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978-0-521-19172-2 - Collective Action in Organizations: Interaction and Engagement in an Era of Technological Change

Bruce Bimber, Andrew J. Flanagin and Cynthia Stohl

Excerpt

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Involvement in Organizational Collective Action in an Era of Technological Change

A great deal of what people wish to accomplish cannot be achieved alone, either by private, individual actions or through markets and their modern instrument for aggregating private interest, the corporation. Only through some form of *collective action* can people realize important individual and group goals and produce the myriad shared benefits associated with social life. Acting collectively requires associating voluntarily with others who share interests or identities, and it can mean participating in solving problems at the local, national, or global scale. Collective action can involve advocating for causes or goals, recruiting others, and banding together to gain voice and representation before public institutions, corporations, and other bodies, or it can entail producing something of value that is shared beyond those who created it. Whether the goal is the creation of public parks or pathways, health care or human rights, environmental sustainability or electoral accountability, or information databases and communication systems, the need for at least two people to act together toward the establishment of some shared “public good” is an enduring fact of human life.

For a long time, scholarly literature placed organizations, not individuals, at the center of collective action. Olson’s 1965 classic, *The Logic of Collection Action*, is an account of the choices faced by individuals to participate in collective efforts or not, and in his widely accepted view, it is organizations that solve the problem of individuals free riding on the efforts of others. Organizations act on behalf of groups of people, embodying and representing their concerns, empowering them as collectivities, and organizing them. Success at collective action in the end is not so much a function of the complexity or individualism of people’s

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choices, which are constrained by the unvarying logic of free riding, but a function of how well organizations perform at overcoming that logic. Likewise, Truman (1951), in his own classic work, viewed latent interests on the part of citizens as being manifest only when expressed in organizational form. Similarly, Knoke defines an association, which can range from a trade association to a civic group, as “a formally organized, named group” and emphasizes the importance of the “acquisition and allocation of organizational resources to collective objectives” (Knoke, 1986, 2).

In historical and structural analyses of the growth and possible decline of civil society, organizational themes are crucial and often overshadow individual-level variation in citizens’ outlooks (della Porta, 2007; Putnam, 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999). Putnam’s famous *Bowling Alone*, for instance, is often read as a story of changes at the level of the individual citizen, but it is essentially an account of the causes and consequences of organizational change, as one class of organization in public life is replaced by others. Similarly, analyses of social movements typically focus on the strategies, tactics, and repertoires used to develop relevant organizational constituencies (Gamson, 1992; Tarrow, 1994), and the role of “social movement organizations” (Snow and Benford, 1992) has been identified as critical in understanding cycles of social protest (see Tarrow, 1983).

However, the place of the individual and the organization in the story of collective action and social change has been recently upended (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Earl and Kimport, 2011). The last two decades have been transformative for the state of collective action, often in ways that challenge the organization-centric view. Among the many interesting cases of collective action in recent years, those that tend to attract the most attention are those not closely managed by any formal organization or central organizer. These include Facebook groups for organizing revolutionary actions in the Middle East as well as protests over immigration policies and practices in Arizona, the use of Twitter to mount protests over election results in Moldova, and Meetups that bring together groups of people across a diversity of activities from hobbies and private interests to community service and various public-goods efforts.

As technologies of communication and information have proliferated and evolved, so too have opportunities among individuals seeking common goals. Chief obstacles to realizing collective goals, including locating a critical mass of people with shared interests, providing opportunities for meaningful forms of distributed contribution, and coordinating people’s

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actions efficiently have all been diminished by technological tools that fundamentally enhance connectivity among people. Although some key challenges to successful collective action efforts endure as they always have, the novel capacities created by technological innovation have altered the structures and forms of collective action efforts today toward the direction of enhanced individual agency.

Many instances of collective action often lack not only the organizational command that scholars traditionally have believed should be present but also the identity and ideological agreement once thought crucial to such efforts. The cascading passions during late 2010 and early 2011 that grew into tumultuous protests for regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were a result of diverse frustrations, not organizational strategy or control. In an iconic moment in January 2011, after the ouster of Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, who fled into Saudi Arabia, protestors outside the Saudi Embassy in Washington displayed a banner thanking Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and vilifying Ben Ali (Madrigal, 2011). In Tunisia and in Egypt, digital media enabled citizens to coordinate among themselves and to communicate what was happening with observers outside their countries. The soon-to-fail Mubarak government in Egypt was sufficiently concerned about the enabling power of digital media that it shut down nationwide Internet service in late January 2011 – an unprecedented action for a nation of eighty million citizens.

Also prominent on the global stage of collective action have been the highly visible actions against the Iraq war and protests at key World Trade Organization (WTO) events, G8 and G20 summits, and the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. Among the more well-known and earliest of these actions was the 1999 “Battle in Seattle,” in which a far-flung network of groups and organizations from several nations interested in everything from the environment to women’s issues protested the policies of the WTO (Bimber, 2003; Kahn and Kellner, 2004). Similarly, as the U.S. government prepared to attack Iraq in 2003, antiwar demonstrations around the globe, representing not just traditional antiwar groups but also nonaffiliated activists and individuals who had never been involved in a protest before, reached a size and scale comparable to those of the classical height of U.S. protest politics during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Bennett, Breunig, and Givens, 2008). Protests against the repressive Myanmar government in 2007 brought more than seventy-five thousand civilians and Buddhist monks together in Yangon, making the event the largest Burmese antigovernment protest demonstration in twenty years (Global Voices, 2008).

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Although many of these cases constitute ephemeral, one-off events, other examples of organizing that are more decentralized and less dependent upon formal organization show signs of greater persistence. The hundreds of Tea Party groups that began in 2009 to challenge the Democratic and the Republican establishments in the United States are a case of technology-enabled organizing that sustained itself and institutionalized into a meaningful political movement capable of electing officials to high office and shaping the course of public policy. The open-source software movement is not only well institutionalized but also has demonstrated some success at challenging dominant corporations as well as attracting corporations as participants. The user-generated and loosely coordinated content in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia – a public good created through several hundred million small collective actions – has likewise proven to be a vibrant and viable alternative to its more traditional counterparts and is among the world’s most highly visited Web sites. In virtually any domain traditionally dominated by formal organizations, one will now find organization-less groups in which individuals construct their own interest-based collectives.

Cases of “organization-less organizing” have grabbed many headlines, as journalists demonstrate a penchant for stories of “online” accomplishments and novelties. Among scholars, one important strand of thought about digital media and collective action has emphasized the point that formal organizations with structures and incentives are no longer critical for accomplishing things collectively. Benkler (2006) has made this point about the social production of a diversity of resources, calling attention to a potentially fatal flaw in the fundamentals of economic theory, which is visible in the fact that large numbers of people are willing to contribute time and expertise to create things of public value in the absence of material incentives or a controlling organization. That the size of such efforts reaches commercial scale is a striking challenge to old economic paradigms. Shirky (2008) has highlighted the broad range of tasks that can be accomplished through self-organization rather than hierarchically. Many small challenges, such as recovering a lost phone, are problems of information or communication, and such problems can now readily be solved without central authorities. In many ways, the present period is a time of great choice among alternatives for how people can become involved.

In our own previous work, we have explored this issue in some depth, discussing the possibilities of organizing without organization. We argued the simple point that the fundamental solution to the challenges of

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collective action is not organization, but organizing. In a context of high costs of information and communication, which were nearly universal in large and complex societies until fifteen years ago or so, organizing typically requires organizations (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2005; Bimber, Stohl, and Flanagin, 2008; Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber, 2006). Because technology places the requisite tools for organizing more fully in the hands of individuals and informal or semiformal groups, collective action can more seamlessly arise from those with an interest in shared goals, without necessarily requiring the substantial costs associated with the classical organizational apparatus that traditionally has served to facilitate shared action.

Even more fundamentally, the digital-media environment prompts new and unforeseen opportunities for collective action as people are increasingly immersed in an atmosphere in which it is their routine practice to share ideas, connections, and interests. Just as previous tools like the telegraph altered people's conception of time and space (Carey, 1989), recent technological shifts have prompted new understanding and assumptions about information and communication. These involve a vibrant culture of sharing among younger people, so widely on display at video- and music-sharing Web sites and in social media. It involves greatly weakened social and personal boundaries and diminished demands for privacy, which are the subject of so much discussion since the rise of social media. Among new practices and norms are a heightened emphasis on personal creation and initiative and expectations of choice among an array of informational and communicative alternatives. Living in a world in which two people wishing to communicate must choose among doing so in person, in writing, by phone, by e-mail, by text message, by Twitter, by wall post or message, by chat, or by video call, and in which most of these options are available on devices in their pockets, means that communicative practice and norms are undergoing great change, and with that social and political norms and practice will necessarily change as well. These developments are also contributing to the trend in citizenship practices away from institutions and norms of duty fulfillment and toward more personalized ways of being civic (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008b; Inglehart, 1997; Zukin et al., 2006).

Although some observers might interpret these developments toward more individualized collective action and greater agency as marking the beginning of the end of formal organizations in public life, the complete picture is much more complex. Organizations in civil society are not dying wholesale or becoming obsolete. They are struggling in many cases

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to adapt, yet the result will not be the end of the organization in civic life but rather its transformation, especially with respect to the meaning and role of citizens and the forms of their involvement. As Michael Gilbert, a journal editor and consultant on technology and nonprofit organization, says,

Is this the end of the organization? Probably not by name and certainly not in the broadest sense of the term. But the traditional, tightly controlled, top down, branded organization is finding itself having to adapt and change. Whether the organization as we know it survives or not, it is by studying the changing patterns of communication that we will discover the new shape of civil society. (Gilbert, 2008, n.p.)

It is not the case that formal organizations are being replaced by self-organized groups enabled by digital media. Activist networks and informal groups supplement formal organizations, enriching and adding complexity to the organizational forms rather than substituting the new for the old. All forms of organization, from rigidly bureaucratic and formal to loosely organized and ad hoc, are affected by the recent availability and adoption of tools enabling a wide variety of communicative options among those people whose shared goals are best achieved by banding together in some fashion. Organizations have choices regarding how they go about their business, activists have choices about what kind of organizational forms to develop, and people have choices about what forms their involvement in collective action will take.

In discussions regarding the new face of collective action, some observers have taken stark positions implying that organizations must either be always irrelevant or always necessary, but this rigid dichotomy is false. Social commentator Gladwell (2010), for instance, argued that real social change always requires thick social ties among participants and clear decision making and authority exercised by organizations. But no simple contest exists between networks and organizations, and neither exercises a monopoly over social change. Instead, what has happened throughout the last twenty years or so is that organizational forms and functions have expanded in number and richness, not shrunken. All sorts of organizational structures and processes are implicated in the new technological landscape for collective action, a state that Crowley and Skocpol (2001) refer to as “organizational fecundity.” These include hybrid organizations (Chadwick, 2007), federated network structures (Flanagin, Monge, and Fulk, 2001), networks of organizations (Bennett, Breunig, and Givens, 2008; Stohl and Stohl, 2007), altered organizational

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strategies in public life (Bimber, 2003), and at the extreme, spontaneous, ephemeral, and large-scale organizing in the absence of the accoutrements of traditional organizations, such as the protests in Myanmar or the March 2006 walkout of thousands of Los Angeles high school students to protest the treatment of immigrants (Cho and Gorman, 2006). In many cases, formal organizations work alongside organization-less networks. In the wake of the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, for example, social media such as Twitter, YouTube, and blogs were not only the major sources of initial information, but also many classic, formal aid and relief organizations found them to be the most effective means for managing information as well as for generating donations. Less than forty-eight hours after the earthquake, the American Red Cross had received more than \$35 million in donations, including \$8 million directly from text messages (Morgan, 2010).

Frequently lost in the excitement over new organizational forms as well as organization-less collective action is the story of traditional, formal organizations that can use digital media creatively, like the Red Cross. Organizations are increasingly recognizing that they can embrace a variety of methods for member engagement in their goals. At Amnesty International, for instance, an organization with more than two million members globally, people can join the U.S. chapter for thirty-five dollars. Or, without joining or making a donation, one can sign up to volunteer or take action online, receive an “activist toolkit,” get updates on topics of interest to them, or link to Amnesty from Facebook or MySpace pages, Twitter, YouTube, or from mobile phone-based social-networking tools. Interested people can also find a nearby chapter at a school in order to connect with like-minded others on their own terms.

From the global scale to the local, Amnesty International, like virtually every major membership group, now offers a complex set of varying relationships and contexts for collective action, rather than a simple model of “membership” and “recruitment.” An important feature of these practices of organizations – one that is central to what we have to say in this book – is that when organizations abandon old, constrained, limited definitions of membership in order to provide people alternative ways to affiliate, then they are engaging people’s desire for choice. One result of people exercising choice when they act collectively through organizations is that understanding what they are doing requires more attention to individuals than was true in the past, when organizations were firmly the centerpiece of scholars’ stories about collective action. Room exists for the new individualism and agency within organizations.

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An unmistakable fact about the state of collective action at present is that formal collective action organizations are thriving, right alongside the profusion of organization-less forms of association that attract so much attention, as well as the many hybrid and mixed organizational forms and networks. A number of metrics indicate the strength of formal organizations of various kinds. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, nearly one-fifth of the world's thirty-seven thousand nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were formed just in the 1990s, in precisely the period that digital media arose and made organizing without organizations possible. Tarrow (2006) similarly reports that the number of transnational social movement organizations tripled between 1983 and 2003. The diffusion of the Internet, the expansion of organization-less organization, and the creation of new formal organizations have all moved together during the last two decades.

Within the United States, which is the focus of this book, the story of contemporary formal organizations in collective life is a vibrant one. The period between the 1960s and early 1990s is well-known as a time when interest groups multiplied rapidly. In the time since, the rate of founding of new organizations has slowed, but existing organizations remained stable and, in many cases, grew in size and infrastructure. For example, at the top of the scale of interest-group size in the United States is AARP, the organization for citizens more than fifty years in age.¹ It has thrived since the emergence of the Internet into civic life. In 1998, on its fortieth anniversary, AARP reported its membership to be close to thirty million, while in 2010 it was about forty million (AARP, 2010). This surge is due in large part to the aging U.S. population, as the baby boomers move through AARP. But as we will see in this book, the organization has been very successful at employing technology in order to expand and enrich membership, as well as to redefine it.

The Environmental Defense Fund had three hundred thousand members and 160 staff in seven offices in 1997, which is close to the time of the outset of the diffusion of the Internet into politics and organizing. Rather than shedding members or physical infrastructure in the presence of new communication tools, it grew to more than half a million members and 340 staff in eleven offices by 2009 (Environmental Defense

¹ AARP, with about 40 million members, and the American Automobile Association with about 50 million, are by far the largest interest groups in the United States, both about an order of magnitude larger than the next largest class of interest groups, which have a few million members.

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Fund, 1997, 2009, 2010). It has benefited organizationally from the ability to communicate and inform people in new ways, at the same time that many citizens have also found new outlets for online environmental activism, such as Environment Online, also known as ENO, and the countless social media groups dedicated to green issues. Accomplishing this required considerable experimentation and adaptation (Bimber, 2003).

Another case is the National Council of La Raza, the largest organization advocating for Latinos and Latinas in the United States, and an example of a group formed during the heyday of organizing in the 1960s. In 2008, it celebrated its fortieth anniversary with a very traditional activity for formal organizations, the completion of a new building in Washington, D.C., near the White House. La Raza works through networks of community-based organizations rather than a large direct membership like the Sierra Club or AARP, and the size of its network grew from two hundred fifty organizations in 2000 to about three hundred in 2008 (La Raza, 2000, 2008). At the other end of the political spectrum, a wave of new antiimmigration organizations was established around the 1980s, and these remind us that not all immigration protest and advocacy is conducted through Facebook. These groups include Americans for Immigration Control, U.S. Border Patrol, and English First. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (or FAIR) was founded in 1979 and reported growth during the decade of the 2000s from about seventy thousand members to a quarter of a million (FAIR, 2001, 2008). The American Legion, which will be discussed much more in this book, continues to lose significant numbers of World War II veterans every day (in 2008 only 2.5 million out of 16 million World War II veterans were still alive), but since 2000 has recruited an average of 256,000 new members each year.

The growth and vitality of traditional organizations such as these is sometimes overlooked in the story of contemporary collective action across the globe. Some are doing old things in new ways, and some are doing entirely new things. The National Rifle Association (NRA), like many groups, exploits the Web to permit people who are not members and who do not contribute money to participate in its activities. Although it attempts to entice people to join with various member services and discounts, it also makes available to anyone many of its publications, blog, schedules of various programs, and news stream. In traditional theoretical terms, it is giving away for free some of the key selective incentives that it

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might otherwise use to overcome the free-riding problem associated with membership. Organizations are not supposed to do this, according to classical theories of collective action. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) breaks theoretical rules further, not only posting reports and its congressional scorecard for the public but also “action alerts” that exhort the public to join petitions or send letters to officials regarding issues of importance to the organization. It provides a guide to activism with such tips as how to be an effective caller to talk-radio shows. All of these resources are directed toward the public at large, regardless of whether a citizen has “joined” or become a paying member. These efforts by the NRA and the ACLU, like so many other traditional organizations, suggest the weakening of one of the theoretically most important boundaries in traditional views of interest groups, the boundary between members and nonmembers.

In the contemporary culture, people’s use of digital media breaks down boundaries within organizations in other ways as well. For instance, the children’s advocacy group World Vision links its members to MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Digg, and other media environments. This common tactic easily enables members to inform and enlist their personal networks in the organization’s campaigns. The organization is seeking to exploit members’ networks for communication and recruitment, and in doing so has shifted some impetus for organizing and activism to the members. Another striking example of old organizations doing new things involves AARP. At its Web site, it offers opportunities for members to interact personally with one another through social forums and discussion groups. In these contexts, which it calls an “online community,” its members join support groups for health problems and grief, discuss aging issues, and exchange views about the politics of Social Security, health-care reform, and many other issues. AARP provides links to opportunities for volunteering and public service at the community level. According to senior staff at AARP, the volunteer program is very large and still growing, which may come as a surprise to observers who think of the organization as being entirely anonymous and mail-based. AARP is a large interest group and a large volunteer group. In these ways, it confounds decades of scholarship about what distinguishes interest groups, civic organizations, and other forms of personal and community association.

So, alongside the new forms of collective action, which emphasize social networks, organization-less organizing, and the social production of public goods facilitated by digital media, traditional organizations are enduring and innovating and are breaking scholars’ rules. They are