

**IN OUR VERY BLOOD:
THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE 2018 WEST
VIRGINIA TEACHERS' STRIKE**

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Everette Scott Sikes
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DEDICATION

For all the teachers in my life.

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ABSTRACT

The 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike exemplifies the changing shape of social movements and events of dissent and protest in the digital age. The use of information communication technologies (ICT) and social media have changed the ways such events develop and unfold. These technologies offer new tools for organizing and strategizing, for generating large numbers of participants, and for communicating crucial information while reducing temporal and spatial barriers. The teachers' strike presents an opportunity to increase our understandings of these issues and to widen the scope of research in the field of information sciences to include the impact of ICTs on the social world. Further, the location of West Virginia within the region of Appalachia means that additional questions regarding the role of collective identity in social movements can be explored in the context of a state with an extensive history and heritage of labor movements.

Through in-depth interviews conducted with teachers who participated, this study takes a critical approach to understanding the role of social media in the 2018 strike, the significance of social media to the outcomes of the strike, and the importance of an Appalachian collective identity in the event. The qualitative data is presented in a creative and unconventional way that highlights the voices of the teachers and richly illustrates the complexities of their individual perspectives.

This work operates from an understanding that a standardized and positivistic approach to social scientific inquiry is unhelpful for making sense of the contradictions, complications, and uncertainties found in the personal experiences of the West Virginia strike. As a critique of modernist and overly rationalistic understanding of the world and of academic research, it serves instead as a call for an understanding that we are shaped by forces that are larger than human reason and that are wholly subjective but no less powerful.

Keywords: Social media, social movements, Appalachia, collective action

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On February 22, 2018 nearly 20,000 teachers, bus drivers, and related public-school personnel walked off the job in the state of West Virginia. While the dismal level of salaries for teachers in the state became a central focus of media coverage during the strike, of primary concern to the educators themselves were proposed changes to the health insurance program for West Virginia public employees. These changes would have impacted the costs of annual premiums, reduced overall healthcare coverage, and required the enrollment of employees in a wellness program that raised significant issues of privacy (Brescia, 2020).

Frustrations and anger around a host of festering problems related to public education, along with a perceived lack of respect for the profession, reached a tipping point in the face of the proposed policy changes to the public health insurance plan. The financial implications of these changes were considerable and would have resulted in a net loss of income for teachers who were already among the lowest paid in the United States (Blanc, 2019; McAleve, 2018). To fight these measures, the teachers took action to affect a nine-day work stoppage across all fifty-five county school systems. The strike ultimately forced the West Virginia legislature to reverse its course by suspending the proposed health insurance changes for further review and by including in the upcoming annual state budget an increase in the pay rate for teachers (Bidgood, 2018). The 2018 walkout occurred in response to policies that affected all public employees in West

Virginia. Furthermore, teachers were joined in their action by service personnel who also worked in public schools (Blanc, 2019). Nevertheless, the event has come to be commonly referred to as the teachers' strike and, for the sake of clarity, the same wording will be utilized throughout this narrative.

The West Virginia teachers' strike of 2018 has taken its place among a host of movements of dissent, protest, and revolution that have occurred across the globe in the last decade in which social media played a fundamental role (Brescia, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). From Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring to Tahrir Square to Black Lives Matter and the MeToo movement, among many others, the use of social media in the organizing of mass movements for social and political change has illuminated a host of implications for the understanding of such events and the general role of digital media technologies in the social world (Dencik & Leistert, 2015). Frustrated as they were by a perceived lack of action on the part of union leaders, the teachers organized themselves primarily through the utilization of private Facebook groups, prompting a media narrative that characterized the walkout as a "crowd-sourced strike" (Bidgood & Robertson, 2018). Additionally, the event in West Virginia ignited a storm of similar work stoppages and walkouts across the country, notably in Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona, and in the city of Los Angeles, by teachers who also made significant use of digital technologies to organize and mobilize for collective action (Balingit, 2019; Uppercue & Alvarez, 2018).

The study of social movements has been dramatically transformed by the rise of social media and the use of related information communication technologies (ICT) in events of protest (Howard & Hussain, 2013; van Stekelenburg & Roggeband, 2013).

Digital technologies are seen by many to upend what McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilley (2001) termed the dynamics of contention. By negating gender, socioeconomic, and circumstantial obstacles, digital activism reduces personal and collective risk, allowing for greater and more effective expressions of dissent from marginalized groups (Schmidt & Cohen, 2014). Such technologies are thought by some to have ushered in a new age of social change in which social, spatial, and temporal barriers are nullified, enabling activists to organize and mobilize faster, with fewer costs, and with little need for hierarchical structures and organizations (Gunel & Baruh, 2016; Wellman, 2001).

The action taken by West Virginia teachers served for some of them as a kind of open revolt against the formalized labor organizations in the state. The event was a wildcat strike – initially unsanctioned by unions and plainly illegal in a state that had only two years prior passed right-to-work legislation into law (DePillis, 2016). A group of teachers who were impatient with union leaders made ready use of Facebook as a vital tool for organizing an unauthorized walkout (Delgadillo, 2018). In its effective use of new digital communication tools, the West Virginia strike is regarded as an exemplar of new forms of social movements – swift and largescale disruptive activism unencumbered by bureaucratic hand wrangling or by the requisite patience needed for formal policy making of the sort that takes years and alliances with those in power to advance (Brescia, 2020; Kelly, 2018).

Ahead of the strike and throughout its duration, thousands of teachers and other public school employees staged regular mass demonstrations in and around the state capitol building in Charleston, West Virginia (Quinn, 2018a). Clad in red shirts and

making their presence known with a deluge of raucous chants and songs, the teachers brought the business of the legislature to a standstill (Quinn, 2018a; Quinn & Kabler, 2018). In solidarity, other teachers and supporters stood on picket lines and joined in protests across the state (Larimer, 2018). Such images are nothing new in West Virginia. The state has a long and storied history of organized labor and of conflict, oftentimes violent, between workers and management, especially in mining and in the other heavy industries that have shaped the economy of the state and of the larger Appalachian region (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.; Catte, 2018; Williams, 2002). In a published collection of personal essays by strike participants, teachers regularly discussed their connections to the history of organized labor and activism in West Virginia and pointed to this heritage as important among their reasons for deciding to strike (Catte, Hilliard, & Salfia, 2018). As one contributor said, “The willingness to stand is a part of our DNA; it is in our very blood. Although there’s an understanding that striking is illegal, people in the south fear more serious repercussions: disappointing our ancestors” (p. 24).

In light of these issues and related sociological and technological shifts, this study relied on data gathered through in-depth interviews with teachers who participated in the West Virginia strike to analyze the role of social media in a specific event of protest from a critical perspective. The remainder of this chapter presents the formalized research questions and provides a general discussion of the overarching theoretical and sociological concerns. Chapter Two offers a far more substantial analysis of the scholarly literature that informed this work and that served as the philosophical foundation for the research. Chapter Three confronts the methodological problems presented by a critical

perspective, offers a self-examination of my own sociopolitical position and its subsequent implications, and outlines the procedures utilized in the collection and analysis of data. The fourth chapter utilizes a creative approach for reporting the research data in a way that allows the story of the 2018 strike to be told in the voices of the teachers who experienced it. Chapter Four also provides a discussion of the key findings from the story within the framework of the research questions. Finally, Chapter Five presents the conclusions reached and a discussion of what was learned about the role of social media and collective identity from the teachers' strike.

Research Questions

This research questions posed in this study examined the utilization of social media in the event of the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike. Additionally, the research questions explored the implications of collective identity as it relates to the long history of dissent and labor protests in West Virginia and across the Appalachian region.

The study considered the following three research questions:

RQ1: What was the role of social media in the organizational, strategic, and operational execution of the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike?

RQ2: How was the use of social media related to the outcomes of the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike?

RQ3: What role did a collective identity with the Appalachian region and its history of labor movements play in the teachers' strike?

Theoretical Framework

The theory of collective action, especially as it continues to be shaped by the rise of internet technologies and platforms used for online social networking and by the

increasing use of social media in events of collective dissent, served as a theoretical starting point for this investigation of the role of social media in the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike. That said, the theory of collective action was not an endpoint for this study. As will be discussed in depth, such a framework is ultimately limiting. A more critical perspective was required to make better sense of an event and of perspectives in the data that were rife with contradictions and conflicts. To start from the position of collective action, though, sheds clearer light on the constraints of such rational choice understandings of the human social world.

In the broadest sense, collective action refers to any effort undertaken by a group in pursuit of a common goal (Oliver, 1993). As a theoretical perspective, collective action has proven a wide-reaching tool, one useful across a broad range of scholarly disciplines, including political science, sociology, anthropology, and others. Among the earliest explications of collective action was the landmark work, *The Logic of Collective Action*, by Mancur Olson (1965), an economist. Olson's perspective serves as a beginning point for most modern explorations of social movements (Oliver, 1993). Problematically, however, it is based on an epistemological paradigm that seeks to make sense of the world in terms of the market and that explains social life as transactional by nature. Collective action starts from an understanding of the behavior of human beings as being driven by an inherent self-interest. From this perspective, in decisions large and small, individuals perform a kind of cost-benefit analysis, acting primarily out of a rational concern for their own good and not for the benefit of others (Ostrom, 2000). This

viewpoint does not address the possibility of a sense of altruism or identity with a community or commitment to anything larger than or beyond the individual self.

Central to the theory of collective action are two key problems, that of the free rider and that of the tragedy of the commons (Smith & Welser, 2005). The problem of the free rider is described as a kind of market failure in which a person reaps all the benefits of a common good or resource with minimal or no participation in efforts expended toward its attainment. The tragedy of the commons was also first expressed by an economist (Hardin, 1982) and refers to the degradation of a common good through use by the individual members of a group. Individuals make use of a resource with little thought given to the resulting devaluation of that resource for others (Yamigachi, 1995).

The problem of the free rider stems from an understanding that there is far greater propensity for individuals to make free use of collective resources while bearing none of the cost for their acquisition. Smith and Welser (2005) noted that the problem of the free rider is particularly visible in online groups or networks in which formalized organization and structure is of less necessity. As Olson initially put forth, individuals make a rational and calculated choice when it comes to any decision to take an active part in a social movement. Participation requires time, effort, presence, the rearrangement of one's life and routine, all of which adds up to significant personal cost. As the perceived price of action begins to rise, it becomes far easier to freely enjoy the benefits won through the work of others in the group. Additionally, as a movement reaches a certain size or scope, it becomes more and more difficult for the individual to imagine that her contribution will

make any meaningful difference. An understanding thus arises that the collective good is likely to be achieved with or without one's personal contribution.

The two primary dilemmas found in the logic of collective action were long thought to be mediated by the presence of formalized groups, institutions, and organizations (Oliver, 1993; Ostrom, 2000). These formal and fixed network structures are more able to bear the myriad costs of collective action. More so than individuals, they are better equipped to expend money, time, energy, and effort toward strategizing and communicating while also providing a strong sense of group identity through which can be channeled motivation for persons to participate and to act. The dilemma of the free rider becomes especially problematic for voluntary and informal groups because individual members have little incentive for investments of time and energy in the building of both individual reputations and a unified group identity. According to Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl (2005), formalized groups act on behalf of individuals and provide a level of accountability among individuals and create necessary mechanisms for the formulation and implementation of organizational strategies necessary for the effectiveness of any collective action.

The development of ICTs and the rise in prevalence of social media platforms has turned this issue completely on its head (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Some scholars contend that new information and communication technologies allow for broader participation in social movements by significantly reducing or utterly negating the personal costs (Freelon, Wells, & Bennett, 2013; Castells, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Garrett, 2006). Information is everywhere all the time. Cell phones allow for quicker and

more far-reaching communication among activists. Social media platforms allow for the free dissemination of information both within the group and to the world at-large. Every person has now the ability to participate in any movement immediately and with little to no expenditure of resources of time and effort.

The use of social media in a multitude of social movements across the globe over the last decade or so presents a marked and crucial turning point in the evolution of our understanding of collective action, specifically the need for formalized organizational structures. Given the ubiquity of technology driven networks like Facebook and their role in events of protest, dissent, and revolution, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argued for the necessity of a new logic of *connective* action, noting that the existence of information technologies and the online networks they facilitate has reduced or negated the role of formalized groups in social movements. According to this viewpoint, it is not that formal organizational structures are no longer necessary for effective collective action. Rather, it is that technology enabled networks reduce the need for their most vital contribution, that of bearing the costs of activism and of mitigating the inherent self-interest of human beings by offering a group or cause to which personal identity may be strongly linked. While such a new logic may represent a move beyond the rational choice framework of earlier scholarship, the idea of connective action still concerns itself with explaining the work of social movements primarily in economic terms.

Collective action theory understands the need for formal structures in order to coordinate information and communication in events of collective actions; however, as exemplified by the West Virginia teachers' strike, digital technologies and online social

networking now make informal and grassroots-based organization more viable in myriad ways. The many such examples of successful and effective events of group actions organized through social media have monumental implications for the concept of collective action. The use of social media for organizing group protests means that the assumed necessity of formalized group structures to overcoming the problem of the free rider may very well be negated as fundamental to any understanding of the theory of collective action.

Understanding the problem of the free rider in events of collective action depends upon the implication that institutions prompt a fuller and deeper commitment to the group on the part of individuals. In the most direct sense, the formalized structures of organized groups induce buy-in on the part of the individual. The existential foundation of any group is a collective sense of responsibility to the greater good. Without this structure, according to long-held understandings of collective action, the ego takes over and the inherent selfishness of the human being holds sway (Olson, 1965; Smith & Welser, 2005). However, a number of scholars have noted that the influence of traditional institutional structures has waned significantly in the last few decades, and this social issue is contextually important for any consideration of the impact of social media on events of collective action.

The Decline of Institutions, the Rise of Social Media, and Implications for the Polis

Brooks (2019) identified an attachment to institutions as a marker of a bygone era, a time in previous decades when our culture was more disposed toward communal

activities, when individual lives were shaped by a sense of duty to institutions. Brooks cited this collective imperative as an example of a moral ecology or what we can understand as a system of beliefs and behaviors that shapes individuals and defines societies. In the era following the Great Depression and the Second World War, “big problems required big institutional responses. People joined armies, formed unions, worked at big companies. They bonded tightly together as warring nations. Therefore, a culture developed that emphasized doing your duty, fitting into institutions, conforming to the group, deferring to authority...” (p. 4).

Such a value system may seem decidedly outmoded as society moves deeper into the 21st Century. Putnam (2000) famously marked the decline of engagement with formal groups and traditional civic organizations as a sign of the fraying social fabric. Likewise, Bauman (1998; 2001) noted that our modern world has turned the traditional authority of the collective over to the overwhelming power of the self. The rise of consumerism and globalism have prompted a cultural shift in the way we perceive and understand all of society’s traditional structures, from marriage to the military to our sense of a relationship to the divine.

Empirical data confirms a growing dissolution of confidence in institutions. Trust in government and in political institutions is declining (Dalton, 2005). The influence of mainline Protestantism has diminished (Johnson, Hoge, & Luidens, 1993). The number of individuals who claim no religious affiliation at all is growing, especially among younger generations (Lipka, 2015). There exists less and less societal and individual trust in institutions of all sorts, not only in the realms of government and religion, but also

regarding public schools, the media, corporations, and organized labor (Fournier & Quinton, 2012; Saad, 2018). In a time when we can connect virtually with people scattered around the globe, we have fewer personal relationships with our neighbors down the street (Dunkelman, 2014). For all the visions of the power social media holds to spread the values and promises of liberalism, a strong argument can be made that it has, in fact, hastened the downfall of democracy (Foroohar, 2019; Schradie, 2019; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

For some, social media is an appropriate replacement for traditional groups and communities as well as a technological marvel that presents new opportunities for democratization and action toward social change (Howard, 2010; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Miller 2017). Social media, in this view, is included among the many wonders of new information and communication technologies that are thought to enable more democratic involvement and to shift the balance of power for social impact to the masses (Evans et al., 2017; Fisher & Boekkooi, 2010; Margetts et al., 2016). After all, more people than ever before can connect, communicate, and participate.

We seem to find ourselves in the midst of a monumental shift of the social order, which harkens back to earlier disruptions. The foundational work of Weber (1968) regarding organizational forms itself occurred during such a societal upheaval. Weber came to understand bureaucracy as crucial to the development of any organization, ensuring efficiency and effectiveness through the creation of a clear power structure. Such organizations, as in the crumbling institutions we have long known, are considered less relevant in this our age of information. The technological tools that now guide and

shape our lives, the ways we communicate with one another, and the ways we organize and distribute information have usurped any need for extraneous, meddlesome bureaucracies. For some, the rise of ICTs means that power can be more widely distributed and social action and movements more collaborative, more democratic (Shirky, 2008).

Social media, though, for all its connotations of connectivity and community, affixes its primary concern on the needs of the user, wielding extraordinary influence on the behaviors and identities of the individual (Christakis & Fowler, 2008; Merchant, 2016). Furthermore, social media companies appear more interested not in communities of users, but in the market value of the vast and varied amount of personal data generated by those users (van Dijck, 2013). Thus, social media platforms, rather than creating social value through connections, more primarily create monetary value for shareholders and corporations via the information produced about the habits of consumers.

This erosion of trust in traditional institutional powers poses complex issues for collective action. According to Bishop and Cushing (2008), organizations and institutions must devise ways to subtly shape individual behavior and to help promote individualized brands in order to accomplish goals once deemed the responsibility of the community. As the influence of traditional group identities and associations has waned, they have been overtaken by the fleeting passions of one-time events and gatherings of a temporary nature that demand no long-term commitments or responsibilities.

McAdam's (1988) influential study of the Freedom Summer of 1964 declared that what matters most in activism is not ideological fervor but a sense of personal connection

to a movement. Gladwell (2010) likewise asserted that social media, rather than expanding possibilities for deep connection, promotes instead the development of weak ties. This critique noted that such threadbare affiliations do little for the kind of high-risk activism that gave power to the Civil Rights Movement and that leads to meaningful social change. While important for the proliferation of ideas and information and while providing extraordinary means for efficient collaboration and commerce, ICTs and social media platforms, in fact, run counter to the promotion of democracy and activism (Morozov, 2011).

There is little doubt that social media was instrumental in a number of ways for the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike (Blanc, 2019; Brescia, 2020). The use primarily of Facebook by the teachers allowed for the communication and sharing of crucial information that fueled the decision to strike and offered an easier ability to organize large numbers of people across vast geographic space. Importantly, the use of Facebook in the organization of the strike was central to a media narrative that pointed to the miracle of the internet and its ability to give voice to the powerless, to serve as a tool for reclaiming democracy by the disenfranchised (Bidgood & Robertson, 2018; Quinn 2018b). As human beings, we rely on such hero stories for inspiration, for meaning, for hope (Allison & Goethals, 2016). In the wake of movements like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and Black Lives Matter, to name only a few, this is a story we have come to know well (Castells, 2012; Tai, 2016). Born of a paradigm of human exceptionalism, such a view is rooted in the understanding that all social problems, because of humanity's propensity for unmitigated progress and technological ingenuity, a dominant

characteristic of modernist, Enlightenment thought, are solvable (Catton & Dunlap, 1978).

Yet, do we not also intuit, even yearn for, a larger form of human mind, one removed from our ordinary sense of autonomous self-awareness? Bateson's (1972) phrase, an *ecology of mind*, offers an alternative to the mechanistic notion of human consciousness in which we understand our full participation in a wider, more intricate system – a community of living beings. This stands as antithetical to the modernist perspective, which positions humanity as above, outside of, and against everything else. Individualism may serve to define our time and our economic system, but it cannot be the sum of our humanity. The only limitation on our own self-interest is the notion that, for better or worse, we are members of and to one another (Berry, 2015).

What thus must also be considered in the action taken by the teachers in West Virginia is their collective identity with the place, with their students, and with a sense of duty to one another and to the community. Social media did not allow the teachers to form deep ties; those sorts of thick connections existed before and apart from the informational tool of Facebook. Collective action sees institutions as negating the self-interest of humans. It frames choices in stark economic terms. Individuals make a cost-benefit analysis when they decide to act. Yet, commitments to shared goals, to larger ideologies, and to the needs of a community surely run far deeper than economic self-interest. Such commitments cannot be understood merely through the transactional lens of the market. The decision to act is made because individuals have a collective identity, deep and meaningful ties to one another, to a moral code, to family, to a place. If

individuals are motivated solely by the maximization of self-interest, then there is little hope for our society (Bellah, 1978).

In discussing their motivations to participate individually in the strike, many of the West Virginia teachers voiced a deep sense of commitment to a specific place. This was especially the case for teachers who lived in or had roots in the southern coalfield counties of the state. But more consistently, the teachers who were interviewed talked about a shared commitment to students and to the profession. From their perspective, teachers bore critical responsibility for the very future of West Virginia, and this was related to larger issues and problems that needed to be confronted. That the entirety of West Virginia is understood to fall within the Appalachian region and that the state's history is decidedly bound up with the industry of coal mining and with labor movements is a further contextual element of the study that must be addressed.

Collective Identity and Resistance

According to the political determinations of the Appalachian Regional Commission (n.d.), West Virginia is the only state that lies fully within the Appalachian region. All fifty-five counties in the state are considered a part of this vast geographic entity that encompasses parts of twelve other states and extends north from Mississippi into southern New York (The Appalachian Region, n.d.). The histories of both Appalachia and West Virginia cannot be fully understood without a consideration of the importance of resistance to labor exploitation and collective dissent in the face of cultural oppression (Cattell, 2018; Drake, 2001; Eller, 1982; Fisher, 1993; Williams, 2002). As far back as the late 19th Century, labor unions were active in the region and coal miners in

Appalachia were among the first workers in the country to be organized as unions (Drake, 2001). Today the identity of West Virginia and of much of its citizenry continues to be linked in complex ways to the extractive industry of coal despite its waning economic influence (Bell & York, 2010). According to Nardella (2019), “West Virginia has long been a site of collateral damage in the nation’s need for cheap energy, and an internal other poised to represent the backward segment of a modern nation moving forward” (p. 8).

To remove or set Appalachia as somehow apart from mainstream American culture is essential to framing the region as a sacrifice zone, making it far easier to exploit the region’s labor and resources (Eller, 1982; Smith, 2015). Like other largely rural places, if anything distinguishes the region, it is that it reflects the shortcomings of a capitalist economic system and the gross failures of public policies enacted by those whose faith is placed solely in market solutions for every social ill (Couto, 1999). In the dominant cultural narrative, Appalachia and its people are frequently portrayed through demeaning and dehumanizing stereotypes as a backward, unintelligent, fatalistic group complicit in their own oppression (Fisher, 1993). The region is considered in reductionist terms as an isolated, poverty stricken, economically underdeveloped land that remains home to a generally inferior people who exist outside the normal parameters of American culture and history (Shapiro, 1978; Speer, 1993; Williams, 2002; Whisnant, 2009).

The obverse of these perceptions is the well-known mythos of the rugged mountaineer whose Scots-Irish blood nourishes his fierce and fighting independent spirit (Webb, 2004). The recent idea of Appalachia as the heart of “Trump Country” is of

corresponding hokum (Cattell, 2018). This understanding of the region as indicative of some authentic America where hard work, personal sacrifice, and grit are cultural markers only serves to bolster an incomplete and misinformed narrative that presumes a white, male homogeneity (Glasby, Gradin, & Ryerson, 2020; Hampton, 2020; Hayden, 2002; Mason, 2018). As with any place, the region of Appalachia is dynamic and complex, multi-layered and paradoxical. There does not exist one unique or universal Appalachia (Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010; Manzo, 2005). Those who study the region must “come to understand and accept the reality of multiple Appalachian experiences, taking into account the specificity and diversity of who we are” (Fisher, 2010, p. 59).

Because space and geography are inherent and entwined elements of identity, collective actions of dissent and resistance are about place just as much as they are about identity (Jansson, 2003; Stanley, 2012). Place offers “the context where social movement agency challenges the dominating practices of private capital and the state” (Routledge, 1992, p. 590). Spatial and geographical representations are “deeply symbolic of how we define what is right and wrong and who we identify against” (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995, p. 79). While the full meaning of an Appalachian regional identity is different for everyone, a deep connection to one’s native place fosters a sense of belonging and of understanding of self that are significant mobilizing factors for activism and participation in collective action related to issues of social justice (Fisher, 1999). This reflects a conception of “identity as an intentional act of resistance that grounds individuals, who otherwise face demeaning representations of themselves, and leads outward toward

solidarity with others” (Smith, 2010, p. 56). In media accounts and in personal recollections, participants in the West Virginia teachers’ strike regularly discussed their connections to the place and to the history of union organizing and activism in the state as crucial to their individual decisions to strike (Catte, Hilliard, & Salfia, 2018). Their words illustrate the importance of a collective identity in their own act of resistance.

Having outlined the important contextual issues above, it is necessary to briefly address certain epistemological underpinnings of the study. While the theory of collective action offers a theoretical starting point rooted in a rational-choice paradigm, this inquiry moves beyond such frameworks by taking a critical approach that affords a more holistic and humanizing analysis. Critical theory and dialectical modes of thought provided avenues for drawing deeper meaning from qualitative data that express conflicting viewpoints and competing narratives around an event of collective resistance. Additionally, this study stands as one of the very few examples of an examination of the role of digital information technologies in protest and social movements from an information science perspective. The necessity of this viewpoint as well as implications for broadening the reach of information science as a scholarly discipline are discussed below.

Dialectical Thinking and Critical Inquiry

This work operates from an understanding that positivism, in its reliance on universal truths, is a limited philosophical paradigm for making sense of the contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities found in the multiple personal experiences of the West Virginia strike. More detailed attention will be given to this element in

Chapter Two, but to set the stage, it is important to note that mine is a decidedly critical approach that embraces systematic dialectical thinking as cultivated by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) and, more especially, Marcuse (1941; 1964). Such a framework understands that meaning can be found in the transitory space between contradictory views of reality. The essence of a more humanized way of seeing the world can be realized in narratives that are more conflicting and fragmented than logically structured. After all, our lives are lived daily within the tensions of opposing forces and viewpoints.

A labor strike such as the one instigated by West Virginia teachers in 2018 is inspirational in its expressions of solidarity and unity. However, the reality of the lived experience as told in the stories of the teachers themselves, reflected multiple contentious and discordant perspectives. In addition, digital information and communication technologies such as social media exemplify both the power of human ingenuity to transcend bounds of space and time while also serving to dehumanize and alienate us from the social world. In many respects, these dialectical issues present difficult and even unanswerable questions. This study presents an analysis that moves beyond the bounds of rationalistic and transactional views of human behavior toward a more complex consideration of events like the West Virginia teachers' strike.

The Necessity of an Information Science Perspective

Information science is an inherently social and social scientific discipline (Bawden & Robinson, 2013; Cronin, 2008). Thus, while information science is surely understood as concerning itself with information systems and with the organization and management of information, I contend that it should also serve as an avenue for

scholarship that explores the impact of information on our social world. As a broad field of study, information science relies upon multiple perspectives for the creation of knowledge, including philosophical, mathematical, and sociological, among others (Bawden, 2007; Hirst, 1974).

My work is rooted in Buckland's (1996) idea of the field of information science as a liberal art and, above all else, information as a form of cultural exchange. In this holistic view, information is text, documents, events, and any number of other *things* (Buckland, 1991). Such a perspective encapsulates the intersectionality and interconnectedness of a complex web of issues and problems that present themselves within the domain of information. Information science is thus integral to a more complex understanding of an event such as the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike, an event of collective action clearly impacted by information technology.

The use of social media in events of collective action has become a widespread phenomenon (Castells, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013). Furthermore, we find ourselves living in an age of information, a moment in time when the entire universe of information is to be found at our fingertips through technology that is as mobile as we are and thus never far from our hands if not worn directly on our person (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Drucker, 1999). Both the strike by public school teachers in West Virginia and the use of social media in this event of collective action posed innumerable questions related to both communication and information.

More so, the event raised complex issues that do not fit into neatly bounded and distinct academic disciplines, spanning, as they do, an expansive spectrum that blurs any

lines between information technology or media studies or political science or sociology and anthropology or Appalachian studies, to pinpoint a few. The research questions I examined relate to the use of social media as a key information tool during the strike; to answer them necessitated an understanding of information science that is interdisciplinary. As most straightforwardly connected to the realm of information, these questions were centered on the use of social media to share information and its use as an organizational tool in the strike. At the same time, the importance of collective identity to this event and the interconnectedness of identity and information technology cannot be ignored. This issue has broader sociological, political, and economic implications. To disregard them would be disingenuous and would also neglect to see information phenomena as interrelated with questions explored in other disciplinary realms. Such work contributes then to broadening the perspective of the field and to positioning information science as an interdisciplinary endeavor. The discipline is clearly concerned with the way information is organized, stored, and accessed. It ought also to be concerned with the ways in which information impacts our lives and our social world.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the issues and scholarship related to the research questions examined in this work. Divided into three major sections, the review begins with a description of the theoretical perspective of collective action, which has served as a core framework for the modern study of social movements, and the ways its most elemental dilemmas are addressed. Fundamental to this perspective is a rootedness in rationalistic social scientific paradigms which clearly impact the way events such as the West Virginia teachers' strike are analyzed and understood in both the historical and social scientific narratives. These paradigms also give shape to the prevailing perspectives of the role of information communication technologies (ICT) and social media in social movements and events of dissent and protest. Following this exposition is a discussion of the need to address these issues from a critical perspective. The second major section offers a survey of views regarding the role of ICTs and online social networking platforms in contemporary social movements and the subsequent implications for any understanding of collective action. Attention is also given to critiques of social media and modernistic understandings of the role of technology in movements and events of social change. In the third and final section, issues of individual identity and collective identity are explored within the context of the Appalachian region as related to protest, resistance, and dissent.

Collective Action and Social Movements

The study of social movements, which is wide in scope and varied in perspective, has long been fundamental to any understanding of social change (della Porta & Dianni, 2020). Especially in the decades after the dramatic cultural and political upheavals of the 1960s, the study of social movements became a well-established area of focus and one of the more robust domains of sociology and political science, resulting in an effusion of theoretical and empirical writings on contentious events of dissent, protest, and revolution (Engler & Engler, 2016; Marx & Wood, 1975; Morris & Herring, 1987). Multiple models and perspectives, of course, emerged in that time, all of them interwoven among the theoretical threads of classical social science, and it is therefore impractical to offer here a comprehensive overview of each. Because of its preeminence among rational thought models used to frame modern social movements, for purposes of this review, a theoretical starting point is found in the landmark work, *The Logic of Collective Action*, by Mancur Olson (1965). However, despite the dominance of this perspective, it does not present opportunity for the most fully complete discourse.

Overcoming the Problem of Self-Interest

The framework offered by Olson, an economist, stands as a pillar of the rational thought models that have shaped the contemporary study of social movements. According to Oliver (1993), “the importance of Olson’s argument to the history of social science cannot be overestimated” (p. 273). Before Olson, the prevailing thought was that the concerns of both the individual and the group were always aligned and that there existed a natural inclination for those with shared interests to work together in pursuit of

those interests. What is good for the group is good for me, and what is good for me is also good for the group. Olson's view challenged this presumption, pointing out that, for rational actors, self-interest always exceeds communal interest. Put simply, there can be no reasonable expectation that people will act together to resolve a common problem or to reach a common goal.

Economists tell us that no rational person would voluntarily hand over money to pay for public goods; such contributions are instead made because of compulsory obligation (Olson, 1993; Ostrom, 2000). As such, in this view, coercive taxation is necessary. The propensity is for individuals to make willing use of collective resources while bearing as little of the cost or burden as possible for their attainment. This is what is known as the problem of the free rider. For Olson, the dilemma of the free rider applies to individuals involved in any collective action or decision taken by a group, including social movements and events of dissent and protest.

From a rational thought perspective, this is the chief problem in any attempt to achieve a collective good or to address an issue of social concern. While all individuals in a group stand to gain from a collective benefit, rational individuals act out of primary concern for their own self-interest and are not inclined to expending the costs of time, energy, and effort in order to gain such benefits. The problem of the free rider is particularly applicable to online groups or networks in which formalized organization and structure is of less necessity and because the size of online groups tends to be large (Smith & Welser, 2005). As a movement reaches a certain size or scope, it becomes more difficult for an individual to imagine that her contribution will make any meaningful

difference. The larger the group, the stronger the assumption by individuals that the collective good is likely to be achieved with or without significant personal contribution.

In the case of social movements, individuals make a rational and calculated choice when it comes to a decision to participate. Contributions of time, effort, presence, or money come at personal cost. The higher the perceived price of participation, the easier it is to sit back and let others bear the expense even though one still stands to gain from the work of the others in the group. The theory of collective action thus tells us that individuals perform a cost benefit analysis, weighing the perceived benefits of a resource against the anticipated costs of participating in the action. It is more cost-efficient not to contribute if one may reap the benefits without doing so.

For Olson, this primary dilemma in the logic of collective action was mediated through the structures of formalized groups, institutions, and organizations (Clark & Wilson, 1961; Olson, 1965; Ostrom, 2000). In his view, collective action cannot be effective unless it occurs in small groups or if “there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest” (Olson, 1965, p. 2). Each of these two most effective solutions to the problem of the free rider – selected incentives or coercion – necessitate “organizations with a substantial capacity to monitor, administer, and distribute such measures” (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 31). These formal and fixed network structures are better equipped to bear the most substantial costs of collective action. In addition to a wider ability to expend money, time, energy, and effort, organizations also offer for individual members a strong sense of group identity through which can be channeled motivation for people to participate and to act. Formalized

groups act on behalf of individuals, offering a level of accountability and providing the necessary mechanisms for the formulation, implementation, and communication of strategies necessary for the effectiveness of any collective action (Bimber, Flanagan, & Stohl, 2012).

The theory of collective action is rooted in rationalism and the positivistic paradigm. It is a perspective that understands the social world in terms of reasonable individuals who make rational decisions based on logical ways of seeing and knowing the world. From this empirical point of view, emotional responses or subjective experiences are secondary to scientific understanding. Such thinking follows a path directly from Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution to the sociocultural norms of modernity, promising full liberation for humanity each step of the way, though this promise falls far short (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). According to Fromm (1968) and other key critical theorists, humanity is, in fact, “not on the way to the places toward which our ideological maps tell us we are moving” (p. 25). Rational and modernist ways of knowing have led us instead to places that only limit if not entirely oppress our capacities for freedom.

Rationalism, Modernity, and its Discontents

For explorations of social movements, Olson’s rational thought perspective has long served as a beginning point (Tarrow, 2011). Prior to Olson, understandings of collective action were predicated upon the presumption that people will instinctively or naturally act on common interests or in the pursuit of solutions to common problems. Inaction thus presented the theoretical conundrum. As a countervailing proposition, rational thought models explained collective action as problematic because human

behavior is understood as strictly self-interested and individualistic (Morris & Herring, 1987). This led to the consideration of social movements in terms of resource mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978) and political opportunity (McAdam, 1982; Oberschall, 1973). Such perspectives, rather than stressing a natural tendency for groups to act together in the face of common grievances, focused on resources, organizational capacities, and political shifts as key to understanding why group actions occur (Oliver, 1993).

Rational thought models reflect a mathematical and calculated approach to explaining why people act. For example, Granovetter (1978) developed a threshold model to posit that a decision to participate in a social movement or protest follows an individual analysis of relative costs and benefits. An individual will choose to participate when the perceived benefits of doing so exceed the perceived costs. The threshold is defined as the point at which an individual understands the risks and benefits as sufficient to the costs of participation. The assumption of such models is that human beings act purposively to optimize or to choose between potential actions based on the best outcome for the self (Coleman & Fararo, 1992). Thus, social movements occur and individuals participate in them primarily because they seek to realize their own interests.

It is notable that rational thought models like those described above, which presented the possibility of groups of people working toward a common goal as problematic in a social world where self-interest is elemental to human behavior, gained such solid footing at a time when movements and events of protest and dissent were flourishing. The decade of the 1960s is notable as an historic era for turbulent social

upheaval, movements, and mass protests. Tarrow (2011) noted this irony and connected it to a concurrent trend in the academy during which the discipline of economics was gaining a dominant position among the social sciences. Such perspectives, though, are limited in that they are based on an epistemological paradigm that makes sense of the world solely in terms of the market and that explains the social world as inherently transactional. This viewpoint, for instance, does not address the possibility of a sense of altruism or identity with a community or commitment to anything larger than or beyond the individual self.

The question of how to address problems of human self-interest when cooperation is essential is as ancient as the noble art of philosophy itself. Aristotle (1941) wrestled with the puzzle that “everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of common interest; and only when he is himself concerned as an individual. For besides other considerations, everybody is more inclined to neglect the duty which he expects another to fulfill” (p. 1148). Thus, the modernist perspectives of these rationalistic and utilitarian paradigms are rooted in the very foundations of Western thought.

Habermas (1996) called modernity an unfinished project, one that had yet to realize its full potential for the emancipation of humanity through reason and rationalism. In doing so, however, he also recognized the limitations and failures of Enlightenment thought. The narrative of modernity is built upon the ideals of progress, universal prosperity, and the objectivity of scientific analysis. In outlining a theory of communicative action, Habermas (1984) criticized the project of modernity as immanently one-sided, having been overtaken by forces of economic and administrative

rationalization. For Foucault (1970), modernity was marked by the epistemic assumption of the central role of humans as both the subject and object of knowledge production. The downfall of modern human sciences, including all scholarly disciplines, was that an obsession with reason and universal claims to objective truth led to increasing social and cultural fragmentation.

While Foucault's is considered a postmodern perspective, Giddens (1990) argued that, instead of moving beyond modernism, we are in truth witnessing a radicalization of modernity. Giddens told us that we should think of modernity as a "juggernaut -- a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder" (p. 139). For many, this image is not altogether unpleasant. One only need ride a roller coaster to experience the thrill and exhilaration of a loss of control. One only need be human to understand the thrill of technological innovation or of the creation of new knowledge even as such knowledge opens our eyes to our own self-destruction and sense of alienation.

On a roller coaster, the ride is controllable and predictable. The same is intended to be true of logics born of rationalist thought. For Habermas (1984), modernity was limited by rational control while also depending on such control as the fundamental element required to reshape it. In the eyes of Habermas, progress and change remained imminently possible, and such promise is seen in the act of communication itself. But for Giddens, modernity was out of control. "The intent of modernity is progress—but the

effect of modernity is the creation of mechanisms and processes that become a runaway engine of change” (Allan, 2013, p. 311).

A runaway engine portends carnage. While scientific progress certainly leads to wealth, awe-inspiring technologies, conveniences, relief from physical labor and ailments, it also is at the heart of every evil we have unleashed upon ourselves and upon the world. There is no wealth without dispossession or extraordinary inequality (Harvey, 2003; 2004). There is no technological innovation without the destruction of natural resources (Bunker & Ciccantell, 2005). Moreover, while the modernistic and rationalistic values of unimpeded progress and innovation continue to offer humans clear and creative answers for our most vexing questions, they also empower us by way of an ennobled superciliousness. Humanity and the capacity for reason still reign supreme. There is a stark divide between the human and natural worlds, and the human realm is the dominant. From the modernist perspective, rational thought and scientific analysis explain the actions of individuals, not myth or custom or tradition, and we are no longer bounded by time or space (Giddens, 1990; 1991). Not only are we able to conceive of spaces we have never visited, but we have also created for ourselves virtual space and virtual time. But perhaps a clear divide between nature and humanity is but one of innumerable false dichotomies.

False Dichotomies

Modernist social scientific discourse finds comfort in binary viewpoints and seeks a methodology that leads to a more precise knowledge, a universal truth dependent upon dualistic thinking (King, 2004). Western philosophical and sociological thought is

derived from the original dualisms and consequent problems of good and evil, true and false, nature and humanity, faith and reason, structure and agency. Nietzsche (1907) identified the ontological limitations of these false dichotomies, and Foucault (1975) demonstrated their imprisoning effects. This is thus a limited, unhelpful, and ultimately self-destructive approach to understanding the social world. Robinson (1998) pointed to the necessity for a more complex and intricate paradigmatic framework, noting that “those who would employ reductive definitions of utility or reality credit their own perceptions of truth with fundamentalist simple-heartedness, brooking no allusion to complexities and ambiguities and countervailing experience” (p. 3). There exists no simplistic binary. According to De León (2015), “this problematic dualism is part of the futile quest to ascribe to humans credit for all action while assigning randomness or inanimate status to all matter outside our species, a phenomenon largely attributed to Western elites” (p. 40).

Such a dichotomy was evidenced in two seemingly opposed schools of thought regarding the nature of grassroots organizing for social change. Alinsky (1971) and Piven and Cloward (1977) each offered models of organizing for those who lack power and privilege and who seek justice and equity. The Alinsky model of grassroots organizing, which has also come to be known as Chicago-style community organizing, remains highly influential and is reflected in numerous activist networks that exist today (Engler & Engler, 2016). This model reflects an approach of slow, incremental work toward social change that is centered on the development of stable, institutional structures. The point is to build organizations, not movements. In this view, change is rarely instant or

dramatic. Rather, it is a long, tedious process that involves building on locally established centers of power such as churches or other small community groups. Not motivated by ideology or abstract values, the Alinsky model seeks the achievement of strategic, long-term goals rather than the formation of a distinctive collective identity. This requires the laborious work of person-by-person recruitment, leadership development, and the creation of stable organizations and broad coalitions.

Piven and Cloward (1977), on the other hand, sought change in the disruptive power of mass mobilizations that form and coalesce with rapid velocity. This model finds bureaucratic institutions to be constraining in their general aversion to risk-taking and in their necessary focus on self-preservation. Such formal structures detract from the anger and hope ignited through dynamic events of mass protest. The abiding understanding is that people who most lack resources and influence are unable to achieve much in the way of change through the conventional political methods followed by members of the elite and of the establishment. The key tools for effective social movements are protest, disruption, and mass moments of dissent that directly and forcefully challenge dominant paradigms of power. In many ways, this approach was prophetic in terms of the elements that mark contemporary popular movements. For Piven, Occupy Wall Street and the like marked an entirely new cycle of protest and a revival of the power of mass mobilization (Maisano, 2012). Such movements are held up as exemplary of leaderless, decentralized revolt that seizes momentum for social change through mass mobilization and protest.

These two models of grassroots organizing illustrate the limitations of a false binary because the divide between organization for structural change and disruptive

protest is not necessarily clear cut. To see the two schools of thought as mutually exclusive does little to present the complexities and multidimensionality of social movements and reflects the reductionist understandings of the world brought about through modernistic, rationalist forms of knowledge creation. Rather than standing in opposition, each school of grassroots organizing offers both strengths and weaknesses, and in each the value of the other can be recognized. Payne (1995) noted that the civil rights movement incorporated elements of both viewpoints even in the face of tensions that regularly arose between those who preferred one or the other approach either in general or in moments of specific social and historic contexts. Alinsky himself saw the values and benefits of mass disruption, of moments of whirlwind (Horwitt, 1992). Tarrow (2011) argued that “it is not possible today – if it ever was – to separate politics in the streets from elite and institutional politics” (p. 261). Thus, these two prominent avenues for organizing for social change are interrelated, bound up in one body of interdependent processes.

The tensions of opposing viewpoints and competing narratives characterize the story of the West Virginia teachers’ strike as it is told in Chapter Four. While the strike was an event grounded in solidarity, individual experiences of it were marked at the same time by discord and contradiction. A fuller, more complex understanding of the collective action of the teachers and thus also of the role of social media in its organization required a dialectical perspective that made room for such incongruence and dissonance. For this research, a critical perspective was used to seek meaning in the contradictions.

Meaning in Contradiction: Dialectical Thinking and the Critical Perspective

This work moves beyond the idea of universal truths and explanations and points out the contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities to be found in personal experiences of the West Virginia strike. In this it is a decidedly critical approach that embraces systematic dialectical thinking as cultivated by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) and, more especially, Marcuse (1941; 1964). Simply put, such a framework understands that what appear to be contradictory views of reality can be reconciled into a meaning more reasonable than either of the seemingly opposed positions. From this perspective, the dichotomous space is not muddy; rather, the questions and conflicts raised therein is where the essence of our humanity is found. An examination of that space more clearly reflects the reality of our lived experience through an ability to consider issues from multiple perspectives. Knowledge is not gained only from discovering logical answers but also from formulating logical but inherently unanswerable questions.

A rationalistic, positivistic perspective is not useless; it simply does not allow for an articulation of the fullest picture. It does not allow us a sufficient understanding of our humanity. For Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), positivism represented the peak of the project of Enlightenment. What Enlightenment gave us is an over-rationalized philosophy that serves as an instrument of technocracy. For instance, modern science does not try to explain nature; the point is rather to duplicate nature and subjugate it, to emerge in triumph over larger cosmic forces. We are thus products of a “modern society which is technically-minded, self-centered, and self-loving, almost in a sickly narcissistic fashion, scoring honor upon honor, piling up victory upon victory, reaching for the distant

galaxies, and seeing in the here-and-now sensible world the only manifestation of being” (Soloveitchik, 1965, p. 6). This reflects a functional, mechanistic, utilitarian society that is ever oriented to the rational individual and in which “the practical reasons of the mind long ago supplanted the sensitive regions of the heart” (Soloveitchik, 1965, p. 7).

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), in the concept of determinate negation, understood the critical perspective as the best tool for separating truth and ideology. A richer conception of phenomena can be developed through its opposite. For Marcuse (1964), dialectical thinking was defined as two-dimensional, able to transcend positivist, uncritical thinking. In this perspective, a technological rationality has been imposed on every aspect of culture and social life, including in the economic system of capitalism. Our consumerist, modern industrial society serves as a form of social control in that it forces people to see themselves as the commodities they produce and pursue. Social media are also commodities, the product being personal data created by users themselves, and clearly an extension of their minds and bodies. We are therefore utterly controlled, manipulated, and negated by our commodified way of life. Marcuse argued for what he called a Great Refusal, an organized political rejection of capitalism, a negation of the things that negate us (Fuchs, 2017). But refusal and resistance are not a form of passive withdrawal or retreat; they become instead active forms of a radically different mode of being and of doing that challenge forms of domination.

Such radical praxis is foundational to critical theory. According to Dahms (2007), such a perspective illuminates the ways “traditional theories of modern society, conceptions of social science, approaches to studying social life, and practices of doing

research start out from largely implicit yet highly problematic assumptions about the relationship between social science and society" (p. 18). Critical theory understands that the specific economic, political, cultural and ideological contexts are directly related to the normative forms and practices of social life and social scientific research. A distinct need for a critical approach in the field of information science is recognized, especially in light of the tendency to adopt and adapt theoretical perspectives from other disciplines (Leckie & Buschman, 2010). The critical perspective is reflective of a more progressive mindset in the field, one closely aligned with action-oriented outcomes that seek social justice (Mehra & Rioux, 2016).

This study presents an analysis that moves beyond the bounds of rationalistic, mechanistic, positivistic, and transactional views of human behavior toward a more complex understanding of events like the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike. While the logic of collective action remains a central framework that has shaped the scholarly exploration of social movements for some time, it is necessary to realize the ways in which such a perspective is limited and inadequate before a more sufficient conception is considered. Furthermore, the values of modernity stand also at the heart of the prevailing narrative regarding the role of information communication technologies (ICT) in our lives and, consequently, in social movements and events of dissent and protest.

In the next section, an overview of perspectives related to the role of ICTs and online social networking platforms in contemporary social movements is provided. The discussion points to a host of subsequent implications for any understanding of collective action as a result of the rise in the use of ICTs for organizing for social change. Given the

critical perspective of this study, attention is also given to critiques of social media and modernistic understandings of the role of technology in social movements and in events of protest and dissent.

Technology and Social Movements

The rise of ICTs and, more specifically, the use of social media platforms in events of protest and dissent have dramatically reshaped the scholarly conversation around social movements (Howard & Hussain, 2013; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; van Stekelenburg & Roggeband, 2013). These digital technologies are seen by many to utterly reframe what McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilley (2001) called the dynamics of contention. Especially for expressions of dissent from marginalized groups, in this view, digital technologies reduce the personal and collective risks of activism and negate the gender, racial, socioeconomic, and other circumstantial obstacles that typically impede social movements (Schmidt & Cohen, 2014). Numerous scholars have pointed to the promise of new information and communication technologies for broader civic and democratic participation that brings about dramatic social change (Freelon, Wells, & Bennett, 2013; Castells, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Garrett, 2006).

Techno-centrism and the Modern World

A not uncommon viewpoint understands that the internet has changed the world through its ability to connect people, spread information, and seed democracy (Shapiro, 1999). Foroohar (2019) compared the impact of internet technologies on society to that of the development of the atomic bomb and noted that we stand in mystified awe of this most awesome and dangerous power that we have unleashed upon the world by way of

our human ingenuity and scientific prowess. We cannot help but admire and fear it at the same time. This perspective undergirds a conception of digital technologies as our savior, born of a paradigm of human exceptionalism, and rooted in the understanding that all social problems are solvable with the right technology (Catton & Dunlap, 1978). We are told that, in our capacity for creation, we both reflect and usurp the power of gods.

In this way, new technologies are credited with altering the entirety of the human situation. Technology has the power to “change what we mean by ‘knowing’ and ‘truth’; [to] alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is like—a sense of what is the natural order of things, of what is reasonable, of what is necessary, of what is inevitable, of what is real” (Postman, 1992, p. 12). Of course, the nature of computer technology itself aligns with a positivistic and data-driven epistemology. ICTs improve our abilities to derive truth from statistics and to objectify information (Fuchs, 2017). Postman (1992) noted that such ways of knowing can be useful to a point but are also dangerous because of the risks presented in the indiscriminate application of technical solutions to every problem of humankind. Nevertheless, this techno-centric perspective has become comprehensive and dominant.

The potential for technology to offer emancipation and self-fulfillment is a fundamental position of a modernist industrial society (Carr, 2014; Dyer-Witheford, 1999). From this perspective, if our liberation is to be found in technology, it follows that our ability to throw off the yokes of oppression and injustice will only be enhanced by our embrace of it. A techno-centric viewpoint claims not only that advances in communication technologies are crucial to movements for social change, but that ICTs

have fundamentally altered all forms collective action (Shirky, 2008). Social media and related technologies are thought to remove all transactional costs and make information sharing and coordination among activists easier than ever before and thus alter completely the forms, meaning, and significance of social movements (Benkler, 2006; Gerbaudo, 2012; Shirky, 2008).

This is a familiar story in the history of social movements. Such techno-centrism is present in the historical narrative that the Reformation was driven by the emergence of the printing press or that the American Revolution arose because of the ability to widely disseminate copies of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (Eisenstein, 1979; 2002). Yet, no matter the historical context, acts of protest and revolution have always turned upon changes in our ability to communicate, to effectively bend space and time, whether it be in the form of the telegraph or of Facebook. (Brescia, 2020).

Social Media and Contemporary Social Movements

ICTs, in general, certainly have had tremendous impact on contemporary social movements, but in more specific terms, the widespread use of social media platforms has sparked a renewal of public and scholarly interest in how such movements are understood (Haunss, 2015). Social networking sites “have allowed people to link and interact with each other irrespective of time or space, causing significant changes in collective movements” (Gunel & Baruh, 2016, p. 131). Social media platforms are now essential tools for the building of networks among activists who are physically separated and for reducing in significant ways the costs and time required to organize, collaborate, and mobilize. In the view of Castells (2012), social media have given rise to entirely new

forms of protest and participation through horizontal, decentralized, flexible networks that form across multiple levels.

As the ubiquity of online social networking technologies has increased, so too has digital activism (Schmidt & Cohen, 2014). This is especially important for marginalized groups who otherwise have less means of expression and who face greater risk in making their voices heard. The internet and social media lower the threshold for participation for everyone while their mobilizing structures increase the diversity of participants and activists who are involved (Taylor, 2000). Such movements thus help to drive a metanarrative that romanticizes the use of social media for social change. With more technology comes “more anecdotes that capture our imagination and make nice headlines. Even when unsuccessful, revolutionaries occupy a particular position in our collective history that confers a certain respect, if begrudgingly so” (Schmidt & Cohen, 2014, p. 150). These narratives of revolution are central to our understanding of citizenship and civic participation. The use of social media promotes a more individualized conception of participation along with a new type of participant in the form of individuals whose allegiances are diffuse and for whom institutional structures hold less sway. According to Castells (2001), the open architecture of online social networking and the ease of information dissemination “makes it possible for every individual to induce or be the locus of a network or movement” (p. 134).

Those involved in social movements use social media for the rapid spread of information and for quick responses to issues and events. Protests and other events of dissent happen quicker, on larger scales, and can be conducted and coordinated

irrespective of geographical bounds (van Stekelenburg & Roggeband, 2013). A further effect is the ability for protesters to use social media to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and to generate their own coverage of events, framing the political discourse on their own terms (Castells, 2012).

The tools that social media platforms provide for social movements in their ability to increase both communication and participation are straightforward. What raises more questions are the potential implications of social media use in social movements for the ability of institutional structures to mitigate the prevailing problems of collective action. There exists a general theoretical assumption that digital activism is equated with a leaderless, decentralized, and horizontal approach, which significantly undermines the suppositions of collective action (Schradie, 2019). In social movements of the digital age, “the more interactive and self-configurable communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization and the more participatory is the movement” (Castells, 2012, p. 13). Digital activism, for many, has entirely reformulated the necessity for institutional infrastructure and has also given rise to new organizational forms that are dependent upon a high degree and quality of personalized digital engagement (Chadwick, 2007; Wells, 2015).

Implications for Collective Action

For Tufekci (2017), contemporary movements and protests are markedly different from those of the past and operate with a distinct logic. Still, the major dilemmas remain, key among them the problem of the free rider, though such problems and their solutions have been transformed in dramatic ways. Others go further, drawing direct correlations between the rise of ICTs and the wholesale demise of traditional institutional structures

(Schmidt & Cohen, 2014). In this view, old institutions and hierarchies must adapt or face irrelevancy and obsolescence because ICTs have transformed institutional structures and have shattered spatial and temporal impediments that previously hindered our ability to connect and collaborate with other individuals either in the neighboring county or across the globe. Additionally, the widespread use of social media has coincided with a declining level of trust in the ideals and institutions of liberal democracy itself (Feroz, 2019). Ever greater inequality as a result of neoliberal policies also contributes to “a sense that the game is rigged, and that there is now an even wider social and economic chasm dividing the haves and have-nots, a divide created not just by Wall Street, but by Silicon Valley, too” (p. 8).

A prevailing perspective has emerged that the hierarchical, impenetrable structures of the past have been replaced by online activist networks that are more individualized and permeable (Wellman, 2001). In the most direct reassessment of Olson’s original theory following the rise of social media, Bennett and Segerberg (2011; 2012; 2013) argued that it is now incumbent upon organizations to meet the demands of new expectations of movement participants. As participation in events of collective action has become more individualized so has an ability to engage on multiple fronts increased. Virtual networks offer a kind of choose your own adventure for would be activists. One can move fluidly from one protest network or movement to another. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2011), there is “growing demand for personalized relations with causes and organizations [which] makes digital technologies increasingly central to the organization and conduct of collective action” (p. 771). In their view, the

meaning of individual narratives has become more crucial to the mobilization of people toward collective action by formal organizations. The organizations that survive, thrive, and remain effective in the digital age will be those most willing to be flexible in defining issues and strategies and that adopt a more personalized communications process.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) built upon the idea that “individualized orientations result in engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances” (p. 743) and illustrated that digital communications technologies provide useful tools for personalizing organized action more effectively than do identities with more traditional and formalized social groups, memberships, or ideologies. Actions, then, have become expressions of personal identity and are less and less driven by individual identification with a common group. As a result, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) refashioned collective action as *connective* action since digital communication technologies can provide for personalization through digital connections in the form of texts, tweets, or posts to social networking sites. Contrary to the conventional logic of collective action, which depends upon formal group structures and identity, Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) new logic of connective action starts with the “self-motivated sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others” (p. 753). Tai (2016) pointed out that “while connective action is preconditioned on the prevalence of highly personalized and digitally mediated social networks, its linchpin is the constitutive role of sharing of personally engaging content” (p. 157). What this means, of course, is that, in its focus on an individualistic perspective and on the commodification of user data, Bennett and Segerberg’s conception does

nothing to move beyond the dominant, modernistic paradigm at the root of Olson's original theoretical perspective.

On the other hand, Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2005) pointed to the rise of digital communication technologies and online networks as rendering completely negligible the general explanations and expectations of the theory of collective action. From their perspective, such technologies have made communication cheaper, easier, quicker, and unrestricted by previous constraints. Thus, the existence of the dilemma of the free rider is disputable since "individuals can now contribute to information repositories with no or only partial knowledge of other participants or contributors and without a clear intention or knowledge of contributing to communal information" (p. 372). Though collective action theory expresses the necessity of formal structures in order to effectively organize group actions, as with the West Virginia teachers' strike, digital technologies and social media now make informal and grassroots-based organization possible in other ways. As with landlines and printed maps, earlier foundational explanations for actions taken by groups can be tossed upon the proverbial trash heap of old and useless ideas.

Social Media and the Promise of Democracy

A prevailing assumption exists that the most significant impact of new communication technologies and digitally enabled social networks lies in their ability to dismantle entrenched power structures and to hasten the inevitable progress toward increased individual agency and self-determination (Benkler, 2006; Schmidt & Cohen, 2014; Shirky, 2008). As history and humanity have marched ever onward, "the advent of

new information technologies has often empowered successive waves of people at the expense of traditional power brokers, whether that meant the king, the church, or the elites. Then as now, access to information and to new communication channels meant new opportunities to participate, to hold power to account and to direct the course of one's life with greater agency" (Schmidt & Cohen, 2014, p. 6). Many understand digital technologies as heralding a new age of democratic empowerment all thanks to relatively inexpensive devices we can carry around in our pockets. No longer is the guillotine required; we now have Facebook.

This narrative presumes universal accessibility to these technologies and carries with it a tendency to overlook or ignore any implications for their use by autocrats, would-be dictators, and oppressive regimes. An expectation persists that the world will be altogether freer, better, and safer because of an increased ability to mobilize and participate. We have "imbibed the notion that communicative technologies are necessarily liberating and enlightening, and that the relative openness of internet platforms must work in the direction of free speech, free thought, and democratic reform" (Vaidhyathan, 2018, p. 139). There is both an ethnocentric and imperialistic bent to these views, an assumption that if only people had our brilliant tools and toys, their lives would be instantly improved.

For many, it is difficult not to see a kind of magic in social media and the internet. Benkler (2006) emphasized the liberalizing effects of ICTs and their power to increase political expression. The celebration of contemporary movements and revolutions in both scholarly literature and in media reports often point to social media as the defining

feature of these events (Ghonim, 2012; Mason, 2012, Wall & El Zahed, 2011). For instance, in the view of Howard and Hussain (2011; 2013), social media was in every way crucial and causal to the Arab Spring. In their assessment, the movement simply would not have happened without the digital information infrastructure provided by the internet, cell phones, and social media. Furthermore, digital media not only provoked the popular uprisings in the Arab world, but for years underpinned the social and political activity that led to them. This is one of the clearer examples that draw a positive correlation between social media use and participation in civic and political life since social media platforms are now indispensable to the expression of political views and for civic participation in countries that lack a free and independent press (Boulianne, 2015; 2019).

A dominant understanding of the use of social media in events of protest and revolution in the last decade or so gives the indication that such movements are not only leaderless, but also have appeared out of thin air and not in any way connected to prior years of work, organization, and rising levels of social and political discord (Vaidhyathan, 2018). This discourse is in a great many ways problematic and necessitates a more nuanced and critical view (Brescia, 2020, Dencik, 2015; Porto & Brant, 2015). It must be considered that ICTs themselves are not agents of change and that platforms do not inherently spread freedom and democracy.

A Critical Perspective of Social Media and Protest

According to Postman (1992), “it is a mistake to suppose that any technological innovation has a one-sided effect. Every technology is both a burden and a blessing” (p.

4). Once more, a dualistic perspective – that internet technologies and platforms are either good or bad – is limited and unhelpful. Rather, there is a full range of social and political contexts that contributes to all forms of movement and protest no matter the use of social media (Curran, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013). Even in the age of digital media, all human actions, including revolution, remain contradictory and complex (Juris, 2012). As counter to the narrative that ICTs have the power to spread liberalism and democracy worldwide, real revolutionary social change cannot take place solely through the internet (Morozov, 2011). Rather than escalating activism, digital media might detract from meaningful political engagement. If social media have altered social movements in any way, it is in the undue credit given to low-risk and symbolic action in the form of slacktivism or mere hashtag activism (Carr, 2012; Morozov, 2011; 2013).

But the celebration of the use of technology for social change is an old story. New technologies have always shaped and stimulated revolution, though it has never completely replaced formal organizational structures, widespread political dissent, and cultural cohesion as fundamental elements necessary for change (Schmidt & Cohen, 2014). Technology, for all its power, cannot be understood as the miracle drug for all social ailments. Moreover, social movements occur, but their level of success or failure can be measured on multiple levels which have not changed because of the existence of social media (Vaidhyathan, 2018). Technology and overwrought promises for democracy and activism are nothing new. When the people rise up or protest or revolt, they utilize the communication tools available to them, even if they hang lanterns in the church steeple.

As such, any claim that the internet has changed everything about contentious politics should be made with caution because, “while the internet spreads word of contention quickly and widely, it cannot substitute for the interpersonal trust that comes from personal ties” (Tarrow, 2011, p. 263). For Tarrow (2011), the elements that fuel movement remain constant and contain three main powers: repertoires, mobilizing structures, and framing. Thus, it has always been the case that both the tools used for action and the means of diffusion of information change over time as new communication technologies develop.

What must also be pointed out is that the powers afforded by ICTs run in more than one direction. New tools of communication impact movements, certainly, but they also affect the ways existing powers respond to them. Such tools offer states and governments, whether they be legitimate or not, new abilities for surveillance and disinformation. And it must be noted that the state generally holds control of the infrastructure that provides virtual networks and thus the power to shut down virtual communication networks (Schmidt & Cohen, 2014). Empirical research shows that social media are a more useful, powerful tool for authoritarian regimes than they are for activists and that social media platforms are also utilized most successfully by movements and groups that are not socially or politically progressive (Schradié, 2019; Vaidhyathan, 2018).

Social media both helps to fuel extremism and violence and has helped to usher in what Zuboff (2018) called the age of surveillance capitalism. The phrase surveillance capitalism refers to a mutant and parasitic economic logic that poses a critical threat to

human rights and to humanity in general. This view notes that the real but overlooked marvel of internet-based communication technologies is in their capacity for the generation, aggregation, and mining of data. The internet was originally developed “for and by the military; every social exchange through it is enabled and occasioned in a system designed for tracking, monitoring, and analytics” (McNeil, 2020, p. 77). While the dominant technology companies market themselves as contributors to the public good and frame their services as centered upon improving our lives, it is our personal data that is of utmost value to their success (Foroohar, 2019). We thus willingly offer our free labor for the creation of a most precious commodity: information about our habits as consumers. The effectiveness of these tech giants, measured by the untold wealth created for their owners and shareholders, is in an ability to make advertising more strategic and lucrative. In this perspective, these corporations have entirely reshaped the economic order, creating “natural monopolies whose domination is so great that they don’t just lay claim to a market, but seize the market entirely” (Foroohar, 2019, p. 21).

In addition to change the economy and politics as we know it, internet technologies alter our neurological makeup and impact our cognitive skills (Carr, 2010). In order to generate the most precise and in-depth data about our buying habits, the actual business of companies like Facebook is in not just keeping our attention but in dominating it. These are persuasive technologies that rely on Skinner’s (1953) mechanism of intermittent variable rewards – the same technique behind slot machines – to make and keep us addicted to them (Alter, 2018). The very purpose of this concept is to shape and control human behavior. Mindless scrolling through social media timelines

makes humans the equivalents of rats in cages, incessantly tapping away at tiny virtual levers for the next hit of dopamine offered by our attention machines (Foroohar, 2019). The algorithms behind the Facebook feed are designed expressly to thrive on things like our responses of political outrage (von Drehle, 2020). This is antithetical then to any deeper understanding of citizenship, relying on anger, anxiety, and alienation instead of reflection, critical inquiry, and nonviolent activism.

If our lives, including our political lives, are now conducted online, then our lives are conducted on platforms owned and designed by extraordinarily large and wealthy corporations that face little regulation or competition (Farrell, 2013). This issue is evident in recent anti-trust litigation filed by the federal government against Google and Facebook (Swisher, 2020). Social media and related ICTs are first and foremost – and perhaps entirely – about advertising revenue, not the spread of democracy. Thus, it may be said that any question of the role of social media in social movements is ultimately inconsequential (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Facebook clearly lowers the transactional costs of activism and participation in collective action, but it does not create protest or revolution. It is not responsible for social upheaval or political change. What social media offers more than anything else is a sense of critical mass. If the way to get people into the streets is to convince enough other people that people are willing to go, this is what social media provide (Tufekci, 2017). In this way, “social media are not so much creating new forms of protest but amplifying traditional forms of protest” (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 936). Social media are not requisite for motivation and mobilization through the generation of emotional responses as successful

movements all through the course of human history illustrate. The existence of ICTs and social media do not produce or even provoke movements for change; there is far more to the picture. Shared languages, cultures, and ideologies are also crucial, and the use of communication technologies creates complex issues regarding our understanding of the individual and the collective self. Thus, in the third and final section, issues of individual identity and collective identity as related to protest and resistance are explored within the specific sociocultural context of the Appalachian region.

Collective Identity, Place, and Refusal

Crucial to any understanding of social movements are elements of personal and collective identity. Identity, in fact, is at the root of the processes of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilley, 2001). According to Spencer-Oatey (2007), “identity helps people ‘locate’ themselves in social worlds. By helping to define where they belong and where they do not belong in relation to others, it helps to anchor them in their social worlds” (p. 642). Furthermore, the construction of identity occurs through an ongoing and dynamic process that is interactive and shared. In the formation of identity, “elements are constructed and negotiated through a recurrent process of activation of the relations that bind actors together” (Melucci, 1996, p. 70). To draw once more upon Habermas (1984), it is through communicative action that individuals form an identity and are thus able to coordinate actions that lead to our emancipation from dominant forces.

As a process, then, identity allows individuals to find and produce shared meanings through collective actions that spring from our social networks. These networks are formed through our tendency as humans to seek out and associate with those who are

like ourselves and who agree with us, particularly in terms of our race, class, and gender identities (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). We are more prone to feel a sense of connection with those with whom we already identify, and it is these connections that lend us our identity. This is illustrated in the theory of homophily, and it is one that has long been applied by social scientists to the study of social networks (Lieberman, 2016).

Collective Identity and Social Movements

It is in our connections to our social networks that our ways of seeing and understanding the world are forged (Brescia, 2020). Such networks shape not just our identity but also our willingness to engage with a group of like-minded individuals in a fight for a just cause. Social networks are thus crucial for both calls to action and as channels for mobilization. The identities of members of a social network are bound up within the message or messages of the group (Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield, 1994). Furthermore, the social networks to which individuals belong and through which they decide to participate in collective action not only help activate social movements but determine the level of success of movements and whether energy and enthusiasm for change can be sustained (Tarrow, 2011).

According to Gamson (1992), groups “that have achieved a successful integration of personal and collective identity will have an easier time doing what it takes to launch many kinds of collective action” (p. 60). Thus, the success or failure of any movement has long been understood to hinge upon an ability to make effective use of social networks (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Individual identities and their expression through networks of individuals is both a goal and condition of collective struggle

(Calhoun, et al., 2012). The most recognized and successful social movements in history, the struggle for civil rights in America chief among them, have been regularly born out of and dependent upon these preexisting relationships (McAdam, 1994; Morris, 1984). Especially in struggles for social justice, common identity is strategically valuable and its understanding of and acceptance by participants is essential. Social networks help to increase agency through the loosening of constrictive hierarchical bonds (Benkler, 2006). In contemporary movements, digitally enabled social networks in the form of social media foment collective identity and facilitate mobilization but also give rise to more complex issues of identity itself (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002).

Social Media and Identity

ICTs, and social media platforms more specifically, are now fundamental components in the formation of social relationships that foment and strengthen movements (Milan, 2015). The concept of social networks is nothing new, but the media through which individuals interact with one another certainly are (Lieberman, 2016). However social networks are created and defined, maintaining social ties with others is important to the development of identity, and longstanding theoretical frameworks remain valid and necessary in the study of digitally enabled networks (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006). The online world serves as a continuation of our real-world interactions. While the real world and the virtual world are separately categorized in our minds, they are more and more reflections of each other. According to Merchant (2016), “relationships enacted on social networking sites are more often than not anchored to relationships and social activities in the real world” (p. 20). This, of course,

has implications for both privacy and self-expression, especially in the ways we enact our individual identities in the social world (Livingstone, 2008). No matter where they occur, all our social interactions are performative (Goffman, 1959). We are all actors who inhabit established roles which we are constantly adjusting based on the context and setting. Wherever we are, the goal is to present our best selves.

Therefore, online social networking and the resulting sense of constant connectivity we feel in this age of digital communication technologies encourage us “to be continually producing our identity through the ongoing activity of consumption and self-publishing” (Merchant, 2016, p. 9). As consumers, workers, and citizens, nonstop connection through ICTs feels as if it is an unremitting requirement of daily life. The need to continuously create and re-create our identity in the course of regular online interactions is an accepted and assumed challenge that we navigate with little awareness of the impact on our sense of self. The internet has expanded our social world. The performative aspect of being is multiplied through the juggling and maintenance of a multitude of identities that are constantly enacted on social media. On social media, we “are repeatedly improvising and embellishing the reference points we inhabit in relation to time, space, and events” (Merchant, 2016, p. 10). For Merchant, this new social world requires an enlargement of earlier theoretical perspectives. Social relationships expressed through digitally enabled networks remain new and emergent and also reflect a haphazard and discursive logic. These social “practices are best seen as part of an assemblage, an ongoing flow of lived experience, attitude, and belief, marked only by the trace of textual threads that meander across multiple spaces and sites both on- and offline” (p. 10).

What we do know is that social media and related digital technologies offer a way for individuals to connect with like-minded others and to more easily communicate their beliefs and ideologies (Tufekci, 2017). Social media enable the formation of new political communities that transcend spatial and temporal forms. We can stake our claim to membership in a tribe in the most direct and emphatic terms through what we post and share on platforms like Facebook (Vaidhyathan, 2018). This brings us comfort and pleasure and generates social value even if it comes with a cost. Because “even when we post and share demonstrably false stories and claims we do so to declare our affiliation, to assert that our social bonds mean more to us than the question of truth” (Vaidhyathan, p. 51). Our communications and participation on social media platforms symbolize and prove our group membership and serve as interaction rituals (Milan, 2015). Through such rituals we create shared realities with others, even if they be fleeting or virtual or false. An interactive ritual is “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention [which] generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Collins, 2004, p. 7). In the reinforcement of individual understandings of identity and of a sense of belonging, social media stimulates collective action. Our identities, though, are multilayered and involve not only virtual spaces, but physical spaces as well.

Place-based Identity

Of course, as human beings, we hold a multitude of identities and stake claims to membership in a variety of communities. Our identity is our own understanding of all that defines us and makes us who we are; it is what distinguishes us from others. From the rationalist perspective, we live in a modern world built upon the precedence of the

individual over society, in which, above all else, the “I” is revered and glorified. The shape of our lives is understood to be no one’s responsibility but our own. It is thus that our individual identity becomes of more value in the dominant culture than any shared categorizations such as nationality, class, occupation, or native ground (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Our individual identity has become our own personal brand and our sense of self tied inexplicably to a cultural reality defined almost solely in economic terms (Harris & Rae, 2011). In the view of many, the unstoppable forces of globalization are a form of the “imposition of the logic of capital and the market on ever more regions of the world and spheres of life” which leads to cultural homogenization (Kellner, 2002, p. 286). Others make the case that globalization creates new conflicts and generates new spaces for resistance and struggle, marking a difference between globalization from above and globalization from below (Brecher, Costello, & Smith, 2000). The awareness by people “of being part of the global space of flows seems to have generated a search for new points of orientation, efforts to strengthen old boundaries and to create new ones, often based on identities of resistance” (Paasi, 2003, p. 475). One specific point of orientation is that of a regional or place-based identity, an idea that is of renewed importance across a host of disciplines, most especially geography.

This turn has meant that earlier narratives of regional geographies that imposed exclusive, homogenizing bounded orders upon the landscape are no longer valid. Critical geographers see place and space as key parts of a more complex and amorphous discourse of identity formation in which people hold many contested identities that are

interrelated and mutually constitutive (Keith & Pile, 1993). David Harvey (2005) understands space as socially produced and based in three interlocking dimensions: the fixed geographical point of existence, the position within a flow of information and commodities, and the meanings we find in memory and in relationship with others.

Just as the construction of identity is a dynamic and shared process, so too is *place* a social process. Place, as a concept, is more complex, more incongruous than community or even what is termed a *sense of place* because it is a “product of human relationships lived out in a specific landscape, in the context of social and cultural forces and conflicts known in that place as well as in other places formed in analogous processes” (Stanley, 2012, p. 2). Every place is continuously formed in the ongoing interactions between the intertwined elements of the natural environment, the built environment, and human culture and history (Harvey, 1996; Stanley, 2012; Williams, 1983). Each of these distinct realities is bound up with and inseparable from the others. Place transcends human time and evades the political and cultural boundaries we impose upon it.

Collective action is dependent upon a sense of distinction between us and them (della Porta & Diani, 2020). Localized, place-based identity, integrative as it is of differences of race, class, gender, and religious and cultural tradition serves as one of the most dynamic and important bases of political mobilization and activism (Harvey, 1993). But while place identity is recognized as a key element in the understanding of regions as sociopolitical spaces, pinning down exactly what is meant by regional identity and its effects on specific events of collective action is more difficult (Keating, 2001). According

to Paasi (2003), “regional identity is, in a way, an interpretation of the process through which a region becomes institutionalized, a process consisting of the production of territorial boundaries, symbolism and institutions” (p. 478). Furthermore, it is necessary to realize the distinctions between the identity of a specific region and the regional consciousness and identity of the people who live there or who have left (Paasi, 1991). The identity of a region, as distinguished from the individual identities of its people, is based in classifications of science, politics, marketing, government, and others. Such categories are always expressive acts of power that delimit, name, and symbolize otherwise disparate places and groups of people.

Imagined Appalachia and Refusal/Resistance

We know the region of Appalachia as a fixed entity primarily because of what has been wrenched from its landscape and because of what are framed as its distinctive deficiencies. As illustration, one only need look to the political determinations of the Appalachian Regional Commission (n.d.), which identifies as its purview an immense geographic entity encompassing parts of twelve states, including the entirety of West Virginia, snaking all the way from northern Mississippi to southern New York, and based wholly on levels of economic distress. Yet, if any place is a complex web of simultaneous and eternal processes through which it is continuously reformulated, reshaped, and redefined, it can thus be precisely located only as an *imagined* place, indeterminate and unfinished. These kinds of fabricated spaces were for Jansson (2003) elemental to the formation of a broader national identity. For the benefit of dominant, hegemonic representations of a larger territory or country, an internal other is created and

carries a subordinate identity which allows for the installation and entrenchment of a grander, preeminent national identity (Jansson, 2007).

In the dominant cultural narrative, the region of Appalachia has long been defined by otherness, its people most often portrayed through reductionist, dehumanizing stereotypes (Shapiro, 1978). It is a place that “has rarely been allowed to speak for itself [and] has been incessantly ‘discovered’ and then ‘rediscovered’ by a long series of novelists, journalists, social scientists, satirists, and documentarians, most – if not all – inspired by the irony of Appalachian Otherness” (Hutton, 2019, p. 21). A vast swath of diverse landscapes and locales is commonly understood as a monolith, an isolated, underdeveloped land populated by backward and inferior people who exist somewhere outside of and beyond mainstream American culture and history (Speer, 1993; Williams, 2002; Whisnant, 2009).

On the other hand, and indicative of the complex identity construct of an entirely imagined place, a romanticized Appalachia also exists that is rustic and pastoral, reflecting bygone, outmoded values of a more authentic but forgotten American spirit. This is where the rugged, hardworking, fiercely independent – and almost always white, straight, and male – working-class hero of rural America can be found and upon whom we rely for the personification of the resultant aberrations of voting against one’s own self-interest (Cattell, 2018; Glasby, Gradin, & Ryerson, 2020; Hampton, 2020; Hayden, 2002; Mason, 2018). Such dialectical and concomitant processes of othering work together to produce economically and culturally differentiated regions that “are constructed as repositories of backwardness” (Johnson & Coleman, 2012, p. 865), which

then form the inverse of more modern, cosmopolitan (read, urban), progressive spaces that loom larger in importance in the national consciousness.

The state of West Virginia is reflective of the Appalachian dichotomy, having “long been a site of collateral damage in the nation’s need for cheap energy, and an internal other poised to represent the backward segment of a modern nation moving forward” (Nardella, 2019, p. 8). With an identity historically linked to the coal industry, West Virginia serves as a sacrifice zone, exploited for its abundant natural resources but celebrated for the hardworking sensibilities and grit of its people (Eller, 1982; Scott, 2010). While coal as an economic driver in the state has been in precipitous decline for some time, it is a common story in many rural communities that identity with a particular extractive industry continues to be held even long after its economic force has waned (Bell & York, 2010). This even allows the coal industry in West Virginia to manipulate political ideology and to “maintain their political influence, which is often used to avoid government regulations aimed at ensuring the protection of the environment and public health” (Bell & York, 2010, p. 112).

Yet, just as place identity can be exploited by forces of hegemonic power, place also offers “the context where social movement agency challenges the dominating practices of private capital and the state” (Routledge, 1992, p. 590). Place identity can serve then as powerful impetus for acts of resistance that refuse economic, political, and social injustice. Spatial and geographical representations are “deeply symbolic of how we define what is right and wrong and who we identify against” (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995, p. 79). Deep connection to place fosters a sense of belonging and an understanding of self

that serve as significant mobilizing factors for activism and participation in collective action (Fisher, 1999). While identity with a marginalized or othered place may present problems related to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, it can also be elemental to the process of organizing for social change (Satterwhite, 2010). Acceptance of marginalization can result in silence, acquiescence, and a lost sense of identity (Hooks, 1990). But to challenge domination and exploitation, to stand in refusal of those oppressive powers, reflects a conception of “identity as an intentional act of resistance that grounds individuals, who otherwise face demeaning representations of themselves, and leads outward toward solidarity with others” (Smith, 2010, p. 56).

Especially in the coalfield counties of West Virginia, resistance to labor exploitation and collective dissent in the face of cultural oppression is an important and often overlooked aspect of the historical narrative (Cattell, 2018; Drake, 2001; Eller, 1982; Fisher, 1993; Williams, 2002). Labor unions were active in the region as early as the 19th Century, and coal miners were among the first workers in the country to be organized as unions (Drake, 2001). In addition to coal, across the larger Appalachian landscape, “steel making and textile and apparel making companies created ‘communities of proximity’ [and] ‘communities of experience’ [that] grew up around economic activity” and impacted levels of social capital that is crucial for broadening prospects for democracy (Couto, 1999, p. 21; Holtkamp & Weaver, 2018).

Historically, as West Virginia’s identity has been intertwined with coal mining, so have its families largely held a deeply rooted identity as staunchly pro-union (Bell 2009). However, changes in the coal industry, including steep declines in the demand for coal to

fuel American energy plants and the growth and dominance of multinational coal companies that are decidedly antiunion, means that in recent decades union membership has fallen to the point of irrelevancy (Bell, 2009; Burns 2007; Skorup, 2020). Instead of union bumper stickers and hats, it is now the logo of Friends of Coal – a promotional campaign for the industry that is funded by mining companies – that are a dominant cultural marker in West Virginia (Bell & York, 2010; Harki, 2017). The decline in union membership has paralleled the swift and complete shift of West Virginia from a reliably Democratic voting state to one that is now solid red on media election maps. This political sea change opened the way in 2016, just prior to the teacher’s strike, for West Virginia to pass right-to-work legislation into law, meaning that no employee can be forced to pay union dues or to join a union as a condition of employment (DePillis, 2016)

Nevertheless, the fact remains that to fully understand the region is to recognize the pervasive stories of progressive social movements enacted through a wide variety of forms of citizenship and democratic participation, especially by women, that imbue its history (Anglin, 2002; Weinbaum, 2004; Wilkerson, 2019). For decades, throughout Appalachia, women have led the way in social movements and activism, particularly in fights for environmental justice (Bell & Braun, 2010). In media accounts and in personal recollections, participants in the West Virginia teachers’ strike regularly discussed their connections to the place and to the history of union organizing and activism in the state as crucial to their individual decisions to strike (Catte, Hilliard, & Salfia, 2018). Their words illustrate the importance of a collective identity in their own act of refusal and resistance.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROBLEM OF METHODS

Introduction

Conventional, normative forms of social scientific research are restricted to a narrow vision of methodological possibilities (Avgerou, 2005). The academy presumes that the most definitive indication of legitimacy and value in scholarly work is that it fits a clear and systematic framework of procedural standards which are competently reported and recounted through uniform rhetorical structures. This commonly makes for a tedious, lifeless, and altogether uninteresting narrative. More importantly, it falls woefully short of providing a richer understanding of the baffling and mystifying perplexities of living in the world.

This study offers a critical perspective of the role of social media in the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike. It reaches beyond the positivistic paradigms of universal truth to examine the contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities found in the personal experiences of that event. To approach research from a critical perspective is to engage in the process of knowledge creation by making sense of a phenomenon in human terms. Such investigation and analysis does not avoid the embrace of a "the researcher's tacit knowledge, emotionally charged preconceptions, political convictions and moral values, and empathy" with participants (Avgerou, 2005, p. 105).

This chapter discusses the methodological entanglements that emanate from this critical perspective, including questions that arise from my own sociopolitical position.

The first section of the chapter offers an overview of the roots of the positivistic paradigm in order to explain the importance of moving beyond such ways of knowing. This is followed by a confrontation with the methodological puzzle posed by the critical perspective. As a key response, a self-examination of my own sociopolitical perspective is included. Next, an explanation is given of the process of constructing a bricolage of methods in order to complete the research, one that draws upon a spirit of ethnography. The chapter concludes with an outline of the operational strategies of the study, a description of the data analysis process, and a rigorous and reflexive scrutiny of the approaches that were taken.

Slaying the Positivist Father

The assumptions of the positivist paradigm are foundational to social science (Babbie, 2016). Though serious challenges to the dominance of positivism have been raised, this perspective remains a central element in many examinations of the social world across a host of disciplines. Even to understand cultural or critical turns in scholarly discourse means beginning first with the question of that to which such shifts are forcefully responding. The positivist viewpoint sees scientific inquiry as an objective endeavor based in empirical data and dealing only with facts (Punch, 2014). This frame of reference notes distinct differences between facts and values, empirical evidence and subjective interpretation. Just as with natural sciences, in social life can be recognized “patterns that can be objectively understood by following a sequence of logical analysis and preventing personal values and cultural ideologies from entering the inquiry” (Carr, et al., 2017, p. 46).

Positive philosophy arose in direct response to the negations of the Hegelian dialectic which, in the view of the positivist critique, could “neither explain nor justify things as they are” (Marcuse, 1941, p. 239). In order to overcome negative philosophy, positivism studied social realities “through the universal application of the scientific method and through excluding all objectives that, in the last analysis, could not be verified by observation” (Marcuse, 1941, p. 241). The social world, like the natural world, was to be explained through neutral, objective investigation that can identify patterns reflective of universal laws. Matters of fact subsumed all matters of value and ideology. But positive philosophy was itself political from the very first, given that Comte and others were responding primarily to the recognition that Hegelian philosophy contained within itself the instrument for the destruction of the state (Marcuse, 1941). As a direct counter to negative philosophy, positivism developed a new sociology concerned with certainty instead of doubt, organization instead of destruction, and thus tied directly to the maintenance of the existing social order. In short, its aim was to stop the revolution before it began and to instill discipline, obedience, and, above all else, resignation to the prevailing authority. Positivism sought “to insure the ruling classes against every anarchistic invasion” (Comte, 1908, p. 152).

In that society is governed by rational, universal laws, the positivist paradigm applied social theory as a means of liberating human beings from theology and metaphysics. This freedom from irrationality was a result of the inevitable progression of humanity to a higher ideal, which happened not through destruction but as a function of the machinery of the given order. Comte’s philosophy “retained the Enlightenment

conception that progress is primarily intellectual progress, the continuous advance of positive knowledge” (Marcuse, 1941, p. 258). For the Enlightenment frame of mind, it is humanity that reigns supreme, separated from and in authority over nature.

Enlightenment rationalism identifies humanity with its “intellectual nature and creative technological will and [finds] in human existence coherence, legitimacy, and reasonableness exclusively” (Soloveitchik, 1965, p. 29). No longer is there mystery or even a desire to reveal mystery (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). In the advancement of thought, human beings are set free from all ancient fears and superstitions.

Yet, despite the promise of emancipation, “the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity; Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 1). In the conquest of nature, we sowed the seeds of our own destruction. In moving beyond ancient mysteries, we destroyed any sense of deference to things larger than ourselves. Rather than bringing liberation, Enlightenment imprisoned humanity in objectivity, utility, regularity. Enlightenment was thus grounded in a patriarchal logic of domination and oppression.

It is possible to understand and empathize with the need for social scientific disciplines, in their emergence, to imitate the standardization and systemization of knowledge creation that is omnipresent in the rationalistic mindset. To do so was an obvious attempt to legitimize sociological research, to seek a certain level of authority and professional prestige. What was abandoned in obeisance to the imperium, however, is the understanding that real and lived human experience entails perspectives and beliefs that are inexact, partial, multiple. In a word, they are *complicated*. Lived reality does not

always fit neatly into uniform epistemologies. Thus, other forms of inquiry are necessary and, to state it in Freudian terms, any alternative approach must first slay the positivist father in order to realize and reveal soundness and validity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). My own form of inquiry is a critical one, and this approach presents a puzzle for the issue of methodology.

A Critical Perspective and the Methodological Conundrum

Rejections of the positivist view are found in several contrasting forms of methodology. Yet, almost without fail, a purportedly clear epistemological divide is depicted in the organization of research methods textbooks solely around two broad approaches: quantitative and qualitative (Babbie, 2016; Brancati, 2018; Punch, 2014). Typically, in these texts, there is either very little or no mention of the critical perspective. If this position is addressed at all, it is given short shrift at the back of the book, almost as an appendage, in the form of a short section on Foucault (1970) and critical content analysis (Carr, et al., 2017). That such publications nearly always serve as the introduction for both undergraduate and graduate students to the world of research methods and do so by operating from incomplete typologies is in itself, of course, an expression of power. The false duality of either a positivist or non-positivist epistemology does nothing to illustrate that research design, in all available forms, reflects a dynamic interplay of various methods, procedures, perspectives, and paradigms.

No matter the form of design or methodology, though, a critical perspective most directly sees that research should be openly ideological and political and, more specifically, used in the service of the emancipation of oppressed and marginalized

groups (Hammersley 1993; 1995). For instance, feminist scholarship exemplifies the denunciation of persistent positivistic myths and seeks explicitly to disrupt ongoing practices of domination (Haig, 1997). All forms of critical research, though, seek to shake to its very core the Enlightenment faith in unimpeded, linear progress, universal laws and absolute truths, and standardized knowledge production (St. Pierre, 2011). As such, a critical voice is focused on the sociopolitical implications of research. It recognizes dynamic social and cultural threads, and any lack of clear or conclusive results in critical scholarship is a purposeful reflection of the instability of human nature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

While the overarching perspectives of critical theory are apparent, what is less clear are the exact methods called for in the pursuit of critical inquiry. What methods are acceptable when the entire point is to refuse and dismantle the predominant structures of scientific discourse in the first place? To utilize a systematic design in the critique of utilitarian and overly rational ways of understanding the world seems fruitless at best and nonsensical at worst. This dilemma is a hindrance to the development of student researchers and to the professional prospects of early career social scientists. Dominant forms of research reporting and publication expect detailed descriptions of the methods employed, but far more guidance exists both in graduate school programs and in the literature for doing so in the conduction of normative or interpretive work (McGrath, 2005). Instruments and uniform procedures and meticulous methodological accounts exemplify the very strictures propagated by a power-knowledge regime that critical

theory inherently questions. The information contained in this chapter cannot be disregarded or eliminated, so how should it thus be approached?

Immanent Transcendence

There exists no concrete answer to this puzzle. What does seem certain is that critical researchers must fully implicate themselves in the processes of collecting and analyzing data (Charmaz, 1995). To politicize social phenomena and to situate them within larger historical and cultural contexts without any nod to one's own sociopolitical position would be disingenuous. Reflecting the fluidity of knowledge and the meaninglessness of disciplinary boundaries, critical researchers tend toward qualitative strategies but also find it helpful to freely meld and marry together different traditions and methods, seeking to create what Kinchloe, McClaren, and Steinberg (2011) term a bricolage that relies on intuition and flexibility. The design of critical research makes use of a diverse range of materials and tools that are available, and which express multiple layers of paradigmatic understanding.

Lindlof and Taylor (2019) presented this concept as a wandering attunement to the possibility of epiphany, the bringing together of some kind of order – be it precarious and volatile – out of the paradoxical and disparate experiences of social actors and understanding culture not as fixed but as an impermanent site of “displacement, transplantation, disruption, positionality, and difference” (Kinchloe & McClaren, 2005, p. 326). Such moments of discovery and realization describe immanent transcendence, a central precept of contemporary critical theory. Through critical inquiry, we arrive at ideas that “point towards a state beyond the present which [can] be realized, with the

result that the actual situation is transformed in some crucial respect” (Strydom, 2011, p. 96). Immanent transcendence is the ability of reason to show us the way toward emancipation, liberation, justice (Habermas, 1973; Horkheimer, 1972).

Thus, if we are to locate a methodology for critical theory, it is to be found in the transitory places where theory and praxis intersect. Critical theory “sees itself as a necessary catalytic moment within the social complex of life which it analyzes” (Habermas, 1973, p. 2). After all, this perspective developed out of the views of thinkers like Hegel who understood the French Revolution as the dramatic alignment between philosophy and reality (Habermas, 1973; Marcuse, 1941). The aim is to bring about a change in the present social order, to seek social justice, to make the world better, more democratic, humane, and equitable (Horkheimer, 1972). Urgent and fiery revolution is one possibility, but it is more likely to come in the form of intermittent shifts in the sociopolitical situation such as in the ways we might rethink the role of communication technologies and online social networking platforms in our lives and in collective movements like the West Virginia strike.

The methods of critical theory, then, seek to explain what is wrong with the current social reality, identify the actors who are to change it, and to provide both criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (Bohman, 2003; Horkheimer, 1993). But such method is rife with the tensions and contradictions of trying to conjoin idealism to pragmatism. There exists a dialectical contradiction between the real and the ideal. If the ideas born of reason are to be effectively communicated and acted upon, then they must be transformed and relocated into the realities of the complex

social world (Strydom, 2011). This is easier said than done. If the critical perspective does not bring about revolutionary change, it is a result of “the failure to overlook the most serious motive behind critical theory, its negative aspect and messianic impulse” (Blake & Masschelein, 2003, p.55). To embrace or to try to work within the realities of the present can lead to fatalistic acquiescence to the current social order.

The necessary response is in the repudiation and refusal of an acceptance that seems compulsory, even as we recognize the validity of the frustrations that stem from this position. The messianic impulse, of course, is found in the implication that the theorist has been endowed with special intellectual gifts for elucidating the problem and proposing the solution. In this manner, the critical theorist is seen to occupy a rarefied and elite space in which enigmatic philosophical notions are converted into practical solutions for social problems. This dilemma can come closer to resolution in the explicit recognition of our informants and research participants as social agents with particular knowledge, skills, and expertise of their own who contribute equally to scholarship and whose voices are elevated above that of the researcher (Bohman, 2003). Of corresponding importance to surmounting this shortcoming is a requirement for deep engagement and critical participation in public processes of self-reflection on the part of the theorist.

Sociopolitical Positionality

Despite all efforts by positivism to separate facts and values, the paradigm itself functions as both a political and moral statement. The viewpoint serves a dualistic typology – there are facts and there are values, which we are to be understand as utterly

different things. I have already noted extensively that such thinking is a limited perspective that disregards our humanity. Nothing about our social world or individual lives is value free, including the science we create. Such dualistic distinctions are invalid. Therefore, in discussing the methods of our inquiry, “we should be prepared to admit that values do play a significant part [and] to do our best in each case to expose and explicate them...and, finally, to take them into account to whatever extent we can” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 186). To ignore these matters would be self-delusional. The development of a “methodological self-consciousness means examining ourselves in the research process, the meanings we make and the actions we take each step along the way” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 36). I occupy multiple positions that have bearing on the way this study was conducted and implemented, some of which were useful and advantageous, others of which served as impediments to more comprehensive conclusions.

Regarding my own sense of the region, I do not recall a moment in time when I became aware of living in a place called Appalachia. But woven into the earliest of my memories is the vivid understanding that I lived in and was native to the mountains. It was not a political entity that I knew, but an ecological one – a landscape that again and again spills over itself in waves, encircled by high wooded ridges, and etched by streams and rivers that cut their way through limestone. There was never a time when this understanding was not elemental to my sense of self; it was baked into my bones from the outset. It is only those who travel in academic circles or who are engaged in certain conversations with fellow college graduates who refer to Appalachia as if it is a distinct and measurable thing. In ordinary language, my neighbors and my family identify our

homeland as the mountains or, more often, we speak of particular regions of states – as in southwest Virginia or western Carolina – to distinguish the specific geography of our place for outsiders who, based on experience, presumably will only otherwise think of Richmond or Charlotte.

My hometown was not a place of coal mines, but it did lie blanketed beneath the sickly-sweet smell of furniture varnish. My family's own story and the stories of most everyone else I knew were tied to work in the furniture factories and textile mills that filled out the landscape of that place. In a high school English class, we read *River of Earth* by James Still (1940). It was the first book I read that centered upon characters I recognized and who were not written as caricatures but as real human beings with complex and conflicting emotions, people whose speech carried the rhythms and inflections echoed in my own voice and in the voices of my kin. This was the impetus for an awareness that would be enlarged during my college years of the region of Appalachia as a legitimate object of study, as something worthy of inclusion in a novel, and with a wide and diverse story bound together by distinctive historic, economic, and cultural knots.

At about the same time I was reading Still's novel, I held but scant real awareness of an event occurring barely seventy miles away from my home but that remains perhaps the most significant stand by unionized coal miners against coal producers to have occurred in the late Twentieth Century (Brisbin, 2002). This was the Pittston Coal Strike of 1989-90 and, while I recall overhearing conversations about the event, especially those spoken in disapproving tones regarding what were considered to be the needlessly

militant and violent tactics employed by miners, it was only later as a student in college that I learned about the momentousness of the strike. By then, I had read and discussed enough to know of the complexities of Appalachian regional identity, and I had adopted this as a fundamental part of my own identity. My loyalties and sentiments were staked firmly on the side of resistance to what I considered a kind of colonialist exploitation of mountain people on the part of outside corporate interests.

After college, I married someone whose father and grandfather had been coal miners and whose childhood home had been but five miles from the West Virginia state line. I had traveled to the West Virginia coal fields as a college student, but it was in becoming a part of my spouse's family that I learned far more about life in coal towns like Amonate and Jenkinjones and War. I also learned in very personal terms about the shifting and conflicting loyalties within families whose individual members had vastly different opinions about unions. And I began to conceive of Appalachia as more than a monolith, as a place of assorted localized places existing across variant geographies but bound together by geological, social, cultural, and economic stories that are interwoven across the whole of the earth. Despite the multiple issues of trying to pinpoint a singular place called Appalachia, I do know I belong to it, wherever it may be. As part of our decision to marry, my spouse and I affirmed to one another our shared commitment to a place, to this place, which we understand to be a part of the larger region. Together we recognized that our lives and careers would be made on what we consider our native ground.

The entirety of my wife's professional experience has been in public education. She embodies a fierce commitment to the craft of teaching, one that I have witnessed in multiple members of my family. I have known and been loved by a great many people who taught and worked in public schools. My grandmother, whose significance in my life cannot be overstated, was not a teacher, but she worked decades in the cafeteria of my elementary school to support herself after the untimely death of my grandfather. As much as the teachers in that building, she loved and considered it her responsibility to look after all the students there. It was both teachers and family members who cultivated within me the value of education. As a first-generation college student, I have always carried a profound sense of indebtedness to every person who opened for me, in so many ways, an entirely new world of knowledge and ideas. My own pursuit of a PhD and my own sense of calling to teach are stoked each day by an obligation to make recompense for what was given me.

As I watched the events of the strike unfold in 2018, I understood without prompting that the teachers' actions were rooted, in part, in being West Virginians, and that this was, be it consciously or not, a fundamental aspect of what the strike was about. I also understood their sense of commitment to a calling, no matter which county in West Virginia they might consider home, whether it be deep in the coalfields or near Morgantown, site of a major public university. I was firmly on the side of the teachers from the first and was inspired to complete this research by watching and reading about their resistance and refusal. And while I do not consider myself a heavy user of social media – I do not have a Facebook account – I began this work from an assumption that

the success of the teachers was owed in very large measure to their ability to organize using social media.

Witnessing contemporary movements like the teachers' strike or Occupy or Black Lives Matter or MeToo, I cannot help but think of the overwhelming sense of hope I felt as a younger person watching the coverage of the Tiananmen Square protests and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. To grasp later the full and bloody cost of that event in China or that the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), gave shape to the expectations I hold or, rather, do not hold, for the hollow promises of liberal democracy and capitalism or for the powers of rationality and technology to spread freedom far and wide. Those geopolitical events were my own generative moments of alignment between philosophy and ideology with the realities of the world.

My "tacit knowledge, emotionally charged preconceptions, political convictions and moral values, and empathy" (Avgerou, 2005, p. 105) are all grounded in these experiences and sociopolitical positions. I am of, from, and committed to a place known in complicated ways as a distinctive region, one that also shapes the identities of those involved in the West Virginia strike. I operate from political and moral convictions forged by particular historical moments and within a specific cultural awareness that is complicated by class and a great many other issues. I am an ally of teachers. Each of these things inform my own value-laden, subjective interpretations in this work and cannot be separated from it. The values, convictions, and experiences I carry both fueled and limited the effectiveness of my analysis, but they were all essential to its development and results.

Building the Bricolage

The critical perspective is not restricted to the false bounds of academic disciplines nor to a particular method or methods. Research in this vein is open to the most effective and helpful tools available. If there exists any methodological unity to its scholarly practice, it lies in the goal of unmasking the political elements found within our social and cultural practices (Conquergood, 1991). In its sense of the value of the subjective, the critical approach utilizes elements from multiple traditions to build a bricolage of methods for the collection and analysis of phenomenological evidence (Kinchloe, McClaren, & Steinberg, 2011). Nevertheless, in the reliance on hermeneutics and the interpretation of a wide range of text, critical researchers tend toward strategies that generate qualitative data.

Using Qualitative and Interpretivist Methods for Critical Inquiry

This study focused on abstract and complex ideas related to subjective understandings of a specific event and to issues of self-identity. These are intangible or indefinite concepts not easily quantified or measured, but which can be interpreted through the critical analysis of reported first-hand experiences. As it seeks a richer, more detailed understanding of the complexities of the human social world, this work incorporates elements of an interpretivist/constructivist perspective, which accepts that social realities are not necessarily measurable; rather, they are perceived by participants who make sense of the world through a very personal lens, one that is shaped by past experiences and by individual knowledge and assumptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A critical perspective gives little value to generalizability or replicability. In fact, these

might even be considered of no real concern to the creation of knowledge (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). With no interest in things that can be put into calculated terms, research in this vein is often served by qualitative tools and methods. Critical theorists regularly engage with hermeneutic or interpretive methods, though such an approach is not without inherent tensions (McGrath, 2005).

The utilization of qualitative tools in this instance offered participants an avenue for explaining a social phenomenon in their own terms, and these methods are key to understanding how humans make meaning of their social world and how that meaning affects their behavior (Punch, 2014). In other words, such research seeks greater depth in understanding and explaining a specific group or event. In this way, it aims for a more distinct representation of complex structures and patterns found among groups of people. As explained by Schutt (2019), qualitative methods seek to capture a social reality as participants have experienced it instead of through prefixed categories as defined by the researcher. Qualitative research relies “on written or spoken words that do not have a direct numerical interpretation and involve exploratory research questions, inductive reasoning, and orientation to social context and human subjectivity, and the meanings attached by participants to events and to their lives” (Schutt, 2019, p. 19).

There is focus to on the meanings to be found in the dialogue that occurs between a researcher and participants. Critical theory begins from a subjectivist epistemology (Habermas, 1973). Our own sociopolitical positions in the world cannot be separated from what we know or from the process of discovery (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An essential element in our inquiry is the interaction between a particular researcher and a

particular participating individual, one who also brings values and ideologies to the conversation. These are produced through dialogic methods that blend observation and interviewing with conversation and reflection (Kinchloe & McClaren, 2005). Through a reflective dialogic, the full scope of the interaction is important to what is learned, including body language, the way conversations begin and end, the common ground that is found, the explicit and implicit power structures to be navigated, the silences and equivocations, conflicts and tensions. It is all a part of a dynamic social process, and it all matters. What emerges can only have been created in the specific interaction between two particular individuals (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

The Spirit of Ethnography

Ethnography, in its “ambivalent meanings” as both social scientific method and genre, almost certainly contends “more acutely and productively with the political tensions of research” than any other mode of scholarship (Conquergood, 1991, p. 179). As with critical scholarship in general, ethnographic research seeks meaning in the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity. Ethnography follows a meandering path toward “openings rather than absolute truths [and] allows for an emancipatory reflexivity and for a more empowering critique of the rationalities, interventions, and moral issues of our times” (Biehl, 2013, p. 573). In short, it most decidedly opens the way for meaning making outside of the formal strictures of empiricism and offers a useful means for the blurring of methodological and disciplinary boundaries and for interrogating issues of power in our cultural practices.

In the realm of information science as a field of study, ethnographic research methods have been utilized as part of the production of knowledge, though their visibility is not necessarily widespread (Goodman, 2011; Lanclos & Asher, 2016). As counterpoint to the methods and designs of experimental research, ethnographers observe, interpret, look for patterns, and try to experience. In an era defined by internet communication and associated tools, ethnography as method can serve the development of deeper understandings of disparate information users. Methods of observation and interpretation are particularly useful to information science as an academic discipline and present an opportunity to reshape and reinvigorate its scholarship especially in the physical and virtual spaces where information is shared informally, such as on social media platforms (Allard, Levine, & Tenopir, 2009; Bawden & Robinson, 2012; Talip, et al., 2017).

The ethnographer is both scientist and storyteller (Fetterman, 2019). Clifford and Marcus (1986) described ethnography as a genre of writing, one that uses conventions of rhetoric and one that also requires a reflexive and dialogic approach. As method, Geertz (1973) argued that ethnography seeks to create thick description and noted that the role of the ethnographer is to inscribe social processes – *to write it down*. For Rorty (1989), there was no fundamental epistemological difference between ethnography and a multi-layered novel. In this way, the ethnographer does not attempt to paint a “true” picture of the world so much as to build empathy for and solidarity with research participants, a key facet of contemporary critical theory. While epistemological justifications of the work remain of importance, they are on equal footing with personal, poetic, and political justifications.

Ethnography serves as a holistic approach to the description and analysis of the cultural world and relies on a range of methods and multi-layered designs. Yet, the crucial thread remains the centrality of culture (Barker & Jane, 2016). As a methodological framework, ethnography is concerned with the analysis of cultural artifacts to explain and understand social processes. Williams (1976, 1981) considered culture to be the whole way of life, which is an understanding built upon a view of the interrelatedness of the natural, the built, and the social and historical environments (Stanley, 2012). Ethnography is an immersive experience, reflective of the image of a bricolage, in which the elements of scholarly research overlap with a host of methods including observation, interpretation, and in-depth interviewing (Gordon, 2020; Schubotz, 2020).

While this study makes no claim to being an ethnography, in my approach I have invoked the spirit of ethnography (Barker & Jane, 2016). Ethnography as method is in many ways a forceful antithesis to the limitations and dangers of the positivistic perspective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In addition to its inherently critical essence, the work of ethnography strives to be useful and informative to the wider world, reflecting intellectual rigor but less constrained by the typical sterile scholarly framework (De León, 2015). There is additionally a focus on elevating the voices of the participants over that of the researcher. In making use of in-depth interviews as the primary means of data collection, the understandings I have developed are grounded in the words of those who lived and participated in the West Virginia strike, as will be shown in the following chapter.

Furthermore, my own values and sociopolitical positions have been stated clearly, including that I am born of and deeply committed to a place that is part of the complicated and enigmatic region that is Appalachia. I do thus make the claim that my position as a native and resident of the region serves in one measure as an immersive experience that informed this study. In attempting to make sense of the social world, cultural context is elemental, and this is what an ethnographic perspective allows for and is built upon. My loyalties to the place and my affection for it means that I shoulder an obligation to honestly and responsibly study, interpret, translate, and narrate important social processes that happen here. My personal and political values and ideals underpin this work and shape my beliefs that cultural context for any social scientific study is crucial, that a more complete view of the Appalachian region is imperative for any research of issues occurring there, and that the resistance and refusal of West Virginia's teachers is a phenomenon that can tell us important things about people, movements, and power.

In doing the work of ethnography, our own culture is made strange to us (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I make my home barely fifty miles from the West Virginia state line, far less than that by the most direct route. The very same economic forces that have made ghost towns of hundreds of places in the coalfields of West Virginia also decimated my small hometown, a place once dependent upon the furniture and textile industries (Macy, 2014). Furthermore, coal weaves a thread through my wife's own family story in the same way that those two industries mark my own. To tell the history of central Appalachia and most of the state of West Virginia is to also tell the

story of boom and bust of coal and also of the fierce labor wars fought there between unions and mine owners over the course of much of the 20th Century (Stoll, 2017; Williams, 2002). My place is in this world, in the hills and hollows of the mountains that are my home, and in the rural places sacrificed to the global economy.

Fassin (2013) noted that ethnography is an important way to explore places that are tragically understudied. To utilize elements of ethnography as method and, more especially, as genre, is one way to give poetic expression to the voices of those who otherwise exist on the margins. I do not believe that we can consider Appalachia understudied or as, to use Fassin's phrasing, a scholarly black hole. There exists an entire academic association devoted to its study, and for decades multiple academic works have addressed a myriad of issues here. Nevertheless, within the larger culture and most assuredly within academia, the region remains a place largely misunderstood and misrepresented. Colonial perspectives that shaped earlier work of cultural anthropology (Chagnon, 1968) not only pervade early studies of the Appalachian region but also continue to find their way into recent work (Vance, 2016). In the media and other popular expressions of culture, Appalachia continues to be painted as a place set apart, stereotypically primitive or savage, and populated by a people who are unable or who refuse to take responsibility for their own economic and social situation. This is a perspective that utterly ignores the larger social structures beyond the control of individuals, but which deeply impact their lives. Furthermore, the 2018 strike was an event of collective action organized and led largely by women whose daily work points to

a deep sense of commitment to a profession widely recognized for its relative low pay in a state where their salaries ranked at the very bottom of the country.

The centerpiece of the bricolage of methods I used in this study are the interviews I conducted with teachers who participated in the 2018 strike. At the same time, my research was informed by the sociopolitical values I hold that are interwoven with my own understanding of place and my own life experience in the region. Through my own cultural immersion, in my approach to the interview as a dialogic and social process, and in the way I have chosen to construct and frame my narrative, I relied on an ethnographic spirit as my guide. What follows is a discussion of details regarding the specific elements that make up this bricolage of methods as well as the procedures I used to collect and analyze the data.

Research Methods

According to Ragin and Amoroso (2019), it is common for qualitative research to make use of strategies that investigate a small number of cases, such as a single historical event or a single group. Furthermore, open-ended and qualitative data are more appropriate to research that seeks to capture the lived human experience and is commonly used in the conduction of critical research (Avegerou, 2005; Punch, 2014). As I sought answers to my three research questions, I spent time reviewing as much media coverage of the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike as I could find. I also relied on my memories of following that event in real time, primarily in news coverage provided by the *New York Times*. Additionally, as my own work began to take shape, I attended two public presentations by teachers who had played leadership roles in the strike and who had

contributed to the development of a published collection of personal essays by participants, which I also, of course, read. I reached out to this group through mutual acquaintances and spent much time in informal conversation with them.

The presentations I attended and observed and the discussions I had with these individuals helped me to become more familiar with the details and the timeline of the strike and, most importantly, prompted the formulation of my thoughts ahead of the formalized study. These sources and this initial research helped me piece together the basic framework and methodological approach. This stage of the process was also theoretically informed as I evaluated these informal data in light of the dominant perspectives of collective action and social movements. At that point, I was particularly open to any information that could illuminate the key issues in the existing scholarly literature. Finally, I conducted a pilot study by interviewing four teachers who had participated in the strike. The pilot study was important for developing an interview process that was as productive as possible and enabled me to think through particular questions and lines of inquiry prior to beginning my official research. These preliminary activities also served to enhance my credibility in later conversations as I had significant background knowledge about the strike and the experiences of the teachers.

My primary data was then collected through personal interviews with teachers across the state of West Virginia who had participated in the strike. Personal interviews as method allows the researcher to bear sound witness to events of social importance that have not or cannot be directly observed (Hammersley & Gomm, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor 2019). Lindlof and Taylor (2019) further tell us that interviews get to the very heart of the

purposes of qualitative research and are used to solicit an in-depth understanding of events, to gather insights and information about a particular social phenomenon, to build trust with participants, and to make sense of the subtleties of social relationships. The primary goal of the personal interview is the generation of “factual information about the world, especially about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means” (p. 221). Given that the West Virginia teachers’ strike happened in the past, albeit the recent past, and that I did not participate in or directly witness the event myself, the research questions were best answered through data obtained from those who were there and in the form of open-ended responses by those who were actively involved in the action of the strike.

Sampling and Procedures

In sum, I conducted a total of sixteen interviews with West Virginia public school teachers who were employed at the time of the 2018 action. Most of the interviews took place online utilizing the Zoom remote meeting platform. A small number were completed in-person at a location of the participant’s choosing. My sample consisted of fourteen classroom teachers who were a part of the strike and two administrative personnel – a principal and an assistant principal – who did not officially join the teachers in their walkout, but who did not report to work during the event. I had no selection criteria for interview participants other than that they had been employed in a West Virginia public school at the time of the 2018 strike. All interviewees were initially contacted by email. I recruited my initial participants through my personal network, beginning with the group of teachers whose presentations I attended, while also

contacting other potential interviewees through mutual acquaintances. From that point, I relied on the purposive technique of snowball sampling, asking each interviewee for email introductions to others who might be willing to speak with me. Use of this nonprobability sampling method is appropriate when population members are difficult to locate and allows for the creation of a sample based on the social networks of participants themselves (Browne, 2005; Babbie, 2016).

For this study, I designed a semi-structured interview guide, included below in Appendix A, consisting of broad, open-ended questions. This interview guide helped me to better facilitate the conversations and to bring focus to the central topics addressed by the research questions. Nevertheless, I did not ask a standard set of questions that were worded in the same way or posed in a distinct order in each interview, nor did I necessarily follow the outline of the interview guide in the same way for each conversation. My time with participants was intended to be a reflective, dialogic interaction. During the interview, I encouraged the pursuit of tangential ideas and issues put forth by the participant and in some instances deviated from the interview guide more than in others. Such digressions always led me to interesting and previously uncovered points that were then incorporated into subsequent interviews. For instance, in my first interview with a teacher who had served in union leadership, I discovered a divergent narrative regarding communications from the teachers' unions in the months leading up to the strike about proposed legislation that would affect the health insurance plan for the state's public school employees. I made sure to then inquire about this issue in all interviews that followed.

In this way, my research was able to better reflect the lived experiences and thoughts of the teachers more so than my own preconceived ideas. Brancati (2018) explained that the flexibility granted by such semi-structured interviews presents challenges for making comparisons between participant respondents; however, this limitation is offset by the improved efficiency of the process and by the quality of responses elicited. A flexible and responsive interview technique allows for a more conversational interaction as well as for the creation of additional questions during the course of the interview, promoting a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Using the Zoom online meeting platform allowed me to record both the audio and video of each interview. I created my own transcriptions of the audio files and these served as the primary data in my analysis. In some instances, though not all, I reviewed the video recording to both clarify and verify what was said and the tone that was conveyed. Each participant agreed to be recorded on Zoom or to have the audio of our conversation recorded if we met in-person. To encourage openness and honesty, the interviewees were assured that their names and any identifying information would remain confidential in this report or in any other published findings. Even though the strike encompassed every school in every county in the state of West Virginia, I consider confidentiality crucial as a sign of respect for the vulnerability of teachers who participated in what was technically an unlawful act and for whom participation still carried significant personal and professional risks.

For the same reasons, I did not archive or save the contact information of every potential participant or copies of my emailed messages to them whether the individual did not respond at all or responded to indicate no desire to participate in the study. I contacted approximately fifty individuals to request a conversation, so the level of response was relatively low. Of note is the fact that this research was carried on amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, a time when teachers everywhere were affected by unusual and daunting demands on both their time and their mental and emotional well-being. I have no doubt that this situation contributed to the response rate. As the school year progressed, the number of replies I received, either positive or negative, dropped noticeably in comparison to the enthusiasm with which my earliest requests met. Nevertheless, the total number of interviews I conducted did achieve a certain level of data saturation. Data saturation is understood to be the point at which no new information is likely to be uncovered and the researcher can reasonably assume that similar results would be generated by any further collection of data (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). In my later interviews, I noted more and more the repetition of general themes and perspectives and felt confident that my sample had identified and generated sufficient data to point toward definitive conclusions.

Data Analysis

As the study sought to explain the role of social media in the West Virginia teachers' strike based on the lived experiences of the teachers, grounded theory was utilized for the analysis of data collected through the interview process. Grounded theory in particular offers a powerful analytical tool for critical scholarship in that it “fosters

asking probing questions about the data and scrutinizing the researcher and the research process” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 34). Utilizing this approach means that critical qualitative inquiry is bolstered in an ongoing, developing process (Charmaz, 2014). Research questions lead to findings that may instill doubt or instigate critical analysis that can lead to practical solutions to theoretical problems. This process allows for the examination of research methods that are dominant and which tend to be taken for granted as normative in scholarly research. We do this “by subjecting our data, our practices, and ourselves to rigorous scrutiny throughout inquiry” in order to allow a critical stance to emerge and to “change how we see our research participants, our research goals, and ourselves” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 35). This calls for a high level of methodological self-consciousness and a level of reflexivity not seen in most research.

In the social sciences, grounded theory can be used both as a strategy for research design and as a method of analysis (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). In general terms, grounded theory as a tool for analysis allows for insights to be drawn directly from the data themselves; any contributions to existing theory or the generation of new theory is thus said to be grounded directly in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Key to the quality of grounded theory analysis and, likewise, to any analysis of qualitative data, is the transparency of the researcher in describing all steps in the process (Tracy, 2010).

My own systematic grounded theory analysis was built upon the model outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020) and termed transcendental realism. Formally, this approach follows an iterative process of data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. This process was not followed sequentially; rather, it was ongoing and

repeated from the initial stages of data collection up to the point of writing my conclusions. Broad categories, themes, and respective codes were generated directly from the data and displayed in a manner that allowed me to discern patterns in systematic and consistent ways. Corbin and Strauss (1990) contended that this type of logical and continual evaluative process is integral to the interpretation of qualitative data.

My data analysis took place through the following steps: open coding occurred initially as I made notes during the interviews, identifying major issues and questions in each conversation. In the creation and compilation of the interview transcriptions, I was able to sort the data into broad categories that presented themselves across all conversations. In the next step, each transcript was reviewed to begin pinpointing key themes along with specific illustrative examples from the participant responses. From this point, I was able to generate a final list of categories and related themes in connection to the inquires of the research questions and the broader conceptual framework of the study. This process of open, axial, and selective coding allowed for a fuller understanding of the data and provided structure for the constant comparative analysis of the responses of the interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). In less jargonistic language, the system of analysis can be considered a gradual and repeated process of sifting through the words of the participants in an effort to drill down to the most important elements. The process began with listening and continued all the way to the task of writing, ending only when the data was collected into its final presented form in the next chapter. Each encounter with the data yielded further and more definitive understanding.

My use of this model was also informed by Charmaz's (2017) concept of constructivist grounded theory. According to Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theory contributes to critical and qualitative approaches in that it is an interactive method of analysis. The more the data are allowed to speak, the more precise the analysis becomes. The data are examined through close reading, but notes are made quickly and spontaneously, unhindered by second guessing. Constructivist grounded theory understands the analytical process to be ongoing and continual, raising critical questions each step along the way, from data collection to analysis to writing. The point of repeated engagement is to increase depth and reach and to bring to light understandings that may otherwise remain hazy or invisible. But the approach of constructivist grounded theory is not only undertaken to deepen the precision of findings. It also invites doubt, prompting the meticulous review of all the limitations encountered in intensely subjective modes of inquiry.

Unruly Doubts and Tumultuous Realities

For the critical perspective, it is crucial to foster a methodological self-consciousness through careful and strenuous attention to the forms of data collection and analysis that are applied in the research process (Charmaz, 2017). This begins from the position that methods are emergent, and that inductive understanding is developed continually as the work unfolds and knowledge is gained (Charmaz, 2008). Yet, we can go even further, welcoming doubt into the analytic process and confronting head-on – no, *embracing* – what strict empiricists consider the shortcomings and limitations of subjective inquiry (Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2017). This rigorous scrutiny involves

honesty and transparency about the dissonant and divergent issues that are at-play in the research and in the formulation of conclusions. These matters are not to be feared; rather, it is necessary to cultivate them even to the point of “articulating a fractured subjectivity” (Kinchloe & McClaren, 2005, p. 329) In this section, I will address as exhaustively as possible the unruly doubts and tumultuous realities that should be considered in this study.

First and foremost, the process of personal interviews for data collection is inherently subjective and is always affected by personal bias on the part of both the interviewer and the participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The recollections of participants, especially over time, can be faulty or unreliable. In retrospect, feelings and events may be considered differently and narratives may be reconstructed in ways more suitable to personal viewpoints and desires. Even subconsciously, participants may answer questions in the way they believe the interviewer wants them to. They might either stoke or rebuff a particular narrative that has become apparent in the researcher’s line of questioning. There is certainly nothing to stop an interviewee from withholding critical information or their own negative analyses. And, of course, my own subjectivities, values, and sociopolitical complications came to bear in my interactions with participants. My sense of what knowledge and understanding might be gained from the use of social media in the West Virginia strike was constantly evolving, and this affected both the development of my questions and the ways in which I posed them.

I am also aware of explicit and implicit systems of power and privilege that affect all communications and interactions in the social world and how these shaped my

conversations with participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I made clear to potential interviewees that I was conducting research for my doctoral dissertation under the auspices of a well-recognized, public university. This was necessary from an ethical standpoint, certainly, but it also was a subtle indication of my expertise and legitimacy. There is no doubt that my confidence in contacting strangers as part of the recruitment process was bolstered by my ability to use all the professional accoutrements that come with being a PhD student at a university, including such things as my email address and signature and the fact that the university logo and official contact information are included on the informed consent statement. I do think this suggested the value of the conversation to social scientific scholarship and to the academy at large; however, it could have either flattered potential participants or turned them off, depending on their own point of view. At the very least, to do so imposed upon the proceedings an air of seriousness that may or may not have helped the interchange.

I felt a very self-conscious need to include in my recruitment emails and to also begin each interview with a statement of my position as the husband of a teacher who had grown up very near West Virginia. Furthermore, throughout all interviews, my comments were peppered with allusions to my own cultural and geographical awareness of the state and of the larger region. I did this to endear myself to interviewees, to set them at ease, and to build rapport. But I also did it to claim a level of social and cultural legitimacy and to overplay my personal interest in the strike as subordinate to the pursuit of my doctoral degree. While I see very little distinction between my personal and professional interests, I also cannot ignore the matter of personal ambition in doing this work. Related to this is

the fact that I tended not to mention at all nor to address in any detail that my course of study is concentrated in the field of information science. I acknowledge that such silence on my part is related to an internalized notion that information science as a scholarly discipline is often perceived as solely applicable to the professional work of librarianship and not as any serious field of sociological study. Thus, I often feel the need to offer justification and explanation for my interest in far broader social issues and questions related to information and related technologies.

I did not ever shy away from disclosing my belief that the strike had been a just and righteous cause. Once more, this was critical from an ethical standpoint, but its role in the shaping of conversations and conclusions is important to confront. To be clear, it is far easier to stake such a political position as a researcher and not as someone who stood on a picket line or who put their career at risk to make such a statement. Moreover, I was assuredly conscientious about downplaying my own position at the beginning of my conversations and to only reveal it more and more as the interview proceeded and, to a degree, only in proportion to the enthusiasm expressed by the participant themselves. Additionally, in making my requests to participants to put me in touch with others they knew who had been involved in the strike, I always asked that it be noted that I was not as interested in the event as a social or political phenomenon as much as the questions it raised about information and the role of social media. I simply did not want anyone to be deterred from speaking with me out of fear or because of a hesitancy to discuss political issues. While not utterly dishonest, I knew that this was not fully transparent as the scope of this narrative no doubt makes clear. It must be said, of course, that all the participants

in this research are far savvier than these reflections give them credit for and that they could discern clearly for themselves what about my words and actions were sincere and what bordered on being merely performative.

I also somehow found it necessary in nearly every interview to insert into the conversation my antipathy toward social media and my general skepticism of its social value. I have little use for social media, though I tend to overlook the amount of time I waste on Twitter when flouting my disdain for such things. Still, I do not have a Facebook account and know very little of most social media platforms. It is nearly impossible to state this without any hint of cultural elitism or self-righteousness. Yet, distorting the amount of time we spend on such platforms and underestimating our level of addiction to social media is not uncommon (Turel, Brevers, & Bechara, 2018). It seemed to me that most participants tended to also downplay their own use of social media in response to my statement and throughout our discussions.

It can certainly be argued that I interviewed a relatively low number of participants. Once again, however, I am entirely confident that I engaged enough strike participants to trust the conclusions I have reached, though questions of generalizability and validity rank low from the critical perspective in the first place. What does stand as a shortcoming is that my sample did not include a better representation of public school employees. I find it regrettable that I did not interview a school custodian or cafeteria worker or office assistant. These voices would have provided useful and important insights and perspectives. My focus on teachers is a notably limiting factor. Moreover, in a study that seeks to emphasize those voices on the margins and that lack power, this is

ironically reflective of a tendency to favor the input of more educated and credentialed individuals who occupy professional roles.

Finally, from a rhetorical standpoint, the highly theoretical approach of this narrative limits its accessibility and its impact on the real world. The discussion and argument presented here is exceedingly philosophical in tone and is driven by a voice that, if perhaps not jargon-infused, is certainly, at points, overwrought. I cannot with any real conviction answer the question of whether my dissertation is one that the teachers themselves would find useful or interesting. The density of this account reflects my own internalized sense of inadequacy to this task and an attempt to prove that I do indeed have legitimate claim to being a scholar. For Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020) the question of how we address the reader in scientific discourse is a troublesome one. Oftentimes, researchers try to “write smart” by falling back on what are considered traditional forms of rhetorical style either because it is the presumed expectation for scholarship or “because they’re arrogant elitists in love with their own intelligence, and they feel that lofty prose, obscure vocabulary, and abstract concepts” communicates brilliance (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020, p. 318). I do not fall on the extreme of either side of this binary and certainly make no claim to brilliance. The voice I have found may be problematic at times, to be sure, but it is wholly my own and one that I inhabit with ease.

What is assuredly of central concern here are the voices of those who stood together in their refusal and resistance in West Virginia, and it is to their own words that I turn in the next chapter. Chapter Four is not a traditional presentation of research data,

though it is systematic, and my process is explained in detail. I have chosen to utilize a more creative approach. We embark from here on a journey that situates my methods in the context of an interactive, dialogical process. The West Virginia teachers will tell the story of the strike in their own collective voice. The conversations I had with each of them will be transformed into a conversation they had with themselves about what they did, how and why they did it, and what meaning they take from their act of resistance.

CHAPTER FOUR

TELLING THE STORY

Introduction

When I began writing this chapter, I quickly and easily slipped into the standard procedure for reporting research data. It was tedious, mind-numbing work. I wrote sections about each of the three research questions and then pulled direct quotations from the transcriptions of the interviews to illustrate key points. This would have been sufficient for the purposes of this work, and I wrote a significant portion of the chapter in this manner. But it did not feel right to me. In fact, it made me extremely uncomfortable. To follow that structure meant that I not only ignored every word I had written in the previous chapters but, most importantly, it was not adequate for sharing the voices of the participants themselves. While I inserted many long quotations into the text, the voices of the teachers were obscured by a stale and colorless academic voice. Such an approach, to my mind, would have been a betrayal both of the teachers who were courageous enough to walk out of their classrooms in 2018 and of the epistemological and methodological ground I seek to claim. Thus, I selected a creative avenue for reporting the data in what I consider to be a more responsible and useful way. What follows is an explanation of the process and the presentation of the results. The final section of the chapter then provides a discussion of the key findings from the story of the 2018 strike within the framework of the three research questions.

The structure of this chapter as it was realized in its final form was the result of a dialogical process. The teachers in West Virginia had an important story to tell, one wholly their own, and that story is offered here in their own voice. The story as it was told is born of the interactions in the interview process. My job was to probe the memories and perspectives of those involved in the strike through specific questions formulated from my own perspective, understanding, and inquiry. But it was their responses, their memories, and their voices that all came together into one astounding collective narrative. I offered a channel for it to be told in this way, in this moment. With other researchers and in other conversations, the story might have been told in an entirely different way but with no less meaning and insight.

Of equal importance is that the result was also a dialogue between the teachers. The story they told was steeped in the contradictions and tensions of competing narratives. For all the expressions of solidarity and unity by those involved in the strike, their own words indicated conflicting viewpoints about the central issues raised by the research questions. Most especially, there existed distinct differences regarding the role of grassroots activists versus that of union leaders in the instigation of the strike. For a great many rank and file members, this issue mattered not. Nevertheless, the disagreement was fundamental to understanding the role of social media in the event.

Those who felt the unions were ineffective turned to Facebook as a key tool for the communication of information about the policy issues at the root of the walkout and to motivate their fellow teachers to action. Understanding this was crucial for sorting out the exact role of social media, its contributions to the outcomes of the strike, and for

better understanding how collective identity was understood by the participants. The history and heritage of labor movements in West Virginia was, in the end, but one facet of a collective sense of identity held by the teachers. This element was central for those who saw themselves as filling a vacuum created by an inadequate response from union leaders. However, there was a far more widespread sense of collective identity with a deeply felt commitment to the needs of children and to a profession seen as long maligned and undervalued. As told by the voices of those who lived the experience of the strike, this story reflected the entangled complexities we see throughout the human social world.

In constructing the story presented below, a collective voice was created through the melding and marriage of individual voices. To distinguish their words from my own, the words of those who were interviewed were italicized in the narrative. I did not intermix chunks of text or break apart any complete thoughts. While this exercise was a little like putting the pieces of a puzzle together, those pieces, in the form of individual responses, remain complete as they were initially offered. I did change all first-person singular pronouns to the first-person plural. In other words, at all points, the “I” was changed to “we” and the “my” to “our” except in cases where the direct quote already used the plural form. This was done to create one voice as told by the teachers themselves, and it necessitated that I also change some words for the purpose of subject-verb agreement. While I made every effort to minimize the presence of my editorial hand, in order to create a more seamless and cogent narrative, I added some words for the sake of clarification, and I eliminated pauses, tics, and repeated words or phrases. In everyday

conversation, very few individuals, if any, speak in complete sentences. Our spoken words are often strewn with “ums” and “uhs” and “you knows.” We continually digress or make asides, and our verbalized thoughts tend to fade out rather than meet clear ends. I tidied up such things in order to create a smoother, more readable narrative. Finally, I removed names and identifying information, replacing such references with other identifiers where necessary.

Aside from these adjustments for clarity, I made every effort to present the words as they were originally spoken. Most of the story below was created through words taken directly from the transcriptions of the recorded interviews. As I see it, I merely provided the scaffolding upon which to affix the words of the teachers. The story begins in my own voice, written in my own narrative style, but there comes a moment when the teachers fully take over. My words eventually come only to occupy a utilitarian space while their words occupy a more powerful and dramatic space. At first, I was concerned that these two voices were incongruous or disjointed, but now I feel that, in reading the story, a kind of magic happens as my words slowly become their words. My voice is gradually subsumed by their voice, which is as it should be. This is noticeable as more and more of the words in the narrative become italicized until, eventually, the majority of the words appear so. I do not find the transition awkward or jarring; rather, it seems like a strange and mysterious and beautiful thing. My words serve merely as vehicle, but the narrative is driven by the teachers.

The Story

The story of our strike begins long before 2018. Like everything, if you wanted to, you could trace this story all the way back to a time before time. From the beginning, here in West Virginia, the landscape itself has been shaped by conflict and collision and by waters that have carved deep gulches like the New River Gorge, which is a mile's drive all the way across. Our story of the strike, too, is sometimes just as murky as that water is after a hard rain. You feel as if you might never see the bottom of it. There is a lot that is just not clear or, like the river, always here one moment but gone the next.

Against steep, wooded ridges, there is just room enough in most of these river bottoms for a winding road, track for trains, and, here and there, little towns to prop themselves, towns named for coal mine owners or their wives. But it is a big state. Some of us *teach in the Eastern Panhandle, which is markedly different economically and geographically from the rest of the state*. Drive north a ways out of the southern coalfields and you will find a couple of university towns. You will eventually drop out of the mountains and come to Ohio or Pennsylvania or Maryland. Our teachers can leave West Virginia and work in any of those states for a lot more pay and for a lot less irritation. We *could drive twenty minutes more and make almost twice as much*. Some of us *taught in Maryland for years and made far more money, but we grew up in southern West Virginia and wanted to move back home and were willing to take a huge pay cut to do it*. Most of the teachers we work with have some other form of employment. We have never just had teaching as a job. We take jobs at Wal-Mart; we wait tables on the weekends; we sell Mary Kay on the side; all so we can keep going into the classroom.

Our state was born during a time of terrible struggle, carved out of the backend of Virginia in the middle of the Civil War. And, while a lot of our people have been blamed for helping to start this new civil war – and maybe some of them deserve it, we can admit that – like everywhere else in the country, there is more to the story. And there are others of us who live here who have fought together for change without violence. Some people have asked us, *how did a thing like this strike happen in Trump country? We tell them it didn't happen in Trump country. West Virginia is where it happened.*

Just like the rivers shaped the land, it was water that helped to make the coal, too. So long ago, along the marshy shoreline of an enormous inland sea, living things died and settled down into the muck at the bottom. Over more millennia than we can imagine, the carbon that was left behind was pressed down, squeezed and compacted with spectacular force until there came to be great seams of coal deep under the surface of the earth. It was good coal, good enough to be coveted, good enough to make steel. After our ancestors drove out the first people from this place – the Monongahela and the Mingo and the Shawnee and the Cherokee and others – they themselves were driven off and into the mines. Before they even understood what they had done, they sold the mineral rights to their lands.

For some of us, our *whole family was in the coal mines. There were unions, and they fought for better pay and for safety and for things like that. It could be violent. It was aggressive. It was, we're not going to take it. And even though we aren't really up for violence, it did equate to change eventually. Our husbands worked in the mines, and our fathers and grandfathers had. We had no choice. It's in our blood.* But it wasn't just the

coal miners. Teachers went on strike in 1990 in West Virginia. Some of our moms *had just started teaching then, and our dads didn't make very much money, but we remember she had to take days unpaid. It was a much different atmosphere at the time. She took days unpaid, and she said that she was always really proud of that because some people didn't do that. She brought us up from a very young age not to ever cross the picket line. Where we came from, we were taught from a young age, you don't go beyond the picket line. The labor movement started in West Virginia, and here we are rekindling that fire. It's just really powerful and awesome. And to know that we played such a big part in that, it's...we're sorry. We have lost our words.*

In West Virginia, we have two unions for teachers, the West Virginia Education Association, or the WVEA, which some of us consider *less a union and more of an advocacy group*, and we have a state chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, the AFT, which represents teachers and the service personnel like bus drivers and custodians, though the union does not represent our school administrators. But the state legislature overrode the governor's veto in 2016 and made West Virginia a right-to-work state, so we are not required to pay dues or to belong to either of the unions. That means that both WVEA and AFT are each working to recruit us as members.

Some of us think this is part of the problem that led to the strike in the first place. *Two of the biggest issues are our legislators playing our unions against one another and our unions spending time and resources to try and out-recruit each other. This is a waste of energy. It's so frustrating because so much time and energy still is expended on this when we have a common enemy we need to be fighting. Many of us cannot get out of that*

mindset – my union is the only correct one and I'm only going to do what my union leaders tell me to do. That's the most frustrating thing. Well, the union leaders haven't told us what to do. We are the union. We get to do whatever we want, and their job is to protect us. They're supposed to answer to us and not the other way around.

When we started teaching, it was just sort of understood that you would join the teacher's union. So, we went ahead and elected to join the union at that point. But other than a couple of times of yearly contact – maybe every six months – we didn't see the benefits. It seems like the only thing that unions had to offer was almost a sort of intimidation. Well, if you don't sign on with the union, then you might be sued, and you can get this policy, or our attorneys will help you or whatever. And so, some of us had to ask, is this the only reason that we joined the union? We don't know what else they do for us. The thing is they don't ever have a campaign. They don't ever have a campaign to win anything. They're just there. They wait until it's the legislative session and they lobby against bad bills or maybe they lobby just so they can say they did.

For some of us, though, the union is essential, it is vital, and we are loyal, and we have served it for much of our career. Are you familiar with what it means when a teacher says they're on the RIF list? RIF stands for reduction in force. At the end of the school year, they have to cut positions based on enrollment changes. Some of us, in our first year of teaching, were on the RIF, which is pretty common. You know, first year teachers are the ones to go. We remember just not knowing what to do about it. And the veteran teachers in our building said, well, you need to be in the union. You need to have that support. Some of us are just very active. We never miss a meeting. Some of us have

served as president of the local for sixteen years. A teachers' union is really a special thing because it's like-minded people who care about the kids. Some people feel funny about the word 'union' when it comes to professionalism. But that's AFT's byline – we're a union of professionals. Some people don't call WVEA a union. They call it an association. And the AFT always says, we're a union. We're a part of the AFL. We believe in the union concept and everything that goes with that.

Talking about the union can be a complicated thing in West Virginia. You can't overstate the importance of the unions, but there are thousands of teachers who were instrumental in the strike and the unity it took to accomplish it who are not affiliated with any union and who really don't care what union leadership says or does. They care about the real stuff, the real reasons why we are walking out of our classrooms. The politicians also get that very wrong.

When we were first talking about crossing the line and all that, you know, we needed our job, as most people did. And, at first, that concerned us. That never happened. It didn't come to that, but who knows what we would have done if it continued because we couldn't lose our job. We thought about that, but we believed in what we were doing. At the same time, some of us didn't have much of a philosophical understanding of the whole thing. Our dad was not really pro-union because he'd had bad experiences with that. When he was younger, he had worked in some factories in Ohio, and he felt like the union represents lazy people. But then, we had an uncle who was a coal miner, and he was rabidly pro-union. And so, that was a tough spot to be in. We remember apologizing.

Not everybody can come to every union meeting. A lot of teachers have afterschool jobs because the pay isn't there, and a lot of other things. There were some teachers who were their family's sole source of income, and they very much felt on the outside. One teacher even shared a letter that he had written to our principal that said if schools were closed, he couldn't afford to strike. He wanted to express that he was still planning on coming to work because he was afraid there would be an interruption in salary and income. And some of us have spouses with other incomes or had another source of income at the time and felt more confident. But we thought, whether we were a member of the union or not, no matter what, we're joining the effort. It wasn't like you were going to receive some kind of pay or subsidy when you were striking.

Some of us are building administrators, the principals and assistant principals, and we felt caught in the middle. We wanted the teachers to get what they deserve because we get paid pretty good, so we're not complaining. But then, it was disrupting. We're also parents, and as an administrator in the building, it was disruptive both to our child's education and to the building we're trying to run. Ultimately, the two things that they were talking about – pay and insurance – actually benefitted us. We also ended up getting a little bit of a raise and our insurance ended up being a little better.

We agreed with what they were fighting for, but it was disruptive. A lot of our teachers were caught in the middle, too. Technically, they didn't strike, but they walked out for a little bit. We were to do surveys beforehand to see how many would actually come to work, and about seventy-five to eighty percent of our staff would have come to work. It wasn't really so much that they wanted to be a part of it; it was more that they

wanted to support their fellow teachers. As principals, some of us were *told, you can't come down one way or the other, so we stayed home, too. But we might have dropped off coffee and doughnuts to them on the picket line. We won't say for sure we did that. We do remember our wives asking, why don't those people go to work? Don't they care about their job? You know, it was hard for some to understand.*

The main grievances were about PEIA, the Public Employees Insurance Agency that affects all of the state employees. It was about the insurance. That was why teachers finally did go. We look back at pictures and the signs we were holding, so many of them mention the insurance. Almost all of them have some allusion to PEIA. The state legislature and the PEIA board wanted to take a spouse's salary and include it in the amount that you would pay for your premiums and your deductibles. What employer in this country requires the salary of your spouse to determine your health insurance coverage? That was really the number one issue for people. PEIA has been a very hot mess. They don't pay their bills. Doctors are waiting to get paid. Once, we didn't go in because we had a sinus infection, but we owed the doctor three hundred dollars. Of course, pay was an issue. Teachers across the country are underpaid, but in West Virginia, we were number forty-nine in the country at the time. Pay was an issue, but it wasn't the main issue. The media was trying to paint us as these greedy teachers, they want more money. But the issue was PEIA and getting that fixed.

We noticed between 2014 and 2016 that everything was up in the air about insurance. It has been said that this started as something with our insurance. It started as a plea to give us better benefits, to lower our rates, to do something to fix PEIA. That was

the catchphrase and we kind of abandoned that. But that was what really pushed us because we saw on paper what we were going to make when we signed on to be a teacher, but a huge part of being a teacher is the benefits. Many teachers take those benefits and carry them for their whole family, and they can be rather expensive. We found out that even just for routine care, we were paying more and more out of pocket. And then, well, PEIA instituted this wellness program. There were many teachers who felt like they were being penalized because they opted not to have the healthiest lifestyle. And whose business is it anyway? So, that started some animosity about our insurance. Then we received a rate sheet for the enrollment period for the coming year. There were lots of service workers who were also getting hit hard with the cost of insurance. We realized, oh my gosh, this is going to go up so much. We're not going to be able to afford it. It's going to be less for more. Salary was secondary.

We believe it was either August or September. At some point, we went to a local union meeting and we remember the union representative telling us, if there is ever a strike, here are the steps we need to take. And we're sitting there, like, what is he talking about? He was on the AFT executive board, so he knew more. He was always getting information. So, he's going, here is what we need to do during the strike. Things could get really ugly. And everybody's kind of looking at each other. Surely not. So, when the winter months start to come and you start to hear they're going to cut PEIA and they're going to cut your benefits, which is essentially a pay cut, you hear all of these people saying, surely they're not going to do that. They know what that's going to end in. And as

we get closer and closer to the legislative session, it just became more and more clear that that's what was going to happen.

Those of us who are union leaders, we had to go into this meeting that we had to do off the fly. We're getting too many questions to be able to pay attention to what we needed to pay attention to. We walked into that meeting and essentially felt like we were crucified for not knowing all of this information.

We kept having these meetings and then we met again and we remember frustration and thinking, are we just going to keep meeting forever and never do anything about it? Because the way we remember unions – we had coal miners in our family – and even if their families starve, they went. If something wasn't right, they struck. We're from a state where we've experienced this before. You've got to fight. If you don't, there's never going to be a change. Nobody wanted to strike. We all kind of knew it was coming, but no one wanted to believe that the legislators would truly cut benefits to the extent that they would.

There were those among us who felt that the unions had not done a good enough job communicating with us about these issues. We thought that our union leaders should be doing more, getting us better information. Some of us think AFT had a Facebook page at some point. We may have even liked AFT West Virginia on Facebook. But they never posted. Same for WVEA. Maybe they'd post a news article about some education related issue in the state, but that was about it. They didn't utilize it as a tool. They still don't really have that kind of model. It's more like, send us your dues, we'll go lobby the legislature, we'll try to make things not as bad as they've been. We know one union

representative who has a Facebook page, but anyone is allowed to join and follow. And the only thing she posts are today's lobby line, a legislative update, a daily statement. She's not doing any kind of organizing or activism on that. It's just an avenue for disseminating top-down union information. There's no power behind it because there's never any organizing or people power that goes into fighting for those issues. So, there's really no expectation of winning on that shit. So, why would they have a Facebook group?

A group of us who worked in the coalfields or who had grown up there decided to take matters into our own hands. We think maybe the Thursday before the strike that there were four counties where each of the superintendents closed schools that day, and those counties boarded school buses and came to Charleston to lobby and to have a presence at the capitol. And they were all four coalfield counties. That action made the news that day big time. People were interested all over the state. So, the day there was going to be something like thirteen counties do that, some people called it a rolling strike, like we'll just ease into this. Then the weekend came and that's when we voted and we didn't have to do this rolling thing. We all were out. But that initial energy, that was from the coalfield counties, those four.

Those of us who are leaders in the union, we were talking about it in executive meetings that, you know, there's rumbling going on in the state, especially in the southern parts of the state. You know, they're mine workers down there. They're UMWA and they aren't afraid to do something. There was talk of wildcat strikes happening down in Boone County and in the southern part of the state where it is heavy miners. But then

there was this Facebook group that started one day out of nowhere. If you're familiar with the strike, you know about that Facebook group. It brought almost every single public employee, especially the teachers, together in a matter of days. It just grew in a matter of days and everybody was talking and all of a sudden it was, this is going to happen now.

Once those benefits started going down and people started talking about it, a page went up on Facebook. Many of us didn't know where it came from, but a friend sent it to us and asked us to join. On this page, you'd have everything from I can't afford my insurance to every time I go to a doctor, I'm hit with this huge bill and now they're going to increase it. It was just sort of a catchall page for everyone's complaints.

We asked, as union leaders, how do we get ahead of this and kind of facilitate it so that it's not all crazy? It definitely was a grassroots effort. Some of us think that's an appropriate term as far as them being out front. We think some of them feel that way for sure. They were very proud of their effort and often reminded us how great they were. Some of us will disagree with that. Not to diminish their work or their effort, but we really feel like AFT was completely in front of everything.

Of course, there are some of us who say that the unions went into this not very strong. We pretty much felt like we drug them into this, the teachers did. And after, maybe it even boosted their confidence a little. Some of us have noticed that they've been more vocal about things with the COVID crisis. They've sent us more updates. We feel like AFT did a better job of that after the strike. But we felt like we dragged them into it. They really were unions in name only. After the strike, they realized that we would

support them. At least, as long as they were going to fight for us and be a little more aggressive.

We had to show them, here's how to do it. You guys call yourself a union? We sort of all came in and pushed them and then they got energized. They just needed to get some teeth, make us feel like somebody was really fighting for us.

Some among us felt like the unions did the best they could. We think that it can be a challenge to communicate with so many people. We feel like the union was very helpful during this time because they kept us informed. Some of the problem with people saying that the information isn't there is that people don't show up to union meetings. You have to be involved to get information. Yes, you pay your dues, but you also have to be an active participant because we know that we've talked about those things. We always talk about, okay, what are the pending issues? What do we need to look for in the legislative session? What do teachers need to worry about for the next year? You have to be actively involved. That's for anything. If you say you don't like church because you're not learning anything, but you don't actually show up, why do you think you don't know?

At our very first union meeting that year, our local president let us know here's what we need to do if there's a strike. So, we knew back in the very beginning of the school year. When all that started, even our state reps came down and we had an event at one of the churches. We probably had one hundred and fifty people there. They talked about what was happening with PEIA and shared all the information they had, so people could ask questions. And we had our local legislators come in and they also did a question-and-answer that the unions hosted. The unions facilitated all that.

It was really funny to see. You could tell that some people running that Facebook page had some inside sources because now that we work for the union, we see how quickly we get information. So, the fact that sometimes they had information before the union did was really interesting. But, again, sometimes it's not about being fast. Sometimes it's about being accurate, and we would rather be accurate than be first.

Some people would complain. They would say, well, the union president hasn't made a speech. But maybe that's because she's in meetings or something or she's mediating some crisis, so let's be patient and see what happens. And then, in the meantime, these 55 United people on Facebook would sort of create something. You know, well, here's what's going on at the capitol. No one else is telling you, but we'll tell you. Then, twenty minutes later, here's the union president coming out and saying here's what's happening. So, you know, we appreciate the work of people who rely on social media and who believe in that, but some of us don't think it's fair to say they drove things. They had an impact. They really did have an impact, but we believe the leadership of AFT and WVEA worked very hard and did a very, very good job.

We would say that social media is definitely utilized more by the union. We listen to our members and, if that's what they want, if they want Facebook Live posts, if that's the way they want the information conveyed, if that's what's easy for them, then that's what we're going to do because our job is to make sure that they have this information. Maybe the unions weren't saying what people wanted to hear, but they were definitely communicating about it. And then, when it got on the radar, some said, you haven't been telling us about it. We said, if you read the news, it's been mentioned. People just weren't

really fair. What the union was communicating perhaps was insufficient to address that very important issue, but people were being a little incorrect when they were saying it hadn't been communicated.

We get emails from AFT and we don't always read them. We might have started reading them when things were heating up, but, you know, we get a lot of email. We get a ton of email. We're trying to work and, depending on what the subject line is, we might just ignore it completely.

Not taking away from general membership, but as union leaders, of course we need to listen to them. The union was asking, how do we get ahead of this? How do we not control it, but how do we make all of these people's voices be able to have one central message and get that out there instead of all these wildcat things going on? We know a lot of people feel that the union sold us out, the leadership sold us out, or they're not listening, but we don't think that was the case. Communication between the top to the rank and file could have definitely been improved a bit. But things changed so quickly that, by the time you put information out, it had changed again. It was a very difficult balancing act. They did the very best they could with the circumstances they were given. It was difficult for everybody, and everybody has a different perspective.

One of the initial ways in which the strike happened was the Facebook group. People were just really angry and anxious to have some sort of action. There were multiple groups online, but there was a very large Facebook group that was everybody together. A lot of teachers and service personnel were engaged there and then at their work sites with pickets, but then a lot of people also traveled to Charleston and sort of

flooded the capitol every day. The strike really gained momentum quickly. And not only were the teachers involved; everybody was involved. It became a big thing. We will use the word strike, but actually it was a work stoppage because all the superintendents agreed to close school.

And so, on Facebook all of the activities from the county were being discussed because we had schedules. We would alternate days. We would strike and get support here in our town while another group of teachers went to the capitol, and then we would alternate, and another group would go to the capitol while the others stayed back. We read Facebook all the time because it was giving you information. You know, it's what counties were going to Charleston that day and some people would stay at their county to picket and then some people would go to the capitol. We would meet at different places.

Teachers did a lot on their individual personal Facebook pages, but we took care of business on those other pages that were just groups for teachers. There was a lot of, on the local level, carpooling types of information. Where are you going to be? Who's going to go with who? That kind of thing. And then, on the larger levels, just sort of more of the big picture of everything.

Sometimes they would say this is what's going on today or we're going to have a prayer circle or where we were going to be organized. We'd make sure, if it was our school specifically or county-wide, that everybody knew that we were going to meet at this time on this day to organize. Or we carpooled a lot down to Charleston because it's about an hour and fifteen minutes and it's always more fun to go with other people. Plus, there was a lack of parking and all, you know, so those are things that we would put on

that Facebook page. We got buses a couple of times for some of the bigger rallies. So, we wanted everyone to know, like, there's going to be a bus, and everybody is invited and things like that.

On Facebook, we posted things like we are meeting at the Panera on Route 9 at this time to this time, be there. You know, make sure to wear this shirt or we're taking up a collection for the woman who got in a car accident on the second or third day of the strike, you know, bring some money for her. It was just more specific information like we're sending buses down; if you want to go let us know. It was specifically for more logistical information. We're hosting town halls here; we're hosting walk-ins here. Facebook was for a lot more concrete action. That was the go-to hub for info. It honestly became more like strategies to fight back. People just took ideas and ran with it and put that stuff on Facebook where they would just kind of share that stuff out.

Facebook helped us organize and strategize, but it also served as a big source of inspiration and empowerment. One of the things that we'll never forget happened on one of the days when the teachers were striking, and they had a picket line out in front of Nutter Fort Elementary School. They had music playing and the song "Respect" came on and the county superintendent was out there, you know, supporting the teachers, and he started dancing and singing along to Aretha Franklin, singing "Respect." That kind of went viral in the Clarksburg area. We don't think they felt disrespected by their superintendent, but to see a superintendent out there, and particularly that song and the word respect, and teachers were feeling very disrespected. It was really great and fun to see.

You know, you feel like when you look at those pictures or you see those live feeds on Facebook and people are singing and chanting and doing all the things, it's just really empowering. It feels like you're experiencing history in the making. The capitol was just packed full of people, lots of shouting, cheering, chanting. It was a really inspiring feeling being there. We came out of there with ringing ears. It was very, very loud.

Definitely, Facebook was very, very active informationally, socially, and inspirationally, too. Some of it was purely informational and then some of it was kind of snarky and a little mean at times. There was a lot of stuff about Mitch Carmichael that made us laugh, you know? We saw pictures of signs comparing him to Voldemort or saying, this never would have happened at Hogwarts. There was a Mean Girls sign where someone had put the Republican politicians' heads on the mean girls. It brought levity, humor.

Facebook gave us an easy way to organize, plan, and share strategic details before and during the strike. But it was not our only source of information. The energy around this was just so overwhelming and big. So, you might be standing at a picket line and fifteen things could happen in ten minutes. Somebody drives by and says, hey, somebody said they're going to do a thing at the city park tomorrow. And then somebody gets a message on their phone, this thing is going on. So, we were just informing each other and using every means of communication possible. Some of us actually were not involved in the Facebook group. Some of us are not Facebook people. Many of our friends were involved in it, so we knew about it and we knew that there was a lot of energy there. We were just not a part of it.

We can remember a friend saying that he was standing in the capitol one day and somebody walked by him and said, are you going to the rally at three o'clock? And he said, oh, I thought it was at two o'clock. So, you know, sometimes it was a little hard to communicate all that because you don't get very good reception at the capitol. Those walls must be made of seven foot of concrete or something. So, again, texting was important, email. You know, everybody's on their phone looking down and trying to find their bars. The best way to do the organizing was just do it at work, you know, using word-of-mouth. That was just the easiest way to do it.

We also appreciated how much our union representative communicated with us and we just texted back and forth. They were excellent about communicating and getting the word out through text messaging, Facebook, or whatever means were necessary. And now that we have GroupMe, we can easily use that platform to communicate with everyone on one app. And we don't have to get everybody's numbers and text back and forth or email people. It's just right on the app and it's super easy. The union representative would text us and say, you know, this is where we're going to be if you want to make it. And then, she's like, some people are going to the capital. But we heard about plans either through text or email.

We'd be on the picket line, so you know, we want to know what's going on. Well, we'll check Facebook, or we'll text another teacher or we'll text somebody that's down there. For a very brief time some of us were on Twitter because we wanted to see if there was anything else going on, but we weren't Twitter fans, so we got rid of it. We kind of wish we had known about Zoom then. We would have conference calls every morning

with all of the local union presidents in the state. Then we would have meetings with our local members quite often during the strike. We had phone trees and we were told not to put things in emails. So, we were very careful with what we put in writing.

Facebook did present some problems. That Facebook group we feel kind of got out of control. Some of us didn't get too involved in that because it kind of went haywire pretty quickly, in our opinion. And if something was on there that was completely left field, we would try to correct or put somebody in the right direction. But to be completely honest, by the time the strike really started getting going, we were way too busy to even deal with any of that nonsense in that group.

We've had to boot people off the page for sure. People have said, like, hey, this is so and so. I know them. Trust me. They're not a public employee nor are they favored to your stuff. So, we've done that some.

And so, if anybody heard anything without verifying anything or really getting all the details or facts or information, they would post it to this group for everybody to start getting all unraveled. And some of us feel like it was detrimental to the movement a lot of times because they didn't have all the information there. They're hearing this from third, fourth, fifth sources sometimes and just posting it so that they can be the first to get it out there. But when you're putting out incorrect information, it's not helping anybody.

Sometimes with social media people have a tendency to be inappropriate because they're hiding behind a computer screen. There was a lot of misinformation. So, many of us tried not to get our information from there because we wanted to make sure we had the correct information, so some of us typically did not use Facebook. Others of us would

use it as a rumor source, as in, hey, here's what's going to happen. We'd look at that, but then we would definitely give credence to the Washington Post or our local paper. Some of us just feel like sometimes you don't get as much accurate information on social media. Because then you get caught up reading comments and, as you know, it's not always accurate. To be honest, we really more relied on our superintendent's office and the superintendent giving us more accurate information.

But we don't think we would have been able to get the numbers that we did without social media. We would have never had those numbers had it not been for social media. It brought the numbers and it got people fired up. Gathering support would have been way more difficult. Some of us are kind of geographically isolated. It connected people. It would have been more of a disjointed effort because what would we have had if all we relied on were those meetings?

At the same time, many of us do think the strike would have happened without social media. It would have because it had been done before. In the '90s, they fought for duty free lunches and they fought for us to have a planning period. But before, when they went on strike, that was without everybody on board, and they still made huge changes. So, it would have still been effective. We don't think it would have been on the news. We don't know if it would have made the impact that it did because, well, a statewide strike, that's unbelievable. People are so divided right now politically. That's why it was so neat to see everybody come together. That was part of this, to have all fifty-five counties, that's really amazing. The whole 55 United thing, social media contributed greatly to that. Social media provided that confidence, that leverage, that platform from which we

could at least show we were great in number. We remember the way we used to have to communicate by phone calls and physical letters, and all of that is a much slower process. Social media is instantaneous. You can reach fifty-five counties all at once with Facebook.

We do think it was a great organizational tool. We would not have had the numbers had we not had that Facebook group, but when we went to talk about going on strike, not one person said we're going on strike because of this group. The pressure was there, but we don't think that was because of the Facebook group.

Some of us, though, think something that helped with that group was when you saw some of the signs that people made or you got on and saw the numbers or the live videos, that really kind of made you want to be involved. You don't want to miss out on what looks like history is being made, and you can see it. It's not like seeing it in the paper the next day. It's okay to stand up and say that something is not right as long as you've got enough people to stand up and say it with you.

Social media definitely does make it easier to distribute information, but we think it also made people want to be more active. When you see those pictures, and it looks like everybody is there, you're like, wow, this is a movement I need to be a part of. We don't think a lot of people would have felt as comfortable going forward and actually striking and maybe even the union themselves if they hadn't had that instant feedback on social media. When you saw that all of your peers were on board, it made you think I need to be on board, too, because it's not just about me. It's about all of us. When we saw that everybody felt that way and that it wasn't just our district, everyone had the same

concern, it gave us confidence. Hey, we really do have the numbers to pull this off. It made us feel stronger. Politically, you have more power. We had influence, we had reach. We do not think it would have been as successful without Facebook because there may have been some people on the fence who thought, you know, this is my only job, I'm not going to risk it.

Without Facebook, some of us don't think we would have understood the full scope of the issues. A lot of the information, we don't know if we would have gone and looked it up for ourselves. A lot of the information that was shared was, here's what's going to happen if we don't do something. We don't think that information would have flowed as quickly. People talked about it at work. We heard about the issues from co-workers and a few people from other counties, but the Facebook page, people would post stuff, so a lot of communication and information was given that way.

It also brought in a lot of the service employees who weighed in. That's something we would have never connected to. On those pages, they would talk about what they were making and how they were struggling as a family. And so, we got to see the bigger picture that way. Once the ball got rolling online, we saw these different scenarios. There were people whose spouses had cancer and they were sharing what was happening with the insurance and how much they were having to pay. It was just crazy. So, you really started to empathize, and it helped you see the bigger picture.

Facebook also helped us keep track of events as they happened and to connect with other people in the community. Community members would want to come stand with us, and the only way they could find that out was through social media. When we were at

the capitol, we were watching social media throughout the whole thing. There were updates coming out from different teachers. You saw pictures from up there in Charleston. It was exciting. Because we all had our red shirts, and you would get caught up in the moment. You saw everybody. It's like they came out of the woodwork and it was just exciting to know that everybody was in unity. You could see how we had come together.

Some ask us if the strike would have been as successful without Facebook. We say, it depends. Because there was a lot of communication that was going on there, and that's important for anything, for people to be communicating. The strike in 1990, of course, they didn't have Facebook, so they didn't have the backing or the information, so it wasn't as successful. It wasn't totally because of Facebook, we can't say that, but it did add to the communication. It was an important piece for communication. But there are a lot of pieces to the puzzle. It's not just Facebook. It helped, yes, because, you know, some people live on Facebook. Facebook was more used for letting us know about all the other counties, for all of us to know what, say, Kanawha County was doing or something like that. It was good for that because they would let us know through Facebook. Facebook was one of the instruments, but it wasn't all.

The strike was effective not only for us; it kind of brought some awareness to the whole country. When we were younger, it took forever for something to travel if you didn't see it on the news. But now, on social media, the news, accurate or not, travels right now. Something that's happening here could go to Nevada or Oklahoma and they could get that information. Social media played a big part in this. Facebook became a

way to stay in touch with other teachers and then we started communicating with teachers from other states. That was integral in igniting the fire that started in other states after we went first. We remember reading encouraging comments from teachers all over the nation, Arizona and California. They had asked to join our page. They were asking for advice on what they should do and how they should approach things and just giving us scenarios and asking us how we would handle them. So, it did spread for sure.

It gave other states that fuel. We saw signs when teachers in those other states were striking that said, don't make me pull a West Virginia on you. We don't know if everybody had the same success that we did. We don't think some of them did.

After the strike, we were at a summer leadership academy in Baltimore and we no more than set foot on the property before people are running out to see us and ask us questions. Every night at dinner, somebody wanted to know about West Virginia and what was next, what was going on. They were curious about what they could do to have their voices heard. Our state treasurer at the time went and spoke at the anniversary of the garbage strike in Memphis. He was a featured speaker there. Some other members went to Puerto Rico. West Virginia is often kind of a wreck. We're kind of last in everything, so it was nice to be first at something.

We think our strike was effective in seeing some of our goals reached, but we think it was more effective in the sense that it inspired the nation. With other states taking action, there was discussion about the importance of the profession and how it's been diminished over the years. We remember watching Anderson Cooper one night and that's exactly what he's talking about, is why are teachers on strike? Well, it's because

they're not well paid, and isn't that something our nation needs to address? We think that's what made this a success.

We don't know if our success was just because of social media. There's an element of it that was definitely aided by social media. We think social media definitely influenced things. We think social media allowed for information, true or untrue, good or bad, to get out there much more quickly. We were able to organize much more quickly, not necessarily more efficiently. Well, maybe a little more efficiently. We wonder and think about this. What would we really have done? How could this have worked if we didn't have those Facebook groups and those ways to communicate with absolute total strangers across the state with this one thing that's connecting us? Honestly, in an age without Facebook, we don't know that we would have. We think we would have had all those wildcat strikes and it would have been more like the '90s. We don't think we would have had that 55 Strong, all fifty-five counties. That is absolutely unheard of, the entire state walking out. Without the social media, we don't think we would have been as strong as we were. As someone who is not the biggest fan of social media, it is a little hard to say that. But we think social media definitely brings people together in a way that nothing else can or will. We can't believe we're touting Facebook, but there's no way the strike could have happened as efficiently, as quickly, as united without that Facebook group.

It just felt powerful for so many of us to be there for a cause, to believe in democracy where we can make a difference. We teach democracy, but we don't often get to really see it in action or to see tangible results. We went there. We did this. And within

a very short time, we were able to make some progress. We made them listen. We were out thirteen days and got a five percent raise for all public employees and a freeze on changes to PEIA. They appointed a task force to fix it.

But some of us are not sure that we won. We got our raise, and we got some improvement with PEIA, so it was pretty effective. We had no intention of starting a movement. We just wanted health insurance that was affordable and covered the bills. Unfortunately, we still don't have that, but we'll keep working, we guess. We're not completely out of the woods yet. PEIA still really has not been dealt with. It's just sort of in a holding pattern. We walked out of our classrooms for healthcare not just for teachers but for all public employees. It's important to say that teachers' strike is a misnomer. It would not have been successful without service personnel. When they stand up and say things like, we're not going to start the buses tomorrow, there is no support like that.

PEIA is still not really fixed, but at least we had made a presence and that we were sticking to what we believed in. The other thing about that is that a few of the people that were against us, they have been voted out. We said, come November, we will remember. And we did. Some of them are still there, but some who gave us a hard time and seemed like they were doing everything against us, they're no longer in office.

PEIA is still an issue. They have slapped a band aid on it for the past three years. We don't believe there are any changes coming about. Next year they are already saying is going to be doom and gloom. Our coverage is going to be cut significantly and our premiums are going to go up. Our deductibles are going to go up. We've offered solutions and answers and ideas, but it's falling on deaf ears. They don't want to hear it. So, it's

still a very big issue. We watched the PEIA taskforce spin their wheels and hold their hearings and do nothing. This dread started growing in our stomach. It became clear that nothing was going to get fixed in terms of PEIA. It is important to highlight with this story that a lot of lawmakers really believed this was just about money, like, we'll give them their money and that will satisfy them.

The heritage of labor movements in West Virginia is one important part of this story. During the strike, some of us stood with our mothers on the picket line. It was something we did together even though she's retired now. That was kind of our last hurrah together. And, in 2018, one of us was eight weeks pregnant, and in our mind, you have three generations on the picket line. Then, in the next year, when we had another walkout, we brought our son to the picket line. Our mom came and we all got to be there again, but this time in person. We will always cherish that because I plan to teach my son to never cross a picket line.

Probably you could say that the coalfield counties were a big driver in this. Probably. We're not really sure. We don't know. The unions there are a big part of stuff, sure, but it was other things more than that. A common sentiment was that the system is broken. If we don't show them that we're essential, if we don't show them that we're necessary, if we don't force their hand, there is never going to be change. It's about the greater cause, the bigger picture. Teacher voices had been silenced for far too long, and people saw that.

You know, in West Virginia, all education is basically controlled by the legislature. We don't have collective bargaining, for example. So, class sizes, everything

is legislated. Some delegates or senators play the political game very well. They say what you want to hear. But some do not. Some are hateful and demeaning. We remember one of our members who was very well spoken and literate, and she kept up with the issues. She went in to speak to the state senator from our area, and he never would answer her questions. He just ignored everything. He would answer other people's questions but not hers. And finally, she said, sir, why are you ignoring me? And he said, I don't talk to women who wear makeup. What a mindset, you know?

We have lots of other problems about infrastructure and about the differences between a school in a rich community and then the ones that struggle. Things like that have an impact on student outcomes. You can't blame it all on poor teaching. Teachers are asked to do more and more. We're not treated with respect and we're not paid. It's just disrespect. The whole thing is that you just feel like people see us as glorified babysitters. Then, of course, there are other issues going on in the legislature. There was a big issue with changing the policy around homeschooling. It used to be that in West Virginia, if you homeschooled somebody in your household, you had to have a college degree. They changed it that session to you only have to be one school year ahead of the child. So, here we are on strike or work stoppage and we're lobbying, but we're also aware of some of these other crazy things going on and trying to juggle all of this.

Education is the only way to see that a democracy survives. We just believe that. The idea of seeing public education hurt or seeing teachers' voices diminished has bothered us for a really long time. At the risk of sounding dramatic, we just really believe that the future of West Virginia lies on the shoulders of teachers. We just kept thinking

about the future of our state. We've never lived outside West Virginia, so there's a lot of pride there. We tried to clarify what we were doing. It was very important to let parents know that we weren't doing this out of selfish motives. Some parents don't understand that we pay for everything in our classroom. We spend a lot of our own personal money and donate it to our kids. If we see kids that don't have shoes, we go out and buy the kids shoes. We don't just turn a blind eye to their needs. We feed them. We love our kids, and we take care of them. Some people would say, well, I don't think you care about kids because you're saying we need to go on strike. We do care about the future of our kids. That's why we're doing this. During the strike, we were still making sure that kids got food. Some people said, well, we were just wanting to take off, but more than not, they could see how we did care about the kids because we were making sure they got fed and they got the stuff that they needed.

Every time we were on TV, we always made the point that this strike was not about teachers; the strike was about the kids. We were trying to do what was best for them. The big issues of insurance and salary were overriding, but we also had something like eight hundred vacancies statewide. They just couldn't fill teaching positions. There are some counties in West Virginia that still have something like forty percent vacancies. So, if we didn't do something to change the perception of our profession, we weren't going to get people to apply for those teaching jobs.

The parents were very supportive, at least where some of us worked at the time. The majority of them understood. It was interesting how the students and the parents supported us and the local restaurants. We think we actually gained weight during the

strike. It was cold, and we were out, and restaurants would just send tons of food. One restaurant brought us pizza and bottled water. So, we had everyone supporting us. We remember posting pictures of a police officer coming over while we were striking, and he was supporting us because we were fighting for them, too. As state employees, they were supporting us even though they weren't striking.

A picket line was never just teachers. It was community members. It was other professionals. It was students. There was just this commitment to this effort. Parents came out and students came out and the city police would come and picket with us. Employees of the pharmacy across the street would come out and they said, come in and use our restrooms and come in and heat up your coffee in our microwave. It just really became an engaging thing for lots and lots of people.

The community at large was very supportive of the teachers in the beginning. We had several parents who even came to the capitol or would give us refreshments or send us food. People would say to us, good job, keep it up. We think it got to the point a little bit, to be honest, where some of the parents were becoming concerned about their child's education. Some parents said this needs to be over with, and our kids need to go back to school. We had our naysayers. Some parents would say, you don't know how it is for my child not to be able to go to school when you all are just taking off. We did get some backlash from the community, the parents, the grandparents. Overall, though, we think the strike was well-received. Everybody was for us on the whole. We think it helped our morale and to just keep fighting on.

When we got back to school, we asked our students to do a reflection on the days that we were out. So many of them used the word 'unity'. We have this young woman who said that watching thousands of teachers stand up together taught her to use her voice. She said, the teachers taught me that my voice matters. That was the most wonderful part of walking back into our classroom, realizing that our students had indeed learned a lesson from their teachers standing up as one.

We have to tell you this story before we finish. We're standing on the picket line one day with some teachers and this little, teeny boy started walking down the sidewalk and we saw him coming toward us. He couldn't have been more than seven years old. We noticed him and stopped him and said, where are you going? And he said, my mother sent me out to find lunch. Keep in mind when schools are closed, kids don't get lunch. So, we said, why don't you eat with the teachers? We have lots of food. He said, no, my mother told me to go to the church.

At the end of the block, there's a large Methodist church. He's walking by himself on this very busy street to go and find lunch. So, we said, well, we've got to walk with this kid and make sure he gets into this church. So, we go down to the church, walk in the side door, and go into the basement. They had a lunch set up. Anybody that wanted lunch, any child or any member of the community, could come in. So, we walk into this beautiful setting where they're serving lunch and there's eight women standing behind the table to serve. All eight of them are teachers. We say to ourselves, so we're picketing, we're lobbying, and we're serving. What a thing. What a statement about West Virginia that

children have to walk down a busy street to find their own lunch and when they find it, it's teachers who are serving it to them.

Discussion

The story of the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike as told by the teachers themselves offered key insights into the research questions posed in this project. While the narrative abounds with contradictions and conflicting perspectives, the tensions of disagreement and clashing viewpoints served to illuminate a more complete understanding of the role of social media in the event. In the following section, the key findings from the story of the 2018 strike are discussed within the framework of the three research questions.

Research Question One

The first research question sought to understand the role of social media in the organizational, strategic, and operational execution of the strike. Throughout the narrative, it was clear that Facebook was a crucial channel for the dissemination of logistical information both in the days leading up to and during the strike. A private Facebook page was created in the early days of January 2018 that grew rapidly to include some twenty thousand members across the state of West Virginia. This private page served as an informational hub for organization and planning of the walkout itself as well as for sharing transportation and scheduling details about large protest rallies held at the state capitol building over the course of the nine-day work stoppage. Additionally, teachers in most of the county school systems also set up smaller private Facebook pages

for organizational and planning purposes related to pickets and demonstrations that occurred on the local level.

Not only did these Facebook group pages serve as a key tool for the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, both small and large group Facebook pages and individual pages also were a primary source of motivation and inspiration. Facebook offered virtual spaces where strike participants could freely share videos, images, memes, and gifs to build support and solidarity and to motivate fellow teachers to participate. Additionally, the sharing of these forms of media brought comedic relief during a time of high stress by mocking and calling attention to insults or words of disrespect directed at the teachers by lawmakers and other officials. Group and personal Facebook pages provided open forums for sharing and expressing contempt and derision of common opponents.

Social media was crucial for organizing, planning, and sharing strategic details quickly to large numbers of people over vast geographic space. However, the teachers consistently noted that Facebook was not their only source of information. Of equal importance were text messaging, emails, mobile communication applications, telephoning, and word-of-mouth. The use of Facebook for organizing was significant, but for a variety of reasons teachers made use of all forms of communication available to them. Because of issues like irregular internet access, varying levels of comfort and experience with social media, privacy, trust, convenience, and an understanding that information needed to be disseminated as widely as possible during a dynamic and fast-moving situation, a wide array of communication tools were utilized. Furthermore, strike

participants recognized that Facebook could also be a source of misinformation and “nonsense” that was ineffective for building trust and solidarity. Facebook was a useful tool, but it also presented multiple limits and disadvantages.

There is little doubt that competing narratives existed regarding the role of the union versus the role of grassroots organizers in the instigation of the strike. This was the biggest surprise to me as I conducted this research. My entrée into this study of the role of social media in the 2018 strike was through the core group of activists who started the statewide Facebook page and who came to be celebrated in media accounts as leaders of a grassroots movement. Their prominence, in fact, made it easy to connect with and introduce myself to those teachers for initial conversations. In their view of how events unfolded, the teachers’ unions were slow and ineffective in making members aware of pending legislation that would result in drastic changes and premium increases to the state health insurance program known as PEIA.

It was particularly felt that unions were overly reliant on email to communicate urgent issues to members and that more effective tools, such as Facebook and other social media, were eschewed in favor of the dissemination of information through a clear chain of command or via the bureaucracy of union leadership. Furthermore, some teachers saw these communication issues as symptomatic of larger ills like a general lack of enthusiasm on the part of higher-level union officials to take more aggressive action on behalf of members. The unions were deemed ineffective in their roles as advocates for and defenders of rank-and-file teachers, especially by those teachers who understood the

legacy of the labor movement in West Virginia to be rich with stories and memories of hard-fought battles for the protection and dignity of workers.

This group of grassroots activist teachers felt compelled to take matters into their own hands, and this prompted the creation of the primary statewide Facebook page. However, in addition to interviewing the core group of activist teachers, I also spoke with AFT building representatives and others who were involved in the union as state level leaders in addition to speaking with other teachers who were part of the rank-and-file. These conversations provided entirely different perspectives and prompted the realization that competing narratives existed around who deserved credit for initiating events that led to the strike and what lessons might be taken from the event. In the interviews with union representatives, state officers, and members who were more sympathetic to the unions, there was a palpable tension when the discussion turned to the perception of the event as being organized at a grassroots level by more activist-minded teachers acting independently. The true narrative was far muddier and more complex.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked how social media was related to the outcomes of the strike. The use of Facebook was key to the results of the 2018 teachers' strike in five distinct ways. First and foremost, the use of social media made it easier to quickly generate massive numbers of participants. In a matter of days, the number of members on the statewide Facebook group page grew exponentially to eventually include over twenty thousand people. Nearly all the teachers who were interviewed pointed out that the strike could not have made a significant impact if all fifty-five county school systems across the

state had not been on board. The strike that occurred in 1990 was largely seen as less effective because it had been a disjointed and largely regional effort. Facebook was recognized as instrumental in eliminating barriers of time and space, thus helping to assure the closure of every single school across the state of West Virginia instead of only schools in the southern coalfield counties or elsewhere.

Secondly, social media served to prompt individual participation in an event which presented tremendous personal and professional risk. That teachers could easily see the numbers of their colleagues who agreed to join the strike allowed for a sense of reduced risk and greater solidarity. As noted in the second chapter, this is what scholars have long said is requisite for any event of collective action to occur. It is easier to act when an individual does not feel they will be acting alone. Furthermore, Facebook allowed for the livestreaming of video and the sharing of images from rallies and protests where groups of teachers and allies could be seen singing, chanting, holding signs, and demonstrating together. Images and footage of teachers massed both outside and inside the West Virginia capitol building were especially compelling and were widely shared on social media and in traditional media. As the teachers said, to see these images was inspirational and served as strong impetus for making a choice to be a part of history in the making.

Next, Facebook was instrumental for educating teachers about the proposed changes to the state insurance system and for humanizing the possible ramifications. Social media made it easier for more people to better understand the policy issues that led to the strike and to share personal stories of frustration and hardship. Moreover, it

allowed for awareness of the fact that changes to the public insurance plan impacted teachers but also all other state employees, including the service personnel who cleaned the schools and prepared meals in the cafeterias. Of course, as many noted in the story of the strike, a significant contradiction exists with this facet. Those who were union representatives and leaders were clearly frustrated that, for some time prior to the legislative session, the unions had been trying to communicate the pending health insurance changes through regular updates and by holding a series of in-person meetings. Despite these efforts, and to their consternation, union leaders felt that their warnings were ignored or largely fell on the deaf ears of members who were not active or who paid them little mind.

A fourth way that social media was related to the outcomes of the strike is that it provided a key tool for keeping participants and allies informed of unfolding events. Facebook served as a real time newsfeed of the legislative session, the massive rallies at the statehouse, and of localized demonstrations. Participants were more easily able to share information with one another about events as they unfolded while sitting in meetings, observing activity in the legislature, or standing on the picket line. At the same time, many teachers noted that they also used or solely relied on traditional media for this information instead of social media by following daily events through more trusted newspaper and television news coverage.

Finally, many of the teachers pointed to Facebook as key for creating a national movement as their walkout inspired similar strikes and protests by teachers from Oklahoma to Nevada to Chicago and elsewhere across the United States. Just as teachers

in West Virginia were inspired by images and information shared on Facebook, so did teachers in other states realize a sense of empowerment by watching their colleagues take an active stand against issues of insufficient benefits and low pay as well as what they saw as a general lack of respect. West Virginia teachers talked about communicating via Facebook with fellow professionals in places far distant from them and from whom they would have otherwise remained disconnected. The teachers shared strategies, offered organizational guidance, and provided encouragement to one another. Finally, a general sense existed that the 2018 strike in West Virginia helped through both social media and coverage by traditional media to raise awareness among the public at-large of challenges and problems faced by teachers everywhere.

However, a crucial issue arose in terms of what the real outcomes were of the strike. There were contradictions regarding the question of whether the event should be considered a success because the most important goals were not met. Those interviewed consistently acknowledged that PEIA remains unfixed; it has been a continual problem despite the strike. The regulatory task force set up in the wake of the 2018 event has thus far failed to address rising costs and declining healthcare coverage. And while the West Virginia legislature authorized a significant salary increase for teachers as part of a deal to end the strike, this did not address the large number of vacant positions or the problem of teachers leaving to work in nearby states for much higher pay. Clearly, the actions of the teachers resulted in no significant or systemic changes to the educational system in the state.

At the same time, and sometimes in the very same breath, the teachers who were interviewed spoke passionately about the ways they had made their voices heard and their presence known. Teachers felt that they had actively participated in the democratic process and illustrated for their students the ability for ordinary people to make change. Some pointed to the fact that several of their most vocal opponents in the legislature had been voted out in the subsequent election. The teachers also felt tremendous pride in starting a nationwide movement, especially in a state usually overlooked or known for ranking at the bottom of most every list. Others noted that, while fruitful on some level and of clear importance, these results had not been the primary goal of the strike. What lasting success had even been realized? This is a question for which there was no clear or unambiguous answer.

Research Question Three

The final research question asked about the role of a collective identity with the Appalachian region and its history of labor movements in the teachers' strike. There is little doubt that this heritage certainly was one element of collective identity for the teachers. However, this was most evident in the cases of teachers who worked in or who were from the southern coalfield counties or who had family members who had been coal miners. Additionally, any narrative of the strike that is focused on the history of the labor movement in West Virginia as a clear impetus for the teachers, while important to consider, is also incomplete. As the words of the interviewees reflect, union membership and strikes are complicated issues in West Virginia. There exists no unified viewpoint regarding labor unions even though the state has a long and storied history of strikes and

robust union membership. Some teachers noted strongly a sense of loyalty to the tenets and precepts of union solidarity, which fueled their participation in 2018 and shaped their understandings of the role and purpose of the teachers' unions. Still others cared little for the unions or felt no real strong affinity for the struggle of labor or had ever lived in the coalfields; their energy and commitment were rooted in other things.

What was clear across every conversation was that the dominant element of collective identity among teachers was a shared and fierce commitment to students and to the profession. From their perspective, teachers bore critical responsibility for the very future of West Virginia. For all the teachers interviewed, these convictions far outweighed any connection to the heritage of the Appalachian region or to the history of labor movements in the state. Collectively, teachers saw larger issues and problems that needed to be confronted. They felt a general lack of respect existed on the part of the general public but especially on the part of state lawmakers who had utmost power for shaping public education. Teachers did not separate their day-to-day work in the classroom from a responsibility to care for and meet the widest range of student needs. Striking teachers made certain that students continued to receive meals during the walkout, even preparing and serving the food themselves. While they understood the health insurance issues in very personal terms, foremost in the minds of teachers was a need to bring attention to the larger problems that negatively impacted students in the public education system. The more central and influential factor than any regional identity was the responsibility felt for the profession and for the students.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike serves as a clear example of the idea that information communication technologies (ICT) and social media have prompted significant changes in the ways collective movements and events of protest, dissent, and revolution develop and unfold. Such technologies allow "people to link and interact with each other irrespective of time or space" (Gunel & Baruh, 2016, p. 131) and enhance the ability of activists to mobilize and organize themselves quicker and with far less cost despite or need for formal organizational structures to facilitate communication and connection. Scholars across multiple disciplines have been confident about these understandings for some time. Castells (2012) posited "that online networks give rise to new forms of participation based on horizontal, decentralized, flexible networks forming across multiple levels" (p. 131).

The rational choice model of collective action as expressed by Olson (1965) and others has been upended in the face of less need for formalized organization and institutional structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). A revised understanding of collective action now sees that technology makes it easier to choose to participate in social movements and provides a new and wondrous tool for grassroots organizing. This updated narrative thus also celebrates a widened sense of democracy as more participatory and with greater potential for freedom. Suddenly, in the view of many, there

is no limit to the promise of ICTs for broader civic and democratic participation that brings about dramatic social change (Freelon, Wells, & Bennett, 2013; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Garrett, 2006).

Such a perspective also notes a new type of participant in events of collective action, an individual actor with diffuse allegiances who has far less need or desire to be embedded in institutional structures. With new ICTs, connecting across time and space can be self-directed, unconstrained by older, traditional forms of communication or network building (Castells, 2001). The open structure and ease of information dissemination provided by social media “makes it possible for every individual to induce or be the locus of a network or movement” (Castells, 2012, p. 134). The individual can come and go on a whim, free to jump from one movement to the next with no sense of or need for deep loyalty to a specific cause, ideology, or place.

However, while such a new understanding of social movements appears on its face to be momentous, it is, in fact, entirely predictable. The potential for technology to offer more widespread emancipation and greater self-fulfillment is a fundamental epistemological and philosophical marker of modern industrial society (Carr, 2014; Dyer-Witheyford, 1999). This view is techno-centric and steeped in the values of Enlightenment and rationalism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). The assumption is that our liberation is to be found in technology, the full embrace of which only serves to enhance our ability to resist and extinguish forces of oppression and injustice.

On some level, the story of the West Virginia teachers confirms this view. But their voice also offers something more, pushes toward something deeper and far more

complex, points to an understanding of social movements and technology that is not as definitive but that is no less powerful. A critical perspective offers a tool that can cut a path into these more ambiguous entanglements. According to Fromm (1968), “logical thought is not rational if it is merely logical and not guided by the concern for life, and by the inquiry into the total process of living in all its concreteness and with all its contradictions (p. 43). The story the teachers told in the previous chapter fully reflects the contradictions and complexities of their own lived experience during the strike.

The conclusions reached in this work are built upon the following key elements discerned from the narrative of the 2018 West Virginia teachers’ strike as created and shared by the participants themselves. First, the role of social media in the strike was apparent though not unambiguous. While the use of social media was crucial, it did not serve as a kind of magical elixir that in and of itself gave rise to the walkout. Social media was one useful communication tool for organizing among many. Second, despite the spatial and temporal bounds that were overcome by using social media and despite its role in generating participation on a massive scale, there is no certainty that the strike can be considered a success. Many teachers noted a failure to meet the most important and concrete goals of their action. Either way, no widespread agreement was found among the teachers interviewed that social media played a definitive and decisive role in the outcomes of the strike. A consensus emerged that a walkout likely would have occurred with or without social media but would not have happened on as wide a scale. Teachers felt that social media was instrumental in the formation of a collective voice that included all fifty-five county school systems in West Virginia. Finally, while identity with the

region of Appalachia and the heritage of labor movements was one element of the teachers' collective identity, it was not the most significant element. There was, in fact, an expression by teachers of a greater sense of connection to broader ideals, to a sense of love and care for students that was enhanced by but not limited to geography alone.

The sections below review the contradictions and ambiguities found among these three elements and lead to a final consideration of the conclusions that can be drawn from the study.

The Role of Social Media

Private group Facebook pages were used extensively before and during the teachers' strike as a channel for sharing logistical information. The statewide Facebook page was a critical source for teachers across West Virginia for information about the primary issues at play ahead of and during the walkout and for organizational information throughout the event. This page gave rise to numerous smaller Facebook pages that served the same purposes for localized groups of teachers in their respective county systems. In addition to serving as informational and organizational hubs, these pages were also key sources of inspiration and motivation. Yet, social media was one of many tools utilized during the strike for the dissemination of information and for strategic planning and organizing. Of equal importance to participants were communications via text, email, telephone, and word-of-mouth.

Union leaders and many rank-and-file teachers were aware of proposed changes to the public health insurance program well ahead of the annual legislative session and had made attempts to communicate information about the issue in a variety of ways,

primarily through regular meetings and email updates. At the same time, other teachers claimed a lack of communication from the unions or were not active members of a union and only through Facebook first became aware of the looming financial implications the changes would bring. Thus, for many teachers, the statewide group Facebook page served as a primary channel for building awareness about the insurance program and for sharing personal stories about hardships that would be faced by the modifications to their healthcare coverage. There is little doubt that the activity on this page was a key factor in the decision by many teachers to take active part in the strike. Yet, just as Facebook was one of multiple communication tools, so too was it but one factor among varied and individual choices to participate.

Social media was especially useful for generating massive numbers quickly, for providing important information about the issues, and for providing real-time updates across a vast geography. The great advantage offered by using social media for organizing the strike was in its potential for removing spatial and temporal bounds, allowing the rapid dissemination of information to large numbers of people spread across the state. On the other hand, the great disadvantages of using social media were in its potential to spread misinformation and to stoke already existing tensions between teachers and unions. Many teachers did not fully trust the information they encountered on Facebook pages and still others viewed social media as a useful tool for addressing what they considered ineffective communication and a lack of action on the part of union leadership. The competing narratives and tensions between grassroots activists and those teachers more aligned with and sympathetic to the work of the unions was a key finding

of this study and is essential to understanding the use of Facebook in the West Virginia strike.

The fact that social media was not a determinative or unique communication tool in the West Virginia event confirms what scholars have had to say about communication in social movements. When it comes to social movements, individual activists and organizations always use the most effective tools that are available to them (Tilly, 1981). What those tools are is dependent upon contexts of time and space (Davis & Zald, 2005). As with the use of Facebook in the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike, digital networks and their online platforms simply reflect new repertoires of collective action available to movements in this specific contemporary moment.

The Strike as a Successful Failure

For the teachers, the success of the 2018 strike was not necessarily in the five percent salary increase that was granted by the state legislature as part of the deal struck to end the work stoppage, though this raise was welcome. As the participants stated time and again, the primary catalysts for their action were the proposed changes and resultant increased costs of the health insurance program for public employees in the state. Yet, what was won in this regard was but a temporary reprieve from the implementation of the changes to their insurance coverage, an achievement that still rang hollow for the teachers almost three years later. Most participants discussed the problems with the health insurance program as an ongoing source of frustration and anxiety long after the strike. Ultimately, this crucial battle was lost. What the teachers thus described as the primary

success of the strike was in finding and claiming a powerful collective voice and a renewed sense of the potential of democratic civic engagement.

For those interviewed, though, losing the health insurance battle was beside the point. In their words, history was still made in an ability to affect a full-scale statewide walkout that forced the legislature to contend with and respond to the teachers' demands. Key to this success was that teachers were able to force school closures in every single county school district in West Virginia. This, in fact, is the implication of the hashtag *55Strong*, widely used on social media throughout the strike and which was a reference to the fifty-five total counties in the state (Catte, Hilliard & Salfia, 2018). A prevailing viewpoint was that the use of Facebook was instrumental in the cultivation of this complete voice. Likewise, it was with great pride that the West Virginia teachers pointed to their action as the spark for a larger movement of public educators across the country. Those interviewed consistently pointed to the West Virginia event as the primary impetus for similar protests and strikes in Chicago, Oklahoma, and elsewhere. If efforts to quash the health insurance issues were incomplete, these two outcomes diminished any sense of failure. It is possible, of course, that such equivocal victories were proclaimed because efforts on more strategic fronts fell short of the original goals.

However, there is little doubt that the power of the teachers' collective voice was forcefully witnessed the very next year. In 2019, a similar two-day work stoppage by West Virginia teachers resulted in the swift defeat of an attempt by the state legislature to divert public funds to support the creation of private charter schools (Campbell, 2019). The proposed legislation would have also made it easier to dismiss teachers without

regard to seniority when it came to any reduction in force measures called for in the face of possible budget cuts. Additionally, such changes were part of a package of bills that included a further salary increase, something the teachers viewed as an insidious attempt to draw attention away from the parts of the legislation that supported charter schools. These proposed measures were seen by many as barely concealed retaliation for the previous year's action (Goldstein, 2019). Furthermore, the conflict with the state legislature continued into 2021 when a bill was introduced and subsequently passed that would allow county school systems to fire teachers at will or withhold pay for participation in a strike even though strikes by teachers were already illegal in West Virginia (Raby, 2021).

Thus, while teachers were empowered by the response to their collective voice in 2018, the long-term challenges and struggles have not ended. The fact remains that a rapid response and the generation of large numbers through the use of Facebook, while effective on some levels, did not lead to systemic changes or even to clear victory. Three years after the strike, a supermajority of Republican legislators gained tighter control of the West Virginia statehouse and appeared intent on forcing a policy agenda altogether hostile to public education (Adams, 2020; 2021).

Weinbaum (2004), in an ethnography of failed local worker movements in East Tennessee, categorized such temporary achievements as *successful failures*. According to Weinbaum, “the success or failure of any mobilizing effort by a marginalized group must not be judged by immediate outcomes alone” (p. 14). The ability to generate political mobilization itself is as equally crucial to bringing change as is winning specific

victories. Successful failures foment a collective consciousness that shapes individual political behavior and, in turn, political and social institutions. Thus, people come to better understand “their own power and potential for collective action, power relations in their communities, their individual relationships to various types of authority, the ‘economy’ and public policy issues debated nationally, politics and the role of elected officials, and their commonality with working people across the country and the world” (p. 15).

In Weinbaum’s view, such successful failures are crucial in their demonstration of the power of resistance, in that they naturally lead to networks necessary for mobilization and offer training in skills of political action and participatory citizenship. Nevertheless, Weinbaum also concluded that all effectual organizing requires leadership, organization, and structure. Short term events of protest and dissent “may occasionally arise, but political and social change in the United States of the twenty-first century requires sustained efforts and organized activity” (p. 268). Focus, coordination, and unified goals are necessary for real change and are most effectively realized through formalized structures. In other words, change does not come about through Facebook revolutions, but through the long-term work of building coalitions and relationships, developing leaders, working within the legislative and policy making processes, and organizing for sustainable goals. This is a conclusion to which studies of social movements and collective action have long pointed (McAdam, 1988; Meyer, 2003; Tarrow, 2011). Information technologies and online social networks such as Facebook simply provide updated tools for these efforts.

The social media revolutions of the last decade or so have captured both the imagination of the public at large and the anxious attention of oppressive governments (Bray, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). These events are held up as exemplars of an emergent form of social movement that is marked by massive protests organized by leaderless and loose networks of activists connected only through the marvel of technology and reflective of a limitless form of democracy (Juris, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Yet, years later, strong arguments can be made that many of these movements have realized little in the way of systemic change or significant consequences.

As example, it may be said that the Occupy movement shifted the terms of the conversation around economic systems and income inequality, but others note that the hegemonic structures of neoliberalist capitalism remain firmly in place (Barnett, 2011; Levitin, 2015; Wilson, 2018). Additionally, following the Arab Spring, autocrats are only further entrenched, having consolidated power and clamped down in more repressive ways, economies have collapsed, and violent militias vie for strongholds while ordinary citizens continue to suffer (Hubbard & Kirkpatrick, 2021; Masoud, 2015). Moreover, multiple scholars contend that new communication technologies have proven far more effective in the hands of groups and movements that are decidedly not progressive and that are, in some instances, anti-democratic (Klein & Muis, 2019; Schradie, 2019; Urman & Katz, 2020). One only need look to the insurrection of January 6, 2021 at the United States Capitol to note the use of social media in the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories that foment group actions which seek to overthrow democratic government (Heilweil & Ghaffary, 2021; Klein, 2021).

The 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike stands assuredly as an example of a successful failure. The event also takes its place among inspirational moments of dissent that sprang quickly to life through social media to, in the end, realize modest and short-lived, though critical, successes. As with many such events, the strike was a rapid response in a moment of crisis that effectively harnessed the power of a collective voice to shape the democratic process. At the same time, it has not yet given rise to the kind of powerful and sustainable movement able to affect fundamental changes to the status quo.

The Role of Collective Identity

Collective identity is an important element of any social movement for purposes of recruiting participants and for building a sense of solidarity in the face of power structures (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Yet, this is not to say that all members of a group claim or accept the same identity or to the same degree as all other members (McGarry & Jasper, 2015). Within movements and events of collective action, group identity is fluid and dynamic, ever being constructed and reconstructed (della Porta & Mottoni, 2015).

In both the interviews conducted for this study and in published personal essays written by strike participants, several West Virginia teachers regularly discussed their connections to the history of organized labor and activism in the state and pointed to this heritage as primary among their reasons for deciding to participate in the strike (Catte, Hilliard, & Salfia, 2018). Put in visceral terms by one essayist, to take such action "is in our very blood" (p. 24). There is no doubt that resistance to labor exploitation and collective dissent in the face of cultural oppression is a consistent thread in the history of

West Virginia and of the larger Appalachian region (Catte, 2018; Drake, 2001; Eller, 1982; Fisher, 1993; Williams, 2002). In a state where coal was long a central economic pillar, miners were some of the first workers in America to organize themselves (Drake, 2001). Today in West Virginia, despite the dramatic decrease in mining jobs over the last forty years or more, the coal industry continues to hold outsized sway when it comes to questions of economic policy and of cultural identity (Bell & York, 2010).

Scholars have noted that a deep sense of connection and loyalty to place can be significant mobilizing factors for activism and for participation in collective action related to issues of social justice (Fisher, 1999). Yet, the interviews with West Virginia teachers clearly illustrated that, for them, the full meaning of place or regional identity was not fixed but was instead influenced by a wide range of individual factors. All teachers who were interviewed talked about their ties to and concern for the future of West Virginia. However, there was no uniform perspective among the participants regarding a sense of identity with the Appalachian region. Even among the relatively small sample, there were a multitude of divergent views and feelings about the coal industry, unions, and the heritage of labor movements in the state. For the teachers in the 2018 strike, the clearer and more significant understanding of a collective identity was in their shared and deeply felt commitment to students and to the profession. This was a consistent view no matter where individuals stood in terms of the conflict between unions and grassroots activists in the strike or no matter their understanding of the role of social media in the event.

The narrative that West Virginia teachers stood up in resistance to unjust treatment by the state legislature because their grandfathers had been coal miners contributes in part to a reductionist and romanticized notion of mountain people as gritty fighters who prize individual freedom above all else (Vance, 2016; Webb, 2004). This is a narrative that parallels the idealized notion of technology as a miraculous solution for any social ill, emblematic of an unlimited capacity for human ingenuity and dominance over the natural world (Shirky, 2008). Such one-dimensional understandings are inspirational and stir within us feelings of profound hope for the human condition. Yet, West Virginia and Appalachia, like all places, are complicated. As with other regions and locations, political and social life across vast geographies is rife with ambiguity, conflict, and contradiction. Just as the geographic bounds of the region cannot be precisely pinpointed on a map, there is no singular monolithic and homogenous culture to be found in Appalachia. Rather, as the story of the teachers illustrates, there is a broad, knotty web of multiple and competing viewpoints and experiences.

A critical perspective allows us to see the fuller and more complex picture of each of these issues. According to Marcuse (1966), rationalism alone cannot entirely explain the development of shared identities, a sense of solidarity, or deeply felt empathy in struggles for justice. But the dominant views of social movements stem from a positivist perspective that amplifies reason over the emotional elements that are key to collective actions in the political realm (Funke, Lamas, & Wolfson, 2017). It must be recognized that the forces of hope, love, and imagination, which are not things understood through logical analysis, are as necessary for political engagement and action for social change as

is making a rational and decided choice to participate. In the words of the teachers themselves, it was their hope for a better future, their love for and commitment to students, and their capacity to imagine a better public education system for West Virginia that formed the core of their shared identity.

Conclusions

This work operates from an understanding that a standardized and positivistic approach to social scientific inquiry is unhelpful for making sense of the contradictions, complications, and uncertainties found in the personal experiences of the West Virginia strike. At its core, this work is a critique of modernist and overly rationalistic or systematic understanding of the world and of academic research. Mine is instead a call for an understanding that we are shaped by forces unseen that are larger than mere human reason, things wholly subjective but no less powerful such as love and loyalty and commitment to something beyond the self. The story of the strike as shared by the teachers themselves showed that this is key to any comprehension of actions taken by a group of people to address social injustice no matter the level of success that may or may not be realized. This is seen in the inconsistencies and conflicts between the teachers' own understandings of the strike. But the dialectical space to be found there, however, is not muddy; rather, it is where the essence of our humanity is located, reflecting the messy reality of our lived human experience.

The conclusion is not that traditional institutions are the only way to achieve meaningful change and that social media has no significant role to play in events of

collective action. It is not that effectively responding to a moment of crisis is insufficient or that uniting to speak with a powerful collective voice makes little difference in the long run. It is not that people from West Virginia are not proud of their history or willing to stand up to injustice as one way to honor and acknowledge that history. It is not that any of these elements reflect one side of a categorical binary. The conclusion is instead that meaning is found within the dialectical tension that stretches between these interpretations and the opposing perspective of each. These multiple and diffuse understandings are bound up together and draw upon one another, including in the ways they conflict with and contradict one another.

These conclusions are born of a critical approach which understands that meaning can be found in the fragmented and dynamic spaces that exist between contested views of reality. Our daily lives are lived within the tensions of opposing forces and differing viewpoints. In the embrace of this tension, critical theorists analyze the social world with the expectation that a more humanized way of knowing is realized by adopting methodological and epistemological frameworks that are less logically structured and systematized (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Marcuse, 1941; 1964). An event such as the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike is both inspiring and compelling in terms of what it can tell us about solidarity, unity, and justice. However, the lived experience of the teachers themselves points to a range of contentious and discordant perspectives. Furthermore, while relatively new digital information and communication technologies such as social media are a result of the human capacity for transcending boundaries of

space and time, they also serve to dehumanize and alienate us from the social world. Such dialectical issues offer complex and incomplete answers to difficult questions.

We recognize in these times a fraying of the social fabric, the disintegration of the traditional moral order, the demise of formal institutions and groups. And, these structures are the key, according to rational choice models of collective action, for any kind of group action for change. They serve to solve the problem of an assumed and inherent human self-interest. At the same time, social media allows for informal organizing, for disparate individuals to connect and communicate and share information across vast distances toward common goals at little cost and without mediating institutional structures.

However, there is clearly something to be found in the action of the West Virginia teachers that is different from and more sublime than mere rational human self-interest. While social media was one significant element in the outcomes of the strike, which was not an unqualified success, the real heart of the movement was found in the teachers' collective sense of fidelity to one another, to students, and to the community. Social media was not responsible for the cultivation of such deep and resonant feelings. These ethereal connections existed before and apart from the informational tool of Facebook. Social movements and events of collective action cannot be understood by looking only through a rational, economic, or techno-centric lens. Actions taken by committed groups of people for social change occur because individuals have meaningful ties and loyalties to one another and to things that transcend the self.

Future Directions

There is little doubt that social media will continue to serve as a tool for communication and mobilization in events of protest and dissent and in social movements for change. The critical perspective utilized in this study is crucial for making sense of this issue from a holistic perspective, one that recognizes the ambiguities and complexities of our humanity. Narratives that are one-dimensional or that ignore the full implications of technology for the human social world or that present idealized versions of group identities do little to question or resist hegemonic norms in society and in academic research.

The rise of future social movement presents opportunity for employing a critical perspective in the study of any related phenomenological aspects. More specifically, however, the nationwide movement sparked by the West Virginia teachers' strike continues to play a role in policy debates around public education. The COVID-19 pandemic in some cases has prompted teachers to work together to resist enforced returns to in-person learning when they consider such decisions to be made in haste or with little thought given to the health and wellbeing of educators themselves. This has been most notable in Chicago, but such contentious actions and debates continue to occur across the world (Borges, 2021; Smith, 2021). Given the overwhelming focus of scholarship related to social media and collective action on transnational events of protest and movements, research that is more localized and culturally specific, such as offered here in the case of West Virginia, can only add to the clarity of our understandings.

Furthermore, such an approach is also useful for investigating and analyzing other kinds of localized and specific collective actions. For instance, not only did West Virginia teachers lead the way on an issue of national importance in 2018, but the state is once again being recognized for a collective mobilization that has tremendous implications for the health and future of its citizens. As vaccination plans for the COVID-19 virus began to roll out across the country, West Virginia distinguished itself for the efficiency and effectiveness of its vaccination plan (Mervosh, 2021).

Finally, this work has important implications for research conducted in the field of information sciences. It stands out for its use of critical theory in a discipline that is dominated by the positivistic paradigm and empirical study and one that tends to emphasize the eminence of information technologies over their potential for harm (Webster, 2006). To return to a central critical theorist cited in this work, Marcuse argued that though such technologies offered on some level potential for human liberation, they are more often used to perpetuate a capitalist ideology of domination of the natural world as well as to assist with totalitarian forms of control (Marcuse, 1964). According to Pyati (2010), “the focus on technological rationality as a tool of domination is a useful construct for understanding how discourses of information technology are being used to perpetuate capitalist logics of consumption” (p. 239). As a distinct discipline, information science is better positioned than others and more obligated, we might say, to utilize critical theory in order to point out the ways information technologies either further destructive economic structures or increase our capacity for freedom.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Interview Guide

The following interview guide was used in interviews with research participants. While the interview guide served to facilitate the conversations and to bring focus to the central topics addressed by the research questions, the way the questions were presented and the order in which they were posed was not standardized across all conversations. Any follow-up questions and other or tangential lines of inquiry were based on individual responses of the interviewees. This responsive interview technique allowed for the creation of additional questions during the interviews and served to promote a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Interview Questions

What county are you in? What grade do you teach? How long have you been a teacher? In West Virginia? Did you grow up in West Virginia?

Tell me about your involvement in the 2018 West Virginia teacher's strike.

What were the major issues that prompted your involvement in the strike?

How did you first learn about the strike and how were you informed of ways you could participate?

Tell me about other sources of information that you utilized to follow the events of the strike and to learn about ways you could participate.

Share some examples of the ways you used social media to communicate in the days leading up to the strike and throughout the strike.

What social media platforms do you most utilize before and during the strike?

What are some examples of information you shared and/or utilized using social media either to plan, strategize, or organize events and actions related to the strike?

In what ways do you think social media facilitated the events of the strike?

What are your feelings about the use of social media and the effectiveness of the strike?

Who else can I talk to?

VITA

Everette Scott Sikes lives in southwest Virginia in Washington County. He serves as the Associate Director of the Appalachian Center for Civic Life at Emory & Henry College where he is a faculty member in the Civic Innovation Department.