Introduction

This book is about the organization of contentious political action in the digital age. Much contemporary activism still resembles the familiar protest politics of old, with people joining groups, forging collective identities, and employing a broad spectrum of political strategies from street demonstrations and civil disobedience to election campaigning, litigation, and lobbying. In the case of such traditional political action, access to digital media generally makes it easier and less costly for organizations to communicate with members and supporters. In a number of recent protests, however, digital media have shared the work of mobilizing and organizing action and, in some cases, have done more of it than did formal organizations. This shift in the underpinnings of contentious action is associated with the rise of more highly individualized publics. Such publics consist of a large number of people who experience a common problem or issue and seek common solutions, which may make them seem ripe to join traditional protest movements. In contrast with people who join conventional movements, however, these individualized publics are not inclined (or able) to join formal political organizations and prefer not to adopt definitions of their problems that require trading off personal beliefs for more restrictive group identifications. Despite the importance of communication processes and technologies in their organization, these mobilizations can be relatively stable, persistent, and effective. Indeed, they are commonly referred to as movements, as in "the Occupy Wall Street movement." We seek to understand patterns of participation and organization in these types of collective action and to complement current thinking on how movements can be organized.

A number of factors contribute to the personalization of large-scale political action, particularly changes commonly associated with economic globalization in the post-industrial democracies of Europe and North America. Dramatic changes affected many societies, both north and south, over a period dating roughly from the 1970s and punctuated, if not bounded, by the economic crisis of the early 21st century. This time of transformation witnessed the fraying of modern social, economic, and political structures, buffered differently, of

course, in different societies. One fairly common result was a shift in political identifications of younger generations away from the broad group and institutional affiliations of unions, parties, churches, social class, established movement organizations, and the press – all of which had shaped the heart of 20th-century democratic politics. Those structures were weakened in different ways by globalization's emphasis on market deregulation and greater personal responsibility. While such programs were presented to voters with variations on the promise of "free markets, free people," economic inequality grew in most post-industrial democracies, and many ordinary people experienced their condition in terms of low mobility, increased risk, and reduced political choice. Reflecting these subjective experiences, opinion polls in many countries over several decades reveal declining popular confidence in parties, government, and business.

While there continued to be both more radical and more formally organized challenges to these developments, a growing number of concerned citizens found pathways to engagement through simple, everyday discourses anchored in lifestyles and shared with social networks. Rallying around cries of "Real Democracy, Now!" as the master frame that emerged from *los indignados* in Spain in 2011 or "We Are the 99%" in the Occupy protests in the United States later the same year, large-scale networked action spread through simple discourses that enabled easy personal associations to travel rapidly over social networks, both on- and offline. In some cases that we analyzed, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), churches, labor unions, and social movement organizations were involved, while in other cases such formal organizations were pushed to the periphery by crowd dynamics. What is surprising is that in both the organizationally enabled and crowd-enabled varieties, these easily personalized paths to engagement often developed into large and persistent organizations. This organizational process was made possible by access to everyday communication devices such as mobile phones and computers that connect people through common digital media platforms such as email, SMS, Twitter, YouTube, and hundreds of other technologies.

This book explores what we call digitally networked *connective action* that uses broadly inclusive, easily personalized action frames as a basis for technology-assisted networking. We seek to understand how connective action is organized and how various forms – from relatively more crowd-enabled to more organizationally enabled – differ in terms of political power and capacity to shape outcomes. We also examine how varieties of connective action compare with conventionally organized collective action that builds on strong leadership, brokered coalitions among formal organizations, and action frames that draw on ideology or group (class, race, gender, nationality) identity. In some cases old-style activists and NGOs can also be found in the connective mix, and it is important to understand the role they play in mobilizing (and, sometimes, demobilizing) larger public involvement. However, our primary focus is on sorting out what characterizes the different types of connective action and how they differ from each other. The cases that help define and

challenge our theoretical formulations are drawn from the contemporary economic and environmental crises, which have produced an interesting array of contentious political mobilization, spanning the spectrum of network organization types that we seek to compare and critically evaluate in this book.

The first chapter of the book identifies two types of large-scale connective action networks, both of which differ from forms of collectively framed, organizationally brokered collective action that are already well understood in the study of contentious politics. The following chapters concentrate in more detail on the similarities and differences between the two connective types. Chapters 2–4 analyze cases of large-scale direct citizen participation in connective action networks, comparing those networks across issues (economic and environmental), action categories (demonstrations, issue advocacy networks, and campaigns), and political contexts (national and transnational). In Chapter 5 we look at how power is organized in the different types of connective action and how those power signatures relate to political outcomes. We use this power analysis to compare the effect of an organizationally enabled "Robin Hood Tax" campaign for a tax on speculative financial transactions in the United Kingdom with the impact of the crowd-enabled Occupy protests on public discourse about inequality in the United States.

In addition to summarizing this journey, the concluding chapter considers the conflicts that may occur within connective networks when they clash with more conventional collective action orientations from other groups and activists. The chapter also examines how different forms of networked activism negotiate transitions over time and in response to different external opportunities and threats. For example, what happens after Occupiers are evicted from their camps, particularly when those who remain committed to regrouping are split by very different conceptions of the ideal way to organize action? In addressing these fascinating questions about mobilization and political organization, we draw on our high-level analytical models that distinguish among different organizational forms in complex mobilizations in order to sort through ethnographic accounts of the tensions within those mobilizations. We also reflect on how custom technologies with organizational capacities far greater than Facebook, Twitter, and typical website configurations might better harmonize the divergent action logics that often clash in large-scale mobilizations.

The issues that run through the empirical cases in the book are two of the central concerns of our time: (a) economic justice, or fairness, in the ways economies work, particularly in the context of the global financial crisis that rocked many nations in the first years of the 21st century; and (b) the prospects and possible remedies for global climate change, a problem perceived by many citizens as threatening the quality of life on the planet, both north and south. These two issues are often linked by concerned citizens who worry that economic growth imperatives mean burning more fossil fuels, which contributes to global warming, and that policy makers in many nations sacrifice attention to climate change in order to introduce quick fixes to economies in crisis. The following pages of this introduction develop the basis for focusing on these

issues and explain why they provide good cases for exploring our theoretical framework.

Connective Action and Global Crises

The political times spanning our research and writing have been both turbulent and fascinating. The global financial crisis that erupted in 2008 has been dubbed the "great recession," though for many the conditions better resembled a depression. Millions lost their homes and their jobs, and collapsing banks and financial firms extracted large bailouts at public expense, all leading to the slow-motion train wreck termed the "sovereign debt crisis" that ultimately threatened the viability of the European Union. Behind these headlining events, the climate crisis also reached critical mass due, in part, to the volume of carbon burned over the years of unprecedented global economic growth that preceded the collapse. Extreme weather in the form of heat waves, droughts, floods, melting ice caps, and rising sea levels, along with severe food shortages, gave this period an added degree of historic drama.

As these events unfolded, millions of people around the world joined in protest politics, including *los indignados* in Spain, the Tea Party and Occupy in the United States, and the largest environmental demonstrations on record in many nations. The protests were marked by citizens taking to the streets and squares in great numbers, often with boundaries blurring between seasoned activists and concerned citizens. The spaces were both physical, with encampments in and marches through cities, and virtual, as in the Livestream video coverage and Twitter feeds that linked-in bystander publics who, in turn, added their own voices using repertoires of online engagement techniques. The creative range of protests occurring both nationally and transnationally, and the prominence of dual economic and environment crises that were linked in many events, all provided rich material for developing, challenging, and comparing models of different forms of collective action.

The decade leading up to the financial crisis had already witnessed thousands of protest events, large and small, jumping across locations and causes, and targeting town councils, national leaders, international organizations and summits, and corporate brands. Activists using digital media to help mobilize this family of multi-issue, multi-arena, multi-target, shape-shifting protests can be traced at least as far back as the "Battle of Seattle," in which an unlikely band of "Teamsters and turtles" shut down the World Trade Organization meetings in 1999. Though they differed in size, composition, and levels of coherence and violence, these "global justice" protests bore a family resemblance in terms of the diffusion of action repertoires, campaign models, communication practices, and evolving moral and political discourses. They shared an ethos of diversity and inclusiveness, often enabling large and diverse mobilizations to overcome ideological and strategic differences to address an array of issues, including economic injustice and unfair trade practices in the global south, climate and environmental degradation worldwide, unsustainable energy and

resource management, war and human rights, the predations of banking and finance, and all of these in a single event.

At the top of the long list of interrelated global issues is a cluster of economic and environmental concerns regarding the rise of inequality, unsustainable economic growth, and climate change. The organization and impact of national and transnational economic justice and climate change advocacy networks provided the initial focus of research for this book. However, we soon began thinking and theorizing about the uprisings that occurred in Iceland, Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, the United States, and elsewhere, as they presented interesting variations on large-scale organization using digital media. Although we could not cover all of these cases empirically, we have included analyses from the Occupy protests in the United States since they touched directly on our broad theme of economic justice issues. In addition, the added focus on the United States broadened the comparative scope of the book. However, we are not trying to retell the story of the global justice movement that is intertwined with some of our cases. Many other scholars have already addressed the historical origins of the movement, as well as the patterns of mobilization and mechanisms for individual involvement in global justice politics, and we build on their work in this book.

Ours is a story about organizational processes in complex (multi-arena, multi-issue) citizen mobilizations that often engage people in very personal ways: as consumers, animal and nature lovers, Facebook friends, Twitter followers, and self-styled global citizens who often prefer more direct ways of acting politically than voting or becoming formal members of organizations. More specifically, our story is about the forms of digitally networked action that we call connective action, which result from large-scale personalized and digitally mediated political engagement.

Throughout the book, we develop three themes that serve as touchstones for our investigation into connective action: (a) understanding the personalization of politics and what it means for political mobilization, (b) understanding communication as integral to political participation and organization, and (c) developing and grounding the different logics underlying the organization of collective versus connective action. In the following discussions, we briefly preview each of these themes and then conclude with a more detailed overview of the book.

Personalized, Digitally Mediated Political Engagement

A recurring theme in the book concerns the phenomenon of personalized politics and why personalization pairs so naturally with digital media. The kind of personalization of politics we are interested in has to do with citizens seeking more flexible association with causes, ideas, and political organizations. It is ironic that the very globalization processes that have become targets of so much political activism have also created the social conditions and global communication technologies largely responsible for expanding the available

forms of that activism. Various globalization-related changes have resulted in the separation of many (particularly younger) individuals from the integrative structures of modern society, such as class identification, church, party, union, and traditional family and career models. Those more *individuated* citizens continue to experience common interests and political concerns (hence the impetus to join in action with others). However, their decoupling from the institutions of social and political aggregation has led to the adoption of more personalized brands of politics organized around individual lifestyles and social networks.

It is not so surprising that many forms of highly individualized political action embrace the DIY (Do It Yourself) spirit, as when people across nations take direct consumer actions to buy products such as fair trade or rainforest-certified coffee, knowing that the aggregation of small personal actions helps promote various social, economic, or environmental justice values. What is often taken for granted in accounts of personalized politics is the way in which these individualized acts are mirrored, modeled, scaled, and coordinated across digital media networks that have become part of the social structure of the individuated society. Indeed, one of the things that may keep the "politics of the personal" from disintegrating into chaotic or narcissistic gestures is that personal political stories can be shared and shaped as they travel over very large social networks in which technology of various sorts becomes part of the organization process. Because of this, it becomes important to understand what happens when citizens engage in collective action through digital media and social networks. This involves understanding the workings of these two interesting forces – the personalization of causes and the corresponding inclination to use scalable digital media to aggregate individual actions.

There is, of course, a great deal of content, and a large volume of noise, flowing through these networks. Content is an important part of the organization process, and our analyses look at the fit between media and the symbols, signs, slogans, rallying calls, targeted messages, resource links, videos, images, and multi-media creations shared over connective action networks. Just as social movement scholars have earlier examined the importance of collective action frames, we focus on personal (as in easy-to-personalize) action frames. Sometimes those frames are created by organizations offering easy personal access to events or actions being promoted by organizationally enabled networks. Sometimes these personal action frames emerge directly from crowds, and, in some cases, they "go viral" and become embraced as the common frame for action. In many ways, the U.S. Occupy protests in 2011 displayed personalized content in the extreme.

The noisy diversity of issues and problems arising from Occupy protesters was met by calls from the press to settle on a common demand, reflecting the journalistic logic that stories should be written around simple issue frames such as "tax the rich" that can be played against their targets for reactions. In response to such calls for reducing personal anger to a collective statement, the protesters turned the critics on their heads and adopted the slogan "What is our

one demand?" – often followed by a statement that there are so many problems that they cannot be reduced to a single demand. This rejoinder circulated widely with the aid of Adbusters, the Vancouver-based "culture jamming" organization that was also instrumental in issuing an initial call to Occupy Wall Street. Adbusters produced an advertising-like graphic with the now-iconic image of a ballerina dancing on the head of the Wall Street bull. In response to this opening of a "What is my demand?" discourse space, people populated social media by issuing myriad personal demands: "change," "general strike," "get money out of government," "end war," "end American imperialism," "end health profiteering," "end poverty," "end joblessness," "end corporate censorship," "end police intimidation," "end wealth inequality," "end capital punishment," "Robin Hood Tax," "end fossil fuels," "living wage," "fix education," "stop home evictions," and "stop greed, free weed," to name just a few.

The multiple themes of the Occupy protests and other connective action formations are far more troublesome for the "one-to-many" logic of mass media than for the "many-to-many" logic of digital media technologies, given their ability to filter and reconfigure noisy communication. And sometimes these densely layered networks of digital media can distill broad personal action frames that accommodate diverse individual paths to engagement. Out of the many reasons Occupy protesters offered for their discontent, a broadly inclusive theme eventually emerged from the crowd and connected with the mass media and other social networks well beyond the protest population itself. The enduring slogan of the Occupy protests was "We Are the 99%." As we recount in Chapter 5, this theme was launched on Tumblr, a microblogging service, and quickly attracted a rich and diverse response from people who wrote their personal stories about life in the 99%. People typically shared their personal stories by holding them in front of a cell phone or desktop camera, in personal signatures ranging from longhand to refrigerator magnets, and posting the results in page after page of Tumbler entries. The statements were as varied as the people posting them. One teenage girl held a sheet of paper with these lines printed in marker: "I have type 1 diabetes. How can I afford COLLEGE when I may not be able to afford my INSULIN? I am the 99%. . . . occupywallst.org." People were still posting their stories and photos with many others commenting and tweeting about them more than a year after the Occupy protests emerged in 2011. More important, the overarching protest frame of the 1% versus the 99% traveled out across many digital media platforms and quickly spread through the mainstream press, igniting a long-deferred national and international discussion about the growth of inequality during the era of economic globalization.

Some observers dismiss this personalized shift as shallow and unlikely to make an impact on the serious struggles over power and policy. Our empirical analyses show, however, that personal action frames that emerge from connective networks often satisfy mass media demands for a simple angle and make it possible to intensify networking within various organizationally enabled or crowd-enabled organizations. Media coverage in different cases

and in different countries was often better for connective action protests and issue campaigns than is typically associated with mobilizations under more confrontational collective action frames. Beyond offering empirical comparisons of how different kinds of networked organization operate, we do not take sides in the controversy over which organizational forms are superior. Instead, we try to understand different forms of personalized connective action on their own terms, with an eye to the factors that shape their scale, speed, flexibility, and impact, as well as the factors that lead them to fracture and fall apart.

Communication and the Organization of Connective Action

The second theme concerns the role of communication in contentious action. Communication has many faces, and scholars of contentious politics have focused on its role in information seeking and identity, persuasion, opinion, and the public sphere. Yet in the episodes described here, communication is often much more than a means of exchanging information and forming impressions, or an instrument for sending updates and instructions to followers. Communication routines can, under some conditions, create patterned relationships among people that lend organization and structure to many aspects of social life. As digital media become more prominent in contemporary contention, they too help to configure the protest space and the action that develops within it. Ultimately, technology-enabled networks may become dynamic organizations in their own right. At the core of this book is thus an idea about *communication as organization*.

The organizational capacity of communication is particularly evident in digitally networked action. In the span of a few years, technology developments have enabled people to establish various kinds of relationships across social, cultural, and geographical divides. Different technology platforms embed in each other and help people coordinate activities, establish relationships, and transfer information. Because these information and communication technologies undergird communicative actions with code that can be modified for unintended uses, people and organizations deploying these technologies may fine-tune the levels of automation and the mechanisms for sharing access or filtering inputs. The wide varieties of implementations of these technologies, meanwhile, allow even those with few resources to aggregate huge volumes of traffic across multiple platforms, each of which perform different sorts of organizational work. For example, we discuss the capacity of Twitter as a traffic direction and resource allocation system in Chapters 3 and 5. Twitter may well soon be replaced by something new, but in our cases it routinely emerges as the most highly used technology because of its unique meta-networking properties. This means that Twitter, among other things, enables people in the midst of crowded protests, as well as bystanders from afar, to coordinate resource flows through directed signals and links to various resource platforms inserted in those brief 140 character bursts. The point of the analyses is not Twitter or any other type

of technology as such, but what people do with what the technology "affords" them and the structure this can create.

The kinds of network routines and resource flows evident in our case studies invite us to look squarely at how communication organizes action and what kinds of organization can result from different kinds of communication. Large-scale action networks are assemblages of individuals, formal organizations, and technologies in interaction. In some cases, formal organizations network deliberately to carry the brunt of the organizational burden for the network as a whole; in others, the burden shifts to technology-infused crowd networks with few conventional organizations. Tracing the organizational qualities of discursive and technological networking mechanisms in various cases allows us to explore the qualities of the different organizational forms.

We employ a variety of methods to examine the many forms of networks enabled by both organizations and individuals using different sorts of technology. For example, the simple process of mapping the hyperlinks among organizations involved in protest coordination, issue advocacy, or running campaigns can reveal a good deal about who is in, who is out, who is most commonly recognized by others, and who is sharing the work of linking other organizations into a network. The ways in which these link patterns change over time (as we describe in Chapters 2, 4, and 5) may reveal the coherence, stability, and strategic adjustments going on within the network. Drilling deeper into these networks makes it possible to examine how the patterns of interaction among various organizations, individuals, and technologies develop action networks that may respond to short-term events as well as long-term changes in issues, policies, and political opportunities. We also develop measures of how technologies deployed in both organizationally enabled and crowd-enabled networks actually engage people: What kinds of personal engagement do different technologies afford? Beyond analyzing (and empirically comparing) different network patterns of "affordances" that may engage individuals in different kinds of action, we also examine the power signatures of entire networks, based on whether we can locate organizational coalition backbones from which most engagement flows or whether power is more highly dispersed across layered networks of networks. We are also mindful throughout of the importance of media sites as models or repertoire archives for future action. Even when events or campaigns come to an end, their traces often remain behind online or in archives as testaments to what actually happened according to those who participated and as resources for future activists to consult or incorporate.

In summing up these properties of networked action, the book explores how even seemingly disjointed crowd-enabled connective action networks may achieve coherent organizational form in the sense that they develop capacities for (a) resource allocation and provision, (b) responsiveness to short-term external events such as police actions or the success or failure of protest actions, and (c) long-term adaptive responses such as resource seeking in the long tails of dying or transitioning networks. Using these three minimal defining conditions of organization, we explore how differently organized networks coordinate

or conflict with one another in different political contexts, revealing a good deal about the outcomes of different protest actions. The quest to understand how these and other aspects of digitally networked action work becomes a navigating light of the book.

Three Models of Action in the Spectrum of Contentious Politics

The third theme at the core of this work builds on the topics of personalization and communication-as-organization and develops a framework showing the different organizational logics that may underlie different mobilizations. First, we acknowledge and then depart from the well-known "logic of collective action" that has long been associated with the study of collective action, with its many challengers and variants over the years. We focus most of our analysis on a second logic, the *logic of connective action*, which gives this book its name. In order to make progress in understanding digitally networked action, it is important not to conflate the two logics of action. Different assumptions about the underlying logic of why people participate at the individual level and how they associate at the collective level point to different dynamics at work in large-scale networks. Identifying the different action logics at work in particular situations helps explain how digital media play different roles in different types of organization. What is more, not only are networks of collective and connective action in their pure forms different from each other, but there are characteristic differences between the two types of connective networks that we examined as well. This led us to develop a typology of three ideal types of large-scale action networks relevant to contemporary contentious action.

We became interested in applying our framework to analyses of economic justice and climate change networks for several reasons: they have attracted large-scale citizen action on two of the most pressing issue agendas of our time; they have introduced various forms of contention into different comparative political contexts, locally, nationally, and transnationally; and their organizational boundaries shift as campaigns and other protest activities converge or diverge along issue and policy lines. Our initial focus was on coalitions of formal organizations and the different ways they defined and engaged their publics. In some cases, we noticed that organizations (and their surrounding network partners) regarded followers primarily as members for whom the organizations provided leadership aimed at building collective identifications and common ways of defining issues and acting in concert. In contrast to such well-known patterns of collective action, other organizations and their networks (including many large, well-known NGOs) soft-pedaled demands for formal membership, as well as collective issue and action framing. Instead, they focused on enabling large-scale individual engagement in often highly personalized terms. In some cases, organizations and networks even shifted from one mode to another depending on the calculus of issues, political opportunities, and the strategic value assigned to different forms of public engagement.