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How Political and Social Movements Form on the Internet and How They Change Over Time

Abstract

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are facilitating collective action in ways never thought possible. Although the broader political climate may have a powerful influence on the success or failure of emerging social movement organizations (SMOs), the Internet is enabling groups previously incapable of political action to find their voices. Whether this shift is offering greater relative benefit to previously underrepresented or incumbent political fixtures is subject to debate, but it is clear that like-minded people are now able to better locate and converse with each other via many Internet media. As a result, the distance between talk and organized action has grown smaller.

The Internet is a locus for all types of groups to communicate, collaborate, and cooperate. This technology is, in principle, value neutral: it can be a channel for both positive and negative connections. In other words, cyberspace is a place for people with a wide range of interests including radical groups interested in fomenting social and political discontent. Yet, the methods each group uses to mobilize could be similar. What follows is a summary of the literature on the role of the Internet in social and political mobilization, with the goal of examining concepts, theories, and findings that may be relevant to understanding the potential role of the Internet in radicalization.

ICTs Alter the Collective Action Environment

Scholars have always analyzed channels of communication to understand how people mobilize for collective action. The channels themselves, the content of the messages, the actors who are sending and receiving the messages, and the feedback to those messages all play a part in understanding how and why people organize themselves.

Traditional collective action theory dates back to 1937, when Ronald Coase sought to explain how some groups mobilize to address free market failures. Yet even when Mancur Olson began updating the theory in 1965 to explain “free-riding,” the high-speed, low-cost communications now enjoyed were not imaginable (Lupia & Sin, 2003). New ICTs, especially the Internet, have completely transformed the landscape of collective action. Lupia and Sin (2003) explain that the burden of internal communication is no longer a hindrance to social movements, so larger groups are no longer more successful than smaller ones (at least not by virtue of their size). E-mail, Web sites, chat rooms, blogs, and bulletin boards enable efficient communication, organization, and even deliberation within social movements of any size (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005).

However, some experts believe the collective action effects of the Internet are overstated and may prove ephemeral. For example, McAdams (1996) contend that easier international communication will not automatically translate into success for international social movements because vital interpersonal networks cannot be adequately forged and maintained online. Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) agree that without face-to-face interaction, Internet communications cannot build the stable community a long-lasting movement requires. Van de Donk and Foederer (2001) argue that virtual demonstrations cannot satisfy the protester’s desire for the emotional rush and thrill of real, physical action.

But there are many examples of Internet-based SMOs that have met with success, such as the 1996 Zapatista rebellion in Mexico (see Bob, 2005) and Jody Williams’ global movement to eradicate landmines (see <http://www.icbl.org/index.php>). The operation of groups such as these has recently been characterized as something beyond the traditional SMO: a Collaborative Innovation Network, or CoIN, which is defined as “a cyberteam of self-motivated people with a collective vision, enabled by the Web to collaborate in achieving a common goal by sharing ideas, information, and work” (Gloor, 2006, p. 11). Built around internal transparency and rapid, direct communication, this synergistic model may help explain the rising prominence of online SMOs and project their continued success in the near future.

It is clear that the Internet enables new grassroots movements to spring up quickly and operate for a time, but many doubt whether such Internet-based efforts can persist. Bimber (2001) suggests that perhaps this may become the model for new SMOs: transient, decentralized groups will spring up and remain active through a single political effort, content to fade away afterward with the knowledge that should the need arise, a similar group can quickly be built up again (Garrett, 2006, p. 211).

The following sections look at cyberspace from a variety of perspectives based on the collective action literature: first, the Internet as a space in which people meet; second, the types of organizations that go to the Internet and how they communicate internally; third, how these groups use technology to communicate externally; and fourth, how social networking sites are affecting Internet-based mobilization. We conclude with some thoughts on the future of online mobilization.

Activists Meet, Connect Online

Despite its size, the passive nature of the Internet means that users discover only what they seek, and people normally find information that merely reinforces their interests or beliefs. However, this structure likely streamlines the process of political mobilization because like-minded people can connect more easily (Rogerson, 2009).

For example, petitions, a common action for the nascent social movement, are quite easy to conduct online, especially compared with the time a similar effort takes offline. Free petition setup/hosting services, such as PetitionOnline (<http://www.petitiononline.com/>), further simplify the process, enabling even basic computer users to access this technology. And Internet users have taken notice: in its first 8 years of operation, the PetitionOnline service hosted tens of thousands of petitions and collected more than 47 million signatures (Earl, 2007). This type of activity can begin to rally supporters and be the first step in creating a new online network. As an example, MoveOn.org, a progressive public policy advocacy group with more than 4 million members, began as an online petition in 1998 (Earl & Schussman, 2008).

Cohesive political movements form when previously unorganized groups find a political voice as vague dissatisfactions crystallize into a specific goal or demand for change (Gamson, 1975). The rate, ease, and volume of global communication and multimedia distribution on the Internet cannot help but accelerate the normal process of political movement formation and have been shown to speed the diffusion of both social movement information and even protest itself. These accelerations may contribute to the intensification of Internet-aided conflicts (Garrett, 2006, p. 207). Online, people who perceive themselves to be marginalized can connect broader efforts to local events and quickly expand their movements. But this sudden empowerment can prove fleeting unless a movement can integrate itself with a larger identity and political structures (Lim, 2005).

Decentralized, Horizontal SMOs Coalesce Online

“E-movements” are social movements that emerge entirely online; these are to be distinguished from traditional SMOs that have augmented their normal activities with an online presence. Traditionally, SMOs have been organized into a centralized, vertically hierarchical command structure. E-movements, however, have the freedom to operate in a different fashion.

In the Strategic Voting Movement during the 2000 presidential election, a new horizontal, decentralized leadership model emerged. Despite reports of significant prior activism among movement leaders (which is “normal”), Schussman and Earl (2004) identified many leaders as having computer expertise but no prior political experience. In other words, ICTs empowered nonactivist, computer-savvy individuals to initiate a full-blown e-movement.

The same enhanced ICT capabilities that allowed an alternate leadership profile also ease some of the organizational restrictions that have shaped traditional SMOs. Online movements can now operate successfully without the hierarchical, centralized command structures of the past, and leaders can even act with more freedom within the movement. As demonstrated by the Strategic Voting Movement, e-movements are less fettered by standard social movement constraints. For example, in a traditional group, movement leaders might face pressure from members for different leadership styles. In contrast, in an e-movement many different entrepreneurs can approach the primary objective with their preferred styles and methods, providing a multitude of pathways for interested individuals to participate and achieve the broad goals of the movement (Schussman & Earl, 2004). In addition, a “leader” may just be the member who proposed the best course of action.

Today, there are rapidly assembled self-organizing online groups of protesters, “meet ups,” and viral e-mail lists that quickly and organically coordinate horizontally, without central leadership (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). Because their members communicate, coordinate, and conduct their plans together without a rigid chain of command, online SMOs are more heavily interconnected in a nebulous structure not dissimilar to that of modern terrorist cells (Weimann, 2006a). These decentralized SMOs are more robust, adaptable, and maneuverable in their respective conflicts because actions are linked by a common political agenda rather than a central leadership (Garrett, 2006, p. 211).

Klandermans (1984) proposed that a successful movement must both affect consensus and achieve action mobilization; it must generate new supporters and galvanize existing supporters to action (Snow & Benford, 1988). The Internet clearly facilitates outreach but it also lowers the cost of individual action. Although ICTs are largely absent from contemporary literature, Garrett (2006) correctly points out that they allow the effective aggregation of minor contributions; the Internet makes “micro-contributions” not only possible but also profitable (Garrett, 2006, p. 207). Furthermore, Festinger (1964) explains that according to cognitive dissonance theory, a person will try to enhance the attractiveness of a chosen option once he or she has committed to it. As a result, a micro-contributor will likely feel more committed to the cause subsequent to the minor donation, providing an important secondary benefit to the movement (Garrett, 2006, p. 207). The power of Internet-facilitated micro-contribution was vividly demonstrated during Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign.

Case studies demonstrate that ICTs are enabling the successful creation and maintenance of geographically dispersed networks (Elin, 2003), but it is unclear whether virtual networks can foster long-term, stable relationships and effectively convey social pressures. One study has shown that even weak connections via online networks can be sufficient to produce collective action (Hampton, 2003). This research demonstrated how the simple recognition of others who were regularly online was enough to establish some rapport, potentially leading to mobilization both on- and offline.

SMOs Use the Internet to Access and Bypass Mainstream Media

The Internet has dramatically streamlined internal communications, but successful SMOs must communicate externally as well. A political movement may control only a small portion of what adherents and especially the general public see, hear, and read about the movement (Gamson, 1988). The Internet enables efficient, low-cost, direct communication from the group and is a medium to potentially influence broader media coverage. SMOs seek media coverage to amplify their concerns and frame pertinent issues for the public (Hasse-Reed, Kushin, & Koeppel, 2007). Most social movements, regardless of their size, believe that they cannot succeed without media coverage (Hasse-Reed, Kushin, & Koeppel, 2007).

Although mass media audiences have long been available to the few groups with access to the centralized media apparatus, the Internet is now closing this “media gap” for newer, less established groups (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). Some groups use the Internet to interface with the media, but online, SMOs can reach millions of users directly. Because many movements’ success relies on public perception, this presents an opportunity not only for outreach but to refute criticism, counter negative coverage, and deliver their own messages uncontested (Hasse-Reed, Kushin, & Koeppel, 2007). And regardless of the number of page views or responses, a well-designed and well-maintained Web site adds a sense of legitimacy to any movement (Rogerson, 2009).

In general, the more severely a group’s interests are being ignored, the more attractive the Internet is to it; SMOs are more likely to take their cause online when they are not receiving attention from the conventional media (Weimann, 2006b). Web sites allow movements to control their self-representation to the public (Hasse-Reed, Kushin, & Koeppel, 2007), and access to a mass medium that movements are able to control themselves can be a powerful tool (Owens & Palmer, 2003, p. 336). Without the Internet, it would be virtually impossible for movements to gain and maintain momentum today even absent mainstream media attention, as the Mexican Zapatista movement was able to do (Clever, 2000).

Social Networking Sites Facilitate Faster, Real-time Protest

Social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have altered communication via the Internet into something much more real time with greater possibility for visual connection. This has provided SMOs with more tools. Powerful examples can be found surrounding Iran’s election in June 2009. The government not only brutally limited press operations in Tehran, it also blocked access to pro-opposition Web sites and SNS. Iranians took to the streets of Tehran in the following weeks, but demonstrations also took place in Washington, London, and Toronto while tens of thousands of additional protesters added their virtual voices on social-networking sites (CNN, 2009). Iranians abroad also staged protests in numerous European capitals (Albawaba, 2009). The mainstream media reported what they

could, but with government censorship in place and restrictions on journalist travel, technologically connected individuals were the ones reporting events and indeed were the subjects of most mainstream media coverage; the government could restrict conventional media outlets, but Internet activism incited rapid protests around the world.

Virtually overnight, Twitter became an accidental but valuable agent of digital protest. Iranian government agents did what they could, even posting false information that opposition candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi had conceded the election and called off the protests with a phone number for a “safe house.” It was quickly discovered that this was a government agent, attempting unsuccessfully to lure protesters into custody. But the international Twitter community formed an e-movement that rallied around Iranian users; by changing their personal information and time-zone settings to make it appear they lived in Iran, users in other countries foiled Iranian attempts to track bloggers by time-zone searches. This movement spawned organically with no centralized leadership, simply spreading by word of mouth and morphing to respond to developments as they arose (Gross, 2009).

Future Directions in Research

Online movements are structuring themselves in horizontal, decentralized networks capable of rapid and even spontaneous action that appear to be far cheaper and even easier to maintain than traditional movement infrastructure. The Internet offers many locations and methods for people to contact others who share their passion and beliefs. Yet, while there has been a growing body of research on the impact of the Internet on social and political movements, there are a number of areas that represent critical next steps for research.

For one, more research is needed to address the potential causal relationships between Internet activity and social and political group dynamics. We know that the Internet has significantly lowered the cost of organizing collective action (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004) and that groups and movements that cannot depend on formal funding are likely to derive a greater relative benefit online than more traditional political organizations (Bimber, 1998). Yet some “Internet pessimists” believe that ICTs are simply reinforcing existing global inequities. As such, more research is needed to understand specifically how Internet activities shape political and social causes including how factors relevant to Internet strategies and group characteristics impact benefit to the organization.

Research on technology has always asked the question of whether the technology is instrumental. In other words, is the technology simply a channel that can be manipulated in various ways by the user, or does the specific type of technology really actually influence specific types of outcomes? The Internet is the perfect unit of analysis to revisit these tensions. For example, is the Internet’s impact on political activism dependent more on the technology itself? Or does it rely, to some degree, on other factors such as socioeconomic status, educational attainment, or cultural proclivities?

Another area for further exploration is the relationship between the Internet and democracy. This can take the form of the impact of the Internet on democratic process or the Internet as a venue for democratic action. “Internet optimists” argue that ICTs have given voices to those who did not have them and have had a democratizing impact around the world. Access to the structures of political change can now come from anyone, either at home or through a publicly or privately funded locale—like libraries, universities, or Internet cafes. For example, a testable hypothesis could be analysis of whether these structures actually provide people or groups with the opportunity to get their message out to a wider audience than before the Internet (Rogerson, 2009).

Finally, research should focus on how effective political and social movements that form online are in reaching their stated goals, and how sustainable they are over time. For example, even though it is impossible to say that there was a single stated goal of the recent protests regarding the Iranian election, the final outcome was not ultimately changed as many had hoped (Trippi, 2009). Again, it will be important to look longitudinally at this type of event where online collective action takes place to determine what persistent change(s) may come as a result of the initial movement. Future research into both the impact and sustainability of online political and social movements should be quantitatively based to the extent possible.

Implications for Radicalization

The research and history of collective action provides some useful concepts for understanding another type of decentralized network: radicalized groups. The Internet has significantly lowered the cost of organizing collective action (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004), which may be especially useful to radical groups and movements that do not depend heavily on formal funding. For instance, Earl & Schussman (2008, p. 75) argue that such low operating costs have and will continue to enable people to rally around causes that may not have been the subject of offline organized protest. Radical groups may not rally on the Washington Mall but they can still communicate and mobilize online as a result of much lower overhead costs.

Another insight from previous research is that groups that are already politically active have derived relatively greater benefit from these new communication technologies. Some experts would argue that these politically active groups are more likely to come from elite socioeconomic demographics (Van Laer, 2007). While radical groups may (or may not) come from elite socioeconomic demographics, it is relevant that when the groups’ purposes are political, the benefits of their Internet use may be greater than when their purposes are nonpolitical (such as commercial or cultural). In other words, having overtly political goals may be a catalyst for increasing benefits of the Internet to radical groups.

Radical groups are clearly part of the mix of Internet users. While ICTs are not typically the most important mobilizing mechanism for radicalized groups, these groups have enthusiastically adopted technology to help them reach their intended goals. Notably, the

Internet has united small, disparate populations, connecting their local actions to a broader transnational movement as demonstrated by radical Islamic fundamentalists in Indonesia (Lim, 2005). Online venues have become their meeting places of choice—so much so that in this context commentators have referred to the Internet as a “virtual Afghanistan” (Weimann, 2006a). Other radical groups have used the Internet to bypass regular media, producing their own content and recruiting technology specialists to help with ICT integration.

The Internet and ICTs have greatly benefited nonradical political and social movements, who have effectively capitalized on the Internet’s unique capabilities, such as the ability to communicate a message to a large number of individuals at extremely low cost, and the ability to mobilize individuals who are geographically dispersed. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, these same capabilities have been a boon to radical groups and movements, as well.

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