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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

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## Collective Action in Organizations

### *Interaction and Engagement in an Era of Technological Change*

Challenging the notion that digital media render traditional, formal organizations irrelevant, this book offers a new theory of collective action and organizing. Based on extensive surveys and interviews with members of three influential and distinctive organizations in the United States – The American Legion, AARP, and MoveOn – the authors reconceptualize collective action as a phenomenon in which technology enhances people’s ability to cross boundaries in order to interact with one another and engage with organizations. By developing a theory of collective action space, Bruce Bimber, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Cynthia Stohl explore how people’s attitudes, behaviors, motivations, goals, and digital-media use are related to their organizational involvement. They find that using technology does not necessarily make people more likely to act collectively but contributes to a diversity of “participatory styles,” which hinge on people’s interaction with one another and the extent to which they shape organizational agendas. In the digital-media age, organizations do not simply recruit people into roles; they also provide contexts in which people are able to construct their own collective experiences.

Bruce Bimber is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he is also affiliated with the Department of Communication and is founder and former director of the Center for Information Technology and Society. His interest in digital media and society arises from his training as an electrical engineer as well as a political scientist and from many years of observing the interconnections between social and technological innovation. He is author of *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections* (with Richard Davis) and *Information and American Democracy* (Cambridge 2003). Bimber is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Andrew J. Flanagin is Professor of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he is also director of the Center for Information Technology and Society. His research focuses on processes of collective organizing, particularly as influenced by the use of contemporary technologies, people’s perceptions of the credibility of information gathered and presented online, the use of social media and social metadata for information sharing and assessment, and organizational technologies. He has published extensively across a wide variety of academic fields on various facets of social relations as implicated by technologies and technology use. He is the coeditor of *Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility* (2008) and the coauthor of *Kids and Credibility: An Empirical Examination of Youth, Digital Media Use, and Information Credibility* (2010).

Cynthia Stohl is Professor of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an affiliate faculty member of the Center for Information Technology and Society. Her work focuses on organizing and network processes across a wide range of global contexts, including corporate-NGO partnerships, activist organizing, and clandestine organizations. A signature of Stohl’s work is global connectivity, and her empirical studies span several countries in Europe and Asia as well as New Zealand and the United States. Her interests in communication technologies arose from her studies of boundary permeability and emerging networks in workplace participation programs, organizational collaborations, and the contemporary global social-justice movement. Stohl has published extensively in communication and organizational studies and is the author of *Organizational Communication: Connectedness in Action* (1995). She is a Fellow and the president-elect of the International Communication Association.

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“This book ushers in a new era of theorizing on collective action. It turns contemporary notions of collective action on its head. First, this book brings the individual – and individual differences – back into traditional collective action by theorizing that people’s contributions are shaped not just by demographics or an economically driven cost-benefit calculus, but more substantially by their interaction and engagement. Second, the book brings the relevance of the formal organization back into contemporary notions of collective action. Using compelling evidence, the authors argue that the advent of digital media enables formal organizations to offer much broader opportunities for people to define themselves and to establish their own participatory styles. By bringing to the fore both the individual and the formal organization, the authors offer a timely, balanced, and intellectually engaging corrective to previous undersocialized and oversocialized views of collective action.”

– Noshir Contractor, Jane S. & William J. White Professor of Behavioral Sciences,  
Northwestern University

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Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – among news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. *Communication, Society and Politics* probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspectives.

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# Collective Action in Organizations

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521139632](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521139632)

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First published 2012

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Bimber, Bruce A. (Bruce Allen), 1961–

Collective action in organizations: interaction and engagement in an era of technological change / Bruce Bimber, Andrew J. Flanagin, Cynthia Stohl.

p. cm. – (Communication, society and politics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19172-2 – ISBN 978-0-521-13963-2 (pbk.)

1. Lobbying – United States. 2. Pressure groups – United States. 3. Associations, institutions, etc. – United States. 4. AARP (Organization) 5. American Legion.

6. MoveOn.org. I. Flanagin, Andrew J. II. Stohl, Cynthia. III. Title.

JF529.B585 2012

322.40973-dc23 2011032250

ISBN 978-0-521-19172-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-13963-2 Paperback

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## Preface

This book was from the outset a truly *collective* endeavor among the authors. We therefore chose the convention of listing the authors alphabetically, to convey that we are all equal contributors in this effort.

The project represents the nexus of our interests in technology, organizing, and social behavior. When we first began, a devastating earthquake and subsequent tsunami in the Indian Ocean had generated enormous global relief efforts. Protests against the U.S. war in Iraq were continuing across the globe, and economic and social-justice reform efforts were being waged at local, national, and international levels. Digital technologies, especially mobile ones, were a part of many of these stories of collective action. From Indymedia to smart mobs, videos on YouTube, and photos on Webshots and Flickr, pundits and scholars were heralding a new era of organizing, a time in which individuals no longer needed to rely on the formal apparatus of organizations of the past. Individuals could broker information through emergent and powerful social networks and bypass costly, ponderous infrastructures. To some, the end of formal organizations seemed near.

As we completed this book project, local and global responses to earthquakes in Haiti and New Zealand and rescue and reclamation efforts for the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan were underway. Multiple revolutions and uprisings in the Arab world were also unfolding. These events were not stories of how collective actions are no longer linked to organizations, but rather of events and organizing processes that take place at the nexus of organizations, networks, broadband and cellular access, Twitter and Facebook interactions, social media and blogs, search engines, and digital repositories. Organizations have not ceased to

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exist. Rather, organizations and their relationships with their members and civil society have changed, becoming less bureaucratized, more flexible, more subtle, and more readily constructed by individuals in a world in which people have a great deal of information at their fingertips and an essentially unlimited capacity to communicate with others, near and far, known and unknown.

It is the nature of these changes that have interested us throughout this project. Elsewhere, we have told parts of the story of what can be accomplished at present without formal organizations in the postbureaucratic era. Here we tell the story of organization in this same era, in which membership and involvement are entangled with technology and choice, and the style of participation that people construct for themselves is no less important than the kind of organization to which they belong.

Our account of organizations and collective action in this book would not have been possible without the involvement of key people at the three organizations we studied. Brad Pryor and his colleagues at The American Legion were extremely helpful, open, and accessible. Their commitment to the values and mission of The American Legion are apparent in everything they do and a credit to the organization. At AARP, Xenia Montenegro and her colleagues provided us with timely and expert information. In a time of transition they remained steady and dedicated to the work of AARP, one of the most important organizations in the United States. At MoveOn, Daniel Mintz and his colleagues gave generously of their time to talk with us about the special character of their organization. Their passion and dedication to MoveOn are impressive. We also thank the many members of these organizations who took their time to respond to our survey.

At the University of California, Santa Barbara, where we work, we wish to thank the Center for Information Technology and Society for supporting this project by providing valuable resources throughout the research process. The ideas for this book arose from a series of workshops sponsored by the center that were designed to foster collaborative research. These helped us discover that our interests in the subject matter that became this book were mutual.

This book has benefited from the comments of a number of colleagues: Eva Anduiza, Jennifer Earl, Dave Karpf, and Michael Stohl. We also want to thank those people who worked on the project while they were graduate students at UC Santa Barbara: Melissa Bator, Jennifer Brundidge, Pearl Galano, Alex Markov, and Rob Patton.

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We would like to express special thanks to Robert M. Entman and W. Lance Bennett, editors of the Communication, Society and Politics series of Cambridge University Press. Lance especially supported and advised this project from the outset. His insights, constructive criticism, and wise counsel are greatly appreciated.

The project was funded by grants from the National Science Foundation and the University of California, Santa Barbara, and was also supported by a Fellowship for Bruce Bimber during this period from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford.

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