It is widely recognized that social movements may spread – or “diffuse” – from one site to another. Such diffusion, however, is a complex and multi-dimensional process that involves different actors, networks, and mechanisms. This complexity has spawned a large body of literature on different aspects of the diffusion process, yet a comprehensive framework remains an elusive target. This book is a response to that need, and its framework focuses on three basic analytical questions. First, what is being diffused? This question directs attention to both the protest repertoires and interpretive frames that actors construct to define issues and mobilize political claims. Second, how does diffusion occur? This book focuses attention on the activist networks and communication channels that facilitate diffusion, including dialogue, rumors, the mass media, the Internet, nongovernmental organizations, and organizational brokers. Finally, what is the impact of diffusion on organizational development and shifts in the scale of contentious politics? This volume suggests that diffusion is not a simple matter of political contagion or imitation; rather, it is a creative and strategic process marked by political learning, adaptation, and innovation.

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The Diffusion of Social Movements

Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects

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## Contents

*List of Tables*  

*List of Figures*  

*Contributors*  

*Preface and Acknowledgments*  

1 Introduction: The Dimensions of Diffusion  
   Rebecca Kolins Givan, Kenneth M. Roberts, and Sarah A. Soule  

**PART I: DIFFUSION AND THE FRAMING OF CONTENTIOUS POLITICS**  

2 Transnational Networks and Institutions: How Diffusion Shaped the Politicization of Sexual Harassment in Europe  
   Conny Roggeband  
   19  

3 Temporality and Frame Diffusion: The Case of the Creationist/Intelligent Design and Evolutionist Movements from 1925 to 2005  
   James E. Stobaugh and David A. Snow  
   34  

4 Framing Labor’s New Human Rights Movement  
   Lance Compa  
   56  

5 Framing the GMO: Epistemic Brokers, Authoritative Knowledge, and Diffusion of Opposition to Biotechnology  
   Ronald J. Herring  
   78  

**PART II: MECHANISMS OF DIFFUSION**  

6 Dialogue Matters: Beyond the Transmission Model of Transnational Diffusion between Social Movements  
   Sean Chabot  
   99
Contents

vi

7 The Diffusion of Different Types of Internet Activism: Suggestive Patterns in Website Adoption of Innovations 125
Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport

8 Transnational Networks, Diffusion Dynamics, and Electoral Change in the Postcommunist World 140
Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik

9 Diffusing the Rumor Bomb: “John Kerry Is French” (i.e., Haughty, Foppish, Elitist, Socialist, Cowardly, and Gay) 163
Jayson Harsin

PART III: DIFFUSION, SCALE SHIFT, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

10 From Protest to Organization: The Impact of the 1960 Sit-Ins on Movement Organizations in the American South 187
Michael Biggs and Kenneth T. Andrews

11 Dynamics of Diffusion: Mechanisms, Institutions, and Scale Shift 204
Sidney Tarrow

General Bibliography 221
Index 251
List of Tables

3.1 Cases, Issues, and Holdings ........................................ page 40
3.2 Prognostic Frames by Case ........................................ 49
7.1 Logistic Regression Predicting Types of Internet Activism
on Websites ............................................................... 135
10.1 Movement Organizations in 334 Southern Cities, 1959–1962 ..... 194
10.2 Determinants of Organizational Presence and Membership ... 197
10A Determinants of Organizational Membership .................. 201
10B Determinants of Organizational Presence (i) .................... 202
10C Determinants of Organizational Presence (ii) .................... 203
# List of Figures

1.1  S-Shaped Curve of Diffusion  \hspace{1cm} page 8  
3.1  Diagnostic Frames  \hspace{1cm} 46  
6.1  Alternative Pathways of Transnational Diffusion between Social Movements  \hspace{1cm} 101  
6.2  Dialogical Framework of Transnational Diffusion between Social Movements  \hspace{1cm} 106  
7.1  Brochureware and Online Protest Opportunities by Cause (ordered by percent “brochureware”)  \hspace{1cm} 132  
7.2  Distribution of Types of Internet Activism in Three Causes  \hspace{1cm} 132  
10.1  NAACP Membership in the South, 1957–1963  \hspace{1cm} 193  
10.2  Organizational Presence in 66 Cities Where Sit-Ins Occurred in Spring 1960  \hspace{1cm} 199  
11.1  Scale Shift: Alternative Routes  \hspace{1cm} 216
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Preface and Acknowledgments

Students of social movements have long been fascinated by the ways in which they influence or spread from one site to another – in short, how they diffuse. Recent scholarship has shed light on different dimensions of the diffusion process, including the actors, networks, and mechanisms that make diffusion happen. This volume is an attempt to pull together different strands of this research into an integrated and comprehensive understanding of the diffusion process.

Most of the contributors to this volume participated in a conference at Cornell University in November 2007 that explored how social movements create linkages and frame issues under contention. The conference was an initiative of an interdisciplinary theme project, “Contentious Knowledge: Science, Social Science, and Social Protest,” sponsored by Cornell’s Institute for the Social Sciences. This project brought together scholars who study contentious politics with others who explore the social construction (and contestation) of authoritative knowledge. The dialogue among these scholars sparked considerable interest in the diffusion of mobilizing tactics and frames across activist networks. It also revealed the need for a single volume to integrate what we know about the diffusion of social movements and identify some of the new research frontiers on the topic. We hope this volume contributes to these goals.

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