana claimed he was forced to resign from his job for refusing to call trans students by their chosen names. As she noted, the incident received a lot of media attention, both nationally and locally, which meant NCTE might want to "message around it." Two articles were of particular note. First was a story run in *The Washington Post* that, though it featured oppositional voices, was built around the teacher's experience, including quotes in which he positioned himself as taking a superior moral stance:

> I'm being compelled to encourage students in what I believe is something that's a dangerous lifestyle … I'm fine to teach students with other beliefs, but the fact that teachers are being compelled to speak a certain way is the scary thing. (Rosenberg & Balingit, 2018)

The prominence given to this perspective made it "off message" for NCTE to share, even if they were to reframe the story through the text of their post. The second story, however, was run by *RTV6 Indianapolis*, a local media outlet, and it was built around a trans student, Aidyn Sucec, who had been in the teacher's class. The article focused on how "getting names right is a matter of student safety" and how the teacher's appeal to freedom of speech and religious liberty served as a smokescreen for acting abusively toward his students (McClellan, 2018). This story was much more suitable for sharing because, as Harper Jean noted in the meeting, it showed "this is the impact it has on students." Moreover, as Laurel commented, the student's arguments about the importance of respecting trans students' identities clearly reflected "our own stance on it." The ultimate decision was, accordingly, to share the article.

In contrast, NCTE staff decided against sharing two stories on 17 August 2018, even though both covered events significant enough to warrant posting about. The first story was flagged by Google News because it cited a number of statistics from the USTS. The

story, published in Florida's *Fort Myers News-Press*, profiled three local trans people, using their personal experiences of marginalization to talk about the wider lack of trans acceptance in Southwest Florida. Though NCTE would ordinarily share such a story, this one was, as Laurel argued in the meeting, "problematic in [its] framing," relying on outdated ideas about the etiology of transgender identity to portray the subjects as sympathetic. The other meeting attendees agreed. The second article, published in Utah's *The Salt Lake Tribune*, told the story of Kris Irvin, a trans student at the Mormon Church-run Brigham Young University who was facing potential expulsion for undergoing a transition-related surgery. As in the first story, though the events were worthy of posting about, the textual content of the article was "off message" for NCTE. Media relations manager Gillian had served as an on-background source for the journalist who wrote the story and, as she told the other meeting attendees, "tried really hard with that reporter to direct her in a very positive way." Her efforts were in vain, though, as the journalist failed to take correction and even misattributed a statistic from the USTS to the National LGBTQ Task Force. In both cases, the "off message" story was the only one run on the relevant events, so NCTE decided against sharing anything.

Out of bounds

The third criterion governing whether NCTE would share a news story was whether it was "out of bounds," which is to say it covered an issue the organization categorically did not publicize. During my fieldwork, media relations manager Gillian shared with me a list of issues that fell into this category for her work with journalists. These included, among others, (1) specific instances of anti-transgender violence or suicide and (2) celebrity news or popular culture phenomena unrelated to substantive policy issues. Although these rules were specifically developed to guide decisions about whether to provide journalists with statements, they carried over into considerations of what stories to share on social media. For example, shortly before 5pm on Friday, 3 August 2018, Mary Emily O'Hara of *them*, Condé Nast's LGBTQ-focused digital news platform, tweeted she had a "huge transgender policy scoop" to be published that night after the lifting of an embargo. Comms staff decided Laurel should look out for the news from home that evening, and if it was something NCTE needed to comment on, the team would convene by phone to decide what to say. Shortly after 7pm, the article went live. The "huge transgender policy scoop" was that the CrossFit Games would now allow trans athletes to compete. The following Monday morning, O'Hara's story was included in the press clips to discuss sharing. At the start of the meeting, interim Comms director Dave said none of the press clips warranted sharing. Deputy Comms director Jay sarcastically asked, "But what about CrossFit?" Dave rolled his eyes. Important though it would be to some people, he said, as a sports story it fell outside NCTE's scope of interest.

Although celebrity, culture, and sports news would occasionally be considered for sharing, and NCTE would almost always decline, such instances were much rarer than stories about instances of anti-transgender violence or suicide. Unfortunately, NCTE would consider such stories with regularity, though they categorically avoided sharing them. According to media relations manager Gillian, this was for two reasons. First, declining to share them meant NCTE could avoid the politics of identifying people as trans who could no longer attest to their own identities. Second, they could avoid

placing an undue focus on trans people as "victims," rather than as community members who live full, happy lives.

Conflicting criteria

Although the preceding three criteria guided NCTE's decisions about which news stories to curate into their followers' feeds, these criteria often came into conflict with one another. In these cases, staff needed to decide which criteria would predominate. Though no logic was ever explicitly stated, my analysis revealed an implicit hierarchy of criteria evident in the decisions I observed. The least important criterion, which was often overruled by the other two, was *out of bounds*; NCTE occasionally shared stories on issues they did not wish to publicize when said stories positioned them as authorities or when the overarching message of the story was consistent with the organization's strategic aims. The most important criterion was "on message"; even when a story positioned NCTE as an authority, NCTE would sometimes decline to share because the message it conveyed ran counter to the organization's aims. Annotation served a key function here, sometimes helping NCTE reframe a story in a way that made it "on message," though this was not always the case.

In one example of this hierarchy in action, NCTE's executive director Mara Keisling was quoted in a *The Philadelphia Inquirer* story about the rate of murder for trans women of color in the U.S., reporting that 2018 could become the "deadliest year yet" (Orso, 2018). The story also cited statistics from the USTS. Whereas NCTE generally avoided sharing stories about the murder of trans people (*out of bounds*), the decision was made to share this article because it established the leadership of both Mara as an individual and NCTE as an organization (*authority*). Furthermore, the article used the murder of trans women of color as a launching point to discuss how state and federal politicians failed to adequately protect transgender citizens, advancing a perspective aligned with NCTE's own public communications ("on message"). Thus, since the story met the criteria for *authority* and "on message," the story was shared despite its conflict with the criterion of *out of bounds*.

Importantly, the "on message" criterion also overrode the *authority* criterion for sharing. In one key example, the Associated Press ran an article via *The Conversation* (a wire service for op-eds by academic experts), which drew extensively on USTS reports NCTE published to argue transgender people would face barriers to voting in the 2018 midterm elections. Director of external relations Raffi initially emailed the article to the Comms list, urging to share it. Interim Comms director Dave quickly replied with disagreement, citing the fact "the headline makes it seem like voting will be hard for trans people and I'm worried it will discourage people." Considering the organization was running, via its 501(c)(4) Action Fund, a get-out-the-vote campaign called "TRANSform the Vote," the message of the article ran in direct opposition to NCTE's desired message. Deputy Comms director Jay suggested a compromise of sharing the article, but with an annotation reframing it:

> These are factors that may make people nervous to vote, but guess what? Your ID doesn't have to match your gender presentation in order for you to vote! Learn about voter ID laws and more in our handy #VotingWhileTrans guide at TRANSformtheVote.org!

Raffi and TRANSform the Vote campaign organizer Hope Giselle both expressed agreement with Jay. Dave was still reticent, though. Jay continued their justification for sharing the article: "the point, to me, is really to show that we're being covered in the media / being written about by an expert and use that to promote our own stuff." The conversation was then put on hold until the following day's morning check-in, when it was ultimately agreed not to share the op-ed because the reward of establishing NCTE as an authority was not worth the risk – even with NCTE's reframing of the article – of discouraging trans people from voting. Here, in keeping with the hierarchy of criteria, the criterion of being "on message" took precedence when deciding which stories to share.

Decisions about how to share

Once NCTE decided to share a story, two significant decisions needed to be made about how it would be shared. First, staff needed to decide over which platform(s) to share the story: Facebook, Twitter, or both? Second, staff needed to decide when to share the story, considering how it would fit into the larger schedule of the organization's communications.

Which (social) media?

In deciding which social media platform(s) to share a story over, staff considered two key factors: (1) how did the audiences reached by each platform differ and (2) what content norms governed audience expectations on each platform? For NCTE, the differences between their Twitter and Facebook audiences were clear and stark – and evidenced by analytics. As digital campaigns manager Laurel informed me in an interview, NCTE's Facebook audience tended older and "There are more cis [i.e., non-trans] allies. There are more folks who are just kind of adjacent to the movement who are supportive." On Twitter, in contrast, NCTE's audience tended younger and consisted primarily of trans people who were politically sophisticated. In Laurel's words, "on Twitter, it *is* the movement." Consequently, NCTE often shared a wider array of content to Twitter, where there was greater interest in, investment in, and knowledge of transgender rights issues, whereas they shared content of more general interest and wider political significance to Facebook. For example, on 21 September 2018, NCTE reviewed seven news articles during the Comms morning check-in – one of which, as mentioned earlier, was policy director Harper Jean's op-ed in *The Advocate* on why the Senate should not confirm Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Of those seven articles, staff decided to share four: Harper Jean's op-ed, another op-ed published in Maine's *The Portland Press-Herald*, an article in online news magazine *LGBTQ Nation* about transgender political concerns around the midterm elections, and an article in *them* about Colorado becoming the first state to issue an intersex birth certificate. However, only one of those articles was shared to Facebook: Harper Jean's op-ed. The decision to share it came down to its appeal to NCTE's Facebook audience; it was a trans-specific take on the Kavanaugh nomination (focused on the disproportionately high percentage of trans people who have experienced sexual assault), but one that spoke across a coalition of allied cis-driven political movements, such as the women's movement, with which most of NCTE's Facebook followers would identify. In contrast,

the article about intersex birth certificates was of less interest and less direct relevance to transgender rights for NCTE's Facebook followers. For NCTE's Twitter followers, though, who were more likely to be trans and to understand the complex intersections between trans and intersex political issues, the article was more relevant. Thus, NCTE shared the article to Twitter, but not Facebook.

Additionally, Facebook and Twitter decisions were driven by different perceived content norms related to the frequency of posting. As Laurel explained in an interview, staff believed most people use Facebook for their social connections – for "friends" – and they get frustrated when their newsfeeds are overtaken by content from pages they "like" at the expense of seeing friends' content (see Eslami et al., 2015). Thus, "we only want to do two or three posts a day at the most, otherwise you're going to blow up people's time-lines and they don't want to follow you anymore." On Twitter, in contrast, "you can't really post too much." From staff's perspective, the Twitter newsfeed moves more rapidly, information becomes outdated quickly (Chadwick, 2011), and people tend to follow individuals and organizations they don't have direct connections to for the express purpose of sourcing news (Rosenstiel et al., 2015). Thus, NCTE had no similar rules-of-thumb governing posting frequency.

Finally, NCTE staff had different ideas about what each platform was "for." Whereas Twitter was viewed as a platform for news and engaging other movement actors, Facebook was considered an all-purpose platform for public communications. Outside of curation, NCTE frequently used Facebook as a venue for original content, including hosting weekly "Facebook Live" broadcasts discussing important trans political issues (see Billard, 2021), livestreaming public demonstrations, and conducting fundraisers. Given their desire to not "blow up" their followers' newsfeeds, NCTE shared much less curated content than on Twitter to "leave room" for this original content. None of these kinds of content were shared over Twitter – that's not what Twitter was "for" – allowing more space for curated content.

Ephemeral or evergreen?

Stories selected for sharing fell into two temporal categories: *evergreen* (a label created by NCTE staff) and *ephemeral* (a label I have created to describe the implicit, but unnamed other category of content NCTE shared). Which category a story fell into determined when it would be shared. Ephemeral content needed to be shared more-or-less the day it was discussed, or else it would no longer be relevant. For example, on 20 December 2018, NCTE shared to Twitter an opinion article coauthored by executive director Mara and Jocelyn Samuels of the Williams Institute, which was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Although the content of the article focused on a Department of Health and Human Services memo leaked two months prior, it needed to be shared immediately because its newsworthiness was driven by the fact it had just been published; a few days later it would no longer be "news." But on any given day, multiple ephemeral stories would need to be shared, and the posts sharing these stories would need to be spaced appropriately throughout the day. As Laurel remarked in an interview, though NCTE didn't need to worry about posting too frequently on Twitter, they did need to worry about posting "too quickly in rapid succession – especially if you're trying to highlight things." On 20 December, for instance, NCTE shared 6 posts to Twitter between 11am and 6pm (which Laurel categorized as "peak periods" for

engagement), each of which was spaced at least one hour apart. The *New England Journal of Medicine* article NCTE wanted to ensure people saw was the second post of the day, posted at noon when most people would be on lunch break. Not only did this spacing ensure maximum visibility for each post, but it also allowed NCTE to provide a continuous feed of content for their followers, which previous research has demonstrated increases the attention organizations receive (Guo & Saxton, 2018). Here the temporality of sharing ephemeral content intersected with the perceived content norms of the platforms stories were shared on.

Evergreen content, in contrast, could be shared at any time; its newsworthiness was not time sensitive. This kind of content helped meet the strategic imperative to remain a consistent (but not overbearing) presence in followers' news feeds. Staff could schedule these stories to be shared on weekend days and holidays, when they weren't in the office working, and when news cycles were slower. Additionally, staff could use evergreen content to "fill" workdays without new ephemeral content to share, allowing them to still maintain a constant flow of content. For instance, on 6 August 2018, the Comms team decided none of the press clips warranted sharing, so interim Comms director Dave asked Laurel if there was any "evergreen stuff we can share." She suggested sharing some of the reserved stories NCTE had flagged pertaining to trans issues in the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Kavanaugh nomination hearings. When combined with their original video and infographic content about transgender healthcare access, these evergreen stories provided NCTE with a full day's worth of posts.

Concerning algorithms

NCTE staff had a vague, intuitive understanding of algorithms as a relevant factor shaping content flows and audience attention, though they lacked substantive knowledge about how algorithms affected the flows of their public communications. Accordingly, they relied on "folk theories" of how algorithms work (see Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021) to determine how to navigate them. This is best illustrated with an example related to, but slightly outside the context of social media curation: On 13 July 2020, media relations manager Gillian asked digital campaigns manager Laurel to schedule a tweet sharing NCTE's new Medium.com article, "7 Questions Trans People Have About Brett Kavanaugh." Because NCTE wanted to drive attention to the article, Laurel asked interim Comms director Dave for approval to "promote" the post on Twitter – to pay a modest advertising fee for the post to be featured prominently in the feeds of individuals likely to engage with it. As she reckoned, promoting the tweet would mean more people would read the article, which would in turn drive the Medium.com algorithm to feature the article more prominently on their homepage, ensuring still more readers outside of NCTE's directly reachable audience. Dave was convinced and agreed. Staff were unclear on the mechanics of the algorithms governing their content flows, but they applied their own intuitive logics to decide how to interact with them. And this was true (albeit to a lesser degree than in this example) in considering when and how to share curated news stories.

In addition to their own intuition, NCTE employed other algorithms to help them navigate the uncertainty of algorithm-driven news feeds. NCTE used social media management dashboard Hootsuite to schedule posts for sharing to Twitter and Facebook, but

the dashboard offered more than a convenient pinboard interface. As Laurel demonstrated for me, Hootsuite offered an auto-scheduling function that used a proprietary algorithm to determine when content should be shared for maximum attention. Staff often overrode this automated schedule to accommodate needs the algorithm couldn't account for, but even then, Hootsuite offered algorithmic assistance. Laurel would often prepare individual posts and have Hootsuite's algorithm suggest different posting times based on its analysis of when NCTE's specific followers were most likely to engage with that content type. That algorithmic analysis would then inform her decision-making. As such, algorithms were often relied upon to navigate the very uncertainty created by other algorithms – all without staff ever coming to understanding how exactly those algorithms worked.

Why curate?

Having demonstrated that NCTE consciously took on the curation of political information for their followers and analyzed how they arrived at curatorial decisions, the question remains why they undertook this task. For NCTE, consciously taking on this curatorial role was rooted in an understanding of just how much they could impact the political information environments of their followers. For most of their followers, outside of NCTE's posts, most stories about transgender subjects they encountered would be encountered incidentally because a news outlet they followed published it. In other instances, perhaps, stories would be shared by friends, who, like NCTE, served as curating actors in their personal information networks. As interim Comms director Dave said in an interview,

> I think about where I get my news … [the people] that pop up on my Twitter feed and my Facebook feed. It's a lot of individual people who might just be sharing [news outlets'] stories, but they're the ones who are curating it and putting it in front of me.

However, NCTE's capacity to curate the political information environments of their followers often exceeded that of individuals' personal social connections because NCTE shared content more frequently, held more authority as a curating actor, and were more likely to be featured prominently in individuals' feeds by social media platform algorithms because of the volume of engagement their posts typically received. Thus, NCTE had the capacity to shape much, if not all of the information their followers received about transgender issues.

In curating a selection of news content that suited their own strategic aims, NCTE could cultivate the kinds of shared political opinions and perspectives about transgender issues they hoped for among their social network connections. When paired with NCTE's calls to action, provision of advocacy resources, and public communication trainings, this produced the kind of informed network of transgender advocates NCTE could depend on to engage in advocacy with minimal guidance. As one key illustration, NCTE ran a campaign called "Protect Trans Health" over much of 2018. The campaign focused on mobilizing resistance to the Trump administration's planned rollback of Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, which provided transgender people federal protections from discrimination in healthcare. Though the rollback had not yet occurred, NCTE prioritized stories about discrimination in healthcare, federal and state court victories

battling such discrimination, and state-level antidiscrimination policies for sharing over social media starting in July 2018. On multiple days per week, NCTE shared these stories, ensuring their followers accumulated a high degree of familiarity with, and understanding of, the policy landscape surrounding healthcare. Not only did these stories help "set the transgender agenda" (Billard, 2019b) for NCTE's followers, but they affirmed NCTE's role as an authoritative political actor to be turned to and followed. Then, on 24 May 2019, the Trump administration formally announced their proposed rule reversing Section 1557, initiating a 60-day public comment period on the proposal. Mobilizing followers whom they had provided curated political information on healthcare policy for at least 10 months, NCTE facilitated the submission of over 20,000 individual comments opposing the proposed rollback. As evident in this example, NCTE's decision to curate political information over social media was, at its core, about producing a certain type of informed, readily mobilizable constituent to enhance their advocacy impact.

Discussion

Curation is a fundamental process in the contemporary political information environment, driving the flows of news from its original creators to its ultimate consumers. Curation is also an activity undertaken by a variety of actors, in different ways and for different reasons (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Thus far, the literature has focused quite narrowly on the curation undertaken by individual media users (Merten, 2021), by individuals' social contacts (Anspach, 2017; Kaiser et al., 2021; Kümpel, 2019), and by algorithms (DeVito, 2017; Diakopoulos, 2019; Trielli & Diakopoulos, 2020); curation by strategic communicators has been woefully under-considered. Moreover, these studies have focused more on the fact of curation and less on analyzing the processes of curation. Beyond simply demonstrating the curation undertaken by one category of strategic communicator – social movement organizations – this article pulls back the curtain on how actors arrive at the curatorial decisions that shape individuals' personal political information networks.

My analysis of this case from the U.S. transgender movement reveals the "logics of curation" that govern social movement organizations' curatorial decisions as they consider competing criteria for "shareworthiness" (Trilling et al., 2017), various approaches to story annotation, the content norms and user expectations of different social media platforms, issues of temporality, and the navigation of uncertainty in a media environment shaped by algorithmic filtration – a competing curating actor in the political information system. Furthermore, in identifying the logics of curation that govern these decisions, I show that organizations undertake curation as a conscious means of influencing their followers' political information networks to a very important strategic end: the cultivation of an informed constituency that can readily be mobilized to political action.

This research makes a number of important contributions. First, and most obviously, this research contributes to the emergent literature on curated flows. My research pays overdue attention to the role strategic communicators play in the current political information system. In doing so, it offers novel insight into the often invisible social processes that determine what content flows in that system and how. Whereas the academic literature has noted that these processes occur and has maintained their central significance, it has yet to directly investigate them (cf. Merten, 2021). This study redresses that,

identifying three criteria that motivate the curation of political information: (1) establishing organizations as authorities on their issue areas and, in doing so, reaffirming their value to followers as curating actors; (2) advancing perspectives aligned with organizations' own strategic aims through selectively highlighting externally sourced stories; and (3) producing deliberate silences on issues and ideas organizations wish to make less salient in the political arena. Moreover, this study illustrated how organizations arrive at curatorial decisions via considerations of social media platforms' different content norms and temporalities, as well as how they navigate the intervening influence of platform algorithms, which alter the flows of the information organizations curate beyond their control. Although different organizations are likely to take somewhat different approaches to navigating the same informational environment, these findings provide researchers with a starting point for a more general theory of the logics of curation that drive how (and why) strategic communicators curate.

Second, this research contributes to our understanding of the role social media plays in contemporary social movements. Thus far, the literature on social media use in movements has focused on movements comprised of decentralized networks of often on-the-ground protestor-activists (e.g., Occupy, *los indignados*, etc.) who use social media for coordination and mobilization (e.g., Tufekci, 2017). My research follows Karpf (2012) and Wells (2015) in recentering institutionalized movement organizations, bringing the curated flows perspective to bear on the strategic logics of organizational social media practices. In doing so, this study considers social media not as a technological tool for movement formation, but as the informational environment in which movement organizations act. This perspective is more attentive to the interactional processes that develop movements' sociopolitical change strategies and less focused on the structural qualities of movements themselves. Moreover, this perspective allows a deeper consideration of how organizations act vis-à-vis other informational actors, such as algorithms, instead of treating social media platforms as actors of interest in their own right.

Finally, this research contributes to the study of social media use by nonprofit organizations (e.g., Guo & Saxton, 2014, 2018; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Svensson et al., 2015). The organizing framework of this literature, Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) Information-Community-Action scheme, maintains that organizations' social media posts can be categorized into one of those three purposes. "Information" content – which provides news, facts, and other information relevant to their followers – is the most common of the three, and, according to this literature, is distinct from the other two (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Svensson et al., 2015). My research suggests this scheme offers insufficient precision. First, information content is not monolithic; it comes in a variety of forms, including content meant to establish organizational authority, content meant to cultivate a particular perspective that is "on message" for the organization, etc. Second, information content is only distinct from "action" content – which aims to mobilize constituents to take some kind of action – when assessed superficially. Deep engagement with the logics underpinning the curation of information content reveals that the sharing of information content is motivated by a desire to incite action, laying the groundwork for action content to effectively mobilize. As such, information content is, in many ways, a subset of action content, as its true purpose is not, as Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) claim, "solely to inform" (p. 343).

Of course, in choosing to focus narrowly on the curation of extant news content over social media, this study fails to consider the other ways social movement organizations contribute content that shapes the political information environment. As I noted previously, though the curated flows perspective emphasizes the capacities of non-journalistic actors to produce and distribute novel political information, most research in this vein considers the flows of journalistic news content at the expense of other, less conventional content. This study is no different in that regard. NCTE produced a large amount of original information content, including live-streamed press events, "Facebook Live" broadcasts discussing important policy issues, live Twitter Q&As about current events, explainer videos, infographics, and video-conference trainings (see Billard, 2021). These different kinds of content also disrupt the information/action distinction advanced in the nonprofit social media literature and they enrich our understanding of how social movements have adapted their strategic activities to thrive in the social media sphere. Furthermore, these kinds of content are an important source of political information for contemporary media users, supplementing (and sometimes replacing) news media. Future research must consider this original content and its flows through the political information system in order to provide a fuller picture of people's everyday experiences of political communication.

Additionally, future research should consider other kinds of strategic communicators, outside of social movement organizations, whose curation activities influence the flows of political information. The logics that underpin those actors' curatorial decisions will differ from those that underpin social movement organizations in ways that have significant implications for our understanding of the political information environment.

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