

# Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics

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# 6

## Technological change and the shifting nature of political organization

*Bruce Bimber, Cynthia Stohl, and Andrew J. Flanagin*

*Underpinning the study of politics is an understanding of organizational dynamics and their relation to collective action. This chapter addresses ways in which new communication technologies enable the development of a diverse array of organizational forms in the pursuit of collective interests. Taking advantage of the internet's ability to reduce transaction costs, blur private and public boundaries, and enable accessibility to information and new types of knowledge management systems, actors have available new strategic possibilities for organizing. These options are no longer dependent upon the complex array of material resources and formal coordinating mechanisms needed in the past. We propose an integrative theoretical approach to this rich variety of collective action and forms of organizing. Toward this end, we advance a conception of collective action as communicative in nature, and offer a two-dimensional model of collective action space, comprising dimensions for (a) the mode of interpersonal interaction, and (b) the mode of engagement that shapes interaction. Conclusions address the implications of this new theoretical framework for contemporary organizations, organizing, and organizational membership.*

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It should come as little surprise that so many aspects of politics have been touched in some way by the internet and related technologies. Much of politics, from the highly democratic to the rigidly authoritarian, is fundamentally communicative and informational in nature, and the internet is central to changes in the environment of communication and information that are of historic proportions. In the disciplines where politics is studied, questions of change and stasis associated with the internet appear across many topics: public opinion and behavior, campaigns and elections, political institutions, social movements, global political economy, security studies, and democratization, to name only a few.

Among the most compelling topics associated with the internet and politics is

political organization and its relationship to collective action. Because so many political dynamics involve collective action, from voting for city council to adopting a global warming treaty, and because so much political action is achieved through some form of organization, the nexus of organization and collective action is one of the underpinnings of the study of politics.

Indeed, over the past 35 years, the organizational nature of collective action has been a recurrent subject of research (Davis *et al.*, 2005; Oberschall, 1973; Tilly, 1978). Formal organizations provide the mechanisms through which political issues are articulated, participants are recruited, targets, locations, and timing of collective actions are determined, complex tasks and strategies are coordinated,

and methods and tactics are selected. To varying degrees, these elements of collective action appear in research on topics from social movements (Nagel, 1981) to political parties (Aldrich, 1995). Across political systems, organizational affiliations and identification provide underlying motivations for individuals to respond positively to incentives and sanctions that help ameliorate the ubiquitous free-rider problem found in collective action efforts (Olson, 1965).

In the decade following the mid 1990s, research on organization and collective action associated with the internet focused on several topics, for example, demonstrating the efficacy of “online” collective action, documenting the appearance of novel forms of organizing not associated with traditional interest groups (Gurak, 1996, 1997), and describing changes in the strategy or structure of traditional interest groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and social movements (Bennett, 2003; Bimber, 2003). Because the internet and related technologies reduce transaction costs of all kinds, blur boundaries between public and private realms (Bimber *et al.*, 2005), and make information-intensive tasks and communicative processes and products readily accessible, those actors pursuing the organization of collective action have available to them many alternative forms and strategies. These alternatives are less dependent than in the past on constraints associated with material resources, expertise, location, and target of the organizing.

A dominant theme to emerge from the first decade or so of this research might be described as “organizational fecundity.” In their examination of the history of civic association in the U.S., Crowley and Skocpol (2001, 819) describe the Progressive Era as the most “organizationally fecund” period in American history, because of the profusion of various civic groups in response to the structural

changes in society at that time. The recent literature on organizing and collective action employing the internet suggests that the current period, close to a century from the height of that wave, may well surpass it with regard to the proliferation of organizations and groups.

The fecundity of contemporary political organization is addressed in several literatures that have heretofore remained relatively distinct. For example, organizational and management scholars have explored the technological, social, and economic contingencies associated with the development of organic, self-organizing, post-bureaucratic, and networked organizations (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1990; Heckscher and Donnellon, eds., 1994; Monge and Fulk, 1999). Globalization theorists have identified underlying dynamics of time/space compression, disembeddedness of events, and increased global consciousness that are associated with a plethora of contemporary organizational forms (Castells, 1996; Giddens, 1999; Stohl, 2005). Theories of social capital, particularly the work of Putnam (2000), acknowledge the emergence of new forms of social interaction and association and lament the decline of traditional organizations, which by virtue of providing regularized face-to-face interaction among known others have a politically beneficial effect that other classes of organization do not.

There are two chief contributors to the proliferation and productive nature of new organizing forms, as described in the literature on the internet. The first is the growth of uncountable instances of civic association and organization online, through e-mail lists, discussion groups, common-interest groups at social networking sites such as MySpace, MeetUp, and the like. The focus of many of these groups is political and oriented toward problems of public goods. The second contributor is the expanding portfolio of strategies, linkages, and ways of engaging citizens on



the part of traditional interest groups and political organizations, many of which date to the period described by Crowley and Skocpol (2001). Long-established groups are attracting online “members,” and some of those rooted in historically anonymous forms of membership now facilitate citizens engaging with one another personally in discussion boards, or face-to-face. Clusters of smaller face-to-face groups can now sometimes readily band together to engage in larger scale action, creating new types of alliances across time and space. In these and other ways, the landscape of political organization and collective action shows change: many new types of organizations are doing new things in new ways, old organizations are doing old things in old ways, and old organizations are doing new things in new ways. These developments raise a number of theoretical questions about how organizations are conceptualized and categorized, how variation in structures is explained, and about what underlying processes may be giving rise to these developments.

Across theoretical frameworks, organizational fecundity presents a central problem of explaining organizational heterogeneity and efficacy. Researchers lack a vision of organizing that sufficiently accounts for the variety of contemporary membership groups in existence, and that also accommodates the multiple perspectives addressing collective engagement and interaction. In this chapter, we propose a model that reformulates and synthesizes a variety of relevant theoretical perspectives, while also taking into account the diversity of organizational forms used to achieve collective action efforts today. We then situate existing work on various forms of collective action within this integrative model, and draw conclusions about contemporary organizations, organizing, and organizational membership.

## **Organizational fecundity in the contemporary media environment**

The issue of increased organizational fecundity emerges in several literatures, including work on collective action, organizational structure and form, social capital, and interest groups. Developments since the internet’s emergence have drawn some theories in sharper relief than ever, but have also in some cases presented some empirical exceptions. In others the internet highlights tantalizing connections among theories. Synthesizing observations and findings across these literatures yields a new perspective on the nature of interaction and engagement among organizations and their members.

### **Collective action**

Theories of collective action are central to politics of all kinds, appearing in explanations of social movements (Tarrow, 1998), voting behavior (Acevedo and Krueger, 2004; Downs, 1957), membership in interest groups (Berry, 1984; Olson, 1965), and the operation of the NATO alliance (Olson and Zeckhauser, 1966). These and many other phenomena share the problem of the free rider: namely, that under certain common conditions, individual actors with an interest in an outcome can enjoy its benefits regardless of whether or how much they contribute to it. Actors in such situations may be an individual citizen favoring one candidate over another in an election, or a nation favoring a treaty reducing global carbon emissions. The body of theoretical work defining conditions under which free-riding occurs is enormous, as is empirical work debating its extent in real politics.

One of the original elements of collective action theory as formulated by Olson (1965) is the proposition that organizations are central to the achievement of

collective goals. Organizations serve to locate and contact potential participants in collective action efforts, motivate them to make private resources publicly available, persuade them to remain involved despite short-term setbacks and long-term risks, and coordinate their efforts appropriately. That is, the chief way that free-riding is overcome and collective action achieved is through the action of organizations. Indeed, Olson argued that “most (though by no means all) of the action taken by or on behalf of groups of individuals is taken through organization” (p. 5).

Over the decades, a great deal of work on collective action theory has come to take its organizational character for granted, or has focused on more controversial aspects of the theory, such as the assumption that human behavior is dominated by self-interest. Yet the role of organization in collective action is in many ways a resurgent problem in light of new technologies of communication and information. Researchers have increasingly been reporting instances of collective action that appear not to rely on formal organization. A plethora of communication and information tools, including electronic mail, the web, chat rooms, weblogs, bulletin board systems, databases, portable computing devices, and mobile devices, are increasingly being invoked to create and sustain collective efforts among a diversity of interest groups, formal and informal, enduring and ephemeral.

Uses of technology in novel collective actions have been reported in many contexts around the world, from Indonesia to the Middle East (Kalathil and Boas, 2003; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003) to Iraq (Arieanna, 2005) to Mexico (Ferdinand, 2000). These cases appear to challenge the old tenet of a fundamental nexus between formal organization and the solving of free-riding problems, a tenet that at this point has become part of the background of much social science theory. Use of the

internet in politics suggests that, at the very least, the scope of collective action addressed by theory should be expanded sufficiently to incorporate these efforts alongside the more traditional actions that are typically the focus of the literature, such as writing to public officials, displaying yard signs or bumper stickers, volunteering, and joining interest groups. Of particular interest is self-organized political action in the absence of a previously defined interest group or other central coordinators, and participation in online organizations in the absence of well-defined “membership” boundaries. No less important is the voluntary contribution of informational goods, which includes posting of civically useful information on websites, contributions to wikis, sharing of music, imagery, or other cultural goods, and the creating of metadata through tagging and social network-building. In many such cases, organizing for collective action is not associated with formal organizations dedicated to the specific collective goal at hand (Bimber *et al.*, 2005).

One prominent example was the 1999 “Battle in Seattle,” in which a far-flung network of groups from several nations interested in everything from human rights to the environment to women’s issues used e-mail, the web, and chat rooms to engage in a largely self-organizing protest against the policies of the World Trade Organization (Bimber, 2003; Kahn and Kellner, 2004). This case involved a loosely coupled network without central financing or a fixed structure for leadership, decision-making, and recruitment. Instead, the network employed low-cost communication and information systems to focus attention on the objective of protesting the WTO meeting and to sustain practices of self-joining and horizontal coordination. As the literature describing events such as these has grown over the last ten years or so, it has become

clear that many cases exist that strain the explanatory capacity of traditional collective action theory, if not violating one or another tenet outright (Lupia and Sin, 2003).

One key theoretical issue that arises in these cases of internet politics is that the classic binary free-riding decision metric is not obvious, such as in the posting of publicly useful information online and participation in various groups and public forums where people's useful contributions emerge from an interactive process rather than the explicit pursuit of a goal. In these cases it is difficult for an observer to identify a discrete choice to contribute or to free-ride, which confounds collective action theory. Another key issue is the pursuit of collective action either completely or largely in the absence of formal organization, such as the WTO protest, and the global anti-Iraqi war marches in February, 2003 (Bimber *et al.*, 2005; Flanagan *et al.*, 2006). The theoretical challenges go beyond the longstanding debate over the extent of rationality of people's action (Green and Shapiro, 1994).

### **Organizational structures**

The theoretical issues raised by the internet for organization theory are somewhat different from those in the collective action literature, and they help point the way toward a synthesis. The last several decades have drawn increased attention to the interaction of technologies and organizational structure. Understanding contemporary forms of mobilization and collective action requires understanding the ways in which organizing processes and structures are being transformed in response to rapidly changing social, task, and technological environments. Nonetheless, for the most part the organization literature has not explicitly considered collective action despite the centrality of the proposition that collective action requires organization.

Traditionally, organizational theories of convergence posit mechanisms that explain how and why organizations are becoming similar worldwide (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Hickson *et al.*, 1974; Scott, 1995; Scott and Meyer, 1994). Depending upon the theory, convergence mechanisms are rooted in the increased competitiveness and interconnectedness of the global market, the dynamics of globalization, and/or the institutional mechanisms related to legitimacy (coercive mechanisms), modeling behavior (mimetic mechanisms), and the increasing professionalism and standardization of professional norms (normative mechanisms).

However, the contemporary media environment provides many opportunities for emergent forms that combine the characteristics of traditional organization forms with non-hierarchical networks resulting in new forms of relations among members, leaders, and other stakeholders. A theory of collective action organizing must simultaneously account for the efficacy of bureaucratic as well as network forms of organizing and the possibility that organizations exhibit several types of structures across time and constituencies.

Indeed, in the case of the internet and politics, there is mounting evidence for the coexistence of a myriad of organizational structures. For example, new organizations are emerging that have few organizational levels, simple management and coordination structures, and yet have large memberships that exert considerable political power. Other organizations have retained their formal structures, hierarchical management techniques, and traditional emphases. In yet other cases, hybrid forms of organizing have emerged: large bureaucratic organizations are reconstituted as networked forms where coalitions and alliances cross organizational sectors, types, and domains (Chadwick, 2007). The fluidity, blurring of boundaries, and diverse membership inherent in these dynamic

networks are evidenced in the rapid appearance, transformation, and dissolution of organizations and organizational relationships across the political spectrum.

Contingency theories of organizing help address the variability in organizational forms associated with social mobilization, by focusing on strategies organizations develop to best fit the environmental conditions they face. In brief, contingency theory posits information as the critical organizational problem (Stinchcombe, 1990) and asserts that the way to cope with diverse and uncertain information is to create appropriate variety in organizational structures. By means of sufficient "requisite variety" (Ashby, 1956) in organizational structure, organizations are able to accommodate a variety of perturbations within the environment. This leads to the expectation that as the environment becomes more complex, organizational structures and growth strategies will become more diversified. This proposition, which like collective action theory dates to a time well before the current revolution in media technology, offers a potentially helpful theoretical grasp on the internet in politics. Addressed to a class of organization not typically within its purview, namely the membership organization or interest group, it suggests a way to account for some of the problems in collective action theory with respect to organizational form by offering an explanation for why the kinds of organizations involved in collective action should be diversifying.

### **Social capital**

The literature on social capital constitutes a kind of conceptual crossroads where a number of theoretical traditions intersect. Early work on social capital took a dubious stance toward questions of the internet and politics. Robert Putnam explored the hypothesis that people's use of the internet might contribute positively toward social

capital, and twice returned equivocal but skeptical answers (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen, 2003). Yet a number of studies relying on individual-level measurement of attitudes have shown that internet use can generate social capital (Jennings and Zeitner, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2004; Lin, 2001; Mossberger *et al.*, 2008; Shah, Kwak and Holbert, 2001).

Of particular concern for problems of political organization are two propositions in this literature. The first is that greater stocks of social capital help people overcome free-riding challenges and achieve collective action; the second is that social capital is built in organizations and forms of association of a particular kind (Putnam, 2000). The classic argument by Putnam that generated so much discussion can be restated only slightly as follows: American society has undergone a shift in dominance from one class of participatory organization to others. The class in decline provides regularized face-to-face interaction among known others, and thereby exerts a remarkable and obvious variety of socially and politically beneficial effects, including fostering collective action and the achievement of political goals. At the same time, classes of organization in ascendance, especially the anonymous membership groups that came to dominance in the U.S. in the mid and later twentieth century, contribute to collective action in other ways but do not build the rich, community-based stocks of social capital formed in face-to-face associations. Social capital theory therefore returns us to the connection between organization and politics via a different route, raising the question of how the internet shapes forms of political organization.

### **Interest group mobilization**

A fourth body of literature relevant to these questions is that dealing with

interest groups. It is a commonplace observation that interest groups and related associations grew extremely rapidly in the U.S. during the last three to four decades of the twentieth century, prior to the rise of the internet. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) reported that the number of groups grew from about 5800 in 1950 to over 23,000 in 1995. Some of the important foci in this literature, in addition to the longstanding problem of inequality, are the presence of interest niches and networks, the extent of competition and response of groups to variations in competitive pressure, various tactical and strategic choices among groups, and the distribution of activity across policy areas (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998, 2001; Goldstein, 1999; Gray and Lowery, 1996; Heinz, 1993; Walker, 1991).

While this literature has a great deal to say about how groups represent publics, respond to their environment, compete, occupy niches, and engage the policy-making institutions they seek to influence, it has given only perfunctory notice to technology. The development of computerized direct mail in the 1970s is well recognized as a boon to interest group activity, since it facilitated medium-to large-scale communication with memberships and potential recruits. Yet this literature has treated communication technology as simply one of an organization's tools, rather than conceptualizing information and communication as central features of politics that might be fundamental to the reasons for the existence—or transformation—of groups in the first place. Perhaps for this reason, the literature on interest groups has had little of theoretical note to say about the internet, viewing it as simply a less expensive means for accomplishing an old task, and indeed a means whose efficacy is not yet demonstrated. Not the least of the questions posed by the internet for interest group theory is the problem of specifying

the conditions in which a traditional interest group is more effective or successful than other organizational forms. Another problem is that people's use of the internet in collectivities sometimes confounds the distinction between "interest group" and "civic association" that has been so crucial in the literature on social capital, interest groups, and collective action. Large, anonymous interest groups sometimes now offer their members ways to interact in personal ways with others online, or even to find and meet other members located nearby. And discussion groups online, which can attain a substantial level of personal familiarity, readily convert to advocacy groups when relevant issues arise.

### **Theoretical integration across perspectives**

We believe that common underlying dynamics connect these various problems, and that the use of the internet in politics brings these dynamics into greater relief for researchers. Understanding better how these phenomena may reflect common processes is likely to provide a promising terrain for theoretical development in the social sciences for years—at least as much as further elaboration of each intellectual domain in relative isolation. We advocate several steps in that direction.

### **Organizing and organization**

We begin by drawing a distinction that is simple but that provides immediate purchase on several theoretical issues at once: the distinction between organizing and organization. The central challenge of organizational fecundity for researchers is the proliferation of categories by social scientists for describing types of organization. A list of only a few types described in the various literatures would include

the following: membership organization, civic organization, civic association, bureaucratic organization, post-bureaucratic organization, collective action organization, interest group, secondary and tertiary associations, and online organization. The multiplication of categories in an attempt to contain the profusion of online and traditional organizations creates a need for greater theoretical clarity. By distinguishing between the fundamentals of *organizing*, which are common to most classes of organization in politics and the specific forms of *organization* that manifest themselves in specific cases, it is possible to see linkages across theoretical domains. For many problems connected to the internet and politics, organizing human action and interaction is the fundamental process. Organizing involves a set of informational and communication functions: identifying interested people and their concerns, contacting them for purposes of developing common identity or trust or for purposes of sending appeals and requests, establishing agendas, and coordinating action or engagement.

It should be clear that organizing can occur through a number of organizational forms, and even in some cases without an organization. Given the variety of organizational forms now possible, it becomes facile to claim, as Olson (1965), Walker (1991), and others have, that collective action requires “organization.” As we have argued elsewhere (Bimber *et al.*, 2005), the classic argument that collective action requires “organization” is in fact a special case of the more general claim that collective action requires organizing. Various conditions give rise to different organizational forms. The type of interest group typically envisioned in the literature on that topic represents the manifestation of organizing suited to conditions of high costs of information and communication, few avenues for horizontal interaction among citizens who are not proximate to

one another, and targets for organizing that involve large, slow-moving, policy-making institutions. But all these conditions can vary: costs of information and communication can be low, for example, and the targets of organizing may not be cumbersome institutional processes. In such case, and in others, we would expect organizing to take on other organizational characteristics.

One important feature of the distinction between organizing and organization is that it focuses attention on the individual’s experience of organizing or of being organized, rather than on the particular attributes of the organization that might happen to be at hand. Regardless of organizational form, all people engaged in instances of collective organizing must encounter at least two dimensions of experience, which we call mode of interaction and mode of engagement (Flanagin *et al.*, 2006). These are important to mapping the main concerns of the literature described above.

### **Interaction**

Mode of interaction can be thought of as a dimension describing the extent to which people’s interaction with others is personal. Personal interaction involves repeated, organized interaction with known others over time. Its chief characteristic is the development of interpersonal relations where the identities of others matter, and where relational development and relationship-sustaining activities are important to participation. Personal interaction may itself be the collective action of interest, or it may entail skills and norms important to other actions.

Interaction lacking entirely these attributes is impersonal. In such cases, interaction entails communication and exchange of information about goals, concerns, interests, strategies, or logistics of participation. Entirely impersonal interaction

involves no personal, direct interaction with known others, who therefore remain unknown despite shared affiliation. In cases of impersonal interaction, occasional face-to-face contact might occur at events, or online interaction may occur among people who know one another, but this is incidental to the goals of the group and its members.

Traditionally, theories have maintained relatively sharp distinctions between personal and impersonal interaction. The social capital literature, for example, emphasizes personal interaction as generative of trust and norms of reciprocity that constitute social capital. It is, indeed, a literature about personal interaction. The interest group literature, on the other hand, describes interaction that is impersonal: citizens join groups, and the relevant relationships are between each member as an individual and the central group.

Especially within the collective action literature, a distinction between groups brokering one or the other mode of interaction is typical. Yet many collective action efforts feature elements of both interaction modes. This is especially true of federated organizations, such as Amnesty International, the Sierra Club, and the American Legion. In such cases, members may be organized by the group to become involved in large-scale activities that are anonymous to other group members, such as letter-writing campaigns and making individual financial contributions. At the same time, local chapters often have volunteer events, social get-togethers, fund-raising activities, and chapter meetings characterized by substantial personal interaction. The existence of hybrid personal-impersonal groups suggests the presence of a continuum rather than discrete categories. In practice groups may be more or less personal in the kinds of interaction they offer members, and indeed may offer a range of modes of engagement. Conceptualizing interaction as a

dimension rather than a pair of categories is helpful for modeling change and innovation in groups, and it is especially useful for considering organizing practices associated with the internet. Doing so allows consideration of collective action organizing at any point along the continuum, and facilitates analysis of continuous change over time, as organizations adapt and shift.

### **Engagement**

Similar features of continuous variation are associated with the second dimension of organizing: mode of engagement. This dimension represents the degree to which participants' individual agendas may be enacted within the group context. We use the terms entrepreneurial and institutional to describe the extremes of this dimension. Typically, analysis of interest groups and collective action assumes that mobilizing organizations are centralized, leadership-driven structures that accumulate resources and make decisions hierarchically (Johnson, 1998; Walker, 1991). This we label institutional, in order to highlight what it means for the experience of participation enjoyed by members, namely the paucity of opportunities for individual members to shape the agenda of the organization, and institutional structures that are generally hierarchical and bureaucratic (Bimber, 2003).

In groups with institutional engagement, central leadership makes decisions and rules for the group, and typically is in control of resource accumulation and expenditure, mobilization, and other classic aspects of organization. Institutional engagement is also typically well bounded, in that membership is clearly defined, and distinctions between staff and members are sharp. The interest group is a classic example. It presents members with opportunities for engagement, through donating, contacting public officials, or participating

in events; members decide whether to participate, and how much, but the opportunities are created by the institution rather than organizational members. Members of the NRA, for instance, traditionally respond to, rather than create, the organizational calls for action intended to further the collective interests of members.

Many forms of organization deviating from the bureaucratic type are well known (Davidow and Malone, 1992; Drucker, 1988; Galbraith and Kazanjian, 1988; Heckscher and Donnellon, eds., 1994; Nohria and Berkley, 1994; Powell, 1990). Key features of these are a diversity of organizational roles that may change over time and space, flexible leadership, a high degree of horizontal communication (Monge and Contractor, 2003), boundaries arising from communication patterns rather than institutionalization, and in some cases network-based forms predominating entirely over bureaucratic forms (Fulk, 2001). In instances of collective organizing with many such features, participants have greater opportunities to shape the agenda of action, by defining and creating opportunities for action rather than responding passively to agendas created centrally. They may even produce collective action not sanctioned by a central authority.

We refer to this as entrepreneurial engagement. It is illustrated by students who mobilize “friend” networks on MySpace or Facebook to accomplish a collective action, such as protesting a proposed change to U.S. immigration policy. It is also illustrated by participants in MeetUps, who use the informational power of the internet to propose and organize face-to-face meetings of people interested in some local or national public good. Organizing occurs with both institutional and entrepreneurial features as well. Protests and demonstrations against social injustices connected with globalization provide a number of examples, typically

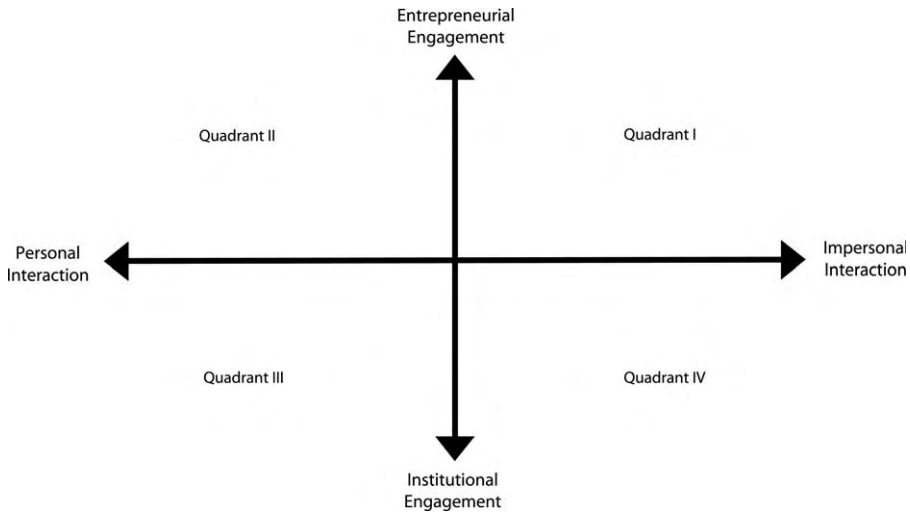
combining the agendas of institutionalized actors, such as fair trade organizations, with the self-organizing aspects of both community groups and international online networks.

It is theoretically useful to align mode of engagement and mode of interaction as orthogonal dimensions. The resulting two-dimensional area we call “collective action space” (Flanagin *et al.*, 2006), which is illustrated in Figure 6.1. In this space, we designate mode of interaction the horizontal dimension, with increasing values representing more personal interaction. On the vertical axis, increasing values represent more entrepreneurial engagement. We use the standard convention for numbering quadrants in a Cartesian system, starting with I in the upper-right and proceeding counter-clockwise to IV.

A number of theoretical traditions and claims can be placed in relation to one another in the collective action space. The observation in the interest group literature about the rapid growth of membership groups in the American political scene constitutes an observation that quadrant IV was largely populated in the U.S. during the second half of the twentieth century. The diversification of political interests in the U.S., the structure of parties and policy-making institutions, and the legacy of industrialization and the growth of the state, created conditions whereby a great deal of organizing and collective action occurred in the institutional-impersonal modes. This makes the increasing population of quadrant IV in the twentieth century an important characteristic of American political development.

Similarly, the development of quadrants II and III, which entail more personal forms of interaction, can be placed historically. Quadrant II represents the Tocquevillian ideal of small-scale civic associations of the early nation, where personal, community-level bonds were





**Figure 6.1** Collective action space.

formed and reinforced through local association. Tocqueville's discovery of the rich array of civic associations embedded in American public life in the early nineteenth century constitutes a comparative observation between the U.S. and Europe with respect to quadrant II. Habermas (1962/1991) similarly recognized the importance of the citizenry articulating their goals and desires, through direct dialog guided by collective interests, toward influencing acts of the state. Later sociological and historical literature describing the dislocations and alienation associated with the industrial revolution, urbanization, and modernization of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (e.g., Toennies, 1887/1980) entails an argument about drift toward more impersonal, institutionalized social relations. In collective action space, modernization appears as drift away from quadrant II, both downward toward institutionalization and rightward toward more impersonal forms of civic association. Putnam's argument about the decay of social capital groups in the twentieth century extends that observation. Finally, organizational theories have also articulated

shifts downward along the vertical axis, as organizations succumb to pressures of institutionalization over time (Scott, 1995; Scott and Christensen, 1995; Scott and Meyer, 1994).

### ***The internet, interaction, and engagement***

Because it depicts variation in the individual-level experience of organizing, rather than in specific organizational categories, the collective action space suggests that a wide range of literatures that have been intellectually adjacent to one another in the social sciences are in fact describing a common set of phenomena: two-dimensional variation over time and issue space in people's interaction with others and with agendas of collective action. This variation drives the highly variable forms of organization that researchers observe at the group and aggregate level of observation.

With this in mind, the dynamics of the internet in politics can be placed in context. In collective action space, the internet does not lead to wholly novel forms of organizing or organization. Like other sociotechnical developments before

it, the internet would appear to alter the distribution of collective action in this space. The hallmark of the internet as a medium relevant to politics is its lack of specialization with respect to interaction and engagement. It facilitates personal and impersonal interaction, from small, intense discussion groups to “viral” e-mail that expands among unknown lists of citizens. It facilitates hierarchical control by permitting the gathering and sense-making of vast amounts of information by the central leadership of globe-spanning organizations, just as it permits decentralized, self-organizing coordination among loose networks of people. Where political organizing is concerned, this flexibility is what distinguishes the internet from previous media. It is why we see the internet aiding large, anonymous membership groups in finding members and mobilizing them toward centrally directed goals, while also helping small groups of citizens with common interests to find one another and act together in a personal way.

The flexibility of this medium makes it theoretically distinct in politics from earlier technologies: broadcasting, databases and direct mail, telephony, and the newspaper. To take one example, databases and direct mail are often described as crucial to the rise of interest-group politics. In our terms, these technologies are particularly well suited to institutional engagement and impersonal interaction. Operating a direct-mail operation requires centralized resources and expertise, and it permits “downward” or outward communication from a center to a membership, but not the reverse. These technologies provide essentially no opportunity for citizens to interact with one another, and only limited opportunity to contribute to collective agenda-building and decision-making in the group. These are technologies specialized in quadrant IV.

It would be impossible to conduct a census of forms of organizing across

collective action space, and to compare this to historical baselines from, say, a decade ago or a half-century ago. However, the thesis that the internet facilitates organizing across all of collective action space is consistent with the observation of organizational fecundity. Increasing variety of organizations and heterogeneity of forms of organizing within individual organizations would be precisely the tendency one would expect to be produced by the widespread, rapid adoption throughout society of a set of technologies with the properties of the internet with respect to interaction and engagement.

If this thesis is correct, then the internet can be understood in relationship to previous historical trends in forms of organizing. Whereas previous trends have tended to be associated with shifts across quadrants and to involve growth that is comparatively localized in collective action space, the tendency of the contemporary media environment involves greater diffusion and spreading across all quadrants. New organizations with entrepreneurial styles and informal structures, such as FreeRepublic, represent growth in the upper quadrants. Meta-organizations such as MeetUp, which facilitate the formation of informal groups by citizens, also contribute to quadrants I and II, as do social networking sites, such as MySpace, which provide a means for people to interact with friends and known others and also to form large networks of thin, impersonal ties, in the absence of a centralized agenda. Efforts to recruit and mobilize members via e-mail by advocacy groups such as Environmental Defense constitute classic quadrant IV activity.

To observe that the affordances of the internet can contribute to forms of organizing located across all of collective action space is useful, but insufficient. Of course, many factors bear on the strategies, boundaries, success, and shape of organizations. Forces for organizational

homophily tend to cause similarity among groups facing similar local circumstances, and therefore might lead to clustering of groups facing similar organizational “fields” or environments (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Competition among groups may provide returns from innovation and experimentation, leading some groups successfully to differentiate themselves in collective action space, as well as along other dimensions. Some organizations face institutionalized constraints on their form and boundaries, as in the case of political parties, which are tied by a rich web of electoral laws to the structure of states. To the extent that collective action goals involve common targets, such as a national legislature, the organizational forms that groups adopt are likely to cluster in ways that have proven historically successful.

The affordances of the internet therefore interact with such factors in affecting the overall distribution of collective action, just as such forces have shaped previous eras of organizing. On the whole, the kind of conditions generally that should contribute toward organizational variety would include low levels of constraints on organizational innovation generally; the absence of strong selection mechanisms weeding out less successful organizational innovations; conditions whereby it is difficult for groups to learn from one another, as in cases where success is distinguished from failure by non-linear, chaotic, or path-dependent mechanisms; and perhaps most importantly, by the complexity of operating environments. It is quite possible that the internet promotes organizational fecundity and variety via mechanisms both internal and external to organizations. Within them, it permits a broader range of interaction and engagement, with the result being a tendency for greater organizational variety. Externally, it contributes toward greater complexity in the organizational environment.

## Conclusion

In just over a decade of its meaningful presence in politics, the internet has shown that questions about the form organizations take, and why, are key not only to organizational theory, but also to theories of collective action, social capital, and interest groups. In those literatures, the topic “organization” has been to a surprising degree a settled issue for years, yet in each case settled in isolation from the others. The ways people are using the internet in politics now is unsettling to those theories, and that is theoretically useful. We have argued that the best way to view organizational form in politics is as a reflection of the environment for communication and information, rather than seeing formal organization as fundamental or as a given. In other words, processes of communication and information give rise to organizations, just as organizations give rise to communication and information. The underlying communicative and informational features of many organizational forms can be understood in terms of engagement and interaction: the personal character of people’s experience with one another as individuals, and the nature of their experience with the process of organizing. From these two ingredients arise the familiar organizational forms of civic associations and interest groups, hybrid forms of organization, and cases that are better understood as processes of organizing than as organizations.

The research road ahead is therefore not simply about technology, or media, or organizations. The crucial questions are: when many of forms of organizing are open to many kinds of actors, who chooses which ones, and how do their choices affect who wins and loses in democracy? Which factors tell us the most about how politics is organized: idiosyncratic and path-dependent features of

organizations, the environment of institutions, culture, or characteristics of participants in collective action themselves? Technology itself can not constitute the answer to these questions, but understanding the relationship between technology and organizing can focus questions in new ways.

In some ways, the historically abrupt emergence of the internet in politics represents what economists might call an “exogenous shock.” The internet has perturbed many parts of political systems, and responses illuminate aspects of systems that were more hidden in times of greater stability. The research agenda presented by the internet is not so much filled with novel problems as with new opportunities to resolve old theoretical problems, by taking advantage of the near ubiquity of the technology to see how common processes connected with communication and organizing may lie beneath a wide range of research topics.

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### Guide to further reading

This chapter integrates three distinct areas of research relevant for understanding contemporary political organization: collective action, new media, and organizational studies. Within the collective action literature, our work builds upon the pioneering treatise of Olson (1965), which functionally introduced the topic of collective action to social scientific exploration, and on Marwell and Oliver’s classic text (1993), which served to synthesize work across various disciplines toward a coherent micro-social theory.

These foundational works helped to articulate the core concepts and dynamics of collective action efforts.

In the last decade or so, the work of a number of scholars has expanded the literature on collective action to accommodate changes in the new media environment. Fulk *et al.* (1996) are particularly helpful in moving the study of public goods into the context of the new media environment. More recently, Lupia and Sin (2003) explicate several ways in which evolving technologies may affect the logic of collective action, and Bimber *et al.* (2005) and Flanagin *et al.* (2006) articulate a number of theoretical and practical modifications suggested by the contemporary media environment. In addition, the theoretical, organizational, and political implications of changes in core technologies can be found in Bimber (2003) and the work of Bennett (2003) is not only useful for identifying the practical implications of organizing within the contemporary media environment but also brings a global perspective to the issues of politics and new media. Finally, Melucci (1994) engages globalization dynamics and moves beyond the traditional concerns of organization and leadership to examine the roles of technology, identity, language, and meaning in collective action.

More generally, the potential contribution of organizational theory to the study of collective action in the global system can be found in Davis *et al.* (2005). In addition, Monge *et al.* (1998) examine multiform, alliance-based interorganizational communication and information public goods, and Fulk *et al.* (2004) and Yuan *et al.* (2005) test the individual action component of the collective action model as applied to individual contributions to organizational information commons.

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# Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics

The politics of the internet has entered the social science mainstream. From debates about its impact on parties and election campaigns following momentous presidential contests in the United States, to concerns over international security, privacy, and surveillance in the post-9/11, post-7/7 environment; from the rise of blogging as a threat to the traditional model of journalism, to controversies at the international level over how and if the internet should be governed by an entity such as the United Nations; from the new repertoires of collective action open to citizens, to the massive programs of public management reform taking place in the name of e-government, internet politics and policy are continually in the headlines.

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