Unexpected Transformations: The Internet’s Effect on Political Associations in American Politics

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Chapter 1: Unexpected Transformations

With Al Gore’s December 9th, 2003 endorsement, Howard Dean cemented his position as presumptive Democratic nominee for President. Not a single vote had been cast yet, but the millions of dollars he had raised online and the hundreds of thousands of volunteers he had attracted to participate through self-organizing “MeetUps” had crowned him clear victor in the “invisible primary.” Gore’s endorsement was a signal of what was being reported everywhere in the media. Dean had risen from nationally-unknown governor of a quirky northeastern state (VT) to become the standard-bearer for a political movement of sorts. Fueled by a dynamic internet campaign and awash in small-dollar online contributions, Dean had all of the momentum. Observers were quick to note that this indicated the dawning of a new day in American politics. The “bottom-up” capacities of the internet had fueled a new kind of political engagement, and the country would never be the same. (Rosin 2003, Wolf 2004)

Two and a half months later, Dean would formally end his campaign, having failed to win a single state primary or caucus. The dramatic failure was occasionally attributed to the “Dean Scream,” a colorful gaffe in his post-Iowa caucus concession speech, but the seeds had been planted much earlier than that. In a eulogy of sorts, titled “Exiting Deanspace,” technology scholar Clay Shirky would write that the error many (including himself) had made was in misunderstanding what all of that money and all of those volunteers signaled: “Prior to MeetUp, getting 300 people to turn out would have meant a huge and latent population of Dean supporters, but because MeetUp makes it easier to gather the faithful, it confused us into thinking that we were seeing an increase in Dean support, rather than a decrease in the hassle of organizing groups.” (Shirky 2004,
The internet consists of a suite of tools that lower the transaction costs of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication. In so doing, it makes group formation “ridiculously easy.” (Paquet 2002) And one could argue that it also makes the sound and fury coming from such activity less meaningful.

More than five years later, however, the legacy of the Dean campaign is a good deal more complicated than that. Dean himself went on to become chair of the Democratic National Committee. His “50 State Strategy,” popular with the emerging political “netroots” and with state party chairs and controversial with longstanding elite party leaders, aided the party in making the most of Republican scandals and general discontent in the 2006 election, helping the Democrats to retake both chambers of Congress. (Kamarck 2006) In 2008, Barack Obama would improve upon Dean’s online campaign apparatus. His My.BarackObama.com (MyBO) web portal provided the backbone of a distributed field campaign that won surprise victories in several caucus states, without which he likely would not have become the Democratic nominee. All told, Obama would raise over $500 million through online donations, and he would involve 13 million supporters in the largest electoral mobilization in American history. What’s more, the set of staffpeople who achieved these internet-mediated milestones were almost entirely alumni of the original Dean campaign. New consulting agencies like Blue State Digital and EchoDitto had been launched in the aftermath of the Dean Campaign, as a new federated political association, Democracy for America, had been born. The staff behind Barack Obama’s and the Democratic party’s technological successes were part of a network that first developed in that earlier failed Presidential bid.

In the story of the Dean campaign and its aftermath, we can see the same patterns
that are at work in American politics today. The internet has had profound impacts on American society, transforming art and commerce alike. New industrial giants such as Google offer “search” as a primary business model. Old giants in the newspaper and book publishing industries fine their revenue streams undercut by upstart, occasionally volunteer-driven enterprises. From content aggregation sites like Flickr and YouTube to social networking sites like FaceBook and LinkedIn, social practice is shifting at a surprising pace. The internet has made communication cheaper, and that has led to a set of shifts that have been, as a class, entirely unexpected. Just as initial observers mistook the implications of Dean’s fundraising and volunteer-recruitment success, and then later observers dismissed the results as proof that nothing much had changed at all, the lowered transaction costs of the internet are producing new markets for political, economic, and social practices. Novel organization forms are rising to prominence, replacing organizations once though “too big to fail.” Moreover, as computer speed, transistor capacity, server space, and bandwidth continually expand outward, the medium itself continues to evolve and develop new capacities for mass collaboration and collective action.

This dissertation details several of these unexpected transformations in the field of American politics. The internet has proven neither unmitigated blessing nor curse for political engagement. Some early researchers expressed hopes that the lowered transaction costs would lead to the flourishing of democratic deliberation (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004), while others expressed fears that increasingly targeted information would replace public news with an individually-tailored “Daily Me,” leading to a fracturing of the polity (Negroponte 1995, Sunstein 2001). Some predicted the internet would promote
mass political engagement (McCaughey and Ayers 2003, Tolbert and McNeal 2003, Krueger 2002), or the revitalization of social capital (Shah et al 2001), while others forecast the steepening decline of social capital (Putnam 2000), or a “digital divide” that would reinforce social inequalities (Norris 2001). Virtually none of these predictions have proven particularly accurate. Many fundamental elements of political life, including some that we hoped or expected to change, have been left unaltered by the new information environment. The lowered transaction costs of the internet allow for a great many new activities, several of them working at cross purposes with one another. The social gains and losses are not easily balanced or measured. Later researchers have largely been concerned with proving or disproving these various theses, even while the medium itself has continued to change in myriad ways.

One major development that has gone overlooked by the research community is the rise of a distinctly new and different generation of internet-mediated political associations. Relying upon the unique capacities of online communication, these groups enable a transformation in how interest groups engage their memberships, raise necessary funds, and deploy their tactical repertoires. The new organizations are nimble, span multiple “issue spaces,” and render our elite system more porous than it had been before. This dissertation is primarily concerned with investigating and describing the rise of these organizations, explaining how they diverge from the previous interest group population, and exploring their implications for political participation in America.

Some will argue that such a transformation is no transformation at all. “We still have an elite system, just with different elites.” To this I would reply that, though it may not have been the revolution we asked for, it nonetheless represents a substantial
alteration in the distribution of power in American politics. The changes have not been what we originally predicted, but that makes understanding them no less important. Would Barack Obama still have been elected President if not for the internet? Quite possibly. Would the network of influential actors surrounding him be different in composition without it, and be more closed to new entrants? Absolutely. Given that we live in an elite-dominated system, if the pathways that incorporate individuals into these networks of influence have themselves shifted, that is indeed a noteworthy effect.

The organizations in this study are broadly recognized as among the largest, most powerful political associations in American politics today, yet they have attracted virtually no attention from the research community. In our attempts to prove or disprove the validity of early claims about the internet’s expected political impacts, we have failed to look deeply at just how different the new generation of organizations is from the old. The DailyKos blogging community operates as a quasi-interest group, bringing together thousands of geographically diffuse, politically motivated leftwing partisans to pursue legislative and electoral campaign priorities. The “kossacks” endorse candidates, donate millions in support of their electoral efforts, regularly attract the attention and response of Democratic elected officials, and meet annually at an in-person convention where they discuss their future goals and efforts. Not a single blogosphere researcher (with the exception of myself) has published research on this community, instead treating it as equivalent to the other single-author, “citizen journalism” sites that populate much of the political blogosphere. MoveOn.org has an e-mail based member list of over 4.5 million, and in the 2008 election this membership donated over $90 million and volunteered over 20 million hours of their time. All of this is accomplished with fewer than two dozen
staff, zero office space, and field-defining, internet-mediated membership engagement practices. In existence for over a decade, MoveOn has received extremely limited attention from the research community (Bimber 2003, Kahn and Kellner 2004, Chadwick 2006). Democracy for America (DFA) was launched in the aftermath of the Dean campaign to support a federation of internet-mediated local affiliates. Reminiscent of the Democratic Club movement of the 1960s and 1970s, local DFA groups have become important fixtures in the political life of several large cities, demonstrating that the reach of internet politics can indeed extend offline. This activity has been completely absent from the literature. In the meantime, the previous generation of direct mail-supported issue advocacy groups that have populated interest group politics for 35 years has begun to decline, as longtime revenue streams disappear and the new generation proves better-equipped for the new information environment.

Such political associations, interest groups, or “pressure groups,“ have long provided the primary means of structuring and mobilizing collective action in American politics. The study of such organizations dates back to Tocqueville, and to Madison’s discussion of “the dangers of faction” in *Federalist #10*. It continues through the pluralist tradition in early American political science (Truman 1951, Dahl 1961, Lowi 1979) and on through the study of interest groups and civic associations today. (Skocpol 2003, Berry1999) This dissertation documents the generational shift currently underway in the interest group population, and explores the implications of this change for how “issue publics” engage in political competition. As a whole, we see additional opportunities for motivated citizens to join with like-minded partisans to pursue political ends. The ranks of these “motivated citizens,” however, still encompass only a tiny

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1 I will use these terms interchangeably, as their boundaries are vague if they exist at all.
portion of the American public. Political competition maintains the elite characteristic that it has had throughout American history (see Schudson 1999 for a historical discussion). We also see an expanded array of issue topics receiving at least short-term representation by some association or another, due to the reduced costs of association-building and the multi-issue scope of the new “internet-mediated issue generalists.” And though these political associations are often frustrated in their efforts to affect change in American politics (as political associations have always been), their short-term campaign efforts produce new organizational networks that in turn affect the long-term vote calculus of decision-makers. As one example of this, consider the recently launching of the new progressive Political Action Committee (PAC), Accountability Now.

**Accountability Now**

Accountability Now PAC was formally launched on February 26, 2009. The immediate headlines it garnered are instructive: from the Associated Press, “Bloggeres, Liberal Groups Challenge Centrist Dems,” (Hirschfeld Davis 2009), from the *New York Times*, “Bloggers Create PAC to Recruit Liberal Candidates,” (Rutenberg 2009), from *USA Today*, “Liberal Group Promises Primary Battles,” (Lawrence and Kiely 2009) and from ABC’s online publication, The Note, “Kos to Dems: Toe Populist Line – or Else” (Davis 2009). The brainchild of a collection of prominent bloggers, leaders of major internet-mediated organizations, and one large union organization, Accountability Now has been set up specifically to recruit and support leftwing primary challengers to centrist Democrats in Democrat-heavy districts. Jane Hamsher of the blog *FireDogLake*
describes the practice as “creating a healthy primary market” within the Democratic Party. (Preston 2009) Markos Moulitsas of DailyKos suggests that “The key here is to make sure we keep these incumbents accountable. If their constituents really like them, and their constituents are properly informed about what their congressman is doing, then that congressman [who] is doing his job has nothing to fear.” (Preston 2009) Accountability Now reflects a shift in focus within the “netroots” political community, from electing “more Democrats” to electing “better Democrats.”

Critics and proponents alike draw parallels between Accountability Now and the conservative Club for Growth. The Club for Growth fills a well-recognized niche among rightwing interest groups, threatening centrist Republicans with well-funded primary challengers if they fall out of line on key anti-tax congressional votes. The threat of a bloody primary fight was enough to prompt Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter to switch parties in 2009, in recognition that he would likely be defeated by former Club for Growth chairman Pat Toomey in the state’s closed Republican primary. The Club for Growth is credited with enforcing tremendous party unity during the period of Republican congressional dominance, as it provided the type of credible threat otherwise lacking in America’s weak party system. It is also criticized for targeting centrist Republicans in states where a more conservative Republican would be unable to win election. The leadership of Accountability Now claims that they will avoid this mistake by only targeting Democrats more centrist than their district profile, but it remains to be seen how this will work out. The network of progressive partisans supporting the organization has some experience with this type of effort, having aided Donna Edwards (D-MD04) in her 2008 primary campaign against centrist Democrat Al Wynn and also
having supported Ned Lamont, Jim Webb, and Jon Tester in 2006 Senate primary
campaigns (see chapter 4 for further discussion). What is most noteworthy about the
group at this early stage is that the niche they are filling was previously unoccupied
within the progressive interest group coalition. Challenging Democrats in primaries is
one means of leveraging an interest group’s power, yet this practice has been eschewed
by the longstanding interest group population. With the exception of the Service
Employees International Union (SEIU), the organizations taking part in Accountability
Now are entirely of the new, internet-mediated generation.

The funding and strategy behind Accountability Now surfaced during a short-term
“netroots” advocacy campaign during the summer of 2008. As with the failed Howard
Dean campaign, the initial effort was both noisy and of limited immediate success. At
issue was the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), particularly a specific
provision on telecommunications company immunity which primary candidate Barack
Obama had promised to filibuster. Obama backed off of this promise as he entered the
general election campaign, wanting to prevent it from becoming a major electoral issue
focus. One of his supporters, outraged by this reversal, launched an affinity group on the
MyBO website, titled “President Obama, Please Get FISA Right.” Another publicized
the group in a recommended diary on DailyKos, and the swarm of attention quickly
attracted over 18,000 Obama supporters who agreed to organize thousands of local events
to voice their disappointment. (Cohen 2008, Davis 2008) Impressed by this self-
organized effort, tech scholar Micah Sifry remarked, “The fact is, we’re all entering
completely new territory here. There have always been efforts to influence political
candidates to take or change positions during a campaign (or afterward), but we’ve never
before had a national campaign create an open platform for mobilizing supporters and
then seen a salient chunk of those supporters openly use that platform to challenge the
candidate on a policy position.” (Sifry 2008)

Prominent blogger Glenn Greenwald meanwhile pursued the FISA legislation on
69% of his widely read posts on slate.com. Drawing upon the simmering outrage,
Greenwald partnered with Jane Hamsher to launch a short-term organizing effort,
“BlueAmerica PAC vs Retroactive Immunity.” They raised $349,842 from 5,972 of their
readers, commenters, and contributors via the progressive bundling site ActBlue.com in
the following two weeks, and turned this money to the goal of pressuring several
Democratic leaders through full-page newspaper advertisements and an Independent
Expenditure Campaign. Seeing limited short-term effects, they rebranded the effort
“Accountability Now” and launched an additional single-day “moneybomb” fundraiser
on August 8th which raised an additional $159,166.

As with the Dean campaign, the FISA protesters attracted large numbers of
volunteers and contributions, and this in turn generated media attention. As with the
Dean campaign, the immediate results were disappointing. The FISA legislation passed
without filibuster and Obama’s field program moved forward unencumbered by the brief
set of protests. Internet skeptics could once again count this as an example of much
sound and fury, signifying nothing. But also as with the Dean campaign, we now see
evidence of a sort of sedimentary infrastructural residue left behind by the short-term
campaign efforts. It is too early to say with confidence what the impact of Accountability
Now will be on the Democratic Party network, but certainly it has attracted major
attention from party elites who recognize that the emergence of credible primary threats
from organized leftwing interests can substantially affect the vote calculus of elected
decision-makers. The new generation of internet-mediated organizations proves capable
of nimble, torrential campaign and fundraising activities. These number prove not only
to be more, they also promote different constellations of power and political authority. It
is under the guise of these new structures for collective action that we find the most
significant impacts of the web on American politics.

**Bringing the Organizations Back In: a Community-centric Alternative to the
Technocentric Approach**

The internet, at base, consists of an expanding suite of communication tools and
software platforms, all of which share two fundamental conditions. First is the shift from
a scarce and costly information environment to one where information is both abundant
and cheap. This is commonly referred to as the dramatic reduction in online transaction
costs. Bruce Bimber has referred to it as a change in “information regimes.” (Bimber
2003) Second is the resultant condition of information abundance. The default setting in
online activity is for information to aggregate, rather than dissipate. E-mails, webpages,
and web traffic all leave data trails that can accrue to yield valuable (and sometimes
dangerous) information about personal choice, consumer activity, and mass preferences.

The tendency among internet-related social science researchers has been towards
a technocentric, behavioralist approach to political activity. Researchers ask what impact
YouTube, or the blogosphere, or “e-government” websites have on general political
knowledge or mass participation. They rely upon the well-established survey and
experimental methods to try to isolate the impact that the new communications medium has either on individuals or on the mass public as a whole. This focus on the introduction of new technology as an independent variable leaves little space for question-oriented research investigating the novel capacities emerging under the new information regime. It presupposes that the internet’s political impacts will be visible using the methodological tools developed for studying previous information regimes. Such design choices lead, for instance, to Bimber and Davis’s well-known assertion in 2003 that the internet would have little effect on political campaigns because candidate websites were mostly visited by existing supporters, leading to “reinforcement, not renewal.” (Bimber and Davis 2003) The study was published, of course, just as the Dean campaign was demonstrating all of the novel campaign capacities that emerge once reinforcement becomes so much less costly.

Central to my dissertation is the belief that we gain greater theoretical traction by bringing the organizations back in. As I will discuss in chapter 4, the study of specific technologies is hampered by the fact that, as the web grows and the technologies diffuse to wider audiences with different skills and preferences, the boundaries of the new medium and applications dramatically shift. The blogosphere of 2009 has little in common with the blogosphere of 2002. As various new internet-mediated tools rise to prominence, their most salient impacts on American politics occur as new or existing organizations and communities-of-interest adapt and adopt them. As I will discuss in chapter 2, the case of Wikipedia demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, online participatory communities can invert the traditional logic of collective action, producing an abundance of sophisticated public goods with little concern for free ridership.
Through the solution of mass coordination problems and the introduction of code-based solutions to the challenges of mass engagement, new organizational forms dramatically break from classical assumptions about pressure group mobilization. It is through the study of these new communities of politically-minded citizens – what Taeku Lee refers to as “counterelites” (Lee 2002, pg 10) – that we can observe the most substantial impacts of the internet on American politics.

This community- or organization-centric lens also helps to avoid the pitfall of technological determinism. Technological determinism is the somewhat teleological belief that the introduction of a new technology directly causes the rise and fall of various social arrangements. In so doing, technological determinists mute the importance of actors, institutions, and other forms of power. By focusing on new communities and organizational forms, I intend to take the spotlight off of specific technologies and place it on to the shifting matrix of actors, networks, and institutions. The online information regime creates a new set of opportunities for political mobilization. Those opportunities are seized by political entrepreneurs and used to create new institutions of authority or augment existing institutions. The changes brought about by the internet depend upon the choices made by these entrepreneurs and the communities they bring together. The internet is neither fundamentally a “bottom-up technology” nor fundamentally a “top-down” technology. Rather, internet-mediated communication expands the opportunity set for various types of political, economic, and social activities, and it can be used for a host of different purposes depending upon the collection of policies, norms, and actors making use of it.
Methodology

Given the *unexpected* quality of the internet’s major impacts – defined as the medium’s tendency to enable new patterns of political, economic, and social engagement, leading in turn to novel organizational arrangements and new structures of participation – I have self-consciously designed this research project to provide an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the largest and best-known internet-mediated organizations. The social scientific enterprise includes both theory-building and theory-testing. This study leans toward the former. Care is taken to provide thick description, rule out alternate hypotheses, and phrase theoretical findings in a testable manner. But one reality of the internet’s condition of *information abundance* is that there is such an overwhelming quantity of data (most of it consisting of useless noise) that we cannot responsibly engage in rigorous theory-testing until we know specifically what to look for and what the useful elements of the abundant data signify.

Methodologically, I began with a thorough review of the various, non-overlapping literatures on the topic, and then engaged in grounded theorizing, content analysis, elite interviews, and ethnographic participant observation with each of my cases. This included 6 months of participant-observation with Philly for Change (the Philadelphia affiliate of Democracy for America), attendance at YearlyKos 2007, Netroots Nation 2008, weekly in-person gatherings of “netroots” activists at “Drinking Liberally” events, and interviews with high-ranking staff and volunteers in several organizations. It also included substantial time reading and analyzing blog posts, MoveOn e-mail alerts, and online appeals from various other organizations.
These methods were augmented in a few cases, particularly in chapter 4, concerning the political blogosphere. In that case, I found that answering the descriptive and theoretical research questions required designing my own quantitative system for measuring and ranking the elite political blogosphere. The methods previously employed in the research literature proved outdated, relying upon external datasets that had universally either been discontinued, developed fundamental flaws, or grown so overbroad as to be of little analytic value. The Blogosphere Authority Index is now publicly available at [www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com](http://www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com) and has resulted in two published articles. I include a summary of the methodology in the appendix of this dissertation and draw upon its findings in chapters 4 and 7. Other chapters – particularly chapter 5 – benefited from organizations revealing proprietary data to me with the understanding that it was only for background purposes.

The issue of proprietary or “firewalled” data is a substantial one, worthy of addressing at the outset. Most of the publicly-available data on web traffic, organizational fundraising, and membership patterns is rife with errors. High-quality data is available to individual bloggers and organizations, and this data is shared informally between them with regularity, but the data is never made available for active scrutiny by the research community (often for reasons of protecting industry trade secrets). Blogosphere data is particularly problematic, because both site traffic and hyperlink data have direct impacts on site revenue. This creates a strong financial incentive for talented code-writers to manipulate the system, artificially boosting their rankings. In the ongoing tug-of-war between malicious code-writers and writers of tracking software, the independent researcher will always be a bystander with limited
access to often-questionable data. Among political associations, there exists a widely-known reality that Prospect Direct Mail open rates and associated revenues have “fallen off a cliff” in recent years, but only one industry study empirically verifies this point. I refer to the direct mail decline as “the most widely known secret in the nonprofit universe” in chapter 5, because fundraising professionals willingly to talk openly about the issue, but all of their data technically remains behind organizational firewalls. The data-availability challenge is less problematic for this study given its qualitative emphasis, but the problem will loom larger for future researcher efforts.

**Case Selection**

One theme that will appear continually throughout the dissertation is the “rich get richer” or power law distribution of traffic, hyperlinks, and other measures of influence online. As chapter 2 will demonstrate, this directly leads to the formation of “hubs” online. Simply put, one reason why we have information abundance online is that the medium is anti-geographic in nature – the millions of blogs that have been quickly founded and abandoned do not clutter the landscape, because we traverse the web via hyperlinks and search engines that sort search results based on hyperlink activity. An abandoned blog takes up an infinitesimal amount of server space, and besides that it imposes no costs on anyone. In the absence of geography, web users practice “preferential attachment,” frequently visiting those sites that are commonly-known to be frequently-visited by everyone else.

Thankfully, the development of these “power law hubs” online has a tremendous
simplifying effect on case selection. If one wanted to study search engines or online auctions, the obvious central case would be Google or eBay. Other search engines and online auction sites exist, but these are publicly known as field-defining cases. “Google” is even treated as a verb in the public lexicon. Likewise, my interest is in large-scale, internet-mediated organizations that define their given fields. Size is crucial, because several organizational challenges and technical solutions only become evident within large organizations. Gathering together 5 people online is now “ridiculously easy.” Gathering together 5 million is a different matter entirely. Thanks to the rich-get-richer nature of the medium, the “hub” organizations are easily identified - particularly among the politically-engaged quasi-elites who I am interested in studying. Any such study that ignored DailyKos, MoveOn, or Democracy for America would need to actively defend their lack of inclusion. These are the hubs.

DailyKos is the single largest community blog in America today. As chapter 4 reveals, by one measure of activity, the site is larger than the next 25 largest blogs combined. As an online community-of-interest, with a blog software architecture that actively supports and encourages community participation, the “kossacks” have become almost synonymous with the political “netroots.” Reviled by political elites on the Right, regularly interviewed by the news media, and both appreciated and attacked by various Democratic elites, the DailyKos community more than any other internet-mediated organization forces us to rethink the very definition of “political association.” With self-identifying “kossack” community members, an annual in-person convention, identifiable levels of volunteer participation, and an electoral and legislative agenda for which they aggressively campaign, the difference between DailyKos and an interest group is one of
Based on the organizational structure rather than organizational mission.

Founded in 1998 as an online petition asking Congress to “censure President Clinton [for the Lewinsky scandal] and move on,” MoveOn.org grew in the early 21st century to be the primary outlet for leftwing opposition to President Bush’s political agenda, particularly in the lead-up to the Iraq War. MoveOn’s fundraising, membership, and tactical innovations are substantial enough to nearly invite an independent book project. Widely regarded as not only the largest internet-mediated group, but in fact the largest political association in America today, public knowledge of MoveOn is broad but shallow, making it an essential element of this study.

As previously mentioned, Democracy for America was the brainchild of the Dean for America campaign. Whereas MoveOn has focused on developing a national membership that primarily engages through e-mail, DFA has held to the motto of providing “online tools for offline action.” A major innovator in this field, with several strong local affiliates around the nation, DFA is a particularly important addition to the study because it emphasizes that not all internet-mediated political action imitates MoveOn. It is a common rejoinder among nonprofit advocacy professionals that MoveOn is impressive, but is limited to online “clickthrough” activity, thus leaving several traditional niches unfilled. DFA demonstrates the wider range of successful organizational practices that are being augmented by the lowered transaction costs of the internet. It has become a particularly important case now that the Obama for America political campaign has converted to a chapter-based organization, Organizing for America, actively attempting to replicate and expand upon the “DFA model.”

Two other organizations – Living Liberally and ActBlue – play a similarly
important role in the “netroots” landscape, but do not rise to the level of requiring their
own dissertation chapter. LivingLiberally.com coordinates face-to-face meetings among
the online left through its “Drinking Liberally,” “Screening Liberally,” “Eating
Liberally,” and various other events. Founded in 2003, the organization provides for
informal coordination among the activist left, particularly political bloggers.
ActBlue.com is the previously-referenced fundraising site where bloggers, individuals,
and candidates can launch their own “endorsement” pages and bundle together funds for
candidates and PACs. ActBlue is an essential piece of progressive infrastructure, and
fills an important niche for other internet-mediated political associations, but does not
itself present an organizational model likely to be duplicated elsewhere.

It bears noting at this point that none of the cases outlined above represent the
conservative end of the political spectrum. This is not an oversight on my part, but rather
an indication that the development of large-scale internet-mediated organizations has
occurred almost entirely among self-identifying “progressives.” Chapter 7 addresses the
dearth of conservative online infrastructure, attempting to further derive theoretical
insights from the several failed attempts at building conservative equivalents to MoveOn,
DailyKos, ActBlue, and Democracy for America.

Outline of the Dissertation

The central thesis of this dissertation is that the dramatic reduction in online
transaction costs has enabled major changes in the membership, fundraising, and tactical
repertoires of political associations, leading to a “generation shift” in the interest group
population. Novel forms of political association are taking advantage of the lowered costs and attendant shifts in mass collaboration, actively changing how we structure collective action in American politics. As this intellectual enterprise is primarily concerned with theory-building, part of its added-value comes in uniting several divergent literatures from both within and outside political science, and using these literatures to animate several key “puzzles” for the research community as a whole.

Chapter 2 introduces a theoretical framework for understanding online communities-of-interest. Drawing upon the classical literature on collective action, the chapter discusses the astonishing success of Wikipedia.org, “the encyclopedia anyone can edit.” A public good in both spirit and definition, the abundance of Wikipedia illuminates several changes to mass collaboration and the production of public goods (such as collective action) under the altered constraints of internet-mediated communication. It turns out that when the costs of participation approach zero, participatory communities emerge regardless of free ridership, so long as problems of mass coordination and community development are overcome. The chapter highlights major topics in the “web science” literature and lays out a five-stage institutional development model of these communities-of-interest which proves useful for understanding expressly political internet-mediated groups.

Chapter 3 offers a comparative analysis of how the internet information regime has affected collective action. Through a discussion of the 1984 and 2008 Democratic Primary campaigns – both of which were heavily contested and eventually determined by the “Superdelegate” votes of party leaders – the chapter discusses why interest groups collectively organized a substantial pressure campaign in 2008, while no such organized
public outcry occurred in 1984. Crucially, the organizations involved in the 2008 Superdelegate Transparency Project were entirely of the “internet mediated” generation. The major interest groups of 1984 did not mobilize in either case. After a discussion of competing explanatory hypotheses, the chapter argues that not only does the new generation of interest groups raise more money and mobilize larger numbers, these groups also operate within an expanded “issue space,” leading to the “mobilization of bias” around issues which previously went unrepresented by the pressure group system. Chapter 3 is meant as a bridging chapter, demonstrating that the novel participatory communities discussed in chapter 2 are also having a demonstrable effect on politics.

Chapter 4 makes the case that political blogs – particularly community blogs such as DailyKos – must be understood as quasi-interest groups. In so doing, it challenges the existing literature on political blogging and demonstrates the importance of the community/organization-centric paradigm I emphasize. Technocentric research on the blogosphere has proven unable to keep pace with the changing nature of the medium itself, as expanding communities have introduced new capacities through software code-based solutions and existing institutions have adopted and incorporated blogging into their suite of online offerings. Through the Blogosphere Authority Index and blogspace typology, chapter 4 demonstrates both that the progressive blogosphere is substantially larger than its conservative counterpart and also that the political “netroots” have gained significant authority within the Democratic Party coalition.

Chapter 5 discusses the “MoveOn effect” on the existing interest group population. This chapter, more than any other, illuminates the thesis that we are witnessing a “generation shift” among advocacy organizations. Drawing upon Theda
Skocpol’s work on the history of political associations (2003) and Clayton Christensen’s work on “disruptive innovation” (1997), the chapter discusses MoveOn’s novel approach to membership and fundraising. This approach takes advantage of the change in information regimes, and enables a new political economy of interest group association-building. It supports not only the rise of new, internet-mediated groups, but also presages the decline of the existing interest group population due to changes in the underlying revenue streams. The “MoveOn Effect” refers to the impact of the information regime change on interest groups generally, rather than a causal impact of the one organization on the decline of the others.

Chapter 6 investigates Democracy for America’s efforts at providing “online tools for offline action,” with a particular focus on Philly for Change, the local affiliate which turns out to be among the strongest in their national federation. The chapter outlines both their successes – which parallel an earlier generation of “Democratic Clubs” with a distinctly local, participatory culture – and also the federation’s limitations. Philly for Change serves as a proof-of-existence that local civic associations can be reinvigorated by internet communication, but the group arose from a very specific and difficult-to-replicate set of circumstances. The chapter then delves into the nascent literatures on distributed reputation systems and “proto-“organizational forms before discussing the next wave of web-based technology. The so-called “Mobile Web” is currently blurring the boundaries between online and offline activity, and this is likely in the near future to relax many of the limitations that currently constrain DFA-type organizations.

Chapter 7 then turns attention to the surprising lack of equivalent conservative organizations. It is not the case that the Republican Party coalition has failed to try to
build its own internet-mediated organizations – several high-profile attempts are easily identifiable. Rather, it appears that a set of institutional incentives have led progressives to not only lead the way in developing online infrastructure, but also have prevented conservatives from closing the gap. Chapter 7 discusses the various failed attempts among conservative elites and then introduces three competing explanatory theses: ideological determinism, outparty innovation incentives, and merry pranksters and their digitized wooden shoes. As many of the conditions supporting these theses have just been altered by Obama’s election to the White House, the chapter serves to illuminate clear next steps for the research agenda. The conclusion chapter then summarizes and reviews the contributions of the dissertation project as a whole.

Each of these chapters uses a single case to explore the unforeseen, but substantial, effects that the internet has had on American politics. Viewed as a whole, the dissertation is wide-ranging specifically because the change in information regime has had such major and expansive effects. These impacts have largely been overlooked by the research literature thus far because of their disruptive and unexpected nature. We are seeing changes in how membership is conceived, information is gathered, and funds are raised. We are seeing new networks of influence rise to authority, as political entrepreneurs seize the opportunity to build new organizations and old elites struggle to maintain power in an environment where so many social and economic institutions are being transformed. Many fundamentals of political life remain unchanged; most importantly, American politics remains, as always, an elite-dominated system in which most Americans remain both uninterested and unable to effectively have a voice. But the
structures of collective action through which motivated citizens and issue publics build political power and influence established elites are undergoing tremendous change. This research project helps to identify the nature of these unexpected transformations currently underway.
Chapter 2: Collective Action Reformulated Online

“Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That’s what we’re doing.” – Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia

Wikipedia, “the encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” is a public good, both in definition and in spirit. It clearly meets the classical definition of public goods, being both nonrival (my use of wikipedia does not reduce your ability to use it) and nonexclusive (all people can access wikipedia, regardless of whether they contributed to it). Perhaps more importantly, it is animated by a set of decision-makers and participants who self-consciously develop it as a free, abundant public resource. Founded in 2001, Wikipedia has grown from curious social experiment to the 8th most-visited site on the entire web, receiving more unique visitors per day than the websites of the New York Times, LA Times, Wall Street Journal, MSNBC.com, and the Chicago Tribune combined. And in its success lies a significant puzzle for political scientists. For at least the past 40 years, since the publication of Mancur Olson’s The Logic of Collective Action, we have known with relative certainty that public goods suffer from the “free rider” problem and, except where this free rider problem is overcome, are underprovided to society. With over 10 million articles across 200 languages, Wikipedia has been subject to a wide array of critiques, but “there isn’t enough of it,” has never been among them.

In evaluating the impact of new information technologies on political associations, this chapter will ask the reader to closely consider the case of Wikipedia.
Thought not a political association itself, the case example illustrates a number of core concepts regarding the structure and novel attributes of web-based communication protocols, and of the online communities that such communication has enabled.

Centrally, it demonstrates that the dramatic reduction in the costs of online communication produces a condition of *information abundance* in which the challenge to mass collaboration approximates a coordination game, rather than a free rider problem. The problem of mass coordination is solved through the development of a *power law topology* in which large hub spaces let communities-of-interest engage in collaborative efforts that would have been impossible under previous information regimes. Novel solutions to the collective action problem, and novel structures for collective action, become possible online because of these changes to the costs, abundance, and availability of information. The emerging landscape of collective action fundamentally departs from previous eras in direct relation to the salience of these attributes, and Wikipedia serves as a guiding example for understanding them.

What makes Wikipedia worthy of analysis is the sheer scale of its success. The only websites more frequently-visited than Wikipedia are the search engines/email providers Google, Yahoo, Windows Live/MSN, video sharing site YouTube.com, and social networking site Facebook.com. Unlike these for-profit internet giants (YouTube being a subsidiary of Google), Wikipedia operates with a budget of less than $500,000 and a staff of fewer than a dozen employees (Lih, 2009. Pg 4). A core of 75,000 active volunteer “Wikipedians,” along with 9.5 million registered users and an untold number of anonymous users contribute the bulk of content, citations, and edits. Despite providing little opportunity for fame or recognition to the volunteers, this expanding volunteer
corps has remained resilient against attempts to subvert the site through vandalism or thinly-veiled advertising. A 2007 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 36% of American adult Internet users consult Wikipedia. It is especially popular amongst the well-educated, with 50% of all online Americans who hold a college degree using it as a reference. On a typical day, 8% of online Americans consult Wikipedia, making it more popular than online purchasing, dating websites, setting travel reservations, using chat rooms, and participating in online auctions. (Rainie and Tancer, 2007) This raises the practical question of whether Wikipedia is now so distinct as to be something different, something greater, than an encyclopedia. Consider the following: in the pre-Internet era, what percent of Americans would we suspect consulted an encyclopedia on an average day? Is it likely that looking things up in the Encyclopedia Brittanica has ever been more popular in daily life than purchasing goods or trying to find a date?

Wikipedia’s ascendant growth has made it a standard example among the cross-disciplinary community interested on the internet’s impact on the economy, society, culture, media, and politics. Yochai Benkler treats it as an example of “commons-based peer production” in his 2006 Wealth of Networks, arguing that the lowered transaction costs of the internet allow for the development of a networked information economy in which volunteer-based production can compete with and even outperform firm-based production (Benkler, 2006). Clay Shirky offers the site as a prime example of “organizing without organizations” in his 2008 Here Comes Everybody. (Shirky, 2008) Axel Bruns suggests that production in these web spaces is so distinctive as to require a new term: “produsage” rather than “production.” (Bruns, 2008) Jonathan Zittrain uses it
as a prime example of the principle of “generativity” in *The Future of the Internet – and How to Stop It* (Zittrain, 2008), while David Weinberger uses it to animate his discussion of changing search protocols in *Everything is Miscellaenous* (Weinberger, 2007). The site is more than just an easy example for such authors. As the most mature example of these voluntary online participatory communities, it provides important insights into the possibilities and limitations of other such communities as they move from small-scale to large.

Political scientists have paid less attention to Wikipedia per se, but they have begun to look into the more generic impacts of the internet’s lowered communication costs on online collective action. Arthur Lupia and Gisela Sin (2003) argue that Mancur Olson’s work is “built from historically uncontroversial assumptions about interpersonal communication. Today, evolving technologies are changing communication dynamics in ways that invalidate some of these once uncontroversial assumptions.” They go on to present a formal model that suggests the organizational advantage held by small groups in Olson’s day is muted by online communication, while the selective benefits that many groups were once able to offer as an incentive for participation are occasionally undermined by the open access of the web (disciplinary journals, for instance, now face open-access, free web-based competition). Bruce Bimber, Andrew Flanagin and Cynthia Stohl (2005) likewise attempt to reconceptualize collective action as a phenomenon of “boundary crossing” between public and private domains, an indication of how near-costless participation in online petitions and other web-based pressure tactics has become.

This chapter will use the Wikipedia example to synthesize several core concepts regarding internet-mediated communication. Centrally, it will demonstrate that the
structure of the web supports the development of large-scale communities that, benefiting from strong “network effects,” can produce tremendous public goods on the basis of surplus labor contributions from hobbyists and partisans. When the costs of participation approach zero, a more complete demand curve for political engagement is revealed. These web-based communities of interest are the building blocks for the various novel political associations discussed through the rest of the dissertation. An additional goal of the chapter is to offer a basic descriptive model of the growth of such communities, borrowing from the literature on the diffusion of innovations. This model will be of particular use in understanding just how dominant the new generation of large-scale internet-mediated organizations is, and the parameters under which they should succeed or fail.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section uses the puzzling case of Wikipedia to illustrate several principles of the internet-mediated information regime. The second describes the growth of wikipedia according to a five stage process linked to standard adopter classes in the diffusion literature, paying particular attention to the institutional development challenges present at each stage. The third discusses the implications of this institutional development model for the stability of power law hubs over time, with a particular eye toward political associations.

The Success of Wikipedia: Easy, Fun, and Full of Network Effects

Wikipedia was founded in 2001 after Nupedia, an attempt at producing an online encyclopedia based on traditional expert-produced and –reviewed contributions, failed to
gather momentum. Jimmy Wales had launched Nupedia as an open-access competitor to pricey encyclopedias like *Britannica*. His expectation was that the speed and ease of email communication could lower the costs of producing a high-quality encyclopedia, making the information free for all visitors.\(^2\) Nupedia was to be expert-led, with a traditional (and daunting) seven-stage peer-review and editing process. What Wales and his collaborator Larry Sanger learned was that the increased speed of e-mail alone does little to transform production processes. The hefty editing process resulted in numerous bottlenecks, leading to an estimated 25 articles in its first three years. As academic journal editors have likewise learned, moving from the fax, phone, and mail systems to digital communication alleviates *some* elements of peer review and content production, but the overall savings prove marginal. In attempting to radically simplify the production process, Wales and Sanger turned to the “wiki” (from the Hawaiian word “wikiwiki,” translating directly to “fast” or “speedy”) software platform. Wiki software code enables open content creation and peer editing. Any user with access (and on Wikipedia, most articles are accessible by all) can click an “edit this” button, make changes to the document, and have those changes instantly available to other users. Past versions are automatically archived and viewable, making such experimentation a low-risk affair.

Developer Larry Sanger wrote a memo to the two-thousand member Nupedia mailing list at the launch of the wiki-based site, saying, “Humor me. Go there and add a little article. It will take all of five or ten minutes.” (Shirky, pg 113) With the bottlenecks eliminated, over 1,000 articles were written within a month, and 10,000 were

\(^2\) Nupedia, unlike Wikipedia, was designed as a for-profit venture of Wales’s company, Bomis.com. While entries were to be free, the site was intended to generate revenue through ad sales. Wikipedia was eventually launched as a separate nonprofit after a controversy among volunteer “wikipedians” over whether the company would one day profit from their free labor.
written within nine months. Clay Shirky describes this as a general shift enabled by the internet-based information regime: from “filter, then publish,” to “publish, then filter.” (Shirky, chapter 4) Print-based publication is costly and (thus) scarce. Firms are necessary to provide editorial and quality-control decisions at the front end, ensuring that the final product is well-written and attractive to a paying audience. Comparatively, Shirky notes that web-based publication is “ridiculously easy.” Indeed, ever-expanding transistor capacity and server space render the web an abundant information environment where point-to-point communication (e-mail) can happen near instantaneously and self-publication is free. Wikipedia could not exist without internet-mediated communication, and moreover it could only exist through the embrace of novel alternatives to traditional production practices. Faster and cheaper communications media alone produce little change, but they create the possibility for novel structures for mass collaboration and collective action.

The ease of publishing online may be self-evident, but that is a far cry from assuring high-quality encyclopedia entries. Indeed, Wikipedia’s quick rise in popularity was accompanied by an avalanche of skepticism regarding the quality of the new-entrant encyclopedia. The basic criticism could be summarized as, “Wikipedia is free, and worth every penny.” Jim Giles published a 2005 study in Nature magazine challenging this claim through a comparison of Wikipedia and the Encyclopedia Britannica. Peer reviewers recruited by Nature found an average of 4 inaccuracies per Wikipedia article, and 3 per equivalent Britannica articles (Giles, 2005). This led to a back-and-forth firestorm, with Britannica staff criticizing the study and demanding a retraction. Nature offered a clarification of its methodology, but stood by the study and refused to retract it. Physicist
Bernardo Huberman has since conducted his own research on Wikipedia articles, finding a strong correlation between the number of edits a Wikipedia article receives and the accuracy and writing quality of the article (Huberman 2007). Put another way, the more contributors a Wikipedia article receives, the higher its accuracy and the better the writing. This is not entirely intuitive – certainly, anonymous visitors can and do engage in “graffiti” attempts on Wikipedia pages, and motivated partisans attempt to distort pages to favor their point of view. The site has developed both a set of community norms and practical computer code that lead contributions to have a net-positive effect.

Jonathan Zittrain, the co-founder of Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, traces the success of Wikipedia to three key attributes. The first is what he colorfully terms “verkeersbordvrij,” from an unusual and surprisingly successful experiment in traffic management in the Dutch city of Drachten (Zittrain, pps 127-130). Drachten has done away with traffic signs, parking meters, and parking spaces, instead setting a few minimalistic traffic rules and asking citizens to mindfully operate their cars when interacting with one another. Likewise, Wikipedia began with a bare set of basic rules – (1) articles should display a neutral point of view (NPOV), (2) no copyright infringement, and (3) ignore any rules if they get in the way of building a great encyclopedia – and relied on the Wikipedia community to mindfully work them out, developing additional rules and protocols as needed. As Jimmy Wales has remarked, “Generally we find most people out there on the Internet are good. It’s one of the wonderful humanitarian discoveries in Wikipedia, that most people only want to help us

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3 Today, the three rules have been expanded to “five pillars:” (1) Wikipedia is an encyclopedia. (2) Wikipedia has a neutral point of view. (3) Wikipedia is free content. (4) Wikipedia has a code of conduct. (5) Wikipedia does not have firm rules.
build this free nonprofit charitable resource.” Additional rules have been added over time to manage controversies and improve site quality, but these principles remain at its core. The wiki software code and abundant server space are necessary conditions for this organizing structure. The code lets any community member or passerby offer positive contributions, small or large, while saving past versions for easy review. Graffiti attempts or biased contributions to an article can thus be removed from the page with a simple click of the “revert to past draft” button. “Bias” and “neutrality” are, of course, terms of art rather than an exact science, but the second attribute helps the community to approximate neutrality rather effectively.

The second attribute is the inclusion of a “discussion page” alongside every main Wikipedia page. This is a space for Wikipedians to explain and justify their changes, discuss article quality, and engage in deliberation and disagreement over controversial topics without cluttering the main page. Major edits made without explanation and justification are likely to be reverted, providing an incentive for thoughtful, deliberative engagement. Given the participation of hobbyist communities, many heated “flame war” exchanges occur over topics that are obscure to the mainstream, but passionately debated within a community-of-interest. This is an example of what Lawrence Lessig terms “Code-based governance.” (Lessig 1999) Within cyberspace, many of the decisions about how people can and should interact are determined not through government regulation, but by the development of supportive code. Indeed, the original wiki platform did not feature such pages, and after substantial discussion and debate over Wikipedia’s listserv, community member Clifford Adams customized the software to create these pages. (Lih, pp 65-66) One challenge for scholars interested in studying the web’s impact

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4 Excerpted from a December 5, 2005 interview with CNN. Quotation from Lin, pg 112.
on society is that new code is constantly being developed, and the seemingly impossible dilemmas of 2002 are rendered easily solvable by the new software architecture of 2009. Without discussion pages, Wikipedia would face steep challenges in supporting the NPOV norm. Rather than developing complex organizational bylaws and chains of command, Wikipedia and other online spaces incorporate new Code-based solutions that support community norms by making positive contributions easier and negative contributions harder.

The third attribute of Wikipedia’s success is the core of initial editors – what I will refer to later in this chapter as an actively engaged set of “lead adopters.” Wikipedia needed this initial group of committed, substantively knowledgeable, and technically skilled contributors because the value of the site is almost entirely derived from its network externalities. Consider the value of Wikipedia to the fifth contributor to visit the site compared to its value to the 5,000,000th contributor. Early on, the site is error-prone, full of topical holes, and of questionable quality. Later, it benefits from a phenomenon first described by internet ethnographer Eric Raymond when discussing the success of the open source software movement: “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow.” (Raymond, 2001) Raymond had found that open source software is successful in direct proportion to the size of its community, because a software bug that seems tremendously difficult to one person is likely to be a simple fix for someone else. This network effects phenomenon has received various treatments among computer scientists, the best known being “Reed’s Law,” from David Reed, which suggests that the value of internet-mediated communities rises exponentially with the size of the network (because each additional member can engage in one-to-one or many-to-many communication,
increasing the number of possible groups by one exponent). (Reed, 1999).

Jimmy Wales explains the success of Wikipedia in similar terms: “the technology required for Wikipedia is essentially rather simple. You need a database, you need a Web server, you need a Web browser, and you need the wiki editing concept. While the wiki concepts was invented in 1995 by Ward Cunningham, Wikipedia didn’t start until 2001. So all of the technology, including the idea of a wiki, which is a web site that anyone can edit, has existed since 1995. …The answer is, Wikipedia isn’t a technological innovation at all; it’s a social innovation. What we figured out between 1995 and 2001 was not new technology. We had the Web already, but we discovered the basic idea of how to organize a community.” (Lih, pg xvi) This notion of Wikipedia as a community is of crucial importance for understanding the new generation of internet-mediated political associations. As the site has grown, it has added additional rules (such as the citation requirement colorfully depicted in the “Wikipedia Protester” comic in figure 1 below) and it has empowered a layer of “superusers” with additional editing privileges as a reward for their positive contributions and as a means of engaging in distributed community management. At base though, what we find with Wikipedia is the same phenomenon Yochai Benkler describes in his article on the open source Linux operating system, “Coase’s Penguin,” and further elaborates in his booklength treatment, *The Wealth of Networks*. The lowered transaction costs of the internet enable elaborate structures of peer-production, often through armies of committed volunteers, that compete with and occasionally outperform firm-based production. This is not to say that hierarchically-managed firms will disappear in a sea of voluntarism – there are substantial limitations to “crowdsourcing” – but it is to say that the change in information
regimes enables communities to engage in sophisticated mass collaboration, particularly in those areas of the web where large communities, effective norms, and supportive code have managed to congeal. Wikipedia has attracted such broad scholarly interest because it challenges not only the encyclopedia industry, but the foundational literature in political economy on the logic of the firm (Coase 1937, also Piore and Sabel, 1984).

Figure 2-1: Comic Titled “Wikipedia Protester,” [www.xkcd.com](http://www.xkcd.com)

Returning to the initial puzzle, none of this has necessarily explained why the public good known as Wikipedia avoids the pitfall of free ridership as laid out by Olson and others. One answer to that issue is to note that the great majority of Wikipedia visitors do in fact free ride. Wikipedia globally has about 75,000 “active” members. These are registered users who provide 5 or more edits to the site per month. About 10% of these are “very active” wikipedians, contributing 100 or more edits per month. Given
the site’s overwhelming popularity, with 8% of all Internet users visiting daily, we can extrapolate that for every active content-producer, there are tends of thousands who free ride on the public good. Most users of Wikipedia do not take part in the editing or article-writing process, despite the tremendously low barriers to entry. So free ridership does indeed occur on Wikipedia, but it is not the problem that we would be led to expect. No one would likely say that the central issue for Wikipedia is that it is underprovided.

Clay Shirky, Benkler, and Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl all converge on a similar point: when the costs of participation in collective action approach zero, we face a condition of abundance rather than one of scarcity. People have limited time and limited money, but they have virtually unlimited opinions. What we see on Wikipedia is essentially a multifaceted version of what Olson termed a “privileged group.” When the good in question is not money or time, but rather specialized information, we find that there are plenty of people who are “wealthy” in some form or another. Put another way, most everyone has a hobby. Hobbyists have always happily incurred the “costs” of discussing their topic of interest, often in excruciating detail. When they do so on Wikipedia, they provide exactly as much of the public good (information about video games, the history of knitting, etc) as they themselves want, and this provides more than enough for inquiring minds.

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6 Olson suggests that two types of group will face minimal free rider problems. Small groups will be able to identify non-contributors, creating reputation pressures and incentives to recognizably participate (Chong, 1991, develops this case further with regards to social movements). Privileged groups feature a single wealthy participant who will provide as much of the public good as he or she likes regardless. If the wealthy patron has a strong enough taste for the good, all will be satisfied regardless of free riding.
This is not to say that mass collaboration, collective action, and the provision of online public goods is seamless and assured. Rather, it is to say that the shift from slower, costlier information regimes to an instantaneous, abundant online information regime creates a different dilemma for social engagement. Specifically, the geography-less, abundant online space creates tremendous challenges in search. How are we to identify good, verifiable information from bad? How are motivated partisans or hobbyists to find each other with no central square, and how are onlookers to take advantage of the fruits of these hobbyists’ labor? Wikipedia critically benefits from the network externalities of all these hobbyist communities gathering in the same, identifiable location. If five sites all competed for the same niche of “online information hub,” the sum of those parts would be far less than the whole found on Wikipedia.

Indeed, initial developer Larry Sanger eventually left Wikipedia and started his own site, Citizendium.org, because he felt there should be a greater role for credentialed experts (Bruns 2008). In two and a half years, the site has built a small community of 800 contributors, authoring 10,700 articles in total and attracting a fraction of a percent of Wikipedia’s audience. For this reason, I depart from Lupia and Sin (2003) and Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2005). I would suggest that the critical challenge to online collective action is not public-private boundary-crossing or the declining value of selective incentives, but rather solving the search dilemma under conditions of abundance – a challenge which approximates a mass coordination game.

**Hyperlinks, Hubs and Power Laws: An Iterated Solution to the Search Dilemma**

Before there was the World Wide Web, there was the hyperlink. Hyperlinks provide the networked structure of the internet, with clickable links embedded in text which direct a reader from one page of text to another. A solitary web page with no inbound or outbound hyperlinks lies, in a very real sense, at the periphery of the World Wide Web. Though such a page is accessible through direct input of its Uniform Resource Locator (URL: the text-based “address” appearing after http:// in the address line of a web page), one would be unlikely to stumble upon it through everyday surfing.

The hyperlink calls to attention two dimensions of the internet’s novel search puzzle. First is the anti-geographic nature of the medium itself. Search in the offline world is aided by landscape-imposed scarcity. Towns and cities have physical centers and peripheries, and this translates directly into the price system of the real estate market. There is a cost imposed by being out-of-the-way, either for residencies (commute) or commercial zones (foot traffic and shopping districts). Thus restaurants tend to be grouped together, one can generally expect to find a pawn shop in close proximity to a race track, and proximity to desirable locations translates into higher rents. On the internet, by contrast, there is no physical landscape to traverse. As one example, consider the hundreds of millions of blogs have been created and then abandoned. This provides the slightest inconvenience for Google, the company upon whom’s server farms most of these sites are hosted, and whose search algorithm must handle them, but the realities of increasing bandwidth and transistor capacity relegates this to a minor nuisance at most. From the user’s perspective, dead blogs and abandoned web pages do not litter any landscape, because the Web is composed of hyperlinks and we are never forced to
traverse their pages in our daily online pursuits. An abandoned blog goes unhyperlinked, and thus floats to the periphery of web “space.” The lack of geography on the web is a substantial component of the condition of information abundance found online. There is no such thing as “location, location, location.”

The second dimension is the challenge for like-minded hobbyists of finding each other. Internet communication is instantaneous, but also asynchronous. One can post a message to a discussion board or send an e-mail alert and it will be immediately viewable, but as opposed to a phone or face-to-face conversation, replies do not necessarily come in real time. Lacking town centers, where are hobbyists, partisans, or other communities-of-interest to gather? With no town center, what good is a self-publishing soapbox, anyway? This is closely related with the problem of identifying verifiable information on the web. In essence, the internet lowers the communication costs for all types of publication and online group interaction. Scarcity provides some baseline assurance that a group or information source is reliable; the very act of publication or gathering indicates an ability to surpass some minimal cost threshold. Under the condition of abundance, how are we to tell reliable information from speculation? How are we to find other like-minded participants when there literally is no “there” there?

Hyperlinks provide the kernel of the solution, with Google’s PageRank algorithm acting as pioneer. Prior to PageRank, internet search was tremendously problematic. The two standard solutions were to provide a top-down directory of all web pages or offer a search mechanism based on the appearance of keywords on a webpage. The problem with directories was twofold. First, the scale and rapid growth of the web meant
that no directory could manage to be comprehensive. Second, directories are built around
meta-level organizing assumptions about the categories a user will wish to search
through. Thus AOL.com, for instance, could provide a list of topical headings such as
“sports,” “news,” and “entertainment” and then further divide the categories into fine-
grained subheadings. But a user interested in new banjo strings and information on an
upcoming jamboree would have little idea where to begin. Keyword-based search could
help with this, organizing results based on the combination of “banjo strings,” and
“jamboree,” but separating new information from old becomes problematic, and such
keyword searches are easily gamed. Google’s ingenious solution was to include
hyperlink data in the presentation of search results. Pages with numerous hyperlinks,
particularly from other sites that are highly-linked, appear at the top of the results page.
Thus google lets web users “vote with their feet,” in a sense, indicating the quality of an
information source based on the number of web users who have chosen to link to it. The
simple inclusion of this network data in their search results is what led Google to rise
from a tiny startup, three-person operation to the largest company in the online space.
(Vise and Malseed 2005)

Physicist Albert Lazlo Barabasi offered an important early treatment of these link
patterns on the web in a 1999 article in Nature Magazine. As he would later describe in
his public-audience book, Linked, Barabasi was interested in the distribution of links
among web pages. His early assumption had been that link distribution would
approximate a normal curve, indicating that the web could be understood mathematically
using the standard assumptions of random graph theory. Instead, Barabasi found that link
patterns followed a heavily skewed distribution approximating a power law or Pareto
distribution. Vilfredo Pareto initially observed these distributions in his study of wealth disparity in European societies, leading them to often be termed “rich get richer” or “80-20” distributions, since he found that 80% of a society’s wealth was held by the top 20%, and that the greater the level of income, the more stark the disparity. Power laws are based on a decaying function in which the Nth-largest node is 1/Nth the size of the largest node. (Barabasi 2003) Clay Shirky and Matthew Hindman produced separate studies in 2003 demonstrating that the blogosphere in particular displays power law tendencies in its hyperlink distribution, leading to the emergence of an “A-list” or elite status among early political bloggers. Though there has been some debate as to whether these link patterns are a power law or some other heavily-skewed distribution (Drezner and Farrell 2008), what is of particular interest here is the mechanism that Barabasi tells us produces power law distributions.

Barabasi demonstrates in his article that power law distributions emerge in a network simulation when two simple conditions are present: (1) growth and (2) preferential attachment. Simply put, if a network is growing and new links between nodes are determined based upon the preferences of their observable neighbors, then a set of “hubs” will develop over time, as the link-rich are more likely to gain additional links, further increasing link disparity over time and, critically, developing a power law distribution. Growth plus preferential attachment leads to the emergence of power law hubs. This is crucial to the question before us in this chapter, because it serves as an iterated solution to the mass coordination problem we find online.

Let’s say you are interested in discussing left-wing politics. Living in a conservative rural town, you would like to turn online in order to find other people with
similar interests. Where do you go? Where are they? The previously-mentioned lack of geography provides a dilemma. You have no strong preference regarding the location of the conversation, and neither do the other members of your nascent community-of-interest. Your interest is in finding the same “place” online (and, later, in the place providing supportive environment for healthy, spam- and “troll-free discussion and possibly tools for further collaboration). This is a classical example of a coordination game, in which actors have neutral preference rankings among options, but wish to arrive at the same solution as one another. In a single-iteration coordination game, this can be solved through sequential action: the first actor makes an arbitrary decision and all others follow suit. If actors move simultaneously, or without knowledge of each other’s actions, the problem becomes far more challenging. But in an iterated coordination game, preferential attachment emerges as a viable and simple solution. In particular, a google search will reveal the most popular spaces where like-minded people are already meeting. Rather than selecting an online forum, blog, wiki, etc at random and hoping that a community-of-interest will show up, each additional latent community member can choose to rely on the actions of those who came before them. This leads to the emergence of power-law hubs, and a general principle that I apply throughout my case selection in this study: that large hub spaces online are different than small spaces. The topology of the web, as it has grown over time, is ruled by power-law hubs such as eBay, Wikipedia, DailyKos, YouTube, MoveOn, and Facebook. Each of these “web 2.0” spaces offer value to their users in direct proportion to the network effects provided by large crowds of similar users. Online hub spaces move through identifiable phases of institutional development as they diffuse through the user population and face challenges
related to scale and changing demographics and interests of different user classes.

Chris Anderson helpfully describes these online power law distributions in his 2006 book *The Long Tail*. Identifying the lowered transaction costs of the internet as revealing a more complete demand curve in preferences for music, television, and other goods, Anderson suggests that the internet’s central impact on various industries will be the emergence of a few large-scale hubs (“the short head” of a power law distribution) and an abundance of small-scale niche sites (“the long tail” of such a distribution). Though Anderson misdiagnoses the total market share such niche sites capture, he correctly notes that lowered transaction costs and abundance-related search dilemmas produces an ecology of hubs and niches rather than an ecology of multiple, similar-sized competing firms. Chapter 5 in particular will discuss the important implications of the Long Tail/preferential attachment thesis for ideologically-related political associations. The rest of chapter 2 will be devoted to two questions closely related to this hub-based information ecology. First, it will describe a five-stage development process that Wikipedia and other large web spaces move through as they scale up and diffuse through the online population. Second, it will discuss the impermanence of any one particular hub over time, using the five-stage develop process to illustrate moments when hub spaces can fail to overcome institutional development challenges, leading to their dissolution or replacement. This second point provides the theoretical backdrop for much of chapter 7, which discusses the dearth of conservative online political infrastructure.

**Institutional Development of Hub Communities: A Five-Stage Adopter Class Model**
Wikipedia benefits from the power law topology of the Internet, developing a large community of participants, active and passive, and benefiting from the substantial network externalities that they provide. The rise from nascent startup to power law hub did not occur in a smooth progression, though. Wikipedia was able to succeed because its leadership skillfully and artfully moved it through a predictable series of development challenges that occurred as the community grew and changed. All such internet-mediated community spaces move through the same diffusion process as virtually any other new product or innovation: (1) beginning with a tiny group of lead adopters who co-create the good, (2) expanding to a larger early adopter class which is highly motivated but less technically skilled, (3) launching into the much larger early majority class, whose motivation and skill level is more varied and whose size pressures the system to adapt, (4) adopting protections against spammers and malicious attacks as the site attracts the late majority class and becomes recognized as “valuable online real estate,” and (5) dealing with challenges to institutional power structures as growth slows at the laggard phase and questions regarding voice and equality rise to the fore. These stages are of particular interest because they accord both with Wikipedia’s experience and with the longstanding literature on diffusion of innovations. (Rogers 2003) If Chris Anderson, Mattthew Hindman, and others are correct about the stability of power law hub sites online, then there can only be a small number of these online communities-of-interest, and their development pattern is itself a topic worthy of investigation.

A Brief Overview of the Diffusion Literature
The definitive text regarding diffusion research is *Diffusion of Innovations* by Everett Rogers. First published in 1962, the book is now in its fifth edition and has been cited over 19,000 times,\(^8\) a testament to Rogers’s longstanding impact on the field. Rogers notes that ideas, farm products, viruses, and a whole range of other innovations fit a standard “S-curve” as they diffuse through a community over time. Figure 2-2 offers a graphical representation of the S-curve, along with the five traditional adopter classes. Eric Von Hippel relabels the “innovators” as “lead adopters” in his book, *Democratizing Innovation*. He notes in that work that the first tiny group of adopters often help to co-create the good, repurposing it and providing feedback to the original firms or labs who are releasing the new product. This is particularly true in the computer industry, with beta-testers providing feedback to proprietary software companies and open-source programmers actively participating in the software development process. Following Von Hippel, I use the term “lead adopters” rather than “innovators” here (Von Hippel 2005). Note the relative size of the five adopter classes, with lead adopters being the smallest group, the early and late majorities making up the bulk of the population, and early adopters and laggards representing 13.5% and 16% of the population apiece respectively. This is based on an assumption that time-of-adoption follows a normal curve, with the early and late majorities covering one standard deviation from the mean, early adopters representing the second standard deviation to the left of the mean, lead adopters representing 2+ standard deviations to the left and laggards representing all adoptions occurring more than one standard deviation to the right. (Rogers, pg 281)

\(^8\) Obtained through Google Scholar: [http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&lr=&cites=7511022991152445218](http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&lr=&cites=7511022991152445218)
One of the most important findings from the diffusion literature is that these adopter classes are demographically distinct from one another. Survey research has routinely found that younger, wealthier, better educated, and more “cosmopolitan” members of society have a stronger taste for innovation than their neighbors (Rogers, pps 272-282). Lead adopters and early adopters tend to have peer networks that span wide geographies, exposing them to new ideas and innovations long before their neighbors do. Thomas Valente offers a further advancement on this notion of separate adopter classes

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9 Image obtained through google images: [http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.cyfm.net/articles/images/S-CurveDetail.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.cyfm.net/article.php%3Farticle%3DDont_Good_Ideas_Fly.html&h=900&w=900&sz=67&hl=en&start=4&sig2=aXHLBuRCvt8cFz6sdhO5Ag&tbm id=cAFVuhipoWeM&tnb=146&tnw=146&ei=trjzR6K_FYyeufesIgB&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dcurve%2B%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26safe%3DofI%26sa%3DG](http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.cyfm.net/articles/images/S-CurveDetail.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.cyfm.net/article.php%3Farticle%3DDont_Good_Ideas_Fly.html&h=900&w=900&sz=67&hl=en&start=4&sig2=aXHLBuRCvt8cFz6sdhO5Ag&tbm id=cAFVuhipoWeM&tnb=146&tnw=146&ei=trjzR6K_FYyeufesIgB&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dcurve%2B%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26safe%3DofI%26sa%3DG)
in *Network Models of the Diffusion of Innovation*. Valente unites the longstanding diffusion research tradition with the emerging field of social network analysis, treating actors in a community as nodes in a network with varying adoption thresholds. He goes on to identify three critical mass points: one at the shift from early adopters to early majority, a second at the pivot point between early and late majority, and the third at the shift from late majority to laggards. (Valente 1995) This approach is particularly valuable because it suggests that not only are there differences between adopter classes, but there are also temporal differences between the various phases of adoption.

It is also worth noting at this point a methodological difficulty in the diffusion and networks literatures. As Wasserman and Faust note in their text, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, population definition is a crucial and troubling issue. (Wasserman and Faust 1994 pps 30-35) For early diffusion researchers studying farm implements, the population under study would be farmers in an identifiable community. For later research on drug development, the population would be medical doctors with a shared specialty and overlapping memberships in the American Medical Association. What is the population of potential Wikipedians, though? Looking ahead to the political associations discussed in later chapters, what is the population of potential DailyKos readers or MoveOn members? Boundary definition can only be determined in retrospect for these groups, rendering social network analysis useful for theoretical exercises, but presenting steep data challenges for more quantitative work. For this reason, I use the diffusion and social networks literatures as a starting point for my descriptive model of institutional development in online communities-of-interest, but do not develop the model as a social network study per se. I am of the opinion that, at
present, the data problems are insurmountably large.

Institutional Development Challenges Present at Each Adoption Stage

What should be clear from the diffusion of innovation literature is that the 5th Wikipedian is substantively different from the 5,000,000th Wikipedian. They have different backgrounds, different interests in the site, and different needs of the site architecture. The fifth Wikipedian is co-creating the online space. She is likely involved in writing software code or is particularly devoted to the creation of an open encyclopedia. The five-millionth Wikipedian is visiting an established online space, looking up information of their own, and eventually finding enough value in the space to add a few edits of his own. Effective launch of one of these communities, which I will hereafter term “network-enhanced goods” must move through five distinct phases: (1) initial launch, (2) reaching critical mass, (3) managing the influx of a mass public, (4) defending norms against newcomers, and (5) institutionalizing authority. I will discuss each stage in turn below:

Stage 1: Initial Launch

Recall again Jimmy Wales’s suggestion that the technology behind Wikipedia was both simple and available for years prior to the launch of the site. The success of Wikipedia was a story of community-building. If Wales and Sanger had announced Wikipedia with an aggressive television and newspaper advertising campaign, the site
would have been an almost guaranteed failure. The mass audience would have visited an empty vessel populated by a few anonymous (and likely erroneous) entries, turned around, and never come back. But the initial Nupedia list gave them a small set of highly-motivated participants who could choose to contribute to the site because they individually found it a fascinating and worthwhile project. Their “adoption threshold” in the language of Valente, was tremendously low. The site also had the early blessing of Richard Stallman, founder of the Free Software Foundation and legend within the open source software community, and received an influx of tech-savvy participants through early discussion on the Slashdot.org discussion forum, described by Andrew Lih as “a salon for the technical elite and a grand senate of the computing community.” (Lih, pg 67)

The attention of this lead adopter community is itself a scarce resource: they are, as a whole, well educated, urbane technology and academic professionals, with time for a few interesting side projects and a dense network of social ties. Benkler and Stephen Weber note that the personal incentive for these individuals lies in a combination of reputation-building incentives, socio-psychological incentives, and hedonic personal gratification at solving interesting puzzles (Benkler 2006. Weber 2004) Any online community-of-interest must attract a sizeable number of these lead-adopting co-creators, and that in turn means providing them with the freedom to make changes and provide input to the system. Internet communication may exist in an environment of information abundance, but the interest of these elites is a scarce and valuable resource, best attracted through technology conferences, highly-technical listserv discussion groups, and other traditional networking events that feature high barriers-to-entry. Though the identity of
the lead-adopter community will vary from online community to online community (the lead adopters who populated the early political blogosphere were not the same people who populated early wikipedia), they are invariably drawn from existing networks of influence – the underdefined “policy networks” discussed in the policy agendas literature, for instance (Kingdon 1984).

Stage 2: Reaching Critical Mass

“User-generated content,” like “web 2.0,” is an internet buzzword coming out of the marketing world that has taken on substantial meaning. Web 2.0 can be roughly defined as people finding each other online, whereas Web 1.0 consisted of people finding information online (“the information superhighway). User-generated content refers to comments, information, conversation, or multimedia content that come not from top-down management, but from bottom-up, voluntary production. Several of the major online spaces (circa 2009) serve to aggregate and sort such content, including FaceBook (publicly articulated social network information), YouTube (video sharing), Flickr (photo sharing), the large community blogs, and of course Wikipedia. To the extent that internet mediated political associations rely on channeling the participation and interaction of their communities-of-interest, they likewise fit into this category. Critical mass refers to the point at which a site is receiving enough user-generated content that the network externalities produced exceed the interest threshold for the mass of less-motivated web surfers. Put another way, at some point Wikipedia has enough content to maintain the interest of people who do not self-identify as “techie” or “encyclopedia junkie.” The
addition of this larger swath of the public massively expands the community. As the nascent version of any of these sites expands into this early adopter phase, it must settle a series of technical and normative questions regarding how to handle growth and community contribution.

In Wikipedia’s case, this included some complicated server load issues (Lih, pps 77-79) in 2004, as the number of total English-language articles surpassed 100,000 (about the size of the Encyclopedia Britannica) and increased traffic grew to the point where the site would often crash. The involvement of technical elites was critical to solving these problems, and all growing online communities must either attract the sustained interest of the open source community or maintain a large budget for proprietary software solutions to this aspect of scaling. Lih records that, in the same time period, “because the community was growing so quickly, the process of forming consensus by email did not scale.” (Lih, pg 95) The consensus and co-creation practices that were necessary to attract and keep the lead adopter community had to be modified in order to allow for the early adopters, who by and large displayed a keen interest in the system, but were less technically experienced and lacked deep existing network ties with one another. Wikipedia responded by creating a distributed moderation system of superuser “administrators,” (such reputation systems will be discussed in detail in chapter 6) moving mailing list-based discussion to a separate section of the wiki dubbed the “village pump.” As Wikipedia attracted enough user-generated content to become self-sustaining, then, the system had to adopt new Code-based solutions to the surge of traffic.

Stage 3: Managing the Influx of a Mass Public
As the site reaches Valente’s first critical mass point (Valente 1995), it must deal both with a tremendous surge in traffic/participation and also adapt to a mass public that does not share the particular interests of the lead and early adopters. While lead adopters are contacted through existing social/professional network ties, and early adopters are contacted through niche media outlets (coverage in Wired magazine being particular coveted by many social media ventures at this stage), the shift to early majority is often accompanied by coverage in traditional media venues. Wikipedia had attracted a few brief mentions in the mainstream media during its first few years, but its breakthrough moment occurred during a well-publicized controversy in December, 2005. John Seigenthaler, former editor of The Tennessean newspaper, noticed some incorrect and libelous information posted in his Wikipedia entry. Seigenthaler contacted the editors, who immediately changed it and apologized, but Seigenthaler went on to write a scathing Op-Ed for USA Today on Wikipedia’s unreliability regardless. The Op-Ed produced ripple effects, with other television and newspaper outlets writing stories about the story. (Seelye, 2005) For millions of Americans, this coverage was their first introduction to the site’s existence, and the negative news served as free site publicity that significantly increased traffic and content-creation.

In the history of Wikipedia, this is referred to as “the Seigenthaler effect.” Figure 3 demonstrates the growth in Wikipedia page views pre- and post-Seigenthaler Op-ed. The upward trend in views continued unabated, as Wikipedia grew to its present-day status as the 7th or 8th most-visited website in the world. This sustained growth would not be possible prior to the normative and technical problem-solving occurring in stage 2 –
the site would lack a vibrant community and also lack the capacity to deal with the sudden influx of users. As-is, the arrival of the early majority signaled a change in the character of the site, as the culture of “ignore any rules that get in the way” had to stand up to the rush of onlookers less sure of their co-creating skills and more interested in a simple set of guidelines for what can and cannot be done. It is generally during this third stage that many of the lead adopters, faced with changing community norms and an increasingly noisy environment, depart for some new project or create their own sublist, complaining about how the community has been degraded by the onrushing newcomers (Shirky 2008).


Figure 3: Growth of Wikipedia Page views pre- and post-Seigenthaler Op-Ed

Stage 4: Defending Norms Against Newcomers

As the online community passes Valente’s second inflection point, growth is at its

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highest rate and the network externalities have rendered the space a clear power law hub. At this point, the site becomes known as “valuable online real estate.” A new wave of challenges comes with such a distinction, as malicious users attempt to subvert the network for their own gain. Wikipedia has remained surprisingly robust against these challenges – a credit both to the technical solutions it has created and the participatory community it has enabled. But two examples of this challenge demonstrate the general point. On July 31st, 2006, political humorist Stephen Colbert featured Wikipedia in a segment of his television show, The Colbert Report. Describing Wikipedia as a space where, “any user can change any entry, and if enough users agree with them, it becomes true,” Colbert told his viewers to go onto Wikipedia and edit the article on elephants to say: “Elephant population in Africa has tripled over the past six months.” The flood of user-edits forced site administrators to temporarily lock the page. In a less congenial spirit, companies and political aides have gotten into the habit of anonymously grooming their entries. Zittrain elaborates the tension admirably: “If the Wikipedia entry on Wal-Mart is one of the first hits in a search for the store, it will be important to Wal-Mart to make sure the entry is fair – or even more than fair…” Likewise, August 2006 saw the launch of MyWikiBiz, a company aimed at creating and editing Wikipedia entries on a for-fee basis. Jimmy Wales responded by blocking the company’s user account and banning their I.P. address, and this led to a lengthy community discussion about how to deal with such new ventures.

The “valuable real estate” issue has important implications for the growth of online communities in areas that have already been identified as valuable. When the L.A.

11 Zittrain, pg 139
12 Zittrain, pg 140
*Times* attempted to embrace the wiki editing concept through the launch of “wikitorials,” the site was almost immediately overrun by porn advertisements and was quickly shut down. Clay Shirky writes, “in the absence of a functioning community, a wiki will suffer from the Tragedy of the Commons, as the Wikitorial did, as individuals use it as an attention-getting platform, and there is no community to defend it.”

Chapter seven will discuss the liberal comedy blog SadlyNo.com, whose community regularly targets conservative bloggers and pesters them with insults in their comment threads. Online conservatives face a challenge in closing the online infrastructure gap because large progressive communities recognize nascent conservative equivalents as valuable real estate and take joy in disrupting the spaces before they have reached the critical mass necessary to defend their sites.

### Stage 5: Institutionalizing Authority

Throughout the first four growth phases, we see a continuous fraying of the principles of openness and co-creation that participatory communities must begin with. As sites enter the laggard phase (which I will again note, can only be methodologically defined with rigor retrospectively), the slowdown in site growth raises inevitable questions of power and authority among the now-stabilizing community. Within Wikipedia, one such controversy occurred when longtime site administrator “Essjay” was revealed to have falsified his credentials. Although Wikipedia is open to editing from anyone, Essjay had claimed on his personal page that he held various graduate degrees and a professorship in Theology. He had made reference to this educational background.

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13 Shirky, pg 137
when arguing on various “talk” pages over the years. In 2007, after Jimmy Wales contacted him about joining a for-profit venture, it turned out that Essjay was a 24-year-old editor with no graduate degrees. This led to a long community discussion regarding the validity of his edits, the issues of identity-management in the online space, and the proper role of expertise in Wikipedia.\textsuperscript{14} The progressive blogosphere has likewise endured several governance challenges within the DailyKos hub, with Hillary Clinton-supporting diarists declaring a “strike” in the spring of 2008 and mid-tier bloggers complaining about ad revenues.

As growth slows in this final phase, when most potential community members have joined the site and the remainder of the online population is mostly non-adopters with a few laggard adopters still present, the disparity between hubs and niches comes into stark contrast. While the periods of rapid growth provide a sense that the entire world is changing, the final phase raises questions about who controls the fruits of all this volunteer labor. These changes have been somewhat muted in Wikipedia because the site is a nonprofit, nonpolitical venture. But in other communities-of-interest, particularly ones where a company or political leadership is seen to profit from the voluntary output, the challenges to institutionalized authority can be particularly problematic. The differences of scale that have developed become differences-in-kind, with Larry Sanger’s attempt to start his own equivalent to Wikipedia, Citizendium.org, being an instructive case. As internet publisher Tim O’Reilly has put it, “If there weren’t a network effect driving Wikipedia, [Goolge’s] Knol and Citizendium would be succeeding.”\textsuperscript{15} The powerful network effects that define these online spaces also prevent alternative ventures

\textsuperscript{14} See Zittrain pg 141, Lih pps 194-200 for further discussion.
\textsuperscript{15} See \url{http://radar.oreilly.com/2008/10/network-effects-in-data.html}
from successfully growing to scale. If you don’t like Wikipedia, DailyKos, or Facebook, you are free to start your own, but that in itself is problematic.

If the power law topography creates these differences-in-scale among the sites that allow for novel solutions to the collective action problem, then we must wonder about the conditions under which a power law hub can fall or be replaced. The final section of this chapter will discuss how each of the five institutional development stages listed above produces a challenge which can lead to the failure or replacement of a network-enhanced good.

**Stumbling Along the Path to Power Law Hub-Status**

**Phase 1:**

The first challenge for potential hub spaces lies in attracting a devoted set of lead adopters. This problem can come in at least two forms, depending on the availability of a pre-existing power law hub. In the case of Wikipedia, for instance, the first wave of adopters came from the Nupedia list and from the Slashdot community. The Slashdotters were particularly attracted to Wikipedia because of its novelty. Likewise, the Howard Dean campaign featured the support of dozens of leaders in the field of social technology who were attracted by the new opportunity to apply the principles of open source to a political campaign and see what happened. Attempts at replicating these successes (if the Dean campaign can be considered a success – a point that will be discussed in chapter 6) must find some other reason why technological or topical elite networks would choose to engage in peer production through that particular venue.

This point seems lost upon the hundreds of organizations and companies who
have decided to enter the “web 2.0” age by launching their own social networking sites, for instance. A useful indicator is the existence of a McDonald’s social networking site. Millions of Americans eat at McDonald’s, but how many of them wish to self-identify as members of the “McDonald’s community?” Pushed forward by a consulting industry that has found lucrative contracts in supporting the growth of social media, the very real public goods produced by online communities-of-interest can be easily obscured if we look at the social media industry as a whole. Without a colonizing set of devoted, skilled volunteer participants, the best technology in the world will fail to deliver the valuable network externalities that make these spaces worth regularly visiting. In a similar vein, I argue in a forthcoming journal article, “Macaca Moments Revisited… YouTube Effects or Netroots Effects” that the major impact of new media on politics can only be viewed by studying the large-scale communities-of-interest, rather than by studying specific new media tools such as YouTube (Karpf 2009b). The impact of the internet on political associations and politics in general comes not through lowered communication costs alone, but through the communities-of-interest that these lowered costs enable. The first step in building such a community lies in attracting a set of active co-creators, and these co-creators are themselves a scarce commodity.

Phase 2:

The move from lead adopters to the larger set of early adopters has a different bundle of challenges. Lead adopters are a valuable commodity, but they also have many interests that are distinctly different from the rest of the population. Reaching critical mass requires that a site not only solve a series of technological and normative
challenges; it also requires the new community to exist in an area which is attractive to a substantial issue public. Shirky writes about a variant on this hurdle in his 1999 essay, “The Interest Horizons and the Limits of Software Love.” Responding to Eric Raymond’s then-recent summary of open source, that “every good work of software starts by scratching a developer’s personal itch… given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” Shirky notes, “What if you have a problem that doesn’t scratch some core developers personal itch?” (Shirky 1999) Within the restricted universe of software development projects, some ideas will be more exciting and motivating than others. The least exciting ideas may still have a commercially-viable market, but they are unlikely to attract a large enough community of motivated developers to be appropriate for commons-based peer production.

This critique holds for the formation of online communities-of-interest as well – not surprising, given that Wikipedia and other such communities took inspiration from the open source software movement. The lowered transaction costs of the internet help to reveal the full demand curve for public participation, but part of what that means is that topics or areas that simply aren’t particularly attractive or interesting to any existant or nascent issue public will fail to reach critical mass. The first generation of social scientists to study the internet were optimistic that, thanks to the falling costs of online engagement, we would see the rise of mass deliberative spaces, “online public squares” and other venues for enhanced democratic participation. Many such sites have been launched with enthusiasm, only to fail to reach critical mass. There are several potential explanations for such failure, but one of them is that public interest in lengthy deliberative processes simply isn’t as high as social scientists would ideally like. (see
Schudson, 1999 for a similar historical discussion) One limit of peer production which will hamper communities-of-interest is the inability to attract a large enough community to pass the critical mass point where the user-generated content itself gives people a reason to regularly return to the online space.

**Phase 3:**

Often launched by some event that exposes the hub space to the population through the mass media, the third phase is where substantial scaling and network effects begin to take hold. An important related challenge at this juncture is the availability of a distributed reputation system capable of managing this scaling process. Explored in detail in chapter 6, online reputation systems are a necessary component of all hub space within the power law topography of the internet. A “benevolent dictator” such as Jimmy Wales can play a guiding role in the first two phases of growth, but in phase three, communities of interest quickly learn that “Jimmy doesn’t scale.” (Lih, pg 179) Slashdot’s “mojo” system and eBay’s “feedback forum” are the two best-known examples, but Google’s PageRank algorithm has similar functions, drawing upon a large set of distributed reputation assessments, then applying some form of algorithm that rewards good content or contributions while sanctioning bad content or contributions. Yochai Benkler notes in *The Wealth of Networks* that an effective reputation system is a necessary condition of large-scale peer production. He goes on to suggest that the components of peer-produced systems can be broken down into smaller components (“Modularity”) and that these components themselves can then be reduced to tasks that require little time and effort (“Granularity”). (Benkler, pg 100) Benkler illustrates these
points by drawing upon the set of existing online reputation systems, but in so doing he overlooks an important caveat: some types of mass collaboration are much more easily reduced to small actions taken in front of a computer monitor than others.

This represents a substantial limitation to the internet’s impact on political associations. Wikipedia, DailyKos, MoveOn, and other large-scale communities-of-interest are capable of overwhelming growth with low overhead costs because they are asking their community to engage in distributed tasks that can occur effectively in front of a computer screen. One challenge that MoveOn, Democracy for America, and similar organizations have faced when they attempt to use “online tools for offline action” is that the slight increase in transaction costs – asking people to rate meetings after they return home to them, for instance – is accompanied by a steep drop-off in participation. Chapter 6 will present an argument that these limits are changing thanks to the diffusion of the mobile web (internet-through-iPhone), but for our purposes here, it bears noting that the impact of the internet on offline collaborations is slim when compared with its impact on online collaboration. Potential power law hubs can only radically scale up if they adopt a system to manage the influx of participation. Such systems of reputation and recommendation are not equally applicable to all forms of collaboration and engagement, and where they cannot yet be built, commons-based peer production will fail to displace traditional modes of association and production.

Phase 4:

By the fourth phase, a site has managed to attract mass attention and benefits from substantial network effects. What is to stop it from continuing in this regard? The brief
history of social network sites (SNS) offers a useful illustration. Friendster.com was the first SNS to pass critical mass and attract large-scale participation. Danah boyd chronicles the demise of Friendster, eclipsed by Myspace.com because MySpace offered a more permissive culture, inviting bands to start their own pages and letting users create fake profiles for schools, organizations, and celebrities. Friendster had a network externality-advantage, because more people were initially on its site, but low online transaction costs meant that people could add a MySpace account in minutes, and with greater freedom on MySpace, they eventually switched en masse. Boyd attributes the replacement of Friendster by MySpace as an indicator of “internet culture.” (boyd 2006; boyd and Ellison 2007)

MySpace indeed gained millions more users than Friendster, as SNS’s gained further penetration among the public at large. Matthew Hindman notes that, prior to June 2007, MySpace was stably among the top five web sites in the United States. In his research into the stability of power laws on the web, he notes that MySpace precipitously dropped that June because the site “became uncool.” In the months leading up to that decline, MySpace had become barraged by spam solicitations, as pornography marketers took note of its status as “valuable online real estate” and began creating fake accounts. Viruses also became a problem around this time. Critically, Facebook.com replaced MySpace at this time, and it remains the SNS power law hub today. Facebook included more limiting user registration permissions, and only allowed members of an individual’s school-based or geographic network to view their profile. Perhaps more importantly, in May 2007, Facebook unveiled a new feature: its open application programming interface.

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16 Research presentation at the Oxford Internet Institute, March 2009. Available online at www.oii.ox.ac.uk
The open API allowed outside developers to write new programs, including games and information-sharing tools. Facebook replaced MySpace as power law hub not because of culture, but because the open API gave users something new to do. Failure to respond to the pressures of being “valuable online real estate” rendered MySpace vulnerable, and when Facebook gave users new engagement opportunities, MySpace was left as a virtual ghost town, with over a hundred million registered users, most of whom were suddenly spending the bulk of their time on another site.\footnote{This last point presents a host of measurement issues for social scientists interested in the internet. User accounts, once created, are rarely destroyed. Competition between social networks, community blogs, or internet-mediated political associations must be measured in activity, rather than list size. Unfortunately, activity measures are almost universally proprietary data, when they are available at all.}

The lesson we should draw from the history of social network sites is that, although power law hubs benefit from substantial network effects that render substantial stability in the short run, viewed over a long time horizon the hubs seem more fragile. The internet is a fast-changing environment, and lead adopter communities tend to desert an online space once it gets too noisy and crowded, moving on to experiment with the next wave of innovations. Just as Compuserv, AOL, and Geocities were once defining features of online “geography,” only to be relegated a few years later to the dustbin of history, the changing nature of the internet creates room for a host of “disruptive innovations” (see chapter 5 for further discussion) that can lead to the displacement of existing hub communities.

Phase 5:

The governance challenges presented in the fifth and final stage are difficult to describe in great detail, particularly because of the data limitations present when applying
social network analysis to online communities-of-interest. I cannot say with certain
whether Wikipedia, DailyKos, MoveOn, or other such hub spaces have actually entered
the laggard phase of adoption, because we do not know at present what percentage of the
online population is “non-adopters” rather than laggard adopters. What should be clear,
however, is that the slowdown of site growth creates pressures regarding who controls the
fruits of the community’s labor. As one participant in the participatory ratings site
Yelp.com (discussed in chapter 6) explained regarding her superuser “elite” status, “It
makes you feel special for about two weeks. Then you either realize you’re working for
someone else without getting paid, you totally lose interest, or you get really into it.”
(Zittrain pg 146)

Sites that fail to effectively manage these governance challenges are at serious
risk of “code forking,” the term Stephen Weber uses to describe subsets of the open
source software community who break off from a large project to start their own similar
endeavor. (Weber 2004) Code forking is not inherently a negative attribute – for certain
types of community, particularly ones whose collaboration is not particularly granular or
modular, there exists a “crowding threshold” above which additional members detract
from the community (see Ciffollili 2003 for a related discussion of Club Goods theory).
Too much code forking can reduce the network externalities produced by the community,
and if one of these forked communities successfully passes the critical mass point in
phase 2, then it begins to present a viable alternative to community members who
become disaffected over the governance controversies. Likewise, the community must
deal with these governance challenges while also embracing new Code-based
innovations, otherwise it runs the risk of being displaced by a new entrant that suddenly
offers community members an augmented set of opportunities.

**Conclusion**

This purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the reader to the cross-disciplinary literature on internet-mediated mass collaboration. Wikipedia serves as a guiding example, both because it is such a well-known and mature network-enhanced good, and because it clearly demonstrates that, at least under certain conditions, the internet enables fundamental changes in the production of public goods. The hyperlinked, anti-geographic landscape of the web presents a tremendous reduction in transaction costs, resulting in a condition of information abundance. That abundance gives rise to a mass coordination game, with a power law topography of giant hubs and small niches serving as an iterated game theoretic solution. The final two sections then explored the development of these hubs, and the limits beyond which we should expect them to either not form or prove long-term unstable.

The following chapters will apply this somewhat abstract framework to the new generation of internet-mediated organizations that have risen to influence in the past few years. Chapter 3 will offer a comparative analysis of interest group engagement in the 1984 and 2008 Democratic Primaries, demonstrating that these online communities of interest do indeed lead to the mobilization of collective action in “issue spaces” that previously went unrepresented. Chapter 4 will discuss the high-profile growth of the political blogosphere, specifically arguing that the site architecture of community blogs allows the “netroots” to operate as a quasi-interest group. Chapter 5 explores changes to
membership and fundraising regimes pioneered by MoveOn, and resultant implications of these “disruptive innovations” for the existing interest group population. Chapter 6 discusses Democracy for America’s attempts at using online tools for offline action, and casts an eye to the future through an analysis of reputation systems and the impact that the mobile web will have on such activity as it blurs the distinction between online and offline. Chapter 7 then addresses the dearth of conservative online infrastructure, offering a theoretical framework to explain the partisan gulf in online community engagement. The conclusion then summarizes the general point running through all of these chapters: the dramatic reduction in online transaction costs is leading to a substantial reorganization of the community of political associations which structure and mobilize collective action in American politics. Wikipedia, though not a political medium in its own right, serves to illuminate the extent to which changes in the costs of information and communication can alter the political economy of public goods production.
Chapter 3: The Superdelegate Transparency Project and the New Rules of Latent Group Activation

Since the days of E. E. Schattschneider and V.O. Key, political scientists have been well attuned to the costs of association-building. In his biting critique of early pluralist scholarship, Schattschneider wrote, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent. Probably about 90 percent of the people cannot get into the pressure system... Pressure politics is a selective process ill designed to serve diffuse interests. The system is skewed, loaded, and unbalanced in favor of a fraction of a minority.” (Schattschneider 1960, pg 35) Likewise, Key wrote that “the lobbyists for electrical utilities, for example, are eternally on the job; the lobbyists for the consumers of this monopolistic service are ordinarily conspicuous by their absence.” (Key 1958, pg 166) Mancur Olson’s classic treatise, The Logic of Collective Action, provided a formal theory explaining this phenomenon. Individuals in large groups, like firms in a market, have an incentive to free ride on the actions of others. This results in the underprovision of collective action and a limited range of circumstances under which “latent groups” can convert diffuse interest into political action. (Olson 1965, pg 111-131)

These seminal works in political science tell us that latent group activation is beyond the capacity of the wide variety of diffuse interests. Despite the subsequent rise of professional advocacy groups in the 1970s around “post-materialist” issues, this central conclusion has remained highly salient. (Berry 1999) Rights’-based advocacy organizations raise their funds from a small segment of the public, rarely more than 1%, and convert this support into expert lobbyists, researchers, and media staffers. (Skocpol
2003) The startup costs for such organizations remain high, however, and the groups typically attempt to address the free rider problem through the provision of some form of selective or solidarity-based incentives (discount cards, magazines, backpacks, etc). This contributes to a pervasive public perception of Washington, DC as dominated by “special interest groups” – groups who can overcome the organizational hurdles of association-building and, in a sense, afford to partake in politics.

The previous chapter discussed Wikipedia.org as an example of novel internet-mediated solutions to the collective action problem. It demonstrated that the lowered transaction costs of the internet enable new structures of mass collaboration, and that these structures produce surprising results unseen when online communication is applied to older association structures. The question in this chapter is whether the rise of new political structures for collective action – what I term “internet-mediated organizations – has led to a noticeable shift in the political arena. Put another way, if the costs of latent group activation have been dramatically reduced, do we see political pressure group activity emerge in new issue areas, previously unrepresented issue areas?

This chapter offers a cross-case comparison of pressure group mobilization in the Democratic Party primaries of 2008 and 1984 to present evidence in the affirmative. The change in information regimes has led to a new generation of multi-issue “progressive generalists,” and this results in the mobilization of bias around otherwise-latent interests.

This pair of cases is particularly useful because of their substantial similarities, separated by 24 years that featured the rise of internet-mediated communication and a new set of organizations. Critically, both of these primaries were technically decided by independent “Superdelegates” – individual party stakeholders who are given an
independent vote in the nomination process. While Walter Mondale was able to rely on his Superdelegate supporters without incident or public outcry in 1984, the spring of 2008 featured full-page ads in the *New York Times* and *USA Today* from a coalition of interest groups that declared “*The Democratic Party must be democratic. The superdelegates should let the voters decide between Clinton and Obama, then support the people’s choice.*” In two weeks’ time, these groups had garnered 400,000 petition signatures from Democratic voters supporting their efforts, and had generated enough contributions through online fundraising to take out these expensive print media advertisements. Meanwhile, the wiki-based Superdelegate Transparency Project (STP) relied on the voluntary efforts of 200 “citizen journalists” to aggregate local knowledge about the identities and voting preferences of the 769 privileged party insiders with such a vote, many of whom had no previous public profile. Either the amount of latent interest in “letting the voters decide” had changed between 1984 and 2008 or the shift in information regimes contributed to a distinctly more permissive environment for the mobilization of bias.

After discussing the details and circumstances of the two primaries, three explanatory variables are explored: (1) the path dependent impact of *Bush v Gore (2000)* and fading memories of political conventions of old in Democratic Party politics, (2) increased “bandwidth” for media coverage of the topic due to the growth of 24-hour news programs such as MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News Channel, and (3) the reduction of transaction costs as collective action moves online. I argue that (3) is of primary importance in this case, though both (1) and (2) played important roles by facilitating a suitable “interest horizon.” Critical to this finding is the lack of participation by
prominent left-wing interest groups that had been present in 1984 and 2008. The issue-based professional advocacy groups that constituted the interest group population of 1984 were still present in 2008, and in both cases these groups chose not to participate. Rather, it was a new generation of internet-mediated organizations that mobilized collective action in 2008. This leads into a discussion of the differing political economies of these separate “generations” of political association. The chapter is meant as a bridging comparative case example, indicating that the changes to public goods-production witnessed in chapter 2 has tangible consequences for interest group mobilization. Later chapters will then explore the mechanics and implications of this shift in greater detail.

The Contested Democratic Primary of 1984: No Teapot, No Tempest

“At 7:30 a.m. [June 6th, 1984] aides began contacting uncommitted delegates, mostly elected Democratic officials and regional party leaders, to ask them to stand by for a call from Mondale. The candidate, refreshed and outwardly unshaken by the reports from California, turned on his powers of persuasion. He made some 50 telephone calls, reaching such party luminaries as Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, New Jersey Senator Frank Lautenberg and Alabama Governor George Wallace. The unstated threat: Mondale was certain to win, and late arrivals to the bandwagon were less likely to be remembered favorably by the candidate. About 40 recipients of the Mondale message took it seriously enough to join him. That, by the reckoning of Mondale’s aides, put their boss over the top.”

This passage appeared in the June 19th, 1984 issue of Time Magazine, describing the circumstances under which former Vice President Walter Mondale had finally secured his party’s nomination after a brutal three-and-a-half month campaign. Viewed at the outset with an aura of inevitability, Mondale faced a surprisingly tough challenge from Senator Gary Hart, who in the end won more total primaries and caucus races than

18 [Time Magazine, June 19, 1984.]
Mondale. Neither of them had received the necessary majority of 1,967 supporting
delegates – partially because Reverend Jesse Jackson had himself won four states – but
Mondale had a plurality of delegates, a slim lead in total primary votes cast, and the vital
support of party insiders. Mondale had offered a “guarantee” on the campaign trail that
he would have the requisite delegates by June 6th, the day after the final state primaries in
California and New Jersey. Having badly lost in California, Mondale turned to the
independent “Superdelegates” – a new feature of the 1984 convention rules adopted by
recommendation of the Hunt commission in order to give Democratic party leaders a
renewed voice in the process (Aldrich 2009, pg 33) – and pressured them into delivering
his victory. These Superdelegates were free to change their votes at any time, and indeed
the Hart campaign held out brief hopes of convincing them that Mondale’s long string of
late-primary losses presented a sign that he didn’t have the support necessary to beat
Reagan in the general election. Yet despite his popular appeal to young “yuppie” voters,
there is little evidence that party insiders ever hesitated in throwing their support behind
Mondale. Reporting months earlier, in the February 6th issue of Time, Ed Magnuson
noted the following:

“Mondale … serenely triumphed in the first actual selection of flesh-and-blood
delegates. In an effort to guarantee that elected officials will have more influence
at this year’s convention, the Democratic Party has given its members in Congress
the right to choose 191 delegates. That process began last week in the House,
where Mondale has had a score of aides drumming up support for nearly a year.
It paid off. Of the 164 delegates chosen, Mondale won 75. [John] Glenn got 17;
[Alan] Cranston, 11; [Jesse] Jackson, 7; Hart, 5; and [Reubin] Askew and [Ernest]
Hollings, 4. There were 42 delegates officially uncommitted. While that showing
reinforced Mondale’s standing as the man to beat, it was hardly conclusive, since
3,769 delegates are still to be selected.”

At no point during the primary process was the legitimacy of these Superdelegates

19 [Time magazine, February 5, 1984.]
brought up for public examination. On May 21st, when citing a congressional Democratic leader that “Mondale doesn’t really need to win any more to put him over the top,” and noting the “Reason: he should do well among the 219 ‘superdelegate’ and 39 at-large delegates still to be picked among party leaders and state officials,” Time reporters made no mention of the possibility that party leaders, rather than the voters themselves, deciding the election would provoke public outcry. Again on May 28th, when Time dispassionately reported that “Indeed, Hart will probably finish the spring having won most of the primaries and perhaps even a majority of the cumulative popular vote. Yet Mondale still has a wide lead in total delegates,” there was no indication that this would be seen as a problem for the party to resolve. Through the beginning, middle, and end of this, the most hotly contested primary in party history, there was no mass collective action challenging the power of party leaders to step in and determine the nominee. There was no tempest brewing, nor were there any political pressure groups serving as “teapot” in which such discontent might brew.

1984 on Steroids? Similar Setup, Different Results in 2008

“Indeed, 2008 is looking like 1984 on steroids: For the poorly organized, underfinanced insurgent (Hart), substitute a candidate (Barack Obama) with the money and organization to compete with the establishment candidate (Hillary Clinton). For a front-runner about whom the party faithful are hardly enthusiastic (Mondale), substitute a candidate (Clinton) who has a loyal, energized following.”– Ruth Marcus, Washington Post

Reflecting on Mondale’s fateful June 6th phone calls in a January 16th, 2008 Washington Post column, Ruth Marcus penned the column above, offering one of the first looks past the February 5th “Super Tuesday” set of primaries and noticing that,
thanks to proportional allocation of delegates, “it’s easy to imagine the race remaining as
scrambled as it seems right now, and the array of states voting on Feb. 5 producing a
fractured outcome that would deliciously extend what once looked like an unalterably
front-loaded campaign.” As with ’84, the Democratic Party had attempted to develop a
schedule that would quickly determine their nominee. As with ’84, the party had a clear,
anointed frontrunner with ties to a previous Democratic administration and a spate of
early Superdelegate endorsements. And as with ’84, an early upset (this time in the Iowa
caucuses rather than the New Hampshire primary) would pave the way for a wire-to-wire,
hard-fought primary battle that eventually would require the input of Superdelegates to
determine a winner.

It is easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to assume that these party insiders would
eventually have named Obama as the nominee. Unlike Hart, who had won the most
primaries, but neither the most votes nor the most pledged delegates, Barack Obama led
Hillary Clinton in all three of these measurable categories. But particularly in the
middle of the campaign season, during the month of February when it became clear that
the contest would likely be decided by Superdelegates, there was a great brewing
controversy regarding the legitimacy of their role and the danger of potentially
overturning the “will of the people.” This controversy was not generated by Obama’s
campaign organization, but rather came from a set of progressive interest groups and

20 This point is marginally complicated by the disputed Michigan and Florida primaries. Obama, along with several other candidates, had removed his name from the Michigan primary ballot in support of the DNC decision to strip the state of its delegates as punishment for violating the party-determined primary calendar. Clinton’s name remained on the ballot, leading to her contention that she had received “more total votes than any candidate in party history.” Likewise, though all candidates’ names were on the Florida primary ballot, they honored a pledge not to campaign in the state and there was debate over whether and in what manner the state’s voters and disputed delegates should be factored into running tallies of delegate, primary, and vote totals.
“citizen journalists” who were concerned that a brokered convention would destroy the Party’s chances in the general election.

The Superdelegate Transparency Project: A Storm Brewing

Chris Bowers of OpenLeft.com – one of the top 15 left-wing political blogs in 200821 -- first raised the Superdelegate issue in the political blogosphere on Friday, February 1st, with a post titled “Obama Catches Clinton Nationally; Brokered Convention Looms.” Reflecting upon the latest Gallup and Rasmussen polling numbers, Bowers remarked,

“In their post-Edwards polling, Gallup and Rasmussen now have nearly identical numbers, showing Clinton up by about 2% nationwide. In such a close campaign, it will become virtually impossible for one candidate to reach 2,025 entirely via pledged delegates, since there are only 3,253 pledged delegates. When only 2% separates the candidates nationwide, no candidate can possibly win over 60% of the pledged delegates. So, unless Clinton's early voting advantage will overwhelm Obama on Tuesday, it certainly looks like Super Delegates will decide who wins the Democratic nomination.

Long-term, right now I think the most likely scenario for the nomination is that Clinton and Obama remain pretty close in pledged delegates, but through early voting in February 5th states, super delegates, and arguments over Florida and Michigan, Clinton eventually cobbles together enough support to seal the nomination sometime in March. The best analogy might end up being the way Mondale, despite losing almost all of the final primaries to Hart, eventually sealed the nomination via Super Delegates in 1984. *The party will be divided, and the Republican nominee will be strong. And so, despite having the most favorable national electoral outlook Democrats have seen in over thirty years, we will actually be significant underdogs in the presidential campaign.*” (Bowers 2008a)

This message spread through the elite political blogosphere, attracting heavy attention and debate. Online Clinton supporters greeted the news as a positive sign, expecting that party insiders would back Clinton and deliver her the nomination over

21 See [www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com](http://www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com) for full rankings, or Karpf 2008a.
Obama, who they argued would be “unelectable” in a match-up with John McCain.

(Beeton 2008) Obama supporters reacted negatively, predictably calling it a travesty-in-the-making. Bowers and others who had yet to endorse a candidate viewed it primarily as a “complete disaster,” another example of Democratic campaign professionals managing to grasp defeat from the jaws of victory. By Monday, February 4th – the day before the 20 Super Tuesday primaries – Bowers had concluded that the pre-election polling numbers made it a certainty that Superdelegates would determine the nominee.

This led him to the following suggestion:

> “After some thought, the best solution I can come up with is to get a majority of super delegates to pledge to support whoever wins the majority of pledged delegates following the final primaries and caucuses in early June… Our options are not pretty, but that would be better than letting bylaws and super delegates determine the nominee instead of voters. Hopefully, either Clinton or Obama will run up a long list of wins, and the other candidate will drop out. Failing that, hopefully the super delegates will line-up behind whoever has the most popular support and pledged delegates. Failing both, we could be facing a crisis in the party where the nominee lacks legitimacy in the opinion of the rank and file.”

(Bowers 2008b)

Thus was the Superdelegate Transparency Project (STP) born. OpenLeft joined with several prominent political blogs and progressive organizations to organize an internet-based campaign to pressure Superdelegates to support the outcome of the primaries and caucuses. How one defines this outcome remained a murky question –total votes cast, total pledged delegates collected, and total primaries/caucuses won each provided a different metric, and the disputed state of the Florida and Michigan primaries, which had had their delegates stripped by the Democratic National Committee after they refused to comply with the party-determined primary calendar, only added further complication to the competing metrics. Though this provided fodder for heated debate in
both the blogosphere and the mainstream media (MSM) through the spring and much of
the summer, what is of interest here is the pressure tactics used by this short-term
coalition of groups and networked individuals over a roughly three-week timespan.

The coalition engaged in two central activities. First was a wiki-based
information-gathering project, itself titled “Superdelegate Transparency Project”
(Superdelegateinfo.org). A joint project of LiteraryOutpost.com, OpenLeft.com,
DemConWatch.blogspot.com, Sourcewatch.org, and the Huffington Post’s “Off the Bus”
project, the site served as a central gathering place for collecting information on the
identities of the 796 Superdelegates themselves, whether they had made a candidate
endorsement, and which candidate the voters in their local district had favored. The site
also provided contact information for these Superdelegates, so that anyone visiting the
site could write letters or e-mails urging them to support the will of the voters. Since
many of these Superdelegates were not well-known elected officials, this informational
resource was a powerful tool for motivated partisans and attracted the interest of CNN
and other MSM outlets. Roughly 300 volunteer “citizen journalists” contributed to the
project.

Meanwhile, MoveOn.org, Democracy For America, Color of Change, Courage
Campaign, OpenLeft, PowerPAC, and FairVote Action engaged in more traditional
pressure tactics. Activating their massive online membership lists, these organizations
gathered over 400,000 petition signatures from left-wing partisans calling on
Superdelegates to “let the voters decide between Clinton and Obama, then support the
people’s choice.” In just under two weeks, the organizations compiled this massive

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petition and also raised enough funds from their member-supporters online to take out full-page ads in the USA Today and the New York Times on February 20, 2008:

The goal of all these campaign efforts was basic enough. The Clinton campaign had adopted a relatively strident tone, asserting when asked about the role of superdelegates *vis a vis* the will of the voters that “we are interested in acquiring delegates, period,” and “superdelegates are, by design, supposed to exercise independent
judgment.” (Nagourney and Hulse 2008) Obama-supporting partisans (including MoveOn, whose members had voted to endorse him) and bloggers who had refrained from making an endorsement were concerned that this tone reflected poorly on the party and set the stage for a disastrous internal struggle. Their intention was to affect the framing of the issue, pushing the campaigns and the superdelegates to worry about organized outrage from the party base. During a debate on February 21st, one day after the newspaper ads had run, Clinton was asked specifically about the role of Superdelegates and her response signaled just such a change in tone, as she suggested the issue would “sort itself out.”23 Weighing in on this change in tone, Bowers essentially declared victory:

“There was no way for the Clinton campaign to ever win the Superdelegate argument in the broader court of public opinion. Can anyone seriously imagine the majority of Democrats collectively thinking, ‘well, most of us voted for the other guy, but I’m OK with a few hundred party elders canceling out my vote.’ The very notion is absurd … This was a long, three-week campaign, but ultimately it has proven fruitful for democracy. It is always good when political elites are forced to back down out of fear of popular revolt from the voters.” (Bowers 2008c)

Bowers goes on to clarify that he still expects the Clinton campaign to pursue Superdelegates. However, “…they are no longer adopting a strident public attitude about superdelegates because they know it is making them look bad. That indicates that the public relations aspect of the superdelegates has been won, at least for now.” (Bowers 2008c)

It is not the contention of this paper that the Superdelegate Transparency Project succeeded in altering the outcome of the Democratic Presidential nomination process. It

23 February 21st debate transcript available at http://polstate.com/?p=5254
is not even my contention that the STP necessarily altered the personal calculus of individual Superdelegates, or even caused the substantive shift in the issue frames (though both of these suggestions seem highly plausible). Such claims run inevitably into our lack of a real counterfactual. Might the Clinton campaign have moderated their tone regardless of pressure group activity? Possibly. Did pressure group activity force Superdelegates to think twice before announcing an endorsement of one candidate or the other? It is near-impossible to say. But to recall again the classic wit and wisdom of Schattschneider, who argued that “the outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it,” (Schattschneider, pg 2) we can decisively hold that the “audience” – in the guise of progressive interest groups and networked bloggers – became engaged in this issue in 2008 in ways that it clearly did not in 1984. The two elections featured a remarkable number of similarities. Though Gary Hart never achieved quite the level of popular vote and pledged-delegate success of Barack Obama, there was a multi-week period in which there was mainstream media speculation that he likely would. In 2008, this period of uncertainty featured a “crowdsourced” volunteer-driven information-gathering project, 400,000 petition signatures, and enough fundraising for multiple full-page ads. In 1984, there was never a hint of public outcry, despite a Democratic party-in-electorate that featured far fewer enthusiastic Mondale supporters than there were Clinton supporters 24 years later. Why did we witness collective action in the one case and not in the other?

The following section discusses three potential explanations for the uptick in political action: historical contingency, increased media bandwidth, and falling costs of collective action. These explanations are complementary albeit competing –

24 [Time Magazine, May 21 and 28, 1984.]
undoubtedly, each played some role – but I will then go on to make the case that, while the first two created a more permissive general context for pressure group mobilization, the third has central explanatory power. The chapter then enters into a discussion of the difference between the new, internet-mediated associations that were prominent in this case and the early generation of interest groups that still make up the bulk of the interest group population.

**Historical Contingency: Critical Junctures in Comparing the Two Cases**

One challenge in comparing the elections of 1984 and 2008 as most-similar cases is that, in some very real ways, 2008 was *built* out of the experiences of 1984. Just as the Hunt Commission carved out a role for Superdelegates in 1984 in order to respond to the perceived failings of 1976 and 1980 (not enough authority in the hands of the elite leadership, or not enough leadership turnout to the conventions, depending on which historical narrative you prefer), the proponents of the Superdelegate Transparency Project were reacting to the perceived failings of 1984 and 2000. As Pierson suggests in *Politics and Time*, “There are strong grounds for believing that self-reinforcing processes will be prevalent in political life… Once established, patterns of political mobilization, the institutional ‘rules of the game,’ and even citizens’ basic ways of thinking about the political world will often generate self-reinforcing dynamics.” (Pierson 2004, pg 10) Put more plainly, the political world of 2008 was shaped in important ways by the decisions and events of 1984 and beyond. Three such “critical junctures” may indeed have played an important causal role in the development of organized collective action in 2008, regardless of changes to communications media or the falling transaction costs of
collective action.

The first of these junctures is the outcome of the 1984 general election itself. Recall that Walter Mondale suffered an historically lopsided defeat, losing 525-13 in the Electoral College while carrying only his home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia. We can see the specter of 1984 not only in Ruth Marcus’s reporting of 2008 as “1984 on steroids,” but also in the early calls-to-action from Bowers and his colleagues. When Bowers writes “The party will be divided, and the Republican nominee will be strong. And so, despite having the most favorable national electoral outlook Democrats have seen in over thirty years, we will actually be significant underdogs in the presidential campaign,” he is extrapolating from the shared memory among self-described “political junkies” of Mondale’s crushing general election defeat.

Notice that there is no reason why a lengthy primary season would necessarily be bad for the party. By the summer of 2008, Bowers had joined Markos Moulitsas of DailyKos and other progressive bloggers in opining on the benefits of the long primary season – particularly the large number of newly-registered Democrats it had produced. (Bowers 2008d) But for elite political junkies and opinion-makers, the outlook in early February 2008 had a decidedly grim pallor to it, and this was based in the memory of 1984.

Without the lengthy primary and crushing defeat of 1984, there very well may have been no motivation for mobilizing collective action in 2008.

Similarly, we should note that the legitimacy of the Superdelegates’ role looked different in the two cases because of the slow-moving, incremental effect of time lapse on party convention rules. As a new addition to the 1984 Democratic convention rules, publicly presented as an attempt to boost attendance among key Democratic leaders, the
Superdelegate vote was a recent, conscious choice by the Democratic National Committee. As such, arguing against their legitimacy is quite directly arguing that the DNC lacks the authority to set their own nomination rules. Likewise, for political elites, journalists, and the majority of voters, the era of “smoke-filled rooms” and multiple-ballot party conventions was a very recent memory. Primaries and caucuses had been newly empowered through the McGovern-Fraser commission in response to the tragedies at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. (Price 1984) There was no doubt that, historically at least, party elders had a legitimate voice in structuring the process. The quarter-century between these two cases fogged the memories both of partisan elites, professional and citizen journalists, and the voters at large. Rather than a recent, conscious choice by party leaders, the independent role of Superdelegates struck many as an anachronistic oddity left over from years past. Thirty-six years of “letting the voters decide” had left the public at large with a general sense that primary voters, rather than party elites, were the legitimate arbiters of Presidential nominating contests.

Stoking this fire was a third “critical juncture:” the lasting impact of Bush v Gore (2000). Though the circumstances of this Supreme Court case were entirely unlike those of the Democratic primary, it left a lasting impression among left-wing partisans that the 2000 election had been “stolen” by a government that refused to count all of the votes. In a primary race that featured deep discontent with the beneficiary of that decision – sitting President George W. Bush – the psychological impact of this decision ought not be discounted. “Letting the voters decide” was likely a phrase with much greater resonance with the Democratic faithful of 2008 than 1984 specifically because of this strong shared belief that the government of the last eight years had been born in opposition to that very
principle. Social movement scholars such as Robert Benford and David Snow have argued that framing processes are crucial to “render[ing] occurrences or events meaningful and thereby function[ing] to organize experience and guide action.” (Benford and Snow 2000, pg 614) It may be the case, then, that without the framing effects of *Bush v Gore*, attempts at collective action around Superdelegates in 2008 would have failed for lack of broad public interest.

These three critical junctures – the specter of 1984, the fading memory of conventions’ past, and the increased issue salience of *Bush v Gore* – form a causal argument in their own right regarding collective action in 1984 and 2008. At a minimum, there is clear evidence that these moments in time were actively referenced by those who sought to mobilize public action around the issue. It seems reasonable to surmise that it was a contributing precondition to the successful development of collective action in 2008. Put another way, without these historical antecedents, Bowers and company would have seen less reason for concern, and it would have been more difficult for them to tap into a salient concern among Democratic activists. The topic might have fallen below the political equivalent of the “interest threshold” Clay Shirky described in his discussion of the limits of open source. (Shirky 1999)

Party history represents only one changing institutional dynamic during the intervening 24 year period, however. The media environment had also radically changed, with an increase in “bandwidth” as first the 24-hour cable news channels and then internet-mediated communication expanded the range and detail of information available to interested partisans. This suggests a second, competing and complementary, explanation for the expanded collective action of 2008.
The Changing Media Landscape: Increased Bandwidth, A Voracious News Cycle to Feed

In his widely acclaimed 2007 book, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, Markus Prior notes that, from 1970 to 2005, television maintained near-universal diffusion in the United States, but the average household went from having access to a half-dozen channels to about 100 channels. This move from a few broadcast networks to the wide cable spectrum is just one indicator of media expansion, or the increased “bandwidth” for politically-oriented news. Prior’s central thesis is that the expansion of the media environment has unintended negative consequences by increasing political knowledge gaps and reducing “byproduct learning” for low-information voters. He argues that “the media environment – the types of media to which people have access – explains many systematic variations in the amount of free information received… Changes in the set of available media thus affects who follows the news, who learns about politics, and who votes – in short, they affect ‘the distribution of political power in democracy.’” (Prior 2007, pg 6)

Prior’s work does not discuss pressure groups, political associations, or collective action *per se*, but it does delve into the topic of increased partisan polarization. At base, he argues that the increased information available to “political junkies,” combined with a media environment that allows those citizens who lack a preference for political knowledge/entertainment to select other, more preferable entertainment options has dramatic effects on who holds power in the system. His thesis suggests a second causal explanation that we must consider: between 1984 and 2008, we saw the growth of both
the internet and the 24-hour news channel.

The main outlets for political news in 1984 were papers like the *New York Times*, weekly general-interest magazines like *Time*, and the 6 o’clock news on network television stations. By 2008, Fox News Channel, CNN (Cable News Network), and MSNBC all competed for audience share among 24-hour news channels. With the Democratic Primary as the most entertaining “horse race” of the day, these stations directed their resources toward assembling commentators and analysts who could appeal to the segments of the American public who held a strong preference for political information/entertainment. The online components of these stations, along with the major political blogging sites like the Huffington Post and DailyKos, provided even more detailed analysis while offering features that allow their reader base to write comments, participate in online polls, and otherwise engage with the latest news of the day.

This bandwidth expansion is partially evidenced in Time magazine’s own changing coverage of the two cases. During the 1984 primary contest, Time devoted an average of 29.5 paragraphs per weekly issue to topics related to Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, and Jesse Jackson (other candidates failed to attract any individual attention from the magazine). The coverage peaked in the March 12 issue, which had four separate stories and 79 paragraphs-worth of coverage. A graph of Time’s primary coverage, beginning two months before the Iowa caucus, is presented in figure 3-1 below.
In contrast, Time devoted 35.8 paragraphs per weekly issues related to Obama, Clinton, Edwards, or the Democratic field as a whole in 2008. This figure is muted by two mitigating factors. First, since 2008 was an open primary for both the Democrats and Republicans, there were a number of weeks where the magazine devoted attention to the Republican rather than the Democratic primary (in articles which discussed both races, paragraphs that focused on Republicans were not counted toward the total).

Second, there appears to be a stylistic drift in the intervening decades towards writing longer paragraphs. (This is a quantifiable measurement issue, but since I offer these trends only for descriptive, rather than inferential, purposes, it is not one that I pursue.)

Time Magazine’s 2008 Democratic primary coverage is presented in Figure 3-2:
The slight increase in “bandwidth” within Time magazine was accompanied by a much larger increase in coverage of the Superdelegate issue. The topic attracted reporters’ attention only five times in 1984, for a total of six paragraphs’ worth of discussion. In 2008, by contrast, 15 stories discussed these details of the delegate allocation rules, with a total of 63 paragraphs’ worth of discussion. This oversized increase in traditional media attention suggests one of three things. Either the Superdelegate issue was inherently more “newsworthy” in 2008, Time magazine’s audience had changed in the intervening years to adopt a taste for more specialized political knowledge, or else Time was reacting to broader changes in the media environment and trying to keep pace with the level of detail offered through the cable news and internet-based outlets.

Perhaps more important than the changing bandwidth within Time Magazine is the decreasing portion of the national media diet occupied by news media like Time,
Newsweek, and the New York Times – mediums that are regularly relied upon by political scientists to construct time-series metrics. Prior notes that cable television reached only a third of all US households in 1983, while it had passed the 85 percent mark by 2004. (Prior, pg 94) The Pew Internet and American Life Project finds that online political news consumption has grown from 16% of adults looking online for political news in the spring of 2000 to 40% in the spring of 2008. (Smith and Rainie 2008) As Prior puts it, “A change in the media environment that arises for technological reasons has profound but unintended implications for politics because it affects how evenly political knowledge is distributed in the population.” (Prior, pg 96) The addition of new media venues increases the gap in political knowledge between those who choose to learn about politics and those who only receive political information through “byproduct learning.”

When the latest news on the Democratic primary is given multiple, competing hour-length talk shows on the cable networks instead of being limited to brief occasional coverage on the evening network news, we can reasonably expect more detailed exploration of the topic as a result. Particularly during the periodic lulls between the state primaries, such discussions can provide fodder for spirited debate, filling what would otherwise be a slow news cycle. If we consider independent political blogs as a venue for strong partisans to learn about and discuss even more detailed information, then indeed it would appear that changes to the media environment – independent of either the critical junctures in the history of the Democratic convention system or the falling transaction costs related to association-building – could produce dramatically different outcomes in public engagement. Increased media diversity allows self-described “political junkies” to
gain greater information on their topics of interest and this seeds the terrain for political interest groups to mobilize collective action. In this sense, the expansion of media choice again appears to be a contributing factor leading to the creation of the Superdelegate Transparency Project and interest group involvement around the issue.

Still, the internet has not only affected the availability of information for mass publics. It has also provided fertile ground for the development of online communities-of-interest, letting motivated partisans not only satisfy their “sweet tooth” preference for political media, but also engage with each other in collective efforts to affect the political environment. Studies of the internet and political campaigning have traditionally been limited to the role of candidate campaign operations, media outlets, and voters. Given that it was outside groups that sought to affect the framing and political calculus of this issue, let us now consider the internet’s distinctive impacts on association-building and interest group coordination.

**Post-Bureaucratic Organizations and the Changing Shape of the Interest Group Population**

Consider Chris Bowers’s previously-cited victory declaration from February 22nd, 2008: “…This was a long, three-week campaign, but ultimately it has proven fruitful for democracy.” A seasoned interest group leader might find great comedy in the very notion of a “long, three-week campaign.” Between developing a strategic plan, raising the necessary funds, hiring staff, and engaging in public education, constituent outreach, and pressure tactics, professional advocacy groups tend to think year-by-year rather than
week-by-week. Historically, this is just a reality of the embedded communications technologies. Gathering 400,000 petition signatures doesn’t happen spontaneously, and it certainly can’t be coordinated overnight. Yet, just as the Howard Dean campaign demonstrated the internet’s capacity for generating millions in small-dollar, online contributions (Hindman 2005, pp 121-128) (a practice virtually perfected by the 2008 Obama campaign, which raised over $500 million in online donations), the dramatic decrease in online transaction costs allows for a new political economy of association-building, with internet-mediated groups like MoveOn and Democracy for America, along with blogging communities like DailyKos and OpenLeft engaging geographically-diffuse communities-of-interest through new tactical repertoires that take advantage of the emerging information regime.

As chapter 5 will discuss in detail, this is not the first time that technological change has played a transformative role in shaping the contours of the interest group population. The “interest group explosion” of the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Berry 1999, Baumgartner and Jones 1993, and Skocpol 2003) was supported through small-dollar direct mail contributions. Such contributions are garnered through “Prospect Direct Mail,” a technique that is afforded bedrock status in nonprofit fundraising texts (Klein 1994). Prospect Direct Mail requires, at a minimum, mainframe computing technology in order to render large lists of potential members accessible. Often treated as an aftereffect of the rights-based framework of the Civil Rights Movement, the interest group explosion was premised on some decidedly technological underpinnings.

Bruce Bimber suggests in Information and American Democracy that the change in information regimes brought about by the reduced transaction costs of online
communication contributes to the condition of online information abundance discussed in chapter 2. Bimber describes the new types of group enabled by this condition as “post-bureaucratic” in form. Such organizations are expected to depart from existing interest groups in four key areas. “1. Collective action does not necessarily require substantial staff, money, or organization on the part of organizers. 2. Organizational boundaries are often permeable and not sharply defined. 3. Informal association and affiliation are important and sometimes replace formal membership. 4. Collective action is often narrowly focused on subsets of members or affiliates, with the organization reconfiguring itself between issues in opportunistic responses to the flow of political events.” (Bimber 2003) Internet scholar Clay Shirky weighs in with a similar perspective, suggesting that the “ridiculously low” costs of group coordination allow for groups that previously existed below the “Coasian floor” to spring into existence. (Shirky 2008, pg 44) The notion of the “Coasian floor” is perhaps particularly useful in this case – it is a reference to Ronald Coase’s landmark work, “The Nature of the Firm,” which provides the bedrock for modern organizational theory. Echoing V.O. Key and Schattschneider, Shirky’s point is that association-building is costly, and thus there is some threshold (the Coasian floor) below which interests are too diffuse to endure the costs of formal organization. Under conditions of information abundance, the dramatic reduction in costs leads to novel organization forms – Wikipedia being the standard example in the non-political realm, community blogs like OpenLeft and citizen-journalism efforts like the STP arguably being its equivalent in American politics.

While the wiki-based portion of the Superdelegate Transparency Project appears
to be a clear fit with the class of organizations discussed by Bimber, Shirky, and others – it was a short-term meta-organization, lacking clear boundaries and formal membership, and relied heavily on the capacity of web-based operations to aggregate dispersed local information with nearly zero coordination costs – the more traditional pressure-campaign elements of the effort were led by a set of well-known progressive organizations. MoveOn and Democracy for America are staples of the American Left, with large member lists, high-profile Executive Directors, and aggressive, staff-directed tactical repertoires. These pressure groups may be internet-mediated, but they are not examples of “commons-based peer production.” How do these pressure groups differ from the members of the progressive interest group community with longer standing, particularly the ones who were also prominent in 1984?

There appear to be three major distinctions between this new generation of interest groups and the professional advocacy groups that emerged out of the “interest group explosion” of the 1960s and 70s. First is a tendency toward what might be called “nimbleness.” In comparing 2008 to 1984, one thing that should be clear is that, without the internet, the diffuse interest of left-wing partisans in “letting the voters decide” would be much the same as the diffuse interest of energy consumers described in V.O. Key’s classic work. What 1984-era interest group would be a proper fit for mobilizing around this issue? Given the time horizons necessary for raising funds, developing plans, hiring staff, and executing the campaign, it is self-evident why no groups attempted to mobilize around the issue in May, 1984, when it appeared likely that Hart would win both the most

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25 Bimber does discuss both MoveOn and more traditional single-issue advocacy groups in his work. Written based on interviews conducted in 1999 and 2000, the model of post-bureaucratic organizations presented in the book is more sophisticated than the case examples offered, since the vast array of the internet-mediated activism we are now accustomed to had yet to be imagined at that juncture.
primaries and the most votes. The 400,000 petition signatures that the STP raised in a matter of weeks would have taken months if not years to collect without the mediating influence of internet-based communication. By the time the funds had been raised and the staff had been hired, the issue would have long since passed. At a minimum, then, the internet affects the activity of political advocacy groups by dramatically abbreviating the timelines necessary for communicating with the relevant issue public. Interest groups in 2008 are capable of being far more nimble than interest groups in 1984, and this creates the opportunity to capitalize on public sentiment around whatever issue is dominating the news cycle.

A second distinction, building off of the first, regards their underlying membership and fundraising apparatuses. The advocacy organizations of 1984 relied heavily on Prospect Direct Mail to raise necessary funds from their membership. This requires developing an issue specialty and then cultivating a list of member-supporters who are willing to provide annual contributions to support the organization’s work. It leads to single-issue specialist organizations, many of them holdovers from periods of intense, movement-style activism. (Bosso 2005) Rather than general-progressive organizations, the political economy of Prospect Direct Mail fosters single-issue organizations – environmental, women’s rights, gay rights, anti-war, etc. Since each additional piece of membership communication carries a marginal cost (printing and postage), specialization is key to building a sustainable response rate. Chapter 5 details the implications of this change.

For internet-mediated organizations like MoveOn and Democracy for America, differences in membership communication platforms lead to a divergent logic of member
engagement and fundraising. The marginal costs of adding an additional piece of e-mail approaches zero. For this reason, there is little incentive to specialize into a single-issue niche. MoveOn can attract more members by working on both Global Warming and the Iraq War, with some responding more frequently to one and others to the other. So long as the organization’s e-mail output doesn’t expand to the point where they have high dropout rates (a testable proposition that the organization tracks extensively), groups like this are better-served spanning multiple issue areas.

This leads directly to the third distinction: due to their nimbleness and general-progressive orientation, internet-mediated organizations tend to gravitate towards capitalizing on whichever issue is dominating the news cycle of the day. MoveOn, for instance, has organized House Parties and group viewing sessions when films such as Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” and Michael Moore’s “Sicko” were released to theaters amongst much fanfare. Though the groups engage in membership plebiscites to determine their positive issue priorities, they also constantly adapt to the issue of the day, be it a lobbyist scandal, major report, or upcoming election. If we think of the progressive “issue space” as being traditionally divided along classical interest group lines (see figure 3-3), then these internet-mediated progressive generalists cross issue boundaries and also occupy space that previously fell into the cracks between issue groups. (see figure 3-4)
Figure 3-3: Classical Progressive Issue Space. Organizations in brackets are examples, not comprehensive
Figure 3-4: Progressive Issue Space, circa 2008. Progressive generalists encompass existing issue space, along with issues that previously fell between the cracks.

And therein lies the most important difference between the interest group population of 2008 and that of 1984. Due to these distinct capacities that emerge out of the political economy of internet-mediated communication, issues that previously lacked enough concentrated public interest to enable the formation of a political pressure group are now taken up by the largest and most prominent progressive organizations. When Superdelegates dominate the expanded bandwidth of mainstream media, these organizations seize upon the issue and provide voice to public discontent. Referring back once again to Bowers’s victory declaration, “It is always good when political elites are
forced to back down out of fear of popular revolt from the voters,” it seems the longer-term impact herein is the lowering of the barriers to the Schattschneiderian mobilization of bias. In 1984, this issue did not fit into the core mission of any existing interest groups. Gary Hart supporters could protest it, but only through the existing communication and organizational structures of the campaign. Existing elite networks managed the process without fear of organized dissent. In 2008, a new information regime enabled a new class of nimble, internet-mediated progressive generalists, and these groups were able to give voice to a diffuse issue interest. In effect, this makes the networks of political elites more porous by empowering a wider range of actors to engage in political action. The minimum threshold for collective action has been reduced dramatically, leading to short-term, informal organizing efforts and long-running progressive generalists who engage their members across a wide range of issues to pressure decision-makers.

Evaluating the Narratives. First Among Equals?

At this juncture, we have the outline of three explanatory narratives, competing albeit complementary. (1) Critical junctures in the development of the Democratic party nominating system created circumstances for collective action in 2008 that were more favorable than the circumstances present in 1984; one of these junctures being the collective recollection of the results of 1984 itself. (2) Media expansion created the space for motivated partisans to indulge their taste for political information and intrigue, leading to a more information-rich environment that better facilitated the engagement of
relevant issue publics. Just as the 24-hour news networks increased the information gap between political “haves” and “have nots,” it also altered the terrain to be more favorable to public action. (3) Changes to the information regime also altered the costs of association-building, allowing for the development of short-term “meta-organizations” and changing the political economy of interest group organization. With multiple changing dynamics at work, can we say anything more about the relative importance of the three explanatory variables? I argue that one crucial distinction suggests that only (3) qualifies as a generalizably necessary condition for collective action in this case, though (1) and (2) created a more permissive environment that proved important for this specific case.

Consider again the list of organizations that sponsored the full-page ad presented on page 13. For ease of evaluation, I reproduce the list in table 1 below, along with the founding dates and issue areas of each of the participating organizations. Data was collected by visiting each organization’s “about us” page on their website:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Name</th>
<th>Founding Date</th>
<th>Issue Specialty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MoveOn.org Political Action</td>
<td>September, 1998</td>
<td>“…brings real Americans into politics to fight for a more progressive America and elect progressive candidates.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DemocracyforAmerica.com</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>“…our nation’s largest progressive political action community… a grassroots powerhouse working to change our country and the Democratic Party from the bottom-up.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ColorofChange.org</td>
<td>2005 (post-Katrina)</td>
<td>“exists to strengthen Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating Organizations</td>
<td>Year Founded</td>
<td>Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage Campaign</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>“the online organizing hub for Progressive Californians”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FairVote Action</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>“acts to transform our elections to achieve universal access to participation, a full spectrum of meaningful ballot choices and majority rule with fair representation for all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenLeft</td>
<td>July, 2007</td>
<td>“a news, analysis and action website dedicated toward building a progressive governing majority in America.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PowerPAC.org</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>“a nonprofit advocacy and political organization. PowerPAC was organized to champion democracy and social justice in states and communities across the country.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-1: Participating organizations in the Superdelegate Transparency Project Pressure Campaign

Only one of these organizations – FairVote Action – was founded prior to the broad diffusion of internet-mediated communication platforms.26 And FairVote’s mission of electoral reform places the Superdelegate controversy squarely within its issue space. All of the other organizations were founded as internet-mediated organizations,

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26 FairVote was initially founded as the Center for Voting and Democracy in 1992.
with an interest either in “progressive politics” generally, or in strengthening a specific constituency’s voice in pursuit of progressive goals. Noticeably absent from this list is a wide array of prominent left-wing organizations. Labor groups (American Federation of Labor-Congress of International Organizations, Service Employees International Union), Women’s Rights groups (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, National Organization for Women), Environmental groups (Sierra Club, League of Conservation Voters, Friends of the Earth), and traditional Civil Rights groups (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) all are actively engaged in Democratic primary politics. Yet none of these organizations took part in the Superdelegate campaign.

All of these traditional organizations were prominent in both 1984 and 2008. In neither of the two cases did they choose to participate in collective action. This provides a valuable signal in evaluating the three causal narratives. Neither the path dependent critical junctures in Democratic politics nor the expansion of the media environment can explain why only the new generation of left-wing associations engaged in this issue. While these two trends appear to have increased the issue’s salience and provided a more permissive environment for activating a diffuse community-of-interest, their effect is population-wide and thus they offer no explanation for why the tempest surrounding “letting the voters decide” would be contained only in the new generation of progressive advocacy organizations.

Based on a side-by-side comparison of the two cases, we cannot conclusively determine that either explanation (1) or explanation (2) qualifies as a necessary condition.

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27 Color of Change was founded by James Rucker, a former MoveOn staffer, at the encouragement of MoveOn’s founders. Likewise, Courage Campaign was a spinoff of California-based Democracy for America affiliate leaders.
for the emergence of collective action. It seems likely that they played important roles—
without the 1984 loss and Bush v Gore outrage, the network of new progressive advocacy
group leaders might have judged it a non-issue, and without the expanded media
environment, it wouldn’t have been the issue that dominated the news cycle— but lacking
either one, the new advocacy groups could still have chosen to engage in mobilization.
Only (3), the changing political economy of interest group representation, qualifies as a
clear necessary condition for the collective action witnessed in 2008. In the absence of
the information abundance and reduced transaction costs of the internet, only FairVote
would have been a functioning group, and FairVote with a small budget of roughly
$850,000 and a much smaller member list than the other participating organizations,
FairVote would not have been able to produce nearly the same level of public
mobilization. (Payne 2008)

Divergent fundraising and membership-engagement practices, driven by the
availability of new communications media, have created a generational shift in the
interest group population. The new generation of internet-mediated progressive
generalists do not just span the issue spaces of multiple traditional issue groups, but also
engage their large memberships in issues that otherwise would have fallen into the cracks
between the issue groups. This is a difference-in-kind, indicative of a sea change in the
mobilization of bias in American politics. Lowered transaction costs have not just driven
existing organizations to pursue backend efficiency, but have indeed widened the
spectrum of issues around which issue publics will attempt to influence decision-makers.
A larger swath of the “demand curve” for political action is now being realized as a result
of the change in information regimes.
Conclusion

A standard criticism of the early scholarship on the internet and politics has been that the internet makes communication move faster, but otherwise leaves political institutions unchanged. Bimber and Davis reached such a conclusion in their 2003 study, Campaigning Online, where they concluded that the internet would have minimal effects on political campaigns because visitors to candidate web sites tend to be existing supporters, leading to “reinforcement, not persuasion.” (Bimber and Davis, 2003) Their book, based on field research in the 2000 campaign cycle, arrived in stores just in time for the Dean campaign to emphasize the overlooked importance of the mobilization of bias to campaign fundraising and field activities. Likewise, critics of blog scholarship have cautioned that blogging is “just a lot of chatter” with little impact on institutions of power. What this chapter should make clear is that the change in information regimes has substantial implications for mass political engagement. Internet communication has affected the political economy of collective action efforts, widening the issue space in which the new generation of interest groups work to promote political engagement. We should likewise recall Jimmy Wales’s experience with Nupedia, which suggests that quicker communication alone leads to little change when applied to traditional production practices. The lowered transaction costs of the internet enable new structures of public goods production and collective action, and we see from this case that the impact of the internet on political associations lies in the formation of novel organization-types, rather than in accelerating the communication of older political associations.
The next chapters will explore the emerging landscape of internet-mediated political associations, beginning with the often-misunderstood “netroots” political blogosphere. Community blogs like DailyKos and OpenLeft serve as gathering spaces for online communities-of-interest, functioning as quasi-interest groups that are best understood as venues for political engagement rather than “citizen journalism” outlets. Placing these sites in the context of political mobilization helps to clarify their most striking effects on American politics.
Chapter 4: Blogs as Internet-Mediated Organizations

The central contention of this chapter is that large-scale community blogs such as DailyKos and OpenLeft function as quasi-interest groups, and that their effects can only be properly understood when studied as internet-mediated organizations. We saw in the last chapter how bloggers at OpenLeft led the way in launching a national mobilization effort surrounding the role of Superdelegates in the 2008 Democratic Primary. This chapter will critically discuss the emerging literature on political blogging, noting several mistakes that I believe have plagued the research community thus far. As a whole, political science blog research has been concerned with bloggers as “citizen journalists” and has failed to recognize any meaningful differences in blog type. I maintain that a blog is a relatively simple type of software code, and that while lead adopters in 2002 were a networked community with strong shared norms and styles, the technology has been applied to a widening array of purposes as it has diffused to the larger public. Today, variance in blog platform leads to dramatically different types of community-formation, and a focus on the infrastructure and community development of elite political blogs places the political “netroots” in its appropriate context.

This chapter summarizes and builds upon several stand-alone articles that I have either already had published or else are currently under review. The first of these, “Measuring Influence in the Political Blogosphere,” introduces a blogosphere measurement tool called the Blogosphere Authority Index (BAI). The BAI is a ranked tracking system for studying the elite political blogosphere. I developed it after noticing two problems in the existing literature: (1) existing sampling techniques of “elite blogs” made it impossible to say which blogs were acting as power law hubs, and (2) the
publicly-available lists previous scholars had relied upon for sampling were all either defunct, deeply-flawed, or overbroad. The BAI identifies communities, or clumps, of blogs based on their blogroll citation patterns (a form of applied sociometrics), then gathers publicly-available data on each site’s hyperlink authority, site traffic, and comments/week. Each of these measures is converted into an ordinal ranking, and then those rankings are combined to produce the index. The BAI was first produced in November 2007 and has been running as an automated system since August 2008. A summary of the BAI is included as an appendix to the dissertation.

Additional blog-related publications include “Understanding Blogspace,” which introduces the typology of blog architecture I will present in this chapter, and “Macaca Moments Revisited… YouTube Effects or Netroots Effects,” which argues against the habit among social scientists of focusing on individual technologies divorced from the large-scale communities that utilize them. This is in keeping with the suggestion in chapter 2 that Wikipedia and other online spaces are characterized not only by their permissive software code, but also by the active participatory communities they have developed. A recent conference paper, “Stability and Change in the Blogosphere in the 2008 Election Cycle,” presents BAI-based findings on changes to the blog rankings during the heightened traffic of the 2008 election season. I will be referencing some of these findings toward the end of the chapter. To date, my blogs-as-interest groups argument remains somewhat unique in the research community, and thus I have spun off these papers as a contribution to the blog-related literature which is otherwise distinct from the literature on political associations, interest groups, and/or internet-mediated organizations. Since the contribution of this dissertation is primarily to these latter
literatures, this chapter summarizes my relevant arguments and findings.

The chapter is divided into six sections. The first section will discuss the existing literature, with a particular eye towards major recent works. The blogosphere only began attracting scholarly interest in 2003 after bloggers played a role in the Trent Lott scandal, and so the difference of a handful of years represents the lifespan of the nascent field. I will demonstrate that existing research fails to draw distinctions between different types of elite political blog, though it has managed to identify several other important features of the blogosphere. I will also discuss Matthew Hindman’s theory of “Googlerarchy” (2008), which maintains that the power law structure of the internet leads to a replication of a stable elite that advantages the very same white, male, well-educated segments of society that have dominated politics in previous eras. Section two lays out my counterargument to Hindman’s Googlerarchy, suggesting that a closer investigation of the offline roots of the average search request yields a very different understanding of the elite blogosphere, one dominated by mass coordination problems that are solved through developing or longstanding organizational reputations. Section three then lays out the argument for treating blogs as quasi-interest groups, with a particular eye towards mobility and participation in the DailyKos blogging community. DailyKos is of particular interest because it is the “power law hub” of the progressive political blogosphere, a point that it is verified through the BAI dataset. Section four takes a broader look at blog infrastructure, returning to the topic of software code-based governance solutions and introducing the typology of blogspace. Section five then highlights some of the major substantive impacts that the political “netroots” have had in the 2006 and 2008 election cycles. The sixth and final section then offers a comparison
of the left and right blog neighborhoods, drawing upon time series data from the 2008 election season to demonstrate that the growing gap between progressives and conservatives in this particular online organizing space.

**Literature Review**

Scholarly interest in political blogs first surfaced with a set of papers at the 2003 and 2004 American Political Science Association Annual Meetings, including Drezner and Farrell’s “The Power and Politics of Blogs,” McKenna and Pole’s “Do Blogs Matter? Weblogs in American Politics,” Matthew Hindman’s “Googlearchy,” and Joel David Bloom’s “The Blogosphere: How a Once-Humble Medium Came to Drive Elite Media Discourse and Influence Public Policy and Elections.” All of these papers reflected a reality of the blogosphere at that time: it was comprised of early-adopting individuals – “bloggers” – who were networked together through their blogrolls and active hyperlinks. Blogging became widely available in 1999 after Pyra Labs released their easy-to-use “blogger” software platform (later acquired by Google). Bloggers exhibited stylistic similarities, had a largely counter-institutional bent, challenging existing media and political elites, and often wrote behind pseudonyms to protect their identities. The infinitesimal costs of online self-publishing, left-wing bloggers’ critique of media coverage in the leadup to the Iraq War, and right-wing bloggers’ critique of liberal media bias lent to an easy categorization of bloggers as “citizen journalists,” a framework which persists to this day.

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28 A blogroll is a list of bloggers that the site owner(s) recommends or frequently visits, usually running along a side column of the blog itself. Each name in the list consists of a passive hyperlink to the recommended site. Active hyperlinks refer to links appearing within the text of a blog entry.
The 2004 election saw a surge of interest in the medium, particularly as the Howard Dean campaign raised record online funds with the help of liberal bloggers affiliated with MyDD and DailyKos. Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance conducted a well-known study of blog hyperlink patterns, “The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 Election: Divided They Blog” demonstrating that the political left and political right constitute rarely-overlapping network neighborhoods. This tied in with the concerns raised by Cass Sunstein in his (pre-blogosphere) book, *Republic.com*, that the internet, and the blogosphere in particular, might result in an “echo chamber” effect in which liberals and conservatives only hear from like-minded individuals. Echo chambers in turn lead to increased ideological polarization, a far cry from the Habermasian ideal of an “online public sphere” that many had envisioned. Since the 2004 election, much of the political science research on blogs has focused on identifying “who are the bloggers” (McKenna and Pole 2008), “what do they do” (Wallsten 2007) and “how different are they from traditional elites?” (Hindman 2008, Davis 2009). In so doing, however, the research community has drifted away from important changes that have occurred within the elite political blogosphere itself.

As Hindman demonstrated in 2003, the structure of search engines like Google and Yahoo reinforces the rich-get-richer pattern we see throughout the web, leading to the blogosphere’s now-familiar power law distribution. Both Wallsten and Davis follow his lead, building their research around a central distinction between “A-list” or “influential” and “non-elite” or “common” blogs. This is, itself, an important finding. The large mass of blogs are non-political, written for a tiny audience of friends or colleagues, and quickly abandoned. (Davis, pg 35) Meanwhile, elite political blogs
attract visitors in the tens or hundreds of thousands. Making a distinction between the
average easy-to-launch, easy-to-overlook blog and the blogging elite is important for
identifying blogosphere impact, in the same way that making the distinction between the
New York Times and some hand-scrawled “newspaper” produced in someone’s basement
is important. But lumping all elite blogs into a single, undifferentiated class (or
differentiating them only on the basis of ideology) is equally problematic.

Wallsten notes this problem in his study of blog posting habits. Wallsten
excludes DailyKos from his study, noting the methodological challenges in studying a
“hive blog” of its type, with thousands of entries coming from the site’s active
community of registered users. This “diary” structure, in which any user can post their
own content to the site, was introduced in 2003 as part of the Scoop software platform.
Markos Moulitsas was the first individual blogger to embrace the platform, and this
“first-mover advantage” so to speak, is a good deal of what distinguished DailyKos in
those early days from other popular political blogs (leading to the chasm in participation,
traffic, and donations evident today). In effect, Moulitsas invited much of the lead
adopter community to his site at a time when they otherwise would have to blog alone
and jump from page to page to follow the community discussion. Wallsten justifies the
exclusion of DailyKos by noting that the traffic and hyperlink gap between that site and
its 2004 contemporaries was not particularly pronounced, but also specifically suggests
that “if the political significance of political blogs is to be accurately determined, …
future work should explore how the Daily Kos is used and whether its readers are taking
political action.” (Wallsten, pg 119)
Although the gap between DailyKos and its fellow elite political blogs has only become more pronounced (as discussed in a later section of this chapter), the research community has only continued to ignore these differences. In his 2009 book, *Typing Politics: The Role of Blogs in American Politics*, Richard Davis claims to offer a “detailed content analysis of the most popular political blogs.” Drawing from blog posts in September, 2006, Davis lays out the basic empirical claim that 429 blog posts appeared on the site that month, as opposed to 446 at Crooks and Liars, 529 at Eschaton, and 585 at Instapundit. (Davis, pg 58) In his discussion of the site, Davis makes no mention of its “hive” or “community blog” structure, instead suggesting that the site is the blogging home of Moulitsas alone. In point of fact, 9,296 posts were written on DailyKos in September 2006.29 Hundreds of these community-generated “diary” blog posts were voted onto the “recommended list” where they received hundreds and sometimes thousands of comments from fellow community members. Davis undercounts content production by more than twentyfold, and in so doing he fails to examine some of the most important divergences within the political blogosphere. Instapundit is a single-person blog that does not allow reader comments. DailyKos is a hub space for a large-scale community of interest that aggressively attempts to affect electoral and legislative politics. To lump the two together as examples of the same phenomenon is to fundamentally miscast some of the most important features of the blogosphere itself.

I critique Davis here because he is both a well-established voice in the field, publishing in a major university press (Oxford), and because his error in this case is replicated throughout the research literature. To date, there has been no significant

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29 Compiled in March 2009 through a simple query of the DailyKos database. Though all blog posts are archived, the size of the database takes several days to download.
scholarly research into the political “netroots” that takes account of the community-
enhancing diary structure found on DailyKos, OpenLeft, and similar sites. To the extent
that these sites, like Wikipedia, are enabling an online community-of-interest to engage in
the production of a public good (collective action) by setting a coordination point where
like-minded individuals can take advantage of the lowered transaction costs of the
internet, political science researchers have failed to adopt methods that would even
manage to detect this activity. And while many positive contributions have been made to
the field, some with much less glaring empirical flaws, this perspective leads to other,
less-obvious divergences.

The Theory of “Googlearchy:” Stability All the Way Down

Matthew Hindman deserves great credit for his theory of “Googlearchy.” First
proposed in a 2003 conference paper and later advanced in his 2008 book, The Myth of
Digital Democracy, the theory introduces the power law/rich-get-richer mechanics that
undergird the entire web (and substantially influenced the early formation of this
dissertation project). Hindman was the first political scientists to discover this empirical
regularity, and his work has been both a substantial contribution to the field and a clarion
warning to internet optimists who too often drift into platitudes about the equalizing
influence of the new media environment. That said, I would argue that his conclusions
are at times erroneous, in particular because he does not include blog/website structure in
his analysis. The theory of Googlearchy, or “the rule of the most heavily [hyper]linked”
is as follows:
“First, Googlearchy suggests that the number of [hyper]links pointing to a site is the most important determinant of site visibility... All else being equal, sites with more links should receive more traffic. Second, Googlearchy indicates that niche dominance should be a general rule of online life. For every clearly defined group of Web sites, a small portion of the group should receive most of the links and most of the traffic... Third, Googlearchy suggests that this dependence on links should make niche dominance self-perpetuating. Heavily linked sites should continue to attract more links, more eyeballs, and more resources with which to improve site content, while sites with few links remain ignored.” (Hindman, pg 55, emphasis added)

Hindman’s main point is that people traverse the web through search engines. And since search engines feature the most heavily-linked sites at the top of their results, those sites receive a disproportionate amount of traffic, which in turn leads to additional linking. He is noting Barabasi’s condition of “preferential attachment,” discussed in chapter 2 as a precondition for the development of power law distributions. He goes on from there to make the case that web traffic is tremendously stable and hierarchical, and that, since only a few elite bloggers and political web sites emerge to receive large scale traffic, and since this elite is reinforced by search engine dominance, the web simply replicates the patterns of elite dominance found in offline politics. The latter portions of chapter 2 have already laid out part of my rebuttal to Hindman’s “Googlearchy:” power law hubs do not display the long-term stability that Hindman claims, with Google replacing Yahoo and AltaVista and Facebook replacing Myspace and Friendster as two guiding examples. Just as the “incrementalist” school of thought for years predicted that policy subsystems would remain stable and intact in American politics, only to be overturned by Baumgartner and Jones’s “punctuated equilibrium” argument that, viewed over time, any individual subsystem will have long periods of stability and short flashes of substantial change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993), Hindman’s focus on the stochastic
predominance of stability online ignores the predictable conditions under which power
law hubs are likely to be replaced. The following section lays out a second element of
my disagreement with Hindman: that “all else” is in fact not equal in the area of search
requests. That will then be followed by a detailed description of the DailyKos blogging
community, my proposed typology of blog platforms, and a discussion of the impacts of
this set of “netroots” quasi-interest groups in American politics today.

The Offline Determinants of the Average Search Request, and a Matter of Perspective

Hindman correctly suggests that, based on the hyperlinked nature of the web, “all
else being equal, sites with more links should receive more traffic.” Later in his book, he
looks at the top individual search queries according to data obtained from Hitwise
Competitive Intelligence, one of the leading private firms in the field of internet traffic.
While virtually everything else on the web follows a power law distribution, search terms
are widely diffuse, with the top news-related search, “weather” receiving only 0.42% of
the total in the dataset (Hindman, pg 71). This is hardly at odds with the network
literature, because there is no “preferential attachment” in search queries. You do not
have information on what I am searching for, nor does my choice of search term affect
your choice of search term. What’s more, the 3rd most prevalent search term in the
Hitwise “news-related” dataset was not a topic, but an organization: CNN. Hindman
suggests that this nonetheless reinforces Googlearchy because the same sites regularly
appear in the top rankings across multiple search terms. Nonetheless, I would suggest
that, lacking a concentration of query requests, we should not be quick to assume that “all
else” is in fact “equal.”

Chris Bowers of OpenLeft provides importance evidence in this regard. Writing in 2005, when he was an editor at MyDD, Bowers authored an often-referenced blog post titled, “I’m Not Going to Blogroll You.” (Bowers 2005) As a top-10 progressive blog, MyDD regularly received requests from individual bloggers to be added to its blogroll, under the belief that a link from such a high-traffic hub would help them establish themselves. Using the high-quality data that is only revealed to blog purveyors themselves, Bowers explains, “Over 80% of the daily traffic to almost every blog is generated by people going directly to the main URL of a blog without any prompting from a link, blogroll, or web search.” Bowers then goes on to suggest a series of actions that fledging bloggers can take to build their own site audience. His point is that the profligation of hyperlinks between political blogs (which was quite the fad in 2005) was a red herring, that the quest for more links actually bears a relatively weak relationship to the development of a healthy audience or active online community.

Search requests, to state a near-tautology, are determined by what the individual is looking for. And here, existing offline reputation plays a vital role. CNN.com and NYTimes.com attract roughly 7 and 4 times as many visits as HuffingtonPost.com, the most-trafficked political blog in the country. The HuffingtonPost also provides entertainment, business, and lifestyle news, aiming to compete with the major news sites. But one thing that it cannot compete with is their longstanding reputation. “CNN” is a

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30 This is an enduring problem for the web-related research community. High-quality data regarding traffic patterns is made available to site owners, while only much lower-quality data is released to the public. The information gap between practitioners and researchers is immense, and this makes large-scale research endeavors tremendously problematic, because they must either attain the cooperation of a large number of competing firms/interests or rely on data which is deeply flawed.

relatively frequent search query because Cable News Network has developed a brand and reputation in the offline environment, and likewise with the New York Times. Likewise, the Sierra Club does not appear in the first three pages of search results for the query “environmental issues,” or “environmental activism,” but sierraclub.org receives more traffic than globalissues.org or envirolink.org, each of which are in the top 5 search results.  Though Hindman is correct that, all else being equal, higher links lead to higher traffic, the existing reputation of major news networks, interest groups, and other offline institutions translates directly into online site traffic, because either their individual names are entered as search queries or because, more often than not, they are visited through direct entry of their URL rather than through a search query.  Googlearchy is only a minor feature of an online environment dominated by mass coordination challenges.  Search algorithms are one element of the rich-get-richer solution to these challenges, but the broader concept of “reputation” is a stronger explanatory mechanism.

If the difficulty with Davis’s work lies in an empirical disagreement, the difficulty with Hindman is much more one of perspective.  Hindman correctly assesses that political websites and blogs in particular receive far less traffic than other parts of the web.  But this leads to a simple question: “how big is 10,000.”  The answer (of course) is that it depends on context.  A city of 10,000 is small.  A community meeting of 10,000 is enormous.  Applied to the blogosphere, this further means that the system of hubs and niches may not be such a problematic thing if we stop assuming ex ante that bloggers are practicing “citizen journalism.”  OpenLeft receives 8,000-10,000 visits per day and has

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32 The other top-5 results directed traffic to about.com and wikipedia.org. Since Alexa.com tracks traffic to entire domain names, we are incapable of separating the environmental information requests to these sites from other information requests.
an active commenter community of less than 100. Whether that is large or small depends on the goals of the proprietors and the community they have drawn together.

The difference in perspectives does nonetheless result in additional tensions around empirical claims. Maintaining that the power law-dominated structure of the internet leads to the emergence of a small blogging elite, Hindman argues that “though millions of Americans now maintain a blog, only a few dozen political bloggers get as many readers as a typical college newspaper.” (Hindman, pg 103) It is correct to assert that only a few dozen political blogs get that number of readers, but patently incorrect to make the same claim about bloggers. DailyKos alone boasts a 22-member editor corps, though not all of them are currently active. FireDogLake, OpenLeft, MyDD, TalkingPointsMemo, ThinkProgress, and even Eschaton (once the personal blogging home of Duncan, “Atrios” Black) all include multiple full-time professional bloggers, and several of these sites feature the community blogging format which allows hundreds or thousands to gain exposure for their content as well. Hindman is correct that the blogosphere consists of a power law’s “short head” and “long tail,” but he incorrectly equates each power law hub site with a single blogger. This colors the “blogger census,” presented in his book (pps 118-128) and repeated in Davis’s as well (pps 40-42), in which he made the methodological choice to include the most prominent blogger from every elite blog in his survey of demographic characteristics.

The census is central to Hindman’s conclusion that the blogosphere replicates the same demographic disparities found in offline society, privileging affluent, well-educated white males, and leaving little room for new voices. While success in the elite blogosphere is correlated with other demographic indicators of elite advantage at an
underlying level – top bloggers must produce a large amount of content that is both insightful and well-written, and those with wealth, substantial free time in front of computers, and advanced degrees that yield expert insights and writing training thus hold substantial advantages – it simply is not the case that the high-traffic blogging outlets are limited to “a few dozen individuals.” To demonstrate exactly why this is the case, I will now turn to a detailed discussion of the DailyKos blogging community.

**The DailyKos Blogging Community: A “Netroots Nation.”**

DailyKos was initially launched in May 2002 as the individual blogging home of Markos Moulitsas Zuniga. Nicknamed “kos” during his time in the army (which also witnessed his conversion from Republican to Democrat), Moulitsas’s first blog post stated simply, “I am progressive. I am liberal. I make no apologies.” (Moulitsas 2008. Pg 2) Notice the pronoun, “I.” For the first year and a half of its existence, DailyKos was structurally the same as all other political blogs, with one blogger posting his thoughts, hyperlinking to like-minded individuals and news stories of interest, and responding to his small group of commenters. Markos was one of many prominent bloggers in the fledging political blogosphere, but he was less well-known than contemporaries such as Duncan “Atrios” Black and Joshua Micah Marshall, both of whom had played prominent roles in the Trent Lott scandal. But in October 2003, kos was the first blogger to switch his site over to the new community blogging platform offered by Scoop. The defining element of the platform is that it gives registered users the ability to write blog posts of their own and see them featured in the “diary” section.
that appears along the righthand sidebar of the site. This ability to post one’s own content at the hub site does much to blur the distinction between blogger and audience. If someone is a regular DailyKos reader who frequently comments and occasionally posts their own entries to the site, are they a “blogger,” a “diarist” or a reader? The distinctions between the categories become grayscale rather than bright-line, and the single hub space becomes better able to harness the network externalities of its large community. Early bloggers loved this feature and flocked to DailyKos, providing a first-mover advantage that sets it head-and-shoulders above its peers today. Moulitsas wisely recognized the utility of the format for other communities-of-interest and founded SB Nation, a lucrative network of community sports blogs providing a space for fans of individual sports teams.

The growth of DailyKos since October 2003 has been nothing short of phenomenal. Figures 4-1 and 4-2 capture two elements of this growth. Figure 4-1 charts the growth in content posting to the site since it switched over to the Scoop platform. As previously mentioned, these frontpage posts and diary entries number in the thousands per month, with spikes around election seasons that are accompanied by spikes in traffic as well. During the 2008 election season, traffic well exceeded 1 million visits per day and often surpassed 2 million visits/day. In the post election-phase, traffic has fallen to 750,000-850,000/day, substantially higher than the roughly 600,00/day it was receiving prior to the political season. Only the Huffington Post exceeds these traffic levels, and that is thanks to its large staff, celebrity participation, and newspaper-like content that includes entertainment and lifestyle news (see discussion of “bridge blogs” in the following section). No other progressive blog approaches this level of traffic, and the top conservative blog, HotAir.com, still stands a good deal behind it at roughly 550,000/day,
despite a concerted post-election effort.

Figure 4-1: DailyKos blog and diary posts over time

Figure 4-2 provides an even starker distinction. As part of the BAI system, I capture the total number of comments posted on all of a blog’s entries per week. Comments are an excellent indicator of community activity, because they demonstrate that individuals are engaging with the author and/or one another, actively inhabiting that particular online hub, rather than briefly visiting and then surfing away.\footnote{I am the only social science researcher to attempt to capture data on comment totals, simply because the data collection proves difficult-to-automate, large in scale, and tedious. The lack of public attention to comments has another side benefit: whereas traffic metrics and hyperlinks, being publicly-tracked and tied to site income levels, are notoriously unreliable because of the efforts of spammers and malicious coders to game the system, the lack of a financial incentive attached to the signal sent by high comment levels has left them relatively unmanipulated. Spammers place junk comments, bloggers}
found when constructing the BAI was that the total comments on DailyKos alone, circa November 2007, was nearly equal to the comments posted to the next 24 largest progressive blogs, and roughly 50 percent greater than the *entire elite conservative blogosphere* (Karpf 2008a). Figure 4-2 offers the same data analysis, traced through the high-traffic period of the 2008 election season. Community participation on DailyKos simply overwhelms all other elite political blogs combined. There is no analogue to it in the political blogosphere.

Figure 4-2: Comments/week on DailyKos, top-24 progressive blogs, and top-25 conservative blogs

**Features of DailyKos**

The sheer scale and abundance of the comment and diary posting requires an

quickly remove them, and the total/week remains an accurate and verifiable representation.
accompanying set of technical solutions. Borrowing from the Slashdot community’s “mojo” reputation system, DailyKos community members are invited to recommend diaries for inclusion on a featured “recommended list.” Recommended diaries are featured more prominently on the front page, and remain there for a day or more. This distributed rating system rewards quality writing, and authors on the recommended list will generally update their post with a thank-you note to the community in recognition of the honor. It is also of vital importance given space limitations on the front page. The “recent diaries” list only records the 30 most recent diary posts. While this would be plenty for a small or mid-sized blogging community, DailyKos often averages over 300 diary posts per day, meaning that during high-traffic hours, a new diary will have disappeared from the list in less than two hours. Likewise, commenters are encouraged to rate one another’s comments on a zero-to-four scale. Comments with multiple zeros are hidden from view, and users can adjust their preferences so that they only see highly-rated comments, mitigating the daunting task of navigating a comments-thread that can exceed 1,000 entries. High-quality diaries are also featured in a nightly “diary rescue” front page post, based upon the opinions of volunteer “rescue rangers” who take turns reading the many postings of the day and identifying the ones they think are best. Such additional responsibilities, along with other enhanced moderation tools, become available to “trusted users,” a form of superuser status akin to the administrator corps in Wikipedia.

Popular diarists also can be featured in mini-interviews as part of the “Yes We’re Staring at You!” front page series. Other front page series include a daily “Abbreviated Pundit Round-Up,” a daily “Today in Congress” listing, a midday “open thread” with

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34 The exact algorithm used to determine which diaries reach the list, and how long they stay up there, is kept secret in an effort to prevent coordinated groups from gaming the system.
bulleted list of brief highlights from stories happening around the web, a collection of Op-Ed style long-form essays appearing every Sunday, a daily “Cheers and Jeers” comedy segment, and “Saturday Hate Mail,” where kos features and ridicules some of the worst conservative hate mail he received in the previous week. In the 2008 election season, DailyKos also developed a partnership with the polling firm Research 2000 and sponsored its own daily tracking poll. They have maintained that polling relationship and now release a weekly tracking poll of Obama’s favorable/unfavorable rating, featured with analysis every Friday. These features arise in response to reader/community enthusiasm, as do community inside jokes, such as the inclusion of “pie” as an option in most of their spot opinion polls, and abbreviations such as IOKIYAR (“It’s Okay if you are Republican,” a community critique of perceived mainstream media bias in favor of Republicans, invoked whenever a Republican makes a statement which, if made by a Democrat, would provoke controversy.). These terms and features are included in dkospedia.com, a wiki site maintained by the DailyKos community.

**Participation in DailyKos**

DailyKos, like other community blogs, features a “ladder of engagement” similar to those found in traditional federated political associations. (Andrews et al 2008) Gina Cooper, for instance, started infrequently reading DailyKos in 2003. A high school science teacher in Memphis, TN, Cooper had little opportunity to meet like-minded liberals and discuss public issues. She became a regular reader and eventually signed up for an account in order to leave comments in other users’ diearies. In January 2004, she posted her first diary, and the positive feedback she received from other “Kossacks” led her to become even more engaged. In the aftermath of the 2004 election, Cooper and a
few others started discussing the possibility of an in-person gathering of the DailyKos community. She would go on to chair this effort, which received Moulitsas’s blessing, but no direct oversight, and the first YearlyKos convention in 2006 drew over 1,000 bloggers, dozens of media inquiries, and appearances by a host of Democratic party officials (Bai 2007). The following year, all but one Democratic Presidential candidate attended YearlyKos for a nationally-televised debate, one week after shunning the centrist Democratic Leadership Council’s annual meeting. (Moulitsas, pg 39) The conference has since been renamed “Netroots Nation” to highlight the involvement of the entire “netroots” blogosphere and Cooper, after serving as CEO of Netroots Nation, has moved into other political advocacy work, occasionally appearing on CNN while leaving other netroots and kossack volunteers to organize the large annual conference.35

Like Cooper, Steve Singiser is a high school social studies teacher with a penchant for reading and analyzing political polling data. Singiser found a community on DailyKos and, after years of posting highly-popular comments and diaries to the site, was elevated to Contributing Editor status on May 14, 200936 after Contributing Editor Arjun Jaikumar accepted a position as Blog and Netroots Outreach Manager at the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.37 Contributing editorship is a paid position and introduces an element of meritocracy denied in Hindman’s discussion of “Googlearchy.” DailyKos, like Wikipedia, succeeds based on the heavy network externalities provided by its large community-of-interest. Active kossacks who build a personal reputation on the site are given additional opportunities, appear more frequently on the high-traffic “recommended list” and can eventually become frontpage contributing editors

35 http://www.ginacooper.com/node/140
37 http://arjun-jaikumar.dailykos.com/
themselves. The blogosphere may be characterized by power law hubs, but the hubs themselves enable individuals to build an audience and rise through the ranks. While this is far from the egalitarian picture initially envisioned by internet optimists, it is a more porous elite system than the one that preceded it.

**DailyKos as Political Organization**

The DailyKos community-of-interest is bound together by explicitly political interests and goals. The site endorses a slate of “netroots” congressional candidates and, utilizing the ActBlue fundraising portal, donates millions of dollars to them. In a single 48-hour period spanning October 17\(^{th}\)-19\(^{th}\), 2008, after Congresswoman Michele Bachmann (R-MN06) made a colorful misstatement, the DailyKos community led the way in raising over $810,000 for Bachmann’s Democratic challenger, Elwyn Tinklenberg, nearly matching Tinklenberg’s total fundraising over the course of the previous year.\(^3\)\(^8\) (Karpf 2009b) There is an underlying tension between the bottom-up, network externality-capturing community engagement and the need for strategic choices about whom to endorse, which issues to focus on, and how to position the site. Conservative pundits and bloggers regularly paint the site as vulgar, loony, and extremist, linking to the wildest and most offensive posts and comments they can find, and there is virtually no public understanding that open, pseudonymous posting means that the cited diarist or commenter could have no standing in the kossack community. Moulitsas himself acts as a (semi-)benevolent dictator in this regard, with two hard-and-fast policies regarding topics that are off-limits. Any diarist or commenter who raises conspiracy

\(^{38}\) $300,000 of this fundraising came through an ActBlue page set up specifically by kossacks after Tinklenberg’s fundraising portal crashed from the web traffic surge. The total percentage of this $810,000 that came from DailyKos is unknowable without access to proprietary data, but the candidate himself publicly credited the DailyKos community for fundraising success.
theories regarding the September 11th attacks is immediately barred from the site. In the aftermath of the 2004 election, the same policy was set regarding Ohio voter fraud conspiracy theories. Moulitsas has also been a brash and outspoken critic of Ralph Nader supporters and third parties in general, and Hillary Clinton supporters in the 2008 primaries felt the site was overwhelmingly pro-Obama and announced a “strike” as they moved en masse to other elite political blogs.

The academic research community has generally applied the label of “citizen journalism” to all political blogs. The label is a terrible fit for DailyKos, however. Consider: the community engages in targeted electoral and legislative campaigns, attempts to influence media frames and corporate decision-makers, publicly thanks or criticizes public officials for their actions, advances its volunteer membership up a “ladder-of-engagement,” and meets in-person for an annual convention. All of these activities describe the traditional role of an advocacy group. The difference between DailyKos and a traditional political association lies in the details of staffing decisions, physical overhead costs, tax status, and tactical choices. Markos Moulitsas has far more in common with Carl Pope of the Sierra Club, Justin Ruben of MoveOn, or Andy Stern of the SEIU than he does with the editors, journalists, and op-ed columnists of the Washington Post and New York Times.

Understanding Blogspace

The expansion of blogging has occurred simultaneously in two directions: the

39 Portions of this section are excerpted from my previous publication, Understanding Blogspace. (Or, to be more specific, Understanding Blogspace was excerpted from an early draft of this chapter, and some portions of that chapter remain unchanged.)
development of community platforms and the incorporation of blogging into traditional organizational structures. As discussed with the case of DailyKos, community platforms enable multiple levels of engagement within the blog’s reader base, leading to a tiered quasi-organizational structure similar both to communities-of-interest like Wikipedia and to traditional grassroots civic associations. Readers of Glenn Reynolds’s Instapundit.com, which long stood as the single most popular political blog, have only one means of engagement. They can visit the site and click on the hyperlinks in the frequently updated posts. The site does not even allow for reader comments, the first “step” in a community blog’s ladder-of-engagement. To suggest, as several scholars continue to do (Hindman 2008, Davis 2009) that Reynolds and Markos Moulitsas are engaging in essentially the same activity, needing no differentiation based on blog platform, is to obscure more than we reveal about the political blogosphere today.

The second expansion has been a move towards professionalization in the blogosphere. This is evinced by three trends. First, there is the incorporation of successful bloggers in traditional media venues. Previously independent bloggers such as Matthew Yglesias, James Wolcott, Glenn Greenwald, and Kevin Drum have all been hired by major news magazines as a result of their work. Their blogs are now featured elements of existing media sites, challenging the notion of bloggers as distinctively counter-elite. Furthermore embedding bloggers within existing media undermines or calls into question the notion of bloggers-as-citizen-journalists. Wolcott, for instance, is employed as a “cultural critic” by Vanity Fair and had a career as a journalist before he began blogging. He posts, on average, two blog entries per day, only blogging during the workweek. These entries are always substantive essays rather than the hyperlinks-and-
commentary regularly offered by Reynolds and Duncan “Atrios” Black. Wolcott’s blog is the only one among the elite progressive population that does not allow for user comments, making it a read-only format unlike the characteristic interactivity of the blogosphere. If these entries were published in the print edition of Vanity Fair, we would still classify Wolcott as a journalist. Are we really to believe that the difference-in-kind between journalists and bloggers comes down to whether their work is mass-produced in ink-and-pulp format? More likely, professional bloggers maintain their distinctive voices while bringing an additional audience to their associated media institutions. They are thus as much “bloggers” by virtue of their location in a social network as they are because of the particular medium they use for transmitting ideas.

The second trend toward institutionalization has been the incorporation of blogging into the suite of online offerings from major media and political organizations. There is nothing inherently anti-institutional about the technology behind blogging. A blog is merely a convenient format for publishing content online. As the practice has gained popularity, it has been adopted by major media outlets such as CNN and The Washington Post. Political campaigns (Bloom and Kerbel 2006) and congressional offices (Pole 2005) have also added blogs to their repertoires, as have traditional advocacy organizations like the AFL-CIO and the Sierra Club. When these institutions post blog entries, they are doing so to augment their existing mission, and visitors to these blogs arrive on the basis of the institution’s existing reputation. This marks a difference-in-kind from the early, pseudonym-laden, counter-institutional blogosphere.

Thirdly, new online media institutions have formed in recent years, actively incorporating blogging into their toolsets. Leading conservative blogger Michelle Malkin
joined forces with two other major conservative bloggers in April 2006 to launch Hotair.com through Hot Air Network, LLC. They have since incorporated several other prominent conservative bloggers. Hot Air has risen from the fourth-largest conservative blog in November 2007 to the top conservative blog in November 2008 (MichelleMalkin.com was the largest, and is now the second largest). Its corporate mission is to produce and promote politically-oriented video featuring a conservative perspective. Another top-25 conservative blog, OutsidetheBeltway.com, has a seven-person editorial board and includes a “Canadian Affairs Correspondant.” These blogs expressly seek to imitate the structure of traditional institutions of power, making them distinct from the informal, solo-blogger format that has become the hallmark image of the medium.

To capture these divergent trends, I have developed a two-dimensional typology of blog platforms. This typology is designed to provide a framework for researchers and practitioners that highlights the divergent purposes toward which blog technology is regularly put. It is meant as a rejoinder to the unhealthy shortcut of referring to “bloggers” as if they were a single, undifferentiated class of individuals.

*A four-part typology*

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<th>Closed Authorship/Mobility</th>
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The two primary forces that have expanded blogspace are the development of open authorship “community blogs” and the incorporation of blogging into traditional media and political institutions. This implies that the universe of blogs can be mapped along a two-dimensional space, as shown above. The X-axis of this space concerns authorship. Does the software platform provide a megaphone to a single author (or a few authors who jointly share front-page privileges), or does it add a variety of community-engaging features, serving more as a gathering space for a community-of-interest? The Y-axis tracks reputation. Is the blog associated with a single author who is not otherwise featured in elite political or media institutions, or is it a sponsored element of these traditional organizations. This determines the purpose of the blog – is it a venue for new types of political participation, or does it augment traditional forms and elite institutions? From this typology, four distinct types of blog emerge.
Classic Blogs

The lion’s share of the 118 million+ blogs in existence are of the classic type. Freely available through a variety of services, launching a classic blog takes less than one minute. These blogs serve primarily as a platform for low-cost self-publishing of an individual’s daily personal musings and experiences. In many cases, they serve as a form of public personal diary through which an individual can keep their small audience of friends and colleagues updated on their thoughts and feelings. Among elite political blogs, the classic format can be maintained by either a single individual or a small group of like-minded individuals. Authorship is closed and differentiated, though: there are “bloggers” and there are “readers.” The classic blog format is designed to serve as a “personal megaphone” of sorts, though in the anti-geographic online landscape, only a tiny few of these megaphones reach more than a tiny audience.

Community Blogs

As previously discussed, the central distinction between classic and community blogs lies in the suite of additional tools that allow for community participation and engagement. If classic blogs are a megaphone, community blogs are an online public square inhabited by a mutually-identifying community-of-interest. Community blogs are designed to facilitate mass collaboration and collective action. This design goal places a limit on the total number of elite community blogs – popular among the progressive “netroots” at the state level, there are only four national-scale community blogs among the progressive top-25, and only two among the conservative top-25. (Karpf 2009a)
is another example of the “power law topology” of the web. DailyKos, the power law hub, benefits from strong network effects, and this in turn leverages the preferential attachment condition, with incoming self-described “progressives” having more reason to participate at DailyKos than at some other community blog. While multiple niches have developed, and blogs such as FireDogLake have several community-engagement features without including a diary structure, the community blog format is designed to support the production of user-generated content, and this network externality leads to the development of a limited number of large hubs.

Institutional Blogs

Whereas community blogs add community-enhancing features to the standard blog framework, institutional blogs import the standard framework into the platform of a traditional elite institution. Political campaigns, congressional offices, and mainstream media organizations have added blogging to their suite of online offerings, and in each case the content of the blog is modified to suit the goals of the sponsoring organization. This is still blogging-as-megaphone, but the megaphone is used to augment the mission of traditional elites (a megaphone in the hands of the protestor serves a different function than a megaphone in the hands of a police chief). Additionally, institutional blogs import their reputation and audience from offline (or non-blog, in the case of online media organizations like slate.com) sources. Washington Post bloggers or Congressional campaign staffers do not face the same reputation-building challenges as upstart pseudonymous bloggers, because they are being visited based on a known product. Scholars must thus treat institutional blogs separately from the classic and community
blog-types, as they inhabit a different niche and are used for divergent purposes.

Bridge Blogs

Still an emerging phenomenon, bridge blogs combine the organizational affiliation of institutional blogs with the user-engagement of community blogs. The three most prominent examples of this format in the political blogosphere are HuffingtonPost.com, Talking Points Memo, and TownHall. Huffington Post was launched in 2007 with venture capital backing to be an online newspaper of sorts, and includes articles from hundreds of elite bloggers, celebrities, and political professionals. It also includes specifically user-generated endeavors, such as the “Off the Bus” project that took part in the Superdelegate Transparency Project wiki site. Talking Points Memo was once the personal blogging home of Joshua Micah Marshall, but has developed a cadre of investigative journalists, earning it the prestigious Polk Award for excellence in journalism (Cohen, 2008), and includes a “café” where readers can offer their own content and insights. TownHall features a “take action” tool set that attempts to turn conservative political information-gathering into conservative political action, and also features a host of well-known conservative pundits. The bridge blog format is still in its infancy, and it is unclear at this point how the tension between developing an organizational “brand” and fostering community-generated content will be worked out. It bears noting that all three of these prominent sites include community functionality, but none of them feature it particularly prominently.

The Landscape of the Two Competing Blogospheres
Using the BAI methodology to identify a population set of the top 25 progressive and conservative political blogs (see appendix), in “Understanding Blogspace” I coded these top 50 blogs according to their community features and institutional/personal reputation, producing two blogspace maps. In a 2009 Midwest Political Science Association paper, I updated these maps based on weekly BAI data from the 2008 election season. Figures 4-3 and 4-4 below are reproductions of those maps. Each site is placed in its quadrant, along with its median BAI rank over 15 data points collected by February 2009. In brackets after the median site rank is the change in rank from the initial, November 2007 data collection and the 2008 election dataset. This provides a measure of which blogs gained audience-share during the high-traffic election season and which blogs lost audience-share. What emerges is a picture of persistent, and growing, online infrastructural advantages for the political left.

40 In all cases, the median and the mean were nearly indistinguishable. Median ranks are included here to provide simpler data visualization.
Figure 4-3: Progressive blogosphere map, with median 2008 BAI ranks and changes from November 2007 BAI
Figure 4-4: Conservative blogosphere map, with median 2008 BAI ranks and changes from November 2007 BAI

The progressive blogosphere continues to be dominated by DailyKos and HuffingtonPost, with the two sites showing tremendous stability in the rankings. Feministing and FireDogLake both underwent site platform updates that added new community-enhancing features, and both experienced a surge in the rankings in the intervening year. Talking Points Memo likewise added additional user-comment functionality, though its increase in the rankings likely is tied to its journalist corps with
the ability to break election-related news. The other two sites that saw heavy growth – TalkLeft and Taylor Marsh – both served as hubs for Clinton supporters during the divisive primary season and appear to have maintained much of that increased audience during the general election season (the BAI 2008 dataset runs from late August through mid-December). An additional political blog, FiveThirtyEight.com, was started during this cycle and attracted substantial audience-share, but the site was not included in the study because it was classified as more-similar to polling-analysis sites such as Pollster and RealClearPolitics, and likewise was not sociometrically included by progressive bloggers in their blogrolls until late in the election season.

The conservative blogosphere, meanwhile, is dominated by institutional and classic blogs. Of particular interest here is the decline of Little Green Footballs and RedState, the conservative blogosphere’s only elite community blogs. Little Green Footballs fell from 3rd in 2007 to 5th in the 2008 election season, while RedState dropped from 9th to 19th. What’s more, MichelleMalkin.com, HotAir.com, and Little Green Footballs all have the peculiar policy of requiring user registration for all comment posting, but keeping this registration closed so that no new readers can participate. Between these three and Instapundit, there is little space in the conservative hub blogs for the type of community-of-interest activity we see on DailyKos and other progressive sites. This “infrastructure deficit” will be the topic of chapter 7, which will also discuss the failure of conservative attempts to build an equivalent of the ActBlue fundraising portal and MoveOn.org. What is clear here, however, is that the conservative blogosphere has failed to build the type of vibrant community spaces we see in progressive blogosphere, and that this is not for lack of trying. RedState has long been
billed as the conservative equivalent of DailyKos, yet the site not only is exponentially smaller than DailyKos, it also proves to be a less-popular venue than its closed-authorship colleagues during periods of increased traffic and participation.

The BAI system also merges the top 25 progressive and top 25 conservative blogs into a combined top 50 ranking. This provides a measure of comparative strength, a subject that no other blog researcher has been able to provide even rudimentary measurement of. If the two blog networks were equally strong, we would expect the average progressive and average conservative rank in this top 50 to both equal 25. Likewise if the rankings were randomly-generated, though the week-by-week stability of the rankings provides strong indication that these are non-random differences. Figure 4-5 provides the rankings for every BAI collection through February 2009. In November 2007, the average progressive blog was ranked 23.5, while the average conservative blog was ranked 27.48, for a progressive advantage of 3.98. This advantage grew significantly in the 2008 election season, with an average progressive rank of 20.24 and an average conservative rank of 30.39, for a progressive advantage of 10.15 rank-spots. This advantage has persisted in the post-election period. Given that the largest possible difference would be 25 (12.5 vs 37.5), and that this is an ordinal representation of a power law distribution, where large traffic gaps occur at the top of the rankings, this is evidence of a substantial progressive advantage in the political blogosphere.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>ProgAvgRank</th>
<th>ConsAvgRank</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 2007</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>27.48</td>
<td>P +3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 24, 2008</td>
<td>18.72</td>
<td>31.96</td>
<td>P +13.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 21, 2008</td>
<td>19.6</td>
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<td>Sept 28, 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 5, 2008</td>
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<td>P +12.08</td>
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<td>Oct 12, 2008</td>
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<td>Nov 2, 2008</td>
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<td>Nov 23, 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 22, 2009</td>
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</table>

Figure 4-5: average site ranks in combined BAI dataset

**Political Impacts: Much Talk, Signifying What?**

Discussion of the blogosphere’s impact on politics has routinely been scuttled by the problem of not taking blog structure seriously. If we treat Instapundit and DailyKos as two examples of the same phenomenon, the impact of the progressive “netroots” becomes near-impossible to distinguish. Focusing specifically on the DailyKos community and its contemporaries as gathering spaces for a politically motivated community-of-interest, however, a number of impacts quickly come into focus. Figure 4-6 provides one such metric: fundraising. The ActBlue fundraising portal is set up to allow users to endorse their own slate of candidates, advertise the endorsement through their blogs or e-mail lists, and therefore bundle contributions together. Progressive hub blogs have found tremendous success with this platform, as demonstrated below. Listed
below are the 7 2006 Congressional candidates who received an endorsement from the netroots “BlueMajority” list (a collaboration between DailyKos, MyDD, and Swing State Project) and also received funding support from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Community. 6 out of 7 of these candidates received more financial support from the progressive netroots than they did from the party. By using a bundling portal, these communities-of-interest do not face the donor limitations placed on Political Action Committees, but political candidates are well-aware that the money is coming from an identifiable community-of-interest.

As previously mentioned, the DailyKos community received a public “thank you” in the form of a blog post on the site itself from congressional candidate Elwyn Tinklenberg in 2008, after they were responsible for much of his 48-hour, $810,000 fundraising bonanza after his opponent Michele Bachmann (R-MN-06) had made a colorful misstatement in national television. (Tinklenberg 2008) Though he was not elected in 2008, Tinklenberg is the likely 2010 opponent to Bachmann. A political moderate by nature, one has to imagine that the DailyKos community-as-interest-group has gained some standing in his political calculus, given their demonstrated capacity for torrential fundraising. The DailyKos community raised an additional $2.4 million for 15 endorsed candidates from over 25,000 community members.42

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006 Candidate Name</th>
<th>BlueMajority Funding43</th>
<th>DCCC Funding44</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 4-6: Comparative candidate funding from BlueMajority and DCCC

Perhaps more important than these donation numbers is the impact that the netroots have had by aggressively endorsing primary challengers. In 2006, the DailyKos community actively organized in support of Ned Lamont’s primary challenge to centrist Democrat Joe Lieberman (D-CT), recruited Jim Webb to run in the Virginia Senate primary against centrist frontrunner Harris Miller, and supporter Jon Tester in the Montana Senate primary over Democratic Leadership Council-backed opponent John Morrison (Moulitsas 2008). Lamont’s challenge was the most surprising of the bunch. Lieberman, the 2000 Democratic Vice Presidential Candidate, had long been the netroots’ least-favorite Democrat, both because of his centrist voting record and his penchant for appearing on cable news programs to criticize his fellow Democrats. As a political unknown whose only previous campaign experience was a failed State Senate race, Lamont appeared to be undertaking a Quixotic mission in challenging Lieberman. But Connecticut Democratic activists were upset with Lieberman’s record, particularly on the Iraq war, and the political netroots elevated the race to a national media story while funneling over $450,000 to him through ActBlue. Lamont went on to narrowly defeat Lieberman in the primary, though Lieberman retained his Senate seat after running as an “Independent Democrat” and obtaining support from Republican political leaders in

\[44\] from Kamarck 2006
The significance of the Lieberman-Lamont primary is of particular importance when placed in light of the new netroots effort, Accountability Now, discussed in chapter 1. The progressive blogosphere engineered a primary defeat of a well-known centrist Democrat. No liberal interest group in recent memory has accomplished – or even attempted – such a feat. Accountability Now is attempting to fill a similar niche to the conservative Club for Growth, sending a strong signal to centrist Democrats that they will face tough primary challengers if their voting record falls too far outside the expectations of progressive activists on priority issues.

The Tester and Webb victories, meanwhile, demonstrate a direct netroots impact on the makeup of Congress. The standard criticism of the DailyKos community in 2005 was that they could raise a lot of money, but could not elect candidates because their endorsements were too far left. That criticism no longer holds, as Tester and Webb defeated more-centrist counterparts in the primary and went on to earn Senate seats. Likewise, Congresswoman Donna Edwards replaced centrist Democratic Al Wynn in a 2008 special election, a victory that she publicly credits to her active support from netroots volunteers and financial supporters. (Stoller 2008)

This same dynamic can be seen in the decision of seven Democratic Presidential Candidates to attend the 2007 YearlyKos convention one week after skipping the Democratic Leadership Council’s annual meeting. Power within a party network can be considered a zero-sum game, one in which ideological coalitions emerge to support candidates, capture rents in the form of votes and/or consulting contracts, and affect elite endorsements, party platforms, and issue frames. In a weak party system like that of the
US, this power is difficult to measure because there are so many independent actors simultaneously attempting to impact the system, and each elected official is primarily answerable to the constituents in her own district. That being said, the rise of the netroots has pretty clearly come at the expense of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, which produced Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and Joe Lieberman and was widely recognized as among the most influential internal caucuses throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Moulitsas and company specifically viewed the DLC as an impediment to Democratic electoral success, (Moulitsas 2008) and the combination of netroots-backed candidate victories over DLC opponents with the YearlyKos debate paints a clear picture of how the netroots community-of-interest has gained power within the Democratic party network.

Interestingly, many netroots leaders do not, themselves, feel that they are particularly influential. One elite blogger from a top-5 site revealed to me that “our ability to influence candidates after an election drops precipitously… we don’t have the network that lobbyists do, which is woven into the fabric of an elected official’s daily life. If we can just get them to not badmouth us in the press after they take office, we consider ourselves lucky.”

I would suggest this is less a limitation of the blogosphere than a limitation of advocacy groups in general. Leaders of progressive interest groups find themselves regularly confounded when attempting to influence elected officials, and it is unclear whether adding lobbyists to the netroots’ collective payroll would affect legislative voting patterns more than aggressive fundraising and the threat of well-funded primary challengers already do. Whether the netroots’ tactical repertoire is in fact less effective than professional advocacy groups’ repertoires requires clearer benchmarks of

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45 Name withheld, personal correspondance. May 17, 2009.
effectiveness than we have ever been able to develop. The blogger’s statement highlights the central point of this chapter: the impact of the political netroots is distinct from the impact of “political blogs.” One is a community-of-interest, adopting a novel quasi-organizational form in an attempt to influence elite institutions of power, the other is a particular technology increasingly applied to a dizzying and competing array of purposes.

Conclusion

This chapter has made the case that a particular subset of the political blogosphere should be included in any discussion of internet-mediated organizations. While groups like MoveOn and Democracy for America are more clearly political associations by nature, the differences between the DailyKos community and these organizations are more a matter of tactical repertoire and staffing decision than they are differences of mission statement. DailyKos, OpenLeft, and other community blogs have far more in common with political associations than they do with journalism. This stands in contrast to the “citizen journalism” lens which continues to be applied by virtually all blogosphere researchers. The chapter discussed two methodological advances – the Blogosphere Authority Index and the Blogspace typology – that I developed and have seen published during the course of my dissertation research. These tools allow for clearer comparison of the left and right blogosphere, and they demonstrate a dramatic gap in online infrastructure between the political left and the political right.

Community blogs are perhaps the most radical form of internet-mediated organization, radical enough in fact that the primary purpose of this chapter has been to
firmly establish that they should, in fact, be understood as organizations. The following chapter will turn our attention to the internet-mediated organization that needs no such defense, MoveOn.org. MoveOn and DailyKos inhabit substantially different niches, with MoveOn a much clearer competitor to existing advocacy organizations. And as I will demonstrate, the lowered transaction costs and power law topography that undergird MoveOn’s success also result in a dramatic shift in membership and fundraising regimes which, in turn, spell a generational shift for the interest group population.
Chapter 5: The MoveOn Effect: Disruptive Innovation within the Interest Group Ecology of American Politics

With an email-based member list of over 4.5 million and 2008 election year expenditures in excess of $90 million, MoveOn.org stands as the single largest interest group in American politics today. Founded by a pair of technology entrepreneurs, the organization has maintained its commitment to campaign tactical and communications innovations, creating field-defining shifts in membership engagement and small-dollar fundraising practices along the way. More so than the major blogging communities like DailyKos or the meetup-based volunteer coordination of the Dean and Obama presidential campaigns, MoveOn stands as an internet-mediated organization of singular importance to our understanding of how the internet is affecting the distribution of power in American politics. MoveOn’s impact on the political economy of civic activism is of a similar magnitude to that of Amazon.com for book publishing or Craigslist.org for classified ads and the newspapers those ads support. Each of these cases is understood as a case of disruptive innovation (Christensen 1997) in which a new online entrant quickly rose to industry dominance, reshaping underlying economic assumptions along the way and causing shock waves among longstanding industry leaders.

This chapter explores the structural and tactical innovations that have led to MoveOn’s meteoric rise in American politics. Drawing upon recent works detailing the history of civic associations in America, it suggests that the changes in membership and fundraising regimes introduced by MoveOn are similar to the changes witnessed in the late 1960s and early 1970s – changes which led to both an “interest group explosion” (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) and the replacement of a previously-dominant
organization type with a new modal organization-type (Skocpol 2003). It offers an early investigation of the new political economy of interest group representation, characterized by large “generalist” organizations that span multiple issue spaces and, relying on the internet for communications, function with greatly-reduced infrastructure overhead costs, and also by small niche organizations that cater to specialized publics or topics. In so doing, it demonstrates why the recent explosion of internet-mediated participatory activities is associated with significant disadvantages for longstanding political associations, presaging a generation shift within the advocacy community that structure and mobilize collective action in American politics.

It is important to note that these changes, summarized together as “the MoveOn Effect” are not caused by the organization itself. Just as Craig’s List emerged as an online hub space for classified ads, taking advantage of the lowered transaction costs of the new online information regime, MoveOn can be understood as the power law hub in the progressive political space, but the trends it is taking advantage of would be present regardless of the organization’s particular strategic choices.

The chapter has four parts. It will begin with a brief review of the relevant literature. Of particular importance are two recent works in political science – Bruce Bimber’s Information and American Democracy and Theda Skocpol’s Diminished Democracy – and one work from organizational management – Clayton Christensen’s The Innovator’s Dilemma. These three works, rarely associated with each other, each offers important insights into the dynamic shifts in online transaction costs that enable MoveOn’s rise to prominence. The chapter will then move to a detailed discussion of MoveOn itself, with a focus on its member recruitment, engagement, and fundraising.
strategies. Despite MoveOn’s prominent place in American politics, the organization has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention (one noteworthy exception being Chadwick 2007). Based upon website and e-mail content analysis and elite-level interviews, I will offer a description of “The MoveOn Model.” Thirdly, it will look more broadly at membership and fundraising trends among the single-issue professional advocacy organizations that have dominated interest group politics since the interest group generation shift of the 1970s, illuminating important shifts in membership and fundraising regimes currently under way. The chapter then closes by discussing the impact of “the MoveOn effect” on various classes of nonprofit political association, as well as identifying those areas currently underdefined or in need of further exploration. Just as MoveOn is the most substantial internet-mediated organization in American politics today, this chapter stands as the dissertation’s most substantial contribution to the literature. The shift in membership and fundraising regimes brought about by the internet’s lowered transaction costs is producing not only a new generation of political associations, but also a displacement of the previous generation.

**Literature Review**

In discussing generational shifts among American political and civic associations, one is immediately drawn to Theda Skocpol’s excellent 2003 book, *Diminished Democracy*. The book offers a comprehensive look at the large-scale civic associations present since the country’s founding. Noting that there is a long history of local, chapter-based involvement in cross-class membership federations, Skocpol goes on to
demonstrate that a substantial shift “from membership to management” occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This time period saw an explosion in the number of registered lobbying organizations in Washington, DC, but also saw a substantial decline among federated membership organizations. She suggests that this generation shift was rooted in a number of important factors, including the rights-based issue framework emerging from the Civil Rights Movement, the governmental opportunity structure that placed a premium on expert lobbying opinion over opportunities for citizen input, and a changing membership regime from membership-as-participation to membership-by-mail.

This last point is perhaps the most important to our interests in the current study: membership in federated civic organizations consisted of attending meetings, holding office, and forging an identity as an “Elk” or a “Rotarian.” Such identity-based membership was necessary for obtaining dues payments, and Skocpol offers rich examples of early organizational founders traveling from city to city, developing the tapestry of local group affiliates necessary to fiscally sustain a national organization. The new generation of professionally-managed political associations relied on direct mail and, later, issue canvassing for their membership recruitment. This led to a nation of “armchair activists” who, incentivized through solidarity, purposive, or other selective incentives, gave financially without participating locally. Drawing upon Dewey’s notion of civic associations as “Laboratories of Democracy,” Skocpol sees cause for concern in this shift. She usefully points out that the large civic associations provided the bedrock for mass mobilization in the Women’s Suffrage, Prohibition, and Civil Rights movements. Issue-based membership through direct mail was easier and asked less of the members, but this weakened the very associational structures through which large-
scale collective action is mobilized.

Bruce Bimber offers a valuable insight into the technological underpinnings of this sea change in organization-type. Bimber’s *Information and American Democracy* describes the development of political associations in American politics over the course of four “information regimes.” Though lacking the depth of historical analysis present in Skocpol’s volume (the two were written contemporaneously), Bimber does convincingly demonstrate how changes in the costs and availability of information affect the political economy of association-building. Simply put, organizations prior to the late 1960s had to engage in the costly task of developing local infrastructure, because the database technology necessary for financial viability through direct mail appeals had not yet been invented. The falling costs of information, broadly defined, leads to novel developments in membership and fundraising regimes, in turn encouraging the growth of new types of political association. Skocpol briefly makes note of these technological underpinnings in one paragraph of her book (pg 220), but otherwise stays mute on the role of information technology in structuring decisions about how to manage, structure, and finance nonprofit political and civic associations.

It bears noting at this point that both of these authors are discussing a limited, albeit highly visible, form of political association. As Jeffrey Berry (1999), Jack Walker (1991), and Jack Nagel (1987) have shown, the majority of registered lobbying organizations in Washington DC represent business interests. Berry documents the growth of “post-materialist” issue organizations, and Baumgartner and Jones likewise use Walker’s data and the annual *Encyclopedia of Associations* to document the growth of environmental interest groups in particular (1993). Large-scale studies of political
associations are often operationalized via the list of organizations with registered congressional lobbyists. Since lobbying is only one tactic in an organization’s repertoire, (and a tactic particularly suited to business interests which stand to see material benefits through favorable legislation) there is a gap between the literatures on civic associations and interest group lobbying organizations. Nagel draws upon earlier work by Chester Barnard (1938) and Peter Clark and James Q. Wilson (1961) to offer a typology of pressure groups based upon the balance they achieve between participant costs and participant incentives. While small pressure groups can operate with an incentives-costs deficit by relying empowering a small set of motivated volunteers, vocationally-based groups such as the American Medical Association or the American Political Science Association supply an excess of selective incentives, creating few problems for sustained membership. The most visible type of political association, and the one most often depicted in discussions of advocacy organizations, are groups that seek to balance costs and incentives by offering a few week purposive or selective incentives such as a backpack or calendar. This is the category of groups that, relying upon direct mail fundraising technology, began to flourish in the 1970s. (Nagel, pps 127-134)

Virginia Gray and David Lowery have spent the better part of a decade publishing around a theoretical advance in how we understand communities of interest groups (See Gray and Lowery, 1996; Gray and Lowery, 1997; Lowery and Gray 2004). They introduce the population ecology approach to interest group research, borrowing both the metaphors and many of the tools used by natural scientists in studying ecosystems. Their approach seems to have received mixed reception among researchers – clearly, interest groups in competition for membership and funding interact with each other and develop
specialties or niches, but whether organizations can be studied as though they were actual species and phyla is more controversial. Chris Bosso borrows the metaphor if not all of the methodology in his study of the environmental movement, *Environment Inc: From Grassroots to Beltway* (2005). Bosso provides a deeply historical discussion of the growth of the environmental movement, concluding that it has resulted in a mature, complex ecosystem with large organizations that were founded early and smaller niche organizations founded later.

If the interest group ecology seems mature and stable, however, it is worth considering under what conditions an “exogenous shock” of sorts might lead to tremendous turnover. In particular, the population ecology approach does not speak directly to Skocpol’s finding of a generation shift in organization-type. Bimber suggests that such shifts are predicated on changes in information regime, and goes on to provide early case examples of the new generation of internet-mediated organizations. Particularly in early 2009, after the demise of various longstanding financial institutions thought “too big to fail” and the crisis among local newspapers which similarly appeared for decades to have developed a system of ecological “niches,” assumptions that large organizations will remain large in perpetuity deserve to be examined.

We are best served by looking outside of the political science literature to answer this question. Clayton Christensen’s seminal work, *The Innovator’s Dilemma* (1997), discusses “How great firms can fail,” paying particular attention to the disk drive industry, which experienced rapid changeover as the number of megabites the industry could package on a square inch of disk surface rose at the astonishing and near-constant rate of 35% per year (Christensen, pg 7). Christensen found that the top firms universally
led the way when developing “sustaining innovations” – innovations that improved the rate of performance among the industry’s standard products – but that they routinely were poorly-equipped and overtaken in the area of “disruptive innovations” – innovations that redefined performance trajectory. Industry leaders would correctly see little market for smaller, less efficient disk drives, for instance, leaving new entrants to develop these drives and then apply to a new, previously non-existent market. Christensen’s central point is that talented executives and well-managed companies will rationally choose not to invest in these disruptive innovations, because they do not meet the needs and interests of their customers. Technological changes create the opportunity for completely new markets, however, and by the time these markets have matured enough for large firms to gain value in developing a product line for them, they have ceased to be leaders in the sector. Christensen goes on to show the same pattern of disruptive innovation in a host of different economic sectors, and his book has spawned an entire field of inquiry among students of business administration.

The application of Christensen’s work to internet-related business sectors is clear enough to barely need mention. Craig Newmark started CraigsList.org as a venue for discussing local San Francisco events in 1995. The bulletin board offered a means of posting free classifieds, creating a disruptive innovation that undermined the entire newspaper industry. (Jones 2009) Jeff Bezos founded Amazon.com as an unlimited clearinghouse for finding published works, leveraging the self-publishing industry out of irrelevance and challenging the longstanding publishing houses. From file-sharing programs and the recording industry to bloggers and the Associated Press, the tremendous reduction of the costs of online communication has allowed for a host of
disruptive innovations by creating new markets and fostering new consumer preferences that longstanding industry leaders correctly surmised their customers had little interest in only a few years ago. As a result, we have a new set of emerging market giants and a host of large companies that, even before the recent economic downturn, were facing heavily eroding market share.

The question we must ask, then, is whether the reduction in online transaction costs and the new information regime of online communication is having a similar impact on nonprofit political associations. Not all industrial sectors are disruptively transformed by online information abundance; for some the internet functions as a sustaining innovation. Professional sports, for instance, has not been radically challenged by participatory culture. Community blogs and fantasy sports teams fit easily into the experience that ESPN and the NFL were already attempting to cultivate among their customers, and the longstanding industry leaders have, as Christensen would predict, remained at the cutting edge in this area. If internet communication merely lets organizations communicate with their existing members more efficiently, we should expect little change in the “interest group ecology.” If instead the new information regime is leading to a redefinition of membership, participation, and giving patterns, we should expect disruptive innovation. With that framework in mind, let us now turn to the newly-emergent juggernaut among progressive interest groups. How does MoveOn engage its membership, raise funds, and seek to influence American politics? Do the membership and fundraising practices pioneered by MoveOn augment long-standing organizational practices, or undermine them? What long-term effects should we expect MoveOn to have on the interest group ecology of American politics?
The MoveOn “Model”

MoveOn.org was founded by Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, a married couple who had made their fortune in the mid-90s tech boom when they created, among other things, the highly popular “flying toasters” screen saver. In the midst of the Clinton-Lewinksy affair, the two grew tired of scandal politics and started a simple web site where visitors could sign a petition asking Congress to censure Clinton and “move on.” Attention to the web site diffused virally and within a week 100,000 people had signed the petition, eventually attracting 500,000. (Zetter 2004) When the petition failed to make an impression on Congressional decision-makers (as online petitions are wont to do), Blades and Boyd reached out to their list and invited people to engage in citizen lobbying and other pressure tactics. The group attracted a fair amount of media attention as a new, internet-mediated interest group, but was viewed mostly as an odd anecdote rather than a game-changing powerhouse. (Clausing 1999, Evangelista 1998, Healy 1999, Carr 1999) Blades and Boyd’s experience as technologists have left an essential imprint on MoveOn’s organizational philosophy, leading the group to continually experiment and innovate with technologies in the hopes of “bringing real Americans back into the political process.”

In the aftermath of the Lewinsky scandal, MoveOn remained an internet-mediated group without a particularly clear mission. It boasted a large e-mail list and a nimble, virtually-networked staff that required few overhead costs, but it was unclear where this

46 As an aside, is it any wonder that, when significant wealth is distributed based on ideas like “flying toasters,” major changes in the fundraising environment are on the horizon?

47 http://www.moveon.org/about.html
progressive issue-generalist fit into the “interest group ecology” of the American Left. It wasn’t until the post-September 11th lead-up to wars with Afghanistan and Iraq that the organization emerged as the leading voice among the self-described “progressives.” A college student named Eli Pariser built a similarly large list around his website, 9-11peace.org. Blades and Boyd recruited Pariser as MoveOn’s Executive Director, merged the two large e-mail lists, and together the three of them brought the organization to the forefront of the burgeoning anti-war movement. MoveOn’s e-mail based action appeals moved well beyond the e-petition the organization had been founded around.

Through exhaustive message-testing and the development of several innovative campaign tools, MoveOn developed a capacity for generating millions in small-dollar contributions, launching online and offline oppositional tactics to the latest Bush Administration efforts, and continually building a larger and larger list of occasional-to-frequent leftwing political participants.

In the 2008 election, MoveOn’s e-mail member list ballooned to over 4.5 million, largely based on eye-catching viral videos and offers of free Obama/Biden merchandise. The organization fundraised over $88,000,000 for Barack Obama and delivered 933,800 volunteers who contributed over 20,841,507 hours for his campaign. Much of this occurred through “online-to-offline organizing,” with the help of the organization’s system of location-based “MoveOn councils” that act as an internet-mediated equivalent to the local chapters of Skocpolian civic associations. In non-priority states, the group organized web-based “Call for Change” phonebanks, with members in Vermont downloading a list of members in, say, Virginia, calling them up and inviting them to join the local organizing efforts. In battleground states, it also developed direct partnerships
with the Obama campaign field system. MoveOn had been a major player in the 2004 election’s “America Coming Together” coalition (Dwyre, 2007), contributing $21.3 million to its electoral campaign initiatives in that cycle. Already among the largest leftwing organizations in 2004, its growth in 2008 makes clear that MoveOn is not just the largest of the progressive movement organizations, it also continues to grow and outpace its contemporaries. No leftwing organization, with the exception of the Obama campaign itself, operated at anywhere close to MoveOn’s capacity. A deeper understanding of MoveOn’s “model” can be broken down into four categories: membership, engagement, fundraising, and infrastructure.

**MoveOn Membership**

Membership in MoveOn could be considered a disruptive innovation in its own right. Much as the direct mail pioneers redefined organizational membership from “participant” to “small donor,” MoveOn redefines membership from “small donor” to “message recipient.” Given that anyone who receives the organization’s e-mails is classified as a MoveOn member, there is actually a large quantity of members who are unaware that they meet that classification. If you have never given money or taken political action with the organization, but you once forwarded a funny election video of theirs to a friend, is “member” the right term for your involvement with the group?

For MoveOn’s purposes, unlike the purposes of the large political advocacy associations that predate it, the breadth of this category is justifiable. For MoveOn, there

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is virtually no downside to having an expansive list. Matt Bai makes this distinction in his book, *The Argument*, terming it “The Power of the List:” “In a virtual world … few things [are] as valuable as a massive list – that is, a database of names and e-mail addresses that could be identified with a single need or interest, and thus could be mobilized with the push of a button.” (Bai 2007) The distinction here lies in the dramatic reduction in transaction costs online. When organizations communicate with their membership through the mail, a large, disorganized list consumes too many resources. This is because the savings through economies-of-scale are minimal: the postage on 1,000 pieces of mail is 10 times the postage on 100. Online, however, an e-mail to 100 consumes the same resources as an e-mail to 1,000 or 10,000.

Given the infinitesimal costs of e-mail, MoveOn is able to engage in elaborate forms of message testing when engaging around a new issue. The organization actively monitors data on “open-rates” (how many recipients open the e-mail) and “clickthrough.” (how many readers take action) Test messages are sent out to subsets of MoveOn’s list, often with varying issue frames and political “asks,” in a methodology that approaches the requirements for a randomized field experiment. Only those messages that receive acceptably high open and clickthrough rates are distributed to MoveOn’s entire list for action. Likewise, the low costs of information storage and retrieval allow MoveOn to parse their list in a variety of ways, identifying high-activity and low-activity members, as well as members who display or report interests in specific issue areas. If even the lowest-involvement “members” take one action per year, MoveOn captures additional value from their membership redefinition. And if such members never take action, the

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49 Within limits. Organizations must avoid mailing so broadly that they become classified as spam and have their messages rejected. These limits are well-known to list managers, however.
costs to the organization nonetheless hover close to zero.

The change in membership regimes favors internet-mediated “issue generalists” like MoveOn (and DailyKos and Democracy for America) over single-issue specialists like the National Organization for Women, Human Rights Campaign, American Civil Liberties Union, or the Sierra Club. Issue specialties were a necessity in the direct mail era because organizations needed to cultivate targeted lists of members with a high propensity to give towards their particular issue. An individual might care about freedom of speech and wilderness protection, but given limited resources, they will need to make choices about which type of organization to donate to, and the costs associated with mailing require each organization to cultivate a list of people who prioritize their issue speciality. MoveOn is not limited by the costs of mailing, and indeed it can test any issue area and received near-instant feedback from their membership about whether they are willing to take action or give money to that topic. While existing interest groups were investigating how to use the internet to lower the costs of communicating to their membership, MoveOn was redefining membership to take advantage of the new communications environment. As we saw in chapter 3 with the case of the Superdelegate Transparency Project, this leads to an expansion of the “issue spaces” in which leftwing interest groups attempting to mobilize public action. It also overturns the “mature” interest group ecology of the environmental and other issue-based movements. MoveOn has the capacity to work on climate change, health care, the Iraq War, and the economy, thus appealing to a much wider range of potential members than any group in those individual issue areas can muster. And though they do not boast the large staff of scientists, policy specialists, or expert lobbyists of the previous generation of political
associations, they are able to engage their membership in a much wider, more participatory, and timely tactical repertoire.

**MoveOn Engagement**

A common critique of MoveOn comes from those “members” who, though years ago they may have taken a few online actions, now delete the messages sight-unseen and consider them only one step removed from spam. Their sense is that the low barrier-to-entry for organizational membership yields a large-but-questionable base of recipients: “does anyone really still read all those emails?” The initial response must be to acknowledge that MoveOn is aware of this challenge, and thus they consciously test their action alerts and avoid sending out too much, too frequently. Additionally, I learned through elite interview that the organization adds roughly 500,000 new e-mail addresses per year just to keep up with “list churn” as old e-mail addresses are abandoned or deactivated and former members choose to unsubscribe.\(^{50}\) We must also keep in mind the dominant class of membership that MoveOn is replacing, however. MoveOn may send more e-mails than a typical nonprofit sends direct mail, due to the reduced costs, but direct mail and armchair activism were hardly exemplars of the participatory membership experience. That is, indeed, much of the problem that Skocpol raises in her book – it is not so much that social capital has generically declined as it is that the organizations charged with structuring collective action and engagement have moved to a professionalized, bureaucratized model. Looking beyond the flood of e-mails, it becomes clear that much of MoveOn’s “model” involves an intentional effort to create

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\(^{50}\) Interview Notes, Noah Winer. July 14\(^{th}\), 2008.
opportunities for broad and deep membership engagement.

The list of participatory activities in MoveOn’s tactical repertoire includes both online and offline actions. It includes production of user-generated content in online ventures, such as the 2004 “Bush in 30 seconds” process by which MoveOn members submit potential videos highlighting their opposition to Republican policies, voted among the submissions to select a winner, and then were invited to donate $25 to help put that video on the air. It also includes the web-based “call for change” program, which enables members to host and attend Get-Out-the-Vote house parties, download a voter list in a target state, and then use their cell phones at a local member’s house to hold a no-cost phone banking event. The “Bake Back America” bake sale is another such online/offline venture, one which involved 14,000 members holding a national bake sale in 2004, raising $750,000, as are the series of MoveOn “house parties” that the organization plans around campaign-related videos (such as Michael Moore’s Sicko and Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth) and events (such as presidential debates.

On the national scale, MoveOn often turns to their membership for input on major political decisions, including Presidential primary endorsements and issue priorities – in 2004, they chose not to endorse after Howard Dean received a plurality, but not a majority of votes; in 2008, they endorsed Barack Obama on February 1. The issue priority-setting process is particularly interesting, given that the organization’s original

51 Spatial voting theorists would suggest a problem with this process. If issue ad submissions run the gamut from centrist to hard left, such a voting process should winnow to the median policy preference of a MoveOn member. This should nonetheless be far to the left of the median American voter, who will be the audience of such commercials. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that this flaw presents practical issues, as with a 2008 campaign spot “Alex” that was reviewed by Jon Stewart of the Daily Show. After previewing a clip of the campaign ad, Stewart offered his punchline: “That ad of course brought to you by MoveOn.org, ten years of making even people who agree with you cringe.” Jon Stewart, The Daily Show, June 24, 2008.
rise to prominence was as the nimble, vocal opposition to whatever the Bush Administration was doing on a given day. Beginning in 2007, after helping the Democrats to retake House and Senate majorities, MoveOn created a biennial voting process that includes online submissions of suggested priorities, local deliberation at house party events, and worldwide internet-based voting on priority issues. Research and Development Director Daniel Mintz describes this as part and parcel of the organization’s guiding philosophy, “Strong Vision, Big Ears.” (Pearce 2008) There is a deeply-held belief among the staff that the group’s tactics are moderated by its membership, noting that controversial tactics such as the “General Betray-Us” New York Times ad – which earned them a Congressional rebuke and national headlines – had been tested and found exceedingly popular with the membership, because otherwise the membership would not have funded it.

One benefit of MoveOn’s redefinition of the membership concept is that there are no controversies over membership enfranchisement. A serious threat for an issue-based or identity-based membership organization is that online voting could be swamped by supporters of a candidate who have no other stake in the organization’s work. The Sierra Club has a 133-page manual devoted to the particularities of its local, state, and national endorsement process. The manual is designed specifically to prevent such attempted takeovers by “outsiders.” For MoveOn, though, there’s no such thing as an outsider, there is just a large swath of people who have yet to sign up. If Mike Gravel supporters want to mobilize to join MoveOn and vote in favor of his issue positions, that just increases the size and power of MoveOn’s list!\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} This benefit was pointed out to me by Chris Warshaw, former political director of Democracy For America. DFA intentionally designed their local endorsement process to enable such “takeovers,” under the belief that local campaign partisans are the people
In theory at least, this provides an opening for conservatives to join the organization en masse in order to distort its election results and priorities. Three barriers render such a takeover unlikely. First, the sheer scale of the organization, with 4.5 million members, means that a conservative takeover would have to be truly breathtaking in scale. Conservative groups have yet to assemble 4.5 million online members for any joint effort. Second, such a large-scale mobilization could not happen quietly, meaning that progressives could just as easily counter-mobilize to balance out the attack. Third (and, from a structural perspective, most importantly), MoveOn’s central staff decides which questions will be posed to the membership. MoveOn is highly participatory and democratic in practice, but this participation is based in philosophy rather than bylaws. In the case of a massive, malicious strategic voting effort, the staff could just stop asking the membership for their opinions. (As will be discussed in chapter seven, the first two of these barriers are not present for nascent conservative organizations attempting to build their own MoveOn equivalent.)

A final element of MoveOn’s participatory framework is their system of roughly 250 “MoveOn Councils.” These councils consist of a minimum of four active members in a given locality. The members receive increased attention and authority, and are charged with planning local actions and fostering a sense of local identity. In operation since 2004, the council system has been a relatively minor part of the MoveOn system, an indicator of the organization’s reputation as a primarily e-mail-based political association. The councils are similar to Democracy for America’s affiliate system (discussed in Chapter 6), but have received substantially less attention. They have who are most likely to be active in local politics once the campaign has ended. Attempts to influence the endorsement process are thus the structural equivalent of recruitment drives.
received heightened attention in the aftermath of Barack Obama’s Presidential victory, however, with a new commitment on the part of the staff and Board to build local infrastructure and the hiring of eleven new field organizers to help accomplish this task. The councils fill a similar niche to the local affiliates of cross-class membership federations, allowing active MoveOn members to build a sense of local identity and hold leadership positions, and engage in “Laboratory of Democracy”-style activities. Though still a recent and below-the-radar element of MoveOn’s model, they stand as an essential rejoinder to critics who view MoveOn membership as entirely ephemeral. Though membership is designed to signify little and cost nothing, it provides a base for a substantial ladder-of-engagement.

**MoveOn Fundraising**

Comparing participation in MoveOn to participation in other political associations presents two substantial hurdles. First, there is the issue of how we compare organizational activities across widely divergent tactical repertoires. MoveOn hires no issue experts, no full-time lobbyists. How are we to compare them to, say, the National Resource Defense Council, then? Second, there is the issue of effectiveness. How much do all the online petitions and house parties affect elections, administrative decisions, or legislative votes? As I have noted in previous chapters, political science has never found a robust answer to such questions – history is complex and runs in only one direction – and I will not be solving that here. A more standard metric is to count fungible dollars, or (as I will demonstrate) semi-fungible dollars in this case. Certainly, much of what has
attracted so much attention to MoveOn and distinguished it as an industry-leader is its capacity to raise millions in small donations in the space of a single day. No other political association can come close to rivaling the speed and scale of MoveOn fundraising efforts, though many have tried.

There are three distinguishing features of a MoveOn fundraising appeal: *medium*, *audience breadth*, and *issue salience*. The first two have already been discussed to a certain extent. (1) MoveOn fundraising occurs via e-mail, a “push” medium that scales up near-costlessly from 500 recipients to 5 million recipients. The incremental cost of each additional e-mail approaches zero, the only limitation being server capacity. This allows the organization to operate as (2) an “issue generalist,” reaching the broadest possible audience rather than confining itself to those members with a high propensity to give. The third feature is particularly important, however: because of their wide member base and issue generalist stance, MoveOn is capable of targeting their fundraising appeals to whatever issue dominates the current media cycle. Fundraising around the Superdelegate Transparency Project for instance – a short-term pressure campaign aimed at convincing Democratic Convention delegates with an independent vote to “support the will of the primary voters” – is only viable during a short window when that topic is dominating the public debate. Single-issue interest groups lack the staffing and fundraising capacity to engage around such an issue, instead remaining focused on their issue-niche. But for the duration of that short window, fundraising around the topic is particularly successful because the issue is at the “top of the head” among the politically-aware masses (Zaller 1992). The tremendous difference between MoveOn’s online fundraising and the online fundraising of the earlier generation of political associations
lies in these distinctions of audience breadth and issue salience.

Consider the following fundraising e-mails, the first from SaveOurEnvironment.org, the second from MoveOn, both of which were sent out a few days prior to December 31, 2008:

“We have less than 48 hours to reach our goal of raising $10,000 by 11:59PM on December 31 – and we’re not there yet...
There are lots of reasons why you should give to SaveOurEnvironment.org right now:

First, because we’re counting on you. [...] 
Second, because the year is coming to a close. [...] 
And third, because there is no time like the present. The time for excuses is over: America needs strong environmental policies that support a sustainable green economy today. Help us make it happen.”

SaveOurEnvironment has, in essence, moved their traditional direct mail fundraising operation online. They thus take advantage of the reduced costs of the medium, but they reach a much smaller audience than MoveOn, and their appeal lacks clear issue salience, suggesting that members should give “because there is no time like the present.” Compare this to MoveOn’s appeal:

“Dear MoveOn member, You’ve probably heard about how Wall Street financier Bernard Madoff scammed investors out of at least $50 billion. But you may not have heard that his victims included the foundations that support some really important progressive organizations. Groups that fight for human rights, fair elections and racial justice are getting hit hard - just in time for the holidays. We’ve worked side-by-side with many of them.

If these groups can’t replace the funding that came from investment accounts that Madoff stole, they may be forced to start cutting important projects or, in some cases, even lay off staff. Can you pitch in $25 or $50 for each of the four organizations we’re highlighting below? Our friends at Atlantic Philanthropies and the Open Society Institute will each match every dollar that comes in until January 1! So, for the next three days, your donation of $25 or $50 means $75 or
$150 for groups affected by Madoff. If a few thousand of us give together, it can make an enormous difference — and help repair some of the damage Madoff has done. Click here to contribute.”

MoveOn then goes on to note that the year-end contribution will be 100% tax-deductible and provides a brief description of the four organizations they are supporting.

In light of the ecological metaphors often deployed to discuss modern-day interest groups, this distinction is particularly meaningful because MoveOn is in fact fundraising for allied niche organizations. Rather than competing with similar organizations, MoveOn is fundraising on their behalf. And though indicators of each organizations’ open-rates, clickthroughs, and giving rates are proprietary in nature, the qualitative gulf between the two appeals is worthy of note. Direct mail fundraising professionals attempting to apply decades of experience to the online fundraising environment are ill-equipped, specifically because the new information regime supports a style of fundraising that previously would have been horrendously inefficient. The difference between online fundraising in general and MoveOn’s model in particular lies in the size of the list and the timeliness of their appeals.

**MoveOn Infrastructure**

There is a deeper problem with MoveOn’s fundraising model from the perspective of longstanding interest groups: not all fundraising dollars are created equal. Most of MoveOn’s fundraising appeals ask for a highly targeted form of support -- $25 to put a campaign commercial on the air or place a field organizer in a critical state. Targeted appeals have always had a higher rate of success, and they are routinely used by
large nonprofits when approaching major donors and foundations. Anyone familiar with University administration is familiar with the challenge this presents: donors would prefer to give money toward a particular, tangible project or outcome than they would toward the general fund. Many nonprofits divide their fundraising into separate departments, with direct mail based in a “Development” office and major gifts coordinated through an “Advancement” office. One longstanding benefit of direct mail fundraising is that the money comes without any such restrictions. It can be used to pay for Human Resources departments, staff trainings, and physical infrastructure, whereas organizations are legally prevented from applying too large a percentage of targeted, project-specific funds to these overhead costs.

This is one reasonable explanation for why no longstanding interest groups took part in the Superdelegate Transparency Project, for instance: they had hired no staff to work on that issue, and funds raised towards the effort wouldn’t do much to further their mission or pay to keep the lights on. MoveOn and other internet-mediated organizations are capable of being so nimble specifically because they have eschewed such large overhead costs. As of July 2008, MoveOn employed only 19 full-time staff members. Their decision to add an additional 11 field organizers to support the Council system in 2009 represented over a 50% increase in their staff size. The organization eschews traditional overhead costs of office space, management staff, and paper work support. Wes Boyd espouses a philosophy of “radical decentralization” of the staff; there is a standing policy forbidding the creation of physical MoveOn offices. Natalie Foster, who worked as Deputy Field Network Director from 2006-2008, explains the philosophy as follows: “if there are no offices, there’s no water cooler talk. Offices create satellite
offices. MoveOn wants to keep the organization flat, with no hub offices and no
organizers stuck on the periphery. “Rather than a human resources department,
MoveOn has Chief Operating Officer Carrie Olson, who has worked with Blades and
Boyd since their time in the software industry. Olson turns to outside vendors for larger
tasks, creating a “phantom staff” of hundreds when needed, but on a project-specific
basis which is therefore payable by restricted fundraising dollars. The general operating
expenses requiring unrestricted dollars are minimal for America’s largest left-wing
juggernaut.

This final point, then, represents the most clearly disruptive character of
MoveOn’s innovative membership and fundraising practices. Well-managed nonprofits
that boast a large, DC-based lobbying and research staff and substantial physical
infrastructure are disadvantaged by MoveOn’s fundraising innovations. The dramatic
reduction in the costs of information and communication enables a new “market” of sorts
to develop within the realm of political advocacy, and the industry leaders in the existing
ecology of professionally-managed groups cannot rely on this new emerging market for
the type of small-dollar funds that they have relied upon since the advent of the direct
mail membership and fundraising regime. If MoveOn is different, then, and disruptive in
case, the next question we have to ask is just how large its impact on the interest
group ecology of American politics is likely to be.

The MoveOn Effect: Generational Displacement and Interest Group Reformation

The question here could be rephrased as “how ‘ecological’ and interconnected is

53 Interview notes, Natalie Foster. July 8, 2008
the American interest group system, really?” MoveOn’s innovations in the areas of membership of fundraising do not obviously necessitate a decline in money and members for Amnesty International or the ACLU. They are different organizations, and it could be the case that the fundraising strategies that have always worked for the bulk of large, professional advocacy groups will remain unaffected by the growth of this new generation of internet-mediated organizations. A closer look at the previous generation shift, which Skocpol artfully described as a move “from membership to management,” along with an examination of the underlying economics of direct mail fundraising provides reason for skepticism. Though the ideal data for examining systematic fundraising trends lies inaccessible behind organizational firewalls, there are very clear indicators that the fundraising and membership regimes pioneered by MoveOn have far-reaching consequences for the bulk of “post-materialist” or public interest nonprofit advocacy associations.

The shift from federated membership organizations to professional advocacy groups required the emergence of viable funding mechanisms capable of covering the high infrastructure and overhead costs of such political associations. Simply put, before there could be a large cadre of professionally-managed public interest groups in DC, there had to be some way for these organizations to pay their bills. Berry notes the role of foundations, particularly the Ford Foundation, in providing “seed money” for groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resource Defense Council. (Berry, pg 26) “Seed money” is an important turn of phrase: foundations provide only 7.3% of philanthropic contributions in America. (Klein 1994, pg 16) Left-wing foundations in particular have a well-known habit of providing only short-term help,
offering grants to fledgling organizations to get them on their feet, but expecting that within a few years, the organizational will develop its own external fundraising capacity. The emergence of Prospect Direct Mail (PDM) as a fundraising model was a primary enabling condition – necessary, though not sufficient – to the 1970s generational displacement among interest groups. “Prospecting” is a particularly apt term for the functioning of a direct mail program – it bears much in common with goldrush prospectors spending their days panning for gold by a riverside.

To develop a stronger understanding of the mechanics of PDM, I referenced the leading nonprofit fundraising text, Kim Klein’s *Fundraising for Social Change*, now in its fifth edition. Below is a sample balance sheet Klein supplies as an illustration of the logic of a healthy direct mail program:

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**Acquisition and Renewal through Direct Mail: One Organization’s Results (from Klein 1994)**

**Income**

*Acquisition mailings*

- 5 mailings of 2000 pieces each; 1% response @ $25 = $2,500
- (100 donors acquired from these mailings)

*Three more mailings to those who gave asking for extra gifts*

- 10% response from 100 donors at various amounts = $750
- (30 extra gifts from the 100 acquired donors)

*One renewal mailing to these 100 donors; 66% at $25 = $1,650*

**Total Income** = $4,900

**Expenses**

*Acquisition mailings (renting or exchanging lists, printing postage, etc)*

- 10,000 pieces at .35 = $3,500

*Three more mailings to 100 donors*

- 3 X 100 X .40 = $120

*Renewal mailings (one to everyone and a second to those who do not respond to the first)*

- 150 letters total X .40 = $60

**Total Expenses** = $3,680

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Net Gain, 66 donors, $1,670

Note that the initial fundraising appeal (costing $3,500 but raising only $2,500) comes at a net cost of $1,000 to the organization, and that is assuming a 1% rate of return, far from guaranteed. Klein explains, “The vast majority of fundraising time is spent getting people to give once and then getting them to give again.” (Klein, pg 57) Thus that first mailing is meant to prospect for donors – the individuals with a higher propensity to give – and then future mailings are sent to this smaller pool, providing a net profit. The technological aspect of PDM – the element that was technically infeasible prior to the late 1960’s – was the database software necessary for developing and maintaining high-quality lists. The difference between a profitable direct mail program and an unprofitable one is calculated through two factors: cost per member acquired and average lifetime giving rate. Without high-quality prospecting lists, the cost per member acquired [(acquisition mailing expenses-average initial gift)/total new donors] rises to an unaffordable rate, and the quality of those lists is predicated on the database software they are stored upon. Bosso notes that PDM is a “loss leader, the cost of building a base of regular contributors who in time may be convinced to go higher on the ‘pyramid of support’ – where the real money is.” (Bosso, pg 111) This pyramid of support is central to the second factor calculated by fundraising professionals: average lifetime giving rate. Notice that this metric can only be calculated retrospectively. A longstanding organization can look back on their fundraising efforts and calculate how long and how much the average member continued to give, and so long as this average exceeds the costs per member acquired, PDM offers a source of unrestricted organizational funding.

When the average lifetime giving rate is too low or the cost per member acquired is too high, PDM can take on a “shell game” quality. Conservative direct mail specialist Richard Viguerie, for instance, specialized in the 1980s and early 1990s in setting up conservative public interest organizations through direct mail operations. From 1992 through 1995, Viguerie set up three conservative senior organizations to combat the American Association of Retired Persons – the Seniors Coalition, the United Seniors Association, and 60/Plus. Created in quick succession, each organization prospected from the previous Viguerie-founded organization’s mailing list. This resulted in large overlapping memberships and eventually exhausted the response rate and average lifetime gift, leaving each organization in debt despite their large member rolls. (while Viguerie himself made millions in consulting fees, leading Jeffrey Berry to artfully describe him as a “one man tragedy of the commons”) (Berry, pg 95)

It is important to understand these mechanics because there are strong indications that the cost per member acquired is steeply rising for a host of nonprofits – an effect of the generational trend toward paying bills online instead of through the mail. A recent study by Target Analysis Group, which aggregates data on nonprofit fundraising, indicates that donation-by-mail is entering a sharp decline, replaced by internet-based giving. (Flannery, Harris and Rhine 2008) Another study by the same group made note of a sharp demographic split between donors aged 65 and older, who still give through the mail, and donors younger than 65, who primarily give online. (Flannery and Harris 2007, pg 5) One prominent progressive nonprofit noted that its cost per member acquired, which had sunk to an historic low of $7/member in 2000 in response to the Bush threat, had trended up to $21/member after September 11th, and then steadily risen to over
$40/member in the summer of 2008 – prior to the onset of the current recession. Fundraising professionals are increasingly moving their direct mail appeals online, but as we saw in the last section, the direct mail-type appeals do not compete well with the larger recipient base and increased timeliness of MoveOn’s style of online appeal. The appeals that succeed in raising the most money in the instant-communication online environment are the appeals tied to the day’s headline news, and that in turn advantages restricted appeals that do not result in the unrestricted dollars large nonprofits have relied upon for decades through the mail.

Given the retrospective nature of the “average lifetime giving rate” metric, it is near-impossible for an organization to tell at what point it has crossed the threshold from making a positive long-term investment in PDM-based membership to sinking money into an antiquated fundraising structure that has ceased to be viable. Much like the newspaper and publishing industries, which for years noticed declining revenue streams and emerging markets (blogs and self-publishing) to which they were ill-suited, but only recently have had to face major layoffs and industry-wide restructuring, there is currently a quiet panic among many nonprofit political advocacy associations regarding how they will continue to pay for their high staffing and infrastructure costs which, when measured against internet-mediated associations such as MoveOn, suddenly seem astronomically high.

Not all of nonprofits are equally threatened by these funding stream changes. Prospect Direct Mail is a major source of funds, but it is not the only one. Some associations rely disproportionately on a small number of major donors, catering program to the whims and interests of those few individuals, while others have developed

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longstanding corporate, foundation, or governmental ties. The formation of the “Democracy Alliance” in 2005, a collaborative effort among leftwing major donors to coordinate their giving and invest in new progressive infrastructure, produces similar tremors large donor-reliant organizations. (Payne 2008) Unions are a good example of an organization-type that never relied on direct-mail “membership,” and thus the shift in membership and fundraising regimes is likely to have only second-order effects on this type of group. Likewise, the vocational-based membership associations described by Nagel (1987) as having an excess of membership benefits remain largely unaffected by the shift, and the small pressure groups now have an easier time forming though they continue to suffer from long-term instability and a lack of infrastructure. But for a wide variety of nonprofit political associations, it seems clear that the change in membership and fundraising regimes pioneered by MoveOn has threatening implications. The notion that political associations with high infrastructure costs, facing dramatic shifts in fundraising environment, could somehow be “too big to fail” is hard to square with the similar realities currently unfolding in journalism, publishing, and a variety of other sectors.

**Conclusion**

Figure 5-1 summarizes the core historical argument presented in this chapter. Drawing upon Bimber and Skocpol in particular, it identifies the changes in membership and fundraising regimes that occurred during the 1970s “interest group explosion” and are occurring again today, along with the dominant organization-type that we should
expect from such regimes. My central contention has been that MoveOn is not only novel, large, and nimble, but that the very capacities it has pioneered are indicative of a disruptive innovation, presaging a systemic shift in the interest group ecology of American politics. The emerging ecology remains elite-dominated – there is no indication that MoveOn’s membership or the membership of other internet-mediated political associations is demographically more inclusive of underrepresented segments of the American public – but it is a new set of elites, armed with a more responsive tactical repertoire.

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<td>Membership Type</td>
<td>Identity-Based</td>
<td>Issue-Based</td>
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<tr>
<td>Typical Activities</td>
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<td>Mailing Checks, Writing Letters, Signing Petitions (Armchair Activism)</td>
<td>Attending local meetups, Voting online, Submitting User-Generated Content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding Source</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominant Organization-Type</td>
<td>Cross-Class Membership Federations</td>
<td>Single-Issue Professional Advocacy Orgs</td>
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As with the hub community blogs discussed in chapter 4, one of the most surprising aspects of this topic is that it has managed to attract so little scholarly attention thus far. MoveOn has existed for ten years, and been a left-wing juggernaut for at least five, while lacking any substantial interest from the research community. As with the other online “power law hubs” discussed in this study, MoveOn benefits from strong network effects as the largest internet-mediated generalist in the left – potential volunteers have an incentive to participate through MoveOn because they already know that is the primary space where their community-of-interest is gathering. To the extent that this “MoveOn effect” – which is not caused by MoveOn, but it well represented by it – is reordering the interest group ecology of American politics, this is indicative of what may prove to be the largest-scale impact of the internet on the American political system.

Separating MoveOn-as-organization from the MoveOn effect, however, it bears noting that the system of face-to-face “MoveOn Councils” has only recently received substantial resource investment from the organization as a whole. MoveOn activism is, for the most part, “one-click activism:” a displacement of the armchair activist with by the laptop activist, if you will. Beginning with the Howard Dean campaign in 2003, we have seen evidence that the internet can be used to lower the coordination and transaction costs of offline participation as well, at least in some limited set of circumstances. Chapter 6 investigates the most mature example of “Offline Tools for Online Action,” through an ethnographic analysis of Democracy for America’s Philadelphia affiliate, Philly for Change (PfC). If the MoveOn Effect presages the decline of the DC-based professional advocacy group, PfC provides reason to suspect the next generation of
internet-mediated political associations may bear some strong resemblance to Skocpol’s cross-class membership federations.

This chapter discusses the areas of American politics which have, for the most part, remained untouched by MoveOn and DailyKos. The lowered transaction costs, information abundance, and power law topology of the web do not translate directly to the offline world. This leaves a large portion of our civic, political, and social lives minimally affected by the growth of internet-mediated organizations. Lobby visits and civic association meetings don’t occur in front of a computer screen, and offline actions like the Netroots Nation convention and MoveOn Council meetings make up only a small element of these organizations’ work. For this reason, many observers remain skeptical about the impact of “Internet activism” on political and social institutions.

I counted myself among these skeptics until the spring of 2003, when I first encountered the Dean campaign’s use of Meetup.com to organize an army of offline volunteers at minimal costs to the organization. And when the Dean campaign ended in defeat, many of those volunteers kept meeting, forming local chapters of a new federated civic organization, Democracy for America (DFA) whose website prominently displayed a promise of “Online Tools for Offline Action.” This suggested to me the potential of the Internet to revitalize the civic infrastructure celebrated by Theda Skocpol in Diminished Democracy, correcting through the new generation shift in the interest group population some of the negative consequences of the 1970s-era generation shift described in her book.

The chapter draws upon six months of ethnographic research and elite interviews
conducted with the local DFA affiliate, Philly for Change (PfC). My central conclusion is that PfC does indeed succeed in utilizing the internet to promote offline coordination, but that it is also currently limited by many of the same offline transaction costs that organizations have faced for decades. The group is a special case, emerging out of a heightened and difficult-to-replicate period of political engagement and not duplicated in many other cities around the country. In most cities, the gap between online and offline activity has proven too great a hurdle for the formation of internet-mediated local associations.

Given the importance of this online-offline distinction, the second half of this chapter discusses the growth of the Mobile Web – web access through cellular telephones such as Apple’s iPhone. The Mobile Web is blurring the distinction between online and offline activity, relaxing many of the limitations constraining DFA-style groups. The ubiquitous, location-aware devices have already produced new types of social and commercial institutions, and it will not be long until they reach a point of diffusion where they affect political associations as well. I thus classify DFA as a “proto-organizational form,” as typified by the Drudge Report, which is a “proto-blog.” Such organizations develop an initial niche through the benefits of first-mover advantage, but also develop before important shifts in online usage patterns and supportive software code have ripened. With the Obama for America campaign’s decision to follow in Dean for America’s footsteps, launching “Organizing for America” as a federated advocacy network, formally associated with the Democratic National Committee, the DFA case and the growth of the mobile web become increasingly vital to any study of the internet and political associations. Offline advocacy facilitated by online tools is the clear focus
of the next wave of web-related political innovations.

The chapter is divided into three major sections. It begins with a discussion of Philly for Change, including investigation into how the Internet has affected the formation and maintenance of the group’s core functions. This section also discusses the existing limitations of Democracy for America as a federation – limitations that are primarily based in technical challenges to Internet use and software code as they are currently constructed. The chapter then delves into the nascent literature on Distributed Reputation Systems, as this application of reputational data to organizational activities represents the primary hurdle to internet-mediated development of location-based organizational forms. Third, the chapter discusses the novel capacities of the Mobile Web – particularly its conditions of *ubiquity* and *location-awareness* – and examines how they are affecting reputational data and leading to new uses of the Internet that augment previously “offline” activities. Though the Mobile Web is still in the early stages of diffusion, and the future of the technology is far from determined, this provides strong indications for the overall thesis of this chapter: that location-based civic associations, augmented by reduced online communication costs, are likely to regain prominence among the new generation of political associations.

“Online Tools for Offline Action:” Democracy for America and the Emergence of a New “Constituency.”

Philly for Change meets once a month at the Tritone, a dimly-lit bar in downtown Philadelphia. An average meeting draws between 20 and 40 Philadelphia progressives,
most of them between their mid 30s and early 60s. Two volunteers sit at a table by the
door, handing out meeting agendas, nametags, and pointing newcomers to the sign-in
sheet. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 7PM, but that includes around 20 minutes for
people to shuffle in, order dinner and drinks, and mingle with friends. Once begun, the
steering committee chair serves as emcee, introducing guest speakers, asking committee
leaders to provide updates on ongoing activities, highlighting past successes, and urging
the crowd to stay focused and minimize side conversations. The meeting always ends
with a “take action” portion, which usually involves separating the members into small
neighborhood groups where they can make plans for petition-gathering or other local
activities over the course of the following month. To a veteran of civic associations, the
whole experience is strikingly ordinary. The operation of this in-person meeting is
identical to those of civic associations of years past and present. “These are the mighty
‘Deaniacs?’” one is left to wonder. Weren’t they supposed to be younger, more wild-
eyed, armed to the teeth with technological wizardry?

Indeed, what makes Philly for Change unique is not the introduction of novel
technical marvels, but the extent to which they have converted face-to-face community
engagement into political power. PFC is a testament to the value of community presence
that professional advocacy groups of the direct mail era have never been able to replicate.
Jen Murphy, who served as chair of PFC from 2005-2007, describes the organization’s
particular niche in Philadelphia politics as being unrelated to the Internet or the influence
of Dean himself. “The major difference between Philly for Change and all the other
groups is that we have a local volunteer base. The other organizations don’t have that.”

When darkhorse candidate Michael Nutter was elected Philadelphia’s newest mayor in

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56 Interview Notes, Jen Murphy. September 18, 2007.
2007 – without the support of Philadelphia’s powerful Democratic machine – many observers were quick to credit Philly for Change with providing the smart, savvy “boots on the ground” that proved a difference-maker. In a cover story article of the Philadelphia CityPaper, Doris Taussig wrote, “It has been evident for some time now that something is happening in Philadelphia. Melodramatically, you could say it’s a movement; more conservatively, it’s the birth of a new constituency. The participants call themselves ‘progressives’ or, sometimes, ‘reformers.’ Suffice it to say that they’re a new group of players in city politics, and that they’re not pleased with the way things have been going.” (Taussig 2007)

Philly for Change member Tony Payton, Jr has been elected to positions in the State House, while Hannah Miller and others have “infiltrated” the ward system of the local Democratic Party. The leaders self-describe as “party operatives” and believe fervently in Howard Dean’s 50-state strategy. They canvass neighborhoods, organize petition drives, and develop sustained campaigns around issues both local and national. Their endorsement in local races is coveted by political candidates, resulting in election-season general membership meetings crowded to the hilt with powerbrokers. The organization’s membership is strongly reminiscent of the Democratic Clubs described by James Q. Wilson in his 1962 classic, The Amateur Democrat: “cosmopolitan, intellectually oriented amateurs,” where amateur not by skill level or sophistication, but as “one who finds politics intrinsically interesting because it expresses a conception of the public interest,” and is juxtaposed against a set of professionals who are “preoccupied with the outcome of politics in terms of winning or losing.” (Wilson, 1962, pps 3-4, 13)

If local organization-building can result in this sort of political heft, why did

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cross-class membership federations ever fade in the first place? The answer, as Skocpol notes, relates to its relative costs in the broadcast era. “...new technologies and sources of funding created fresh opportunities and incentives for civic organizers. Suddenly, mobilizing fellow citizens into dues-paying, interactive associations that met regularly no longer made sense for ambitious elites, who could instead run professionally managed organizations able to gain immediate access to government and the national media.”

(Skocpol, pg 220) As we stopped being a “nation of joiners,” for whatever reason, it became significantly cheaper to raise funds and hire a staff of professional lobbyists than it was to build and maintain a large volunteer federation. The last few volunteer federations, including Rotary and the Sierra Club, have watched with concern for years as their volunteer base turns from salt-and-pepper to grey-haired, with no new generation filtering in behind them. The day-to-day operations of PFC are not consumed with cutting-edge technology. But through the addition of a few basic structures, the costs of local association-building are mitigated to the point where groups like PFC again become surprisingly viable for a new wave of ambitious local elites. As Anne Dicker, the longtime chair of the group, put it, “…the technology isn’t all that visible in what we do. Mostly, it lowers the barriers to entry for getting into this sort of work. You don’t need as much political experience to get started as you used to.”

The technology behind Philly for Change starts with Meetup.com. Meetup had its moment in the limelight after the 2004 election. (Wolf 2004, Williams et al 2004) The site allows interest-based groups to self-organize through a coordinated web portal. It was chiefly developed to help hobbyists gather locally. Comic book collectors in Des Moines could find each other through the website and schedule a monthly get-together.

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where they could debate Spider-man vs Batman to their hearts’ content. The site establishes the time and location, publicizes it to other local meetup.com visitors, sends out automated meeting RSVPs and reminders, and even solicits post-meeting feedback on how the meeting went. Howard Dean’s campaign manager Joe Trippi famously placed a link to Meetup.com on the frontpage of the Dean website, driving the flood of onlooking deanforamerica.com visitors to a platform (Meetup) where they could self-organize. This, in turn, generated the large and enthusiastic crowds that created the sense of inevitability around his candidacy before a single vote had been cast. (Trippi 2004, Fine 2006) As Clay Shirky noted in his campaign retrospective, the media mistook this heightened volunteer activity for broad-based support: “Prior to MeetUp, getting 300 people to turn out would have meant a huge and latent population of Dean supporters, but because MeetUp makes it easier to gather the faithful, it confused us into thinking that we were seeing an increase in Dean support, rather than a decrease in the hassle of organizing groups.” (Shirky 2003, pg 234)

When the Dean campaign ended, the candidate announced that the organization would live on, rebranded under the same acronym as “Democracy for America”. Dicker describes this experience from a local’s perspective, “Our motto back then was ‘you have a good idea, go do it!’ When the campaign ended, we all gathered and started thinking about what to do next. There were committeeperson elections coming up, so we decided what we should do is take over the Democratic Party of Philadelphia.” 59 The heightened attention of the 2004 primary generated a volunteer base, and institutionalized a date and location for the local volunteer gatherings. Unlike previous presidential primary campaigns, which have traditionally ended with the flourish of a speech declaring that the

59 Interview Notes, Anne Dicker.
campaign ends, but what it represents will live on, the “bottom up” structure of the Dean campaign left a substrate of volunteers turning to their peers, asking each other, “well, what’s next?”

Today, the group continues to use Meetup and an in-house spinoff called DFA-Link to generate meeting reminders and manage their volunteer lists. This is the type of “back-end coordination” celebrated by Matthew Hindman in his 2005 piece, “The Real Lessons of the Howard Dean Campaign. “In the business world, the Internet’s real successes have been not in retail, but at the backend: thousands of businesses have quietly used the Internet to streamline organizational logistics. Dean’s example suggests that the Web may alter the infrastructure of politics in a similar fashion.” (Hindman 2005) This “quiet use” is what separates PFC today from traditional civic associations. PFC fundraising consists of passing a hat around at meetings – they have discussed asking for a small annual dues payment, but to date membership remains free. Their primary organizational expenses include a quarterly newsletter that they like to mail out to their membership and some small volunteer reimbursement expenses. Current PFC chair David Sternberg explained, “Many of our members live in the city, so the biggest expense in our budget is renting cars through Philly Car Share if we want to spend the weekend canvassing.” Like MoveOn, PfC has no office or paid staff (DFA nationally has a handful of staff and a single headquarters in Vermont) and thus it is able to operate effectively on this shoestring budget. The Southeast Pennsylvania Group of the Sierra Club, by contrast, has an office in Manayunk, PA, multiple field staffers hired to organize

60 Notice the interesting juxtaposition here. Rather than a free e-mail newsletter, PFC chooses to spend a little money on printing so that their membership will receive something in harder-to-ignore hard copy.  
61 Meeting notes, June 2008.
volunteers around the organization’s “Cool Cities” campaign, an ink-and-pulp newsletter that goes out to its several thousand membership list, and a five-figure annual operating budget.

For all of Sierra’s heightened expenses, their endorsement is less coveted in local politics, and their profile is much lower. Most Philadelphia progressives that I encountered through participant observation at PfC and Philadelphia Drinking Liberally were unaware that the national Sierra Club included local volunteer leadership, despite the organization’s long history in Philadelphia politics. The newsletter goes out to its direct mail-recruited membership, many of whom discard it as a form of junk mail. Both Sierra and PfC largely attract new volunteers through network connections – active volunteers inviting their friends to join the organization. As we saw with MoveOn and DailyKos in the online realm discussed in chapter 3, 4, and 5, PfC benefits from an expanded sphere of progressive-generalist organizations. Most, though not all self-described “environmentalists” are also “progressives,” whereas many progressives rate the environment as one of many concerns. By expanding the set of issues it can focus on, PfC is attractive to a larger population of potential volunteers. With the initial infusion of volunteer energies provided by the Dean campaign and the lowered costs of networked association-building, this is enough to allow PfC to be vital while groups like Sierra and Rotary continue to gray.
Power Laws Revisited: The Limits of Meetup and DFA.

I began my ethnographic research on PFC under the assumption that it was one of a host of active DFA affiliates. Later interviews revealed that the group was in fact something of an anomaly. Philadelphia, where I happened to be attending graduate school, also happened to have the strongest local DFA chapter. In Charlottesville, VA, there is no DFA affiliate (there is an Elks’ Lodge, a Rotary Club, and a local Sierra Club group, though). In a few select locales, the community of Dean volunteers possessed the right mix of size and enthusiasm to answer the “What’s next” question and eventually convert into an established local entity. Social network theorists refer to this as a
“clustering effect,” which in layman’s terms means that they surpass some critical threshold necessary to produce self-sustaining activity. (boyd 2008, Watts 2003 pg 77)

More generally, the spotty coverage of DFA’s federated network points to one reason why we should remain circumspect about claims that the Internet (in its current form) will lead to a reemergence of location-based political associations. As a national organization, DFA purports to provide “online tools for offline action.” This includes a set of telephone- and internet-based skills trainings for their membership, a blog feature that can be updated by community groups, and – the centerpiece – an online toolset called DFA-Link. After a quick registration process, DFA-Link lets users connect with local DFA groups or start their own DFA-based affinity group. It also includes blogging and event-posting features, sends out automated meeting reminders, and provides standard social networking features that let users link to each other. DFA-Link is instrumental to the organization’s endorsement process, which invites local, state, and national candidates to answer an online questionnaire and then submit themselves to an advisory vote of the membership regarding who the organization should endorse. Any DFA-Link member can then recommend an endorsement of the candidate. This is meant to enable a virtuous positive feedback loop, with a natural incentive built-in for candidates’ supporters to join the organization and try to influence the vote. Chris Warshaw, the former Field Director of DFA who was responsible for designing this element of the

62 The clustering coefficient is a powerful term when producing models of network-enhanced goods. Application to real-world scenarios is, in itself, an important topic for extended study. Such a project is of such depth and complexity that it cannot be incorporated into this current research project.

63 Groups can be either identity-based (Jewish Grandmas for Democracy) or place-based (Sarasotans for Democracy). In legal terms, these groups are not formally incorporated into DFA. This loose relationship simplifies issues of message control, particularly with regard to controversial endorsements.
system, explains that DFA intends for these miniature “takeovers” to happen, noting that “anyone actively involved in promoting a city council candidate is someone we want on our membership rolls.”

The potential of DFA-Link for enabling offline action is not fulfilled by its track record. Warshaw estimates that about 2/3rds of their national membership list (membership in DFA is defined the same as it is in MoveOn: everyone who provides an e-mail address is considered a member) and 80-90% of their active members are Dean alumni. The Dean campaign in 2004, like the Obama campaign in 2008, served as a short-term hub of online engagement. Political volunteers flood into these presidential campaigns for the summer and fall, then disperse back to their daily routines after the election. This is a substantial challenge for DFA when compared to enduring hubs like MoveOn or DailyKos. Those two national, online communities-of-interest are able to attract a steady stream of new volunteers by pivoting to the issue of the day and launching high-profile efforts. They take advantage of their status as “power law hub” while maintaining their presence in high-interest political fields. DFA had a short period of stardom when their “Blog for America” was a focal point for the netroots and the group’s name was synonymous with a new style of activism. (Kerbel and Bloom 2005) But in the aftermath of the Dean campaign, interest in the group receded. DFA pivots from issue to issue at the national level just as MoveOn and DailyKos do, but it’s online component decidedly plays second fiddle to MoveOn, maintaining a 500,000-person e-mail list that is of questionable durability (recall that MoveOn adds this many new e-mail addresses every year without increasing their membership totals, as this only keeps pace

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64 Interview Notes, Chris Warshaw. May 18, 2007
65 Interview Notes, Chris Warshaw. May 18, 2007
DFAs comparative advantage – providing online tools for offline action – faces a steep hurdle here. The DFA-Link online toolset has been described as “inflexible” by one former PFC chair who expressed a preference for the simplicity of e-mail. Of an estimated distribution list of over 4,500 PFC members, only 645 have signed up for accounts on DFA-Link, and the lion’s share of these accounts appear to be inactive. On a day-to-day basis, there is little reason for a PFC member to visit the site. And since so few of them are visiting it, there is little activity to be seen when a member does visit. Neither DFA-Link nor Meetup.com showed signs of regular group activity beyond a core of a dozen or so groups, and the lack of activity on Philly for Change’s own site was a clear indicator that online membership, as displayed through these portals, is a poor indicator of actual in-person group activity.

In the national field of internet-mediated progressive generalists, MoveOn overshadows DFA. In the field of internet-supported, location-based organizing, DFA has been a field-definer, but that runs into the limitations of location-enabled search on the anti-geographic web. PFC makes use of the basic tools in the DFA-Link toolset, but since their canvassing and meeting activities occur offline, they have few additional uses for the system. And it is unclear what search term amateur Philadelphia progressives should enter in order to stumble upon DemocracyforAmerica.com and be guided to their local group. Online hubs, when divided into local entities, lose some of their power law-topographic qualities.

This is unproblematic for PfC, and for similar groups in cities like New York and San Francisco that attracted a large enough set of volunteers during the Dean moment to
maintain themselves through local offline reputation-building and network connections. PfC does not need DFA-Link to do much, even if advances in the toolset could further aid the group. But for the potential PfCs in other cities and states, it means that there is no second wave of potential leaders filing through the door. There is little indication that DFA’s federated system is growing, developing the presence in every state, city, and town that we saw with the cross-class membership federations of old. The Internet can lower the costs of offline association-building once a group like fFC becomes viable, but reaching the threshold of viability for a locally-based association is an enduring problem.66

Likewise, Meetup.com never emerged as the type of “valuable online real estate” that one would expect given its first-mover status and frequent media attention during the 2004 election season. Meetup claims 4.7 million members and 102,000 meetups/month nationwide. It is unclear what we should make of these numbers, however. A search for Sierra Club meetups yielded fifteen such groups nationwide. Four of them were misclassified, while the other eleven were announcements for meetings of existing Sierra Club groups. One of the core lessons from the Dean campaign is that if an organization wants to generate traffic to its Meetups, it needs to promote them through its own site. The other side of this lesson is that there are relatively few people surfing around the site looking for new Meetups to join. The site is of marginal use as an automated meeting

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66 If DFA can correctly be understood as the sedimentary remains of the Dean for America volunteer apparatus, it raises the specter of what the Obama campaign’s successful campaign apparatus, with a list of 13 million names, 3 million volunteers, and hundreds of thousands of volunteers, will turn into. They have attempted to follow the DFA model” by rebranding as Organizing for America (OFA). Early reports note that participation is far less than it was during the election season, but that still may include enough volunteers for vibrant local associational meetings in a much wider swath of the country.
reminder, and beyond that it serves as an online equivalent of a library bulletin board. Existing local groups will post meeting notices on Meetup on the off chance that someone sees them. This does little to help new groups become viable, however, and indeed it is unclear whether the site has succeeded in its goal of bringing many new groups together. It simply does not attract the type of traffic that would lead to these serendipitous encounters. Location-aware online search remains in its infancy, and Meetup’s candidacy for “power law hub” status, with the heavy network effects that are its trademark, has not experienced the same growth we see with Wikipedia, DailyKos, or MoveOn.

Fundamentally then, Democracy for America and Philly for Change present a promising-but-incomplete example of the potential for location-based, internet-enabled political associations. The technology carries the clear promise of lowering the costs of association-building to the point where new “constituencies” can form and challenge the established elite networks of authority. But that promise is tempered by inefficiencies in solving the mass coordination problem identified in Chapter 2. Meetup.com and DFA-Link could provide an efficient means for like-minded locals to find each other, but they suffer from the anti-geographic nature of the web. Not enough people traverse Meetup or DFA-Link to move the site past the first critical mass point, where enough user-generated

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67 This may largely be because of the decision in 2005 to begin charging a $19/month fee of all group organizers. This caused a firestorm of controversy on technorati and other blogging sites, with many open source proponents arguing that the site provided nothing that couldn’t be found for free elsewhere. Tech writer Dave Taylor noted that this was an enduring challenge when social software companies attempt to monetize their product, suggesting, “When your business is a commodity service, how do you survive the transition from free to paid without sweetening the transaction? The answer: You don’t.”

http://www.intuitive.com/blog/change_your_business_model_and_kill_your_business_meetupcom.html
content is present to give new users a reason to continue returning. As a result, with the exception of those few impressive groups that clustered together in the aftermath of the Dean campaign, the Internet has produced a slim record of offline associations, and has given us no mature examples of a nationwide civic federation in the style of the Elks, Rotary, or Sierra. The Internet-fueled interest group explosion has, to date, mostly been confined to “clickthrough” activities conducted in front of a desktop or laptop monitor.

ProtoBlogs and the Ripeness of Software Platforms: Considering the Case of The Drudge Report

If there is one thing we can say for sure about the Internet, it is that it is in a constant state of development. Today’s cutting edge is tomorrow’s standard practice. (Much to the chagrin of academics trying to navigate the publishing market!) If DFA-Link has proven “inflexible” to its target audience thus far and sites like Meetup have failed to attain great popularity, two clear explanations exist. One is that people simply aren’t interested in using the Internet for such purposes – the flaw of companies like pets.com during the first Internet bubble wasn’t that they used poor software platforms, it was that there simply wasn’t much interest or money to be made in the online petfood business. In chapter 2, I referenced Clay Shirky’s discussion of the “Interest Horizon” in open source software production. Shirky argues that since Open Source production relies on voluntary contributions from software developers pursuing interesting puzzles, the process will fail to compete with proprietary development practices when applied to problems broadly viewed as uninteresting or boring. (Shirky 1999)
phenomenon could be responsible for the limited spread of these online-offline toolsets – it could be that no critical mass emerges at the national level because there simply aren’t enough people interested in using the internet to engage with their neighbors.

A second explanation is that the technology has yet to ripen. DailyKos, for instance, couldn’t have been created in 2000, because the community blogging software package hadn’t been created yet. Interest existed, as evinced by the decades-long history of usenet message boards (Rheingold 1993), but interest outpaced the development of supportive technology. Consider, then, the proto-organization form. Proto-organizations are a special class of internet-mediated group, only identifiable in retrospect. They have two defining characteristics. First, they benefit from first-mover advantage, representing the initial major attempt at allowing Internet users to partake in some novel activity online. Second, as a result of this first-mover status, they rely upon a bare-bones software platform that lacks many supportive features that later become accepted as essential functions. As an example, consider the odd case of The Drudge Report.

Matt Drudge (serendipitously, his real name) launched the site in 1994, sending a broadcast e-mail soliciting subscribers for a web site that would feature, “a cross section of things that the editor Matt Drudge is focusing in on …Already read by key players, this tip sheet will be sure to peak [sic] your interest.” (Perlmutter, 2008, pg 58) The site featured a list of headlines, occasionally with brief editorial commentary, each with hyperlinks to a news story found somewhere on the web (see figure 6-1 – screenshot of Drudgereport.com). Drudge’s fame as a cutting edge newshound was cemented in 1998, when he broke news of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in a “world exclusive” after the major news organizations had failed to release the story. His site has had enduring
power, reaching roughly 2 million unique visitors per month, which puts it on par with the Huffington Post. It regularly breaks news of the next day’s headlines, leading journalist Chris Cillizza (author of the Washington Post’s blog, The Fix) to describe the Drudge Report as recently as September 2008 as “the single most influential source for how the presidential campaign is covered in the country.” (Cillizza 2008)

Is the Drudge Report a blog? It is difficult to say. His habit of posting hyperlinks with limited commentary is emulated by a few of the early elite bloggers such as Duncan “Atrios” Black and Glenn “Instapundit” Reynolds (see figure 6-2, screenshot of Instapundit.com). Blogs traditionally appear in reverse-chronological order and are archived over time, whereas the Drudge Report is organized as a three-column spread of news items and includes no archives. Blogs generally include a blogroll of like-minded

authors, and most of them include (at a minimum) the capacity for reader comments, while Drudge has neither of these. In the typology of blogspace presented in Chapter 4, the Drudge Report would appear in the farthest corner of quadrant I (“blogging classic”) since it includes no community-enhancing features and draws an audience entirely on the basis of the author’s individual reputation. It is perhaps for this reason that David Perlmutter, a Journalism Professor at the University of Kansas and author of *Blog Wars*, describes the Drudge Report as a “proto-blog,” noting, “To this day, Drudge is Drudge: one man, no interaction, no community. The combination of independent media, hyperlinked posting, and voluntary association that bypassed and critiqued regular media, however, was developing at the same time, and we would soon all know its name: blog.” (Perlmutter, pps: 58-60)
Notice, then, the particular chain of events. Drudge launched his website in 1994. It burst onto the public consciousness in 1998. It wasn’t until 1999, when Pyra Labs created the commercial software platform blogger.com, that blogging would start to become an identifiable activity even among lead adopter communities. Compared with the latest blogging software platforms, the Drudge Report is the very essence of “clunky” or “inflexible” software. Blogging as a form of criticism, expression, and organization would not take off until additional software elements were added (first by Pyra Labs, and later by Scoop, the platform that allowed DailyKos to add community-enhancing “user diaries”). But thanks to the substantial reservoir of authority that he developed by virtue of his first-mover advantage, Matt Drudge has virtually no incentive to update his site to newer software. Drudge doesn’t need to engage a community of participants to build an audience, because he has already established himself as a known commodity. In 1998, we wouldn’t have known to call the Drudge Report a “proto-blog” because the activity of blogging had yet to mature. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the site fills a similar niche to that of political and media blogs, while lacking many of the features later incorporated as core features of blogging software.

So what of Democracy for America? Is it like pets.com, falling below the “interest horizon” and offering a type of online activity that relatively few people want to engage in? Or is Democracy for America like the Drudge Report, a proto-organizational form that has gained prominence before the necessary supportive technology has been developed? At issue here is our very understanding of internet-mediated organizational forms. Philly for Change demonstrates a proof-of-existence that the web can be used to reinvigorate civic participation at the local level, reviving many of the qualities Skocpol
suggests were lost in the previous interest group generation shift. But both MoveOn and DailyKos are a good deal larger than DFA, and Philly for Change is DFA’s strongest affiliate. The question is whether we should theoretically expect PfC to be an example of exceptional circumstances, or a precursor to the next wave of internet-mediated political engagement.

To understand the prospects for DFA-like organizations, we need centrally to examine the critical role that Distributed Reputation Systems have played in all large-scale online participatory communities. From eBay to Wikipedia, DailyKos to YouTube, the aggregation of mass assessments of quality into a reputation algorithm of some sort is a necessary condition for the development of a large-scale hub. (see Benkler, 2006 for further discussion) These systems serve as a search solution in information-abundant environments, and provide the tools for individuals to interact and self-manage as a community. The next section will discuss the underpinnings of Distributed Reputation Systems, and also illuminate their existing limitations when applied to “offline” forms of engagement. The paper will then discuss the next wave of internet-related innovations, the Mobile Web, which is currently blurring the distinction between online and offline, extending the potential applicability of reputation systems to social activities, and creating a more permissive landscape for DFA-type groups.

Trust in Online Strangers? How Do Individuals Online Become Communities Online?
The above comic artfully reflects one of the deep puzzles regarding Internet-mediated businesses and organizations: why do people behave themselves online? Why do eBay buyers and sellers trust each other to deliver on their promised products and payments in a timely manner? Why isn’t Wikipedia overwhelmed by outlandish fictions and outright smears? Why does anyone ever trust anything said on the blogosphere?

These questions are particularly salient because there is such overwhelming variance in the dependent variable. People do not *always* behave themselves online. In many cases, Internet anonymity does indeed bring out the absolute worst in people. We see “flame wars” on e-mail listservs and discussion boards, where people hurl far greater invective
than social mores would ever allow face-to-face. Likewise, the LA Times’s attempted “Wikitorial” (discussed in Chapter 2) quickly succumbed to anonymous spammers who used it to promote pornographic websites, and the less-trafficked edges of the blogosphere are filled with cascades of outlandish conspiracy theory.

Recall Jimmy Wales’s description of Wikipedia’s success: “…Wikipedia isn’t a technological innovation at all; it’s a social innovation… We had the Web already, but we discovered the basic idea of how to organize a community.” (Lih, pg xvi) Likewise, Shirky has opined, “Wikipedia, like all social tools, is the way it is in part because of the way the software works and in part because of the way the community works.” (Shirky 2008, pg 116) What we face here is a pair of questions – one theoretical, the other technical – “under what conditions do isolated individuals, lacking in-person contextual cues, behave as a community,” and “what are the technical solutions that empower them to enforce shared norms?” A few answers are immediately apparent. When identity is tracked, when positive contributions are rewarded and negative ones are sanctioned, people behave themselves better. Blogs that require user registration have less spam than those that do not. Discussion forums that reward additional “superuser” privileges to members in good standing promote higher-quality discourse. Where norms of respectful dialogue are enforced through loss of user privileges, flame wars are reduced to a simmer. The theoretical literature on such offline interactions generally focuses on reputation, and the family of software protocols that enforce these conditions is known under the broad heading of Distributed Reputation Systems. (Masum and Zhang 2004)

What is Reputation?
An individual’s reputation refers to a set of complex, context-specific community assessments based on past activities. By “complex” I mean that reputation crosses multiple spaces. An academic colleague could have a reputation as an excellent researcher, but narrow-minded in her field, providing excellent feedback but habitually late for meetings. By context-specific, I mean that the dimensions of one’s reputation are variably accessed depending on the situation. The above academic colleague cannot receive a universal standardized reputation score, because habitual lateness matters more in committee assignments than in providing feedback on research. Likewise, one’s business colleagues will hold reputational assessments of how he acts in negotiations, while a very difficult set of connections will hold assessments about her capacities as, say, a chef. By community assessments, I mean that these assessments are embedded in a set of network connections. A business trip that doubles as a visit with old college friends will cross social network boundaries, and an individual will have different, equally valid, and potentially non-overlapping reputations in these two circles.

The importance of reputation to collective action and public goods provision has been well established in the literature. Game theorist Robert Axelrod identifies the importance of reputation in mitigating a host of prisoners’ dilemma-type social challenges, including collective action and the provision of public goods. Axelrod finds that the “Tit for Tat” strategy in pure strategic games, in which actor A’s move at time T+1 is determined by actor B’s move at time T, is a robust long-term strategy when the prisoners’ dilemma is played over multiple iterations. This “shadow of the future” is the formal equivalent of reputation between actors in a network. (Axelrod 1984) Dennis Chong provides an illustrative discussion of reputation’s impact on the American Civil
Rights Movement, noting that it is an essential motivating element that compels actors to participate in high-risk tactics that would otherwise face high levels of free ridership. (Chong 1991) Likewise, Mancur Olson’s opus work, *The Logic of Collective Action*, posits that large groups and small groups are fundamentally different from one another because individual contributions in small groups are significant enough to be tracked, recognized, rewarded and punished. It is when groups attempt to scale up to larger size that Olson suggests we should expect underprovision of public goods. (Olson 1971)

**Distributed Reputation Systems**

If reputation is a collection of complex, context-specific community assessments, a distributed reputation system can be best understood as a technologically-mediated approximation of such community-embedded assessments. As famously articulated by the classic *New Yorker* cartoon, initial forays into the internet faced the challenge of anonymity: “on the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” (Steiner 1993) Reputation systems replace internet anonymity with, at a minimum, internet pseudonymity. This allow members of a community to provide evaluations, assessments, tags, or other indicators of positive or negative contributions. Systems as diffuse as eBay’s “feedback forum,” Slashdot’s “mojo” system, Amazon’s recommendation structure, Wikipedia’s administrator structure and google’s PageRank algorithm all fundamentally share a few core attributes that allow their users to filter for preferred content, reward good behavior/contributions and sanction negative behavior/contributions. Note that some of these systems track the reputations of *individual users* while others track the reputations of
ideas, products, or institutions. A few researchers have separated such systems into divergent categories (Lev-On and Hardin 2007), but for the purposes of this project, we gain more leverage by examining their commonalities. In all of these cases, the value of the reputation system can be reduced to three features: proxy quality, set size, and algorithm.

Proxy Quality.

While small-group reputation assessments are derived from complex interpersonal reactions, distributed online reputation systems must identify some form of proxy data as a stand-in for reputation. Google’s PageRank uses the hyperlinked structure of the web as such a proxy, organizing search results according to those sites that receive the most hyperlinks, particularly frequent hyperlinks from high-traffic locations. Hindman (2008) points out that this has the result of skewing the system in favor of a small number of major sites. Such a skew, however, solves the otherwise enormous search problem by giving searchers more popular, and thus relatively more trustworthy, sources of information. Slashdot and community blogs like DailyKos award “mojo points” to those comments or user-contributions deemed helpful, funny, or informative by their peers. This lets users filter results in a crowded discussion thread and also creates the basis for superusers – active community members, well-respected by their peers, who are given additional moderation or posting privileges. EBay’s feedback forum invites buyers and sellers to rate their interactions, and these ratings aggregate into a permanent “feedback profile.” All reputation systems rely on some form of proxy data, and where no good proxies can be identified or appropriate data is unavailable, reputation systems fail to
operate.

Set Size.

Some types of proxy data are more abundant than others. The smaller the set of assessments, the easier it is to manipulate a distributed recommendation system, subverting it to malicious or counter-productive ends. Assessments can be obtained through various types of data, some of which are more costly to produce than others. These data types can be arranged on a spectrum of data availability, as demonstrated below in figure 6-4. Google and Amazon rely on the “data stream” for their proxy data. This is data that is added to the web as a byproduct of web activity. Clickstreams, hyperlinks, and overlapping “preferred lists” all query databases of existing web activity, drawing upon information that accrues as a costless byproduct of web surfing or participation. Data stream proxies are sometimes protected by proprietary firewalls, but otherwise are by far the most abundant of all data sources, because the data will accrue unless users take specific steps to erase their tracks.

A minimally costly form of proxy data is produced through “integrated user experience” proxies. Comment rating systems on community blogs, for instance, allow users to click a button and score the contribution they have just read positively or negatively. Digg, Reddit, and StumbleUpon all invite users to similarly recommend interesting content as they navigate the web. This requires additional activity, but it is a near-seamless form of engagement, embedded into their web-surfing experience, and thus the additional transaction costs are minimal.

At the high end of the spectrum are “user feedback forms” such as those used by
eBay, RateMyProfessor, and Meetup. These forms invite users to go online after a transaction or event has occurred and provide a rating. Because the activity of submitting a form is temporally separated from the transaction or event itself, the transaction costs are higher. Though in some of these cases, feedback forms can be somewhat heavily used – Resnick reports greater than 50% participation rates in the eBay feedback forum – the more costly it is for users to contribute proxy data, the more limited the available set will be.

The Algorithm.

Algorithms can be simple or complex, proprietary or open, numeric or qualitative. In all cases, however, the purpose of the algorithm is to convert the set of proxy data into a useful product. “Useful” is used intentionally here because distributed reputation ratings, like reputation itself, are context-specific. In each and every case, the designers of a distributed reputation system have a set of activities they want to promote and discourage, and they design their algorithm to convert the raw proxy data into a system that rewards good behavior, products, activities, or ideas while sanctioning bad behavior, counter-productive activity, or lower-quality products or ideas. Note that this implies there can be no such thing as universal measures of online reputation, as forecasted by Zittrain (2008) and others. Offline reputation is context-specific, online reputation is as well.

Distributed reputation systems as a class, then, can be understood as converting a set of proxies through an algorithm into a useful rating system that supports the goals and
purpose of the online community or network. It stands to reason, then, that improvements in either the quality or quantity of available proxy data would allow designers to craft new and better algorithms, applying distributed reputation tracking to a wider range of activities. With that background, let us now turn to the shifts in available data brought about by the Mobile Web, commonly understood as the internet-through-iPhone.

"data stream" i.e. Google

"Integrated user experience" i.e. Blog comment rating

"user feedback forms" i.e. eBay or Meetup

Zero transaction costs

Marginal transaction costs

Figure 6-4: Continuum of data availability

Implications of the Mobile Web for the Use of Reputation Systems

In a recent article for *Wired* magazine, Mathew Honan offered the following summary: “simply put, location changes everything. This one input – our coordinates – has the potential to change all the outputs. Where we shop, who we talk to, what we read, what we search for, where we go – they all change once we merge location and the Web.” (Honan 2009) Indeed, with over 10 million iPhones already in circulation and the recent release of Google’s Android operating system, we are poised to witness a massive expansion of this new version of the mobile phone-based internet access. There is a meaningful distinction to be drawn between the Mobile Web, as it is experienced today,
and the widely-diffused SMS (Short Message Service) text messaging service and limited internet access available offered by most US mobile phone networks.

Howard Rheingold wrote the first treatment of SMS in his 2002 book, *Smart Mobs*, optimistically suggesting that it signaled the beginnings of a social transformation. While SMS played an intriguing role in the “People Power II” Philippines revolt that led to the overthrow of a government and has been used to organize “flashmobs” that virally spread an agreed-upon time and location, then arrive to engage in some form of collective action, the range of text-based applications has remained rather limited. (Rheingold, 2002, pps 20-24) SMS simply does not allow for the transmission of very much information. Apple capitalized on this limitation, as well as the limited breadth of phone-based web browsers, in it’s initial marketing campaign. One of the first commercials announcing the iPhone to consumers intoned, “This is not a watered down version of the internet. Or the mobile version of the internet. Or the kinda-sorta-looks-like-the-internet internet. It’s just the internet. On your phone.”

The iPhone’s data plan allows users to connect to wireless access points where available, and to access the internet through AT&T’s broadband data network where wireless is unavailable. From the user’s perspective, this means that web pages, google maps, wikipedia, and other major internet sites are now ubiquitously accessible.

The iPhone and its competitors affect reputation systems in at least two important ways. First is the flood of location-aware data that they make available, leading to a dramatic shift in the types of proxy data that can potentially be accessed by upstart organizations or communities. Consider Yelp.com, for instance, which launched in 2005 as a sort of “Zagat ratings by the masses, for the masses,” combining elements of

[^69]: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lZMr-ZfoE4


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Wikipedia, community blogs, social networks, and the Yellow Pages, all with a helping of Google Maps on the side. The site currently has over 3.3 million registered users and has expanded from a San Francisco start-up to include both major and mid-sized US cities. Visitors to the site can browse through user-generated reviews of restaurants, shopping, nightlife, beauty and spas, or 15 other categories. Registered users can write their own reviews and give 1-5 star ratings of any location they visit. They can also rate each other’s reviews, giving them credit for being “useful,” “funny,” or “cool,” or flagging them as inappropriate content. Registered users are also invited to fill out profile information and network with each other. The most active reviewers on the site are invited to be members of the “Elite ’08,” a superuser-designation that includes invitations to local “thank-you” mixers.

As reporter Saul Hansell from the New York Times puts it, “Most people aren’t drawn to write a witty review of the scrambled eggs at the local diner simply to get their ego stroked. But enough people find it rewarding to turn Yelp into one of the richest repositories of local reviews on the Web.” (Hansell 2008) Though its launch predates the iPhone’s market entry, Yelp’s recent growth outside of tech-friendly cities like San Francisco and New York can be traced to the growth of mobile accessibility. Yelp provides a location-aware variation on Wikipedia’s production model. Whereas Wikipedia serves as a repository for internet-based hobbyists to add their knowledge, Yelp serves as a repository for local wisdom. As reviews become accessible and

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70 This amounts to fewer “registered users” than, for instance, Meetup.com, but that is due to the ill-defined nature of that statistic. According to Alexa.com traffic rankings, Yelp is the 637th most-visited web site on the World Wide Web, while Meetup ranks 1,359th (www.alexa.com, accessed on November 8, 2008.). Since inactive registrations are never removed from a system, membership size and membership activity can be only loosely correlated.
increasingly writeable on-the-go, Yelp becomes an exponentially more valuable tool. So long as location-aware internet services are tethered to laptop or desktop portals, their utility is circumscribed. Yelp’s iPhone application lets users access this repository of local wisdom at all times, enabling higher participation rates and the accumulation of more assessments. While long-established sites like YellowPages.com and CitySearch.com attempt to provide top-down directors of available services, Yelp invites a growing participatory community to do the legwork behind local search. Location-awareness increases the utility of Yelp’s services, in turn broadening the size and scope of the service’s applicability. As of April 2009, Yelp has surpassed citysearch as the most-trafficked review site on the web, an example of the long-term fragility of “power law hubs” discussed in the latter portion of chapter 2. (Kee 2009)

At least as important as the addition of new types of proxy data is the shift in data abundance as internet access comes untethered from stationary desktop or laptop portals and the line between online and offline is rendered utterly porous. It is perhaps too early to engage in detailed survey research on how the iPhone and its ilk change usage patterns, but a few things seem certain at this juncture. The gap between “integrated user experience” and “user feedback forms,” visually represented in figure 6-4, is almost definitionally reduced as the internet becomes omnipresent. If attendees to a meetup.com event can enter their ratings of the meeting while it is in process, then the costs of rating offline events approximate the costs of rating a blog comment. If “Yelpers” can rate the service at a restaurant while they are enduring an especially long wait, they are more likely to fill the extra time by submitting a low rating. It stands to reason that, at least to the extent that contributions to websites like epinions.com, yelp.com, or
ratemyprofessor.com are limited by the marginal costs of participation, the wide diffusion of the mobile web will lead to massive increases in the production and availability of such assessments.\textsuperscript{71}

The spread of this next technological wave does not itself predetermine the algorithms or uses that will result, and as previously asserted, reputation algorithms are designed to augment the goals of specific communities or organizations. All that we can be certain of at this juncture is that the introduction of new types of data and the increase in availability of other types of data will expand the space in which reputation algorithms can augment community participation and development. If we accept that effective reputation systems require both the quantity and quality of proxy data to be above some minimum threshold, then it follows that expanding the range of both, as the mobile web is doing, will make feasible a wide array of new applications. Consider, then, what this means for the type of “online-to-offline” internet-mediated political associations that are the subject of this chapter.

\textbf{Reputation-in-Motion. Augmenting Offline Collective Action}

In a 2008 interview with Natalie Foster, former Deputy Field Network Director for MoveOn.org, I raised the topic of distributed reputation systems. “That’s the Holy

\textsuperscript{71} This is an important and unknown limiting factor. I am not suggesting that, if rating systems were somehow rendered costless, everyone would choose to provide such ratings. Personal tastes or preferences must be taken into account. As an analogue, lowering the costs of posting personal thoughts on the web through simple and intuitive blogging software packages has not resulted in the entire world blogging. Many people have no interest in using the web in this manner. Likewise, lowering the costs of offering feedback on meetings, events, businesses, or individuals will allow for a fuller realization of the demand curve for such activity, but we have no idea what such a demand curve will look like.
Grail,” she replied, “We always said in MoveOn that what we needed more than anything else was a way to record feedback on which house parties and meetings went well and which one’s didn’t.”

Technically, MoveOn does offer such a feedback mechanism in the form of automated post-event e-mails that are sent to participants asking for their experience. Despite the organization’s enormous size and scale, however, the reply rate to these e-mails is below the necessary threshold for providing systematically useful information. MoveOn has been limited in developing an algorithm because of where these assessments lie on the *continuum of data abundance*, and the low response rate that this entails. How might we expect the spread of the mobile web to affect political associations like MoveOn and DFA, then?

Consider the following: local members of a major internet-mediated political association hold a monthly (offline) meeting to discuss their latest activities in 2014. By this time, the mobile web has reached a high diffusion rate (at least through the range of represented economic classes represented by meeting participants), akin to the camera feature on mobile phones today. The organization has built a rather simple iPhone/Android application that it encourages members to use in association with the meeting. After they have signed up for the meeting online, the app connects to a GoogleMap, helping them find the meeting space. It also lets them review the list of fellow attendees, reinforcing organizational network ties. The meeting agenda is also available on the app. During the meeting, members are invited to give “kudos” and “troll ratings” to each other for positive and negative contributions to the group. “great idea” or “well-facilitated,” “obnoxious comment,” “too jargony” or “unfriendly to new members.” They are also invited to rate the various portions of the meeting from 1 to 5 stars. Due to

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heavy 1-star feedback in previous months, the tedious newsletter editor’s report has been dropped from the agenda and the meetings as a whole have become more participatory and engaging. Toward the end of the meeting, they break out into small groups and assign tasks for the coming month. The group has agreed to a public education campaign and petition drive, and members are identifying local farmer’s markets where they can set up a table and talk with community members. Rather than writing the tasks on scratch paper, which would then inevitably get misplaced, group leaders enter assignments directly into the “notepad” feature of the application. These assignments are stored in a central database and remain accessible to group members over the course of the month. Members can note when the tasks have been completed, remind each other of upcoming deadlines, and give each other support and thanks for completed tasks. Members who routinely overcommit at meetings are, once presented with that pattern, politely invited to be more realistic in their time commitments. Members who are particularly good “workhorses” are recognized and publicly thanked for their contributions.

These meeting activities, sans-application, are a composite of the PfC meetings I observed in 2007. The software code involved in writing the application is technically simple; much of it has already been written. Unlike DFA-Link, which offers DFA members few utilities related to their day-to-day participation, the application as described is designed to augment their existing activities, simplifying local coordination and communication efforts. The data provided by the application could then be captured by the national DFA organization to recognize, thank, and empower the local volunteers who are most respected and valued by their peers. The national organization could grant
such top “kudos”-receivers with quasi-superuser status, inviting them to national conferences or events where they are given heightened governance responsibilities and are publicly thanked for their important contributions. Meanwhile, “troll-ratings” could be aggregated into a “steer-clear” list for the organization as a whole. Those members who speak loudly and antagonize their peers could be barred from receiving updates or routed away from leading teams or hosting distributed events. The “shadow of the future” which large civic associations routinely lose when moving from local-scale volunteerism to national-scale volunteerism can be restored through a collection of simple, helpful applications that aggregate into a useful reputation algorithm.

Zack Exley, formerly of MoveOn and current President of the New Organizing Institute, has colorfully described traditional civic associations as being dominated by the “Tyranny of the Annoying:” “The Tyranny of the Annoying stems from the fact that, except in times of extreme crisis, it is just not worth it for mature, serious people to put up with all the indignities that go along with taking and maintaining leadership of any political entity. This principle guarantees that every Elks Club, Union Local, DAR Chapter, or Democratic town committee will tend toward being controlled by annoying people –they are the ones with egos desperate to be fed by winning petty little power plays and plenty of time on their hands.” (Exley 2007) The internet has enabled the non-annoying to participate in online communities-of-interest for several years now, with distributed reputation systems playing an essential role in distinguishing the valued participants with the respect of their peers from the loudest and most obnoxious. The introduction of location-aware data, the ubiquity of mobile telephony, and the resultant slide of proxy assessments along the continuum of data availability make distributed
reputation tracking a potential reality for offline associations, leading the “Tyranny of the Annoying” to be replaced by the “Wisdom of the Crowd.” As the dividing line between online and off blurs, the network effects found in “clickstream” activist hubs like MoveOn and Dailykos, and in mass collaborative ventures like Wikipedia, become increasingly available for offline collective action. The limitations faced by DFA are being eroded by this new form of web access.

A Note of Caution: Another Step Toward Panopticon?

The lowered transaction costs of the internet have always come with a dark side. From “digital divides” that exacerbate class-based and educational cleavages within society to newly-empowered terrorist and hate-group networks, from a world where privacy is increasingly sacrificed for expediency to shifting cultural practices that carry unintended consequences, we have plentiful reasons to avoid treating the mobile web as an unmitigated good. As this chapter represents one of the first political science treatments of the Mobile Web, I would be remiss if I did not explore four potential pitfalls.

First, we will have to see how the mobile web will affect the digital divide? Put another way, will access to “just the internet… on your phone” follow the trajectory of the Blackberry PDA or of the camera phone. Early in their diffusion rates, both of these represented a novel bundle of hardware features, only available to consumers of high-end mobile phones. Camera phones eventually attained near-market saturation, available on plenty of low-end, cheap models. Blackberries, meanwhile, have remained a high-end
commodity, reaching deep market penetration online among white-collar workers, but rare in other segments of society. Rheingold notes that the United States lagged behind Japan and Sweden in the first version of the mobile internet because of divergent policy stances that created a poor environment for broad diffusion. National governments would be well-advised to look at the policy lessons from the SMS-based mobile internet and actively support the diffusion of this technology. Mobile Web-based applications carry the implicit promise of augmenting our daily lives in a host of small-but-powerful ways. If they are only available to the wealthy, privileged few, they will come to represent a major source of class-based cleavage.

Second, we should remain aware that lowered online transaction costs make everything easier, including a host of socially negative activities. Mathew Honan made note of this in his recent *Wired* article, offering an anecdote of his noticing a woman taking photos with her iPhone in Golden Gate Park, then logging onto Flickr that night, identifying the photo, and searching through linked photos to correctly determine where she lived. The mobile web may prove a boon to civic associations, but it will likely also make predatory internet stalking far more efficient. Likewise, if the mobile web is a boon to knitting enthusiasts or service organizations, how do we prevent it from similarly augmenting the activities of hate groups? These negative byproducts of technological diffusion are unavoidable, but they can also be mitigated. Rather than waiting for the next incarnation of the “Myspace sexual predator” scandal, policymakers and web developers should consider tools that can make the worst applications of information abundance somewhat less threatening.

Third, and related, is the rapidly changing privacy environment. Fears from a
decade ago that web-based credit card transactions would lead to widespread identity
theft were overstated. But a seemingly lesser demon has proved far more pervasive. As
the “data streams” of the internet lead to a costless aggregation of online information, the
privacy environment changes in unexpected and unfortunate ways. Under previous
information regimes, there was an implicit assumption of privacy in most personal
communications, simply because it would be prohibitively costly to track and aggregate
such information. The expansion of online storage capacity and value derived from
“clickstream” data means that there is now a strong incentive for companies and
governments to mine previously-unwieldy amounts of information about our private
lives. Here geolocational data is a dangerous social ill because it dramatically reduces
internet anonymity. Both government policy choice and social education programs will
be required to help mitigate this issue, as many citizens are unlikely to grasp how
seemingly harmless Code can be aggregated into an essentially panoptic environment.

Fourth and finally, the mobile web is likely to continue to shift social practices
and norms. Rheingold detailed a few of these cultural shifts in his 2002 book, discussing
teenagers who constantly multitask and divide their attention between the person in front
of them and the person texting them. These social practices lie outside the scope of this
dissertation project, to be sure. Readers should nonetheless take note that this will be a
topic of substantial discussion in the near future. Though changing technology does not
necessitate any particular changing social practice, technological change does pave the
way to some sort of change or another.

**Conclusion**
Philly for Change stands as the proof-of-existence that the internet can under the right circumstances, be used to promote a resurgence of the location-based, federated political associations that declined at the onset of the direct mail era. Reminiscent of the Democratic Club movement described by James Q. Wilson, DFA and PfC demonstrate that internet-mediated organizations are not entirely limited to web-based activism. The first half of this chapter concerned itself with investigation and rich description of this organizational form. The second half focused on exploring the changing boundary conditions under which we should expect to see such organizations arise. PfC is not indicative of DFA affiliates across the country, and the unique circumstances of the organization’s founding are difficult to replicate. I thus introduced the concept of “proto-organizations” with the guiding example of The Drudge Report, and then turned attention to the Distributed Reputation Systems that are critical to all of the online communities-of-interest described in this dissertation. A closer look at the mechanics of reputation systems reveals that their reach is circumscribed to those areas where a sufficiently-large set of useful proxy assessments can be captured and converted through a purposively designed algorithm. This then points us to the current growth of the Mobile Web, which is expanding those boundaries and increasing the likelihood that location-based internet-mediated associations will rise to prominence in American politics.

The following chapter, like the second half of this one, concerns itself not only with what the internet has meant for political associations, but also what the internet is likely to mean for them in the foreseeable future. At this juncture, the dissertation has explored the altered landscape of internet-mediated collective action and discussed the three most prominent organizational forms that have risen out of the new information
regime’s lowered transaction costs, information abundance, and resultant changes to nonprofit membership and fundraising regimes. Community blogs operate as quasi-interest groups for the political “netroots,” MoveOn takes advantaged of the new communications platform to gather an immense, multi-issue member list and engage them around issues as they appear at the top of the media agenda, and Democracy for America leverages basic web-based tools to reduce the barriers to face-to-face group coordination. Notably absent from these cases is any vibrant activity from the political right. And as with the lack of strong DFA affiliates across the country, the dearth of conservative online infrastructure proves instructive in understanding the underlying forces influencing the development of internet-mediated communities-of-interest and the spread of innovations through politics more generally.
Chapter 7: Exploring the Dearth of Online Conservative Infrastructure

The dissertation up through this point has dealt almost entirely with leftwing internet-mediated organizations. Accountability Now, the Superdelegate Transparency Project, DailyKos, MoveOn, and Democracy for America are all cases worthy of attention, but they raise the natural objection that the project has ignored equivalent activity among conservative interests. This chapter directly confronts that objection. Simply put, the reason there are no detailed conservative case examples in this dissertation is that there are no similarly-sized conservative analogues to the organizations, networks, and campaigns listed above. This chapter details the progressive-conservative online infrastructure gap and explores three competing explanatory theses regarding the lack of conservative internet-mediated organizations. The central argument of the chapter is that the infrastructure gap is a real, measurable phenomenon, and not simply a byproduct of progressives happening to adopt new technologies and organizational forms a step ahead of their conservative counterparts. There have been several conservative attempts to organize groups like MoveOn, DailyKos, and ActBlue, and we can learn nearly as much from their failure as we can from the progressive groups’ success.

At this moment in time, it is impossible to definitively state which of the three competing explanations is most correct (each has at least a little impact). It is still early in the history of online political institutions. I will argue, however, that the first thesis, Ideological Determinism, has the least support if we consider the historical record, despite this explanation being the one most often proffered by academics and
practitioners alike. The second thesis, *Outparty Innovation Incentives*, is the one that I personally feel holds the most explanatory power, and I will discuss the mechanics of this argument in detail in the chapter. The third thesis, *Merry Pranksters and their Digitized Wooden Shoes*, is rooted in the five-stage institutional development process laid out in chapter 2, however, and I cannot rule out the possibility that the internet, unlike previous information regimes, provides unique challenges to nascent communities-of-interest attempting to develop in an area already identified as “valuable online real estate.” The goal of this chapter is to detail the existing state of the infrastructure gap and, drawing upon what we know thus far about the medium in general, discuss when and if we are likely to see the political right successfully form their own set of “power law hub” internet-mediated organizations.

More than any other element of the dissertation, at stake in this chapter is the partisan distribution of power in American politics. As I will detail, the uptake of new campaign technologies within the Democratic party coalition has been accomplished through the displacement of an old network of elites by a new generation of consultants, campaign operatives, and nonprofit professionals. If the Republican Party is to succeed in building the types of organizations we see among this new generation of progress advocacy groups, it will most likely undergo a similar changing-of-the-guard. And if the Republican party coalition proves incapable of “modernizing” in this fashion, then that will result in an increasing Democratic advantage in both electoral and legislative campaign efforts. The progressive “netroots” have demonstrated the capacity to fundraise $810,000 in two days for a virtually-unknown congressional candidate (Elwyn Tinklenberg, as seen chapter 4), and they have the capacity to organize 400,000 signature
petition drives and immense coordinated campaigns on a week’s notice (as seen chapter 3). If pressure campaigns and immediate fundraisers like these matter at all to decision-makers, then the increased agility, speed, and capacity for such tactics in the political left must either be counterbalanced by the political right or else yield added political dividends to the left in the coming years.

The chapter is divided into three primary sections. Section 1 details “all the dogs that aren’t barking,” by which I mean the various high-profile attempts by conservative interests to build internet-mediated organizations similar to the progressive organizations I have detailed. Time and again, conservatives have announced high-profile attempts to build their online infrastructure. This section will discuss these attempts, and what has become of each one. In so doing, I will empirically demonstrate my contention that there simply are no major conservative cases of success to be studied in a project of this type. Section 2 will then turn to the three competing explanatory theses, exploring each one in turn. The final section summarizes these findings and identifies important areas of future research that will likely help to define the causal mechanisms in greater detail and help to distinguish the degree to which each thesis depicts the world as it is.

“All the Dog’s That Didn’t Bark”

The gap in online infrastructure is a recent phenomenon, even judged at the pace of heightened technological development. We should recall that the John McCain presidential primary campaign of 2000 was the cutting edge of fundraising after raising $3 million in the ten days following the New Hampshire primary. (Klotz 2004, pg 77) “Web 1.0” clearly benefited Republicans, as sites like the Drudge Report and
FreeRepublic.com offered an outlet for Republican critiques of the liberal media. As recently as 2005, it appeared to many observers as though there was no strong partisan advantage on the web, at least in terms of its most obvious instantiation, the political blogosphere. Adamic and Glance’s 2005 paper, “The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 Election: Divided They Blog” used hyperlink maps to demonstrate that leftwing and rightwing blogs operated as largely independent neighborhoods and, noting that conservatives linked to one another with greater frequency, implied that the Right was, if anything, leading in this arena. (Adamic and Glance 2005) Robert Ackland conducted a follow-up study with the same dataset and found that conservative bloggers were indeed more “prominent” online. (Ackland 2005)

At that time, conservative law professor Glenn “Instapundit” Reynolds was the most popular political blogger, Matt Drudge’s Protoblog stood unrivaled in its effectiveness, and the multi-author conservative blog PowerLine had been named Time magazine’s “Blog of the Year.” (Grossman 2004) In the public eye, progressive bloggers had made headlines by taking down Trent Lott after his Strom Thurmond speech, but conservative bloggers had countered by taking down Dan Rather after debunking the “Rathergate” forged memo. The Howard Dean campaign had turned heads as an example of the internet’s potential impact, but the collapse of the campaign gave plenty of fuel to skeptics’ arguments, making it a mixed bag to say the least. MoveOn was impressive in size and scope, but their efforts at combating the war and the Bush agenda had produced much noise and little tangible results.

Something had changed by the 2006 election cycle, indicative of a striking gap in online infrastructure that either had just emerged or had finally attracted attention.
Victory certainly had something to do with it, as the “netroots” claimed a short-lived primary victory against Joe Lieberman and successfully shepherded Jon Tester and Jim Webb past Democratic Leadership Council-backed opponents in the Democratic primaries and onward to close general election victories that helped the Democratic party gain an unexpected majority in the Senate. DailyKos held their first annual convention that summer as well, and began regularly attracting the ire of conservative commentators such as Bill O’Reilly. As Markos Moulitsas parlayed the revenues from increasing site visits into upgrades to his software platform, the DailyKos community moved into the later stages of institutional development, where the network externalities of the surrounding community of volunteers reinforce the preferential attachment condition, leading to order-of-magnitude differences between participation levels on that site and competing elite-level blogs. By 2008, the “kossacks” have become a well-known vocal force within the political left, with traditional political elites and elected officials posting diaries to the site, former frontpage editors being hired to key positions within the Democratic Party, and seven presidential candidates attending YearlyKos 2007.

Where is the equivalent community hub blog in the conservative blogosphere? Since its founding in 2004, RedState.com has held the nominal title. RedState is a conservative community blog intentionally set up to enable the DailyKos-style diary structure. It has not, however, emerged as central hub for conservative bloggers. RedState receives roughly 50,000 visits per day – tenfold less than the most-trafficked conservative site, HotAir.com, and seventeenfold less than DailyKos. In terms of content production and hyperlink authority, the site likewise scores middling numbers when compared to other elite political blogs. RedState was the 9th most-trafficked conservative
blog in the initial Blogosphere Authority Index rankings (November 2007) and it fell to 19th place during the 2008 election season. The top two conservative blogs, HotAir.com and MichelleMalkin.com, are closed-authorship blogs that, although they allow comments from registered users, do not allow any new visitors to register. This short-circuiting of the first step in the potential quasi-interest groups’ “ladder of engagement” is something of a puzzle. Even more puzzling is the fact that online conservatives have continued to gravitate to these sites over more-open alternatives such as RedState.

One of my hypotheses in the 2009 “Stability and Change” MPSA paper was that conservative community blogs like RedState during the heightened traffic and engagement of the election season would gain standing in the rankings relative to the other types of elite blog. This hypothesis was directly repudiated by RedState’s decline, as well as the decline of LittleGreenFootballs and TownHall (See figure 4-4). The only conservative blog with community features that has risen through the rankings is the bridge blog Newsbusters, which as a the blogging feature of the conservative Media Research Center, holds as its central mission “exposing and combating liberal media bias.” As with the “RatherGate” scandal, then, conservative online successes appear limited to media criticism, as opposed to mobilization for or against other electoral or legislative efforts. While the progressive netroots has empowered a new set of insurgent leaders within the progressive coalition, the conservative blogosphere is ruled by longtime media critics (Hugh Hewitt, Brett Bozell) and existing contributors to Fox News (Michelle Malkin). For whatever reason, conservative attempts at developing community blogs simply have not attracted high levels of readership, hyperlinking, or participation.

73 See masthead, http://newsbusters.org
A Conservative MoveOn?

As with RedState’s limited success in offering a “conservative DailyKos,” there have been several right-wing attempts at launching a “MoveOn for Conservatives.” RightMarch was the first such attempt, founded in 2003. By that time, MoveOn was transitioning from the small niche of online petition-gatherers to the 3 million-strong internet behemoth synonymous with the vocal left. Heralded in mass media coverage and promoted by wealthy Republican backers, RightMarch promised to be, “the ‘Rapid Response Force’ against the ongoing liberal onslaught.” It never lived up to this billing, however, failing to do much of anything with the large e-mail list they claim to have developed. In an interview with *Mother Jones* magazine, Bill Greene of RightMarch defended their lack of tactical innovation, stating, “well I don’t think that our members are as interested in [podcasting and social networking] because they’ve got families and they’re working people and they don’t have time to meet at someone’s house and watch a webcast.” In terms of fundraising capacity – which as I argue in chapter 5, is one of the signature differences between MoveOn and the earlier generation of advocacy groups, -- RightMarch has been similarly underwhelming. According to data collected by the Center for Responsive Politics, RightMarch spent $60,750 in the 2004 election cycle, versus MoveOn’s $31.8 million. In 2006, RightMarch raised $102,699 while MoveOn

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74 [http://www.rightmarch.com/about.htm](http://www.rightmarch.com/about.htm) accesses online December 18, 2008.
75 In a 2005 interview with Politics Online internet radio ([www.politicsonline.com/content/main/interviews/2005/greene/greene.doc](http://www.politicsonline.com/content/main/interviews/2005/greene/greene.doc)), Bill Greene of RightMarch claimed an e-mail list of 2 million members, but was noticeably circumspect in doing so. The organization has been tight-lipped about its membership, tactics, and successes. Speaking editorially from my time in the non-profit world, this is often a sign that an organization has little to brag about.
77 Note that this MoveOn figure conflicts with MoveOn’s own reporting of over $90 million raised. The difference likely is because much of MoveOn’s fundraising was
brought in $28.1 million. They improved against their own standard in 2008, raising $646,089, but this hardly compares to the $38.4 million raised by MoveOn in the cycle (and at this point, MoveOn and some congressional candidates have demonstrated the ability to raise this much in a single day).  

A promising competitor to RighMarch, TheVanguard.org, was founded in March 2006 by a group of tech-savvy conservative leaders. With a strong base of sophisticated internet entrepreneurs who had previous started the popular online financial transaction site, paypal.com, TheVanguard seemed better positioned to keep pace with MoveOn’s breakneck pace of technological innovation. (Harkinson 2007) Despite heavy promotion from the outset and a collection of conservative activist heavyweights on their board and staff, though, the organization never fully coalesced. Today, two and a half years after launching (and two election cycles/multiple mass media stories later as well) the organization still declares on its website that it will be “launching soon.”

Freedom’s Watch, meanwhile, was launched by a collection of former Bush administration appointees and staffers with an initial wave of ads that countered MoveOn’s controversial “Betray-Us” newspaper ad in the summer of 2007. In a January 20, 2008 feature story about the group in the Washington Post, titled “A Conservative Answer to MoveOn,” Executive Director Joe Eule announced the group to be “a permanent political operation here in town. We’re not going to be Johnny One Note.” (Kane and Weisman 2008) Aided by a reported budget of $200 million, this group was

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heralded as, finally, a successful conservative response. That excitement lasted all of
three months, as a New York Times story in April, 2008 titled “Great Expectations for a
Conservative Group Seem All but Dashed” described the organization as, “plagued by
gridlock and infighting, leaving it struggling for direction” and coming up well short of
its supposedly gigantic budget figures. The organization was almost solely funded by
conservative casino mogul Sheldon Adelson – at the time the third-richest person in the
country. (Luo 2008) After Adelson’s company, Las Vegas Sands Corp, lost 95% of its
stock value in the fall 2008 market decline, he withdrew his funding and the group
announced that it would permanently shut its doors. (Ward 2008) As with community
blogs, conservatives have recognized the value of novel organizations like MoveOn, but
their attempts to build an equivalent force have sputtered and failed.

**Competing Fundraising Portals: A Conservative ActBlue?**

In the area of online fundraising, we see the same chasm develop with a few
interesting wrinkles. Though ActBlue.com has not been the subject of a stand-alone
chapter in this dissertation, it has appeared throughout as an essential piece of online
infrastructure that lets bloggers and other leftwing partisans “bundle” small-dollar
donations toward candidates and Political Action Committees they favor. This malleable
approach to fundraising has proven outstandingly effective, allowing Glenn Greenwald
and Jane Hamsher of FireDogLake to raise $349,842 in two weeks to fund an
Independent Expenditure Campaign around the FISA issue (chapter 1) and giving the
DailyKos community the tools to out-fundraise the Democratic Congressional Campaign
Committee in 5 of the 7 2006 congressional races where donations overlapped (chapter
4). ActBlue is particularly vital to the non-hub sites in the online left. While MoveOn
can afford to develop their own fundraising software platform, or to contract out to a vendor that can give tailored services, the same is unlikely to be true for OpenLeft, and the ability for bloggers and online activists to raise money for short-term coalition efforts is premised on the availability of ActBlue to provide a trustworthy fundraising platform. Since ActBlue lets users set their own endorsement list and easily interfaces with a blog’s infrastructure (including an embedded fundraising thermometer that lets visitors see how close the site is coming to its goal), it proves invaluable in lowering the infrastructure costs of smaller web-based activist groups.

The same cannot be said for ActBlue’s rightwing equivalents. Launched in 2006, the “RightRoots” fundraising site was meant to be a Republican counter to ActBlue, but, crucially, it set out its own list of endorsees, developed by a small circle of prominent conservative bloggers and insiders, and chose not to give users the ability to develop their own lists. Micah Sifry of Personal Democracy Forum pointed out that this lack of malleable functionality meant, “It’s probably fairer to see RightRoots as a mirror of the ‘Netroots’ fundraising pages on ActBlue, which focus attention on a handful of netroots-endorsed’ candidates that have been hand-picked by a few key bloggers.” (Sifry 2006) Indeed, if compared to that single ActBlue fundraising page, RightRoots performed acceptably, raising 1/5th the amount raised through joint DailyKos/MyDD/Swing State Project fundraising page.

RightRoots essentially fell into disuse in the 2008 election cycle, replaced by Slatecard.com, which suffered from the similar top-down management challenges. SlateCard raised “nearly $650,000 for Republican candidates and committees” in the 2008 election cycle,79 setting the combined fundraising totals of the two Republican

answers to ActBlue at around $1 million in two cycles. ActBlue, meanwhile, has raised over $85 million since 2004, nearly half of it in the 2008 election cycle. For some reason, despite seeing the obvious value of this type of site, Republican strategists have proven unable or unwilling to invest in the set-your-own-endorsement-list system that has made ActBlue so value to online progressives and political candidates. This particularly perplexing given that (a) the software code involved is not terribly complicated and (b) the progressive advantage in this arena is so easily quantified in terms of dollars-raised.

There is one interesting exception to this story of conservative online fundraising failure, however: the Ron Paul “revolution” primary campaign. The “Paulites” are best-known for their single-day “moneybomb” on November 5th, 2007, which raised somewhere between $3.75 and $5 million. They also used meetup-style tools to promote local actions throughout the country. Though Paul never experienced Howard Dean’s meteoric rise and fall, his devoted base of supporters remains active, having set up an organization, Campaign for Liberty (www.campaignforliberty.com) that seeks to fill the same niche as Howard Dean’s campaign offspring, Democracy for America (DFA). It is far too early to evaluate success or failure of Campaign for Liberty – as we saw with DFA in chapter 6, setting up a website to facilitate local activity is a lot easier than developing the critical mass that leads to sustained group activity. Nonetheless, as with the moneybomb itself, it is remarkable that the segment of the Conservative party coalition that appears to have most successful emulated the development of netroots online infrastructure has been the upstart Paulites. Positively ridiculed by the elite conservative blogosphere, banished from comment threads wherever they popped up during the 2008 primary season, Ron Paul supporters have functioned as an outparty of
sorts within the conservative coalition. And while the network of elite conservative consultants, party operatives, and politicians has consistently tried and failed to build web-based participatory communities, the one limited success has come from the vocal minority. I personally am skeptical as to whether there were enough Ron Paul supporters to provide a critical mass for sustained local action – the Dean campaign was much larger, and only left a lasting imprint in a select few cities – but this regardless provides a fascinating counterexample to be considered further.

**Misdiagnosing the Problem – Conservapedia and QubeTV**

Media critique would appear to be the one area where online conservatives seem to prove highly engaged and participatory. The “Rathergate” scandal remains the often-cited example of conservative blogosphere efficacy (Davis 2009, Perlmutter 2008), while Newsbusters is the one political community blog to rise in the BAI rankings in 2008. One possible difficulty for online conservatives appears to be that, building on this strength, they have frequently attempted to “slay the wrong dragons” in developing online communities-of-interest. Conservapedia.com, for instance, offers a conservative alternative to Wikipedia’s “Neutral Point of View” standard, which conservative activists view as nonetheless displaying a liberal bias. QubeTV.tv, meanwhile, is set up as a conservative alternative to YouTube. Neither of these sites attract substantial traffic – not surprising because both Wikipedia and YouTube benefit from such overwhelming network externalities that they have effectively solved the online mass coordination problem for their related purposes. Why would an online conservative post content to QubeTV rather than YouTube, knowing that the overwhelming number of online video
viewers – both conservative, liberal, and politically-apathetic – are visiting YouTube to view video content? Why, given the lack of restrictions on ideologically-related content-posting to YouTube and Wikipedia, would users en masse choose to switch to a site with smaller traffic and fewer network externalities?

Therein lies the puzzle as it now stands. The novel organization forms discussed throughout this dissertation project are concentrated in the American Left. Progressives have not only been innovative early adopters of web-based tools, but indeed have opened up wide and sustained gaps between their new generation of organizations and their conservative rivals. Republicans, meanwhile, have recognized the gap and have attempted to launch parallel infrastructure, only to see these attempts continually fizzle. Why is this the case? Is it a matter of ideology, an incentive for out-party innovation embedded in the structure of political competition, or some detail of the institutional development process that, particular to this medium, makes community formation more difficult once an organized opposition has reason to disrupt the early development stages?

**Thesis 1: Ideological Determinism. “Community Organizer.. Haha, what?”**

During his keynote speech at the 2008 Republican National Convention, Rudy Giuliani targeted Barack Obama’s community organizing background to get a quick laugh. “He was a ‘community organizer’ [pauses] haha, what? He worked as a community organizer… Okay, maybe this is the first problem on the resume.”

Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin likewise poked fun at this resume point, stating that

80 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HahW5Qd_-7o
her experience as a small town mayor was “sort of like a community organizer, except with actual responsibilities.” (Curry 2008) These comments earned a hearty laugh from their audiences, while offering grist for the Obama campaign’s mill. Campaign manager David Plouffe responded with a message to the Obama for America email list, “Let’s clarify something for them right now. Community organizing is how ordinary people respond to out-of-touch politicians and their failed policies.” Likewise, the progressive netroots on sites like DailyKos took deep offense to this comment, offering various resolutions to work even harder on the campaign to demonstrate just what community organizing can accomplish.

There is something to the juxtaposition of Giuliani and Palin’s mockery with the Obama campaign’s large-scale campaign mobilization (arguably the largest electoral mobilization in American history). The Obama campaign had turned to Professor Marshall Ganz, a former protégé of Cesar Chavez, early in the primaries and invited him to design their field organizer training program. (Martelle 2008) In a similar vein, Markos Moulitsas devotes much of the first chapter of his 2008 book, Taking on the System, to a discussion of community organizing legend Saul Alinsky and the implications of his classic text, Rules for Radicals, to the netroots blogosphere today. The initial thesis offered by many scholars and practitioners when discussing the online infrastructure gap, simply stated, is that progressives have flourished in the new medium because they are ideologically better-suited for it. Community organizing is a craft and, as Jimmy Wales suggested regarding Wikipedia, much of the challenge in developing online communities-of-interest and large-scale internet-mediated organizations is not technical in nature, but rests rather in “discover[ing] the basic idea of how to organize a
I label this first thesis Ideological Determinism. The core of the thesis is that the political left has naturally outpaced the political right online because of the populist, community orientation embedded in leftwing ideology. If the internet makes it easier for nascent interests to surpass the “Coasian floor” and organize, and if the representation of those interests primarily occurs on one side of the ideological spectrum, then the internet should be a boon to the left while relatively hampering the right. If one side treats community organizing as a craft to be mastered, and the other treats it as an object of ridicule, then that implies a simple explanation for why the one side proves so much better at organizing communities online. The skill is nurtured by the left and derided by the right, or so this thesis would put it.

There is a conservative version of this thesis as well as a progressive one. The progressive explanation is that conservatives are ideologically too “top-down” to take full advantage of the new communications environment. Thus they refuse to offer the malleable functionality of an ActBlue or the agenda-setting responsiveness of a MoveOn because they believe, fundamentally, in hierarchical decision-making. As MoveOn Executive Director Eli Pariser put it when interviewed about his upstart conservative competitors, “The Vanguard folks are spending a lot of time thinking about what they want, and then figuring out how to spin it to their members.” (Harkinson, pg 35) One of MoveOn’s key innovations, by contrast, has been their exacting message-testing practices, which help them identify the issues and tactics which are most attuned to the preferences of their membership. One MoveOn staffer noted to me that the chief mistake made by scholars and journalists when studying the organization is in suggesting that
MoveOn adopts radical tactics in order to gain an audience: “radical tactics don’t go viral. If you want to build a large audience and have an impact, you need to listen to your membership.”

There is a strong populism here, a notion that the lowering of online transaction costs can free the pent-up energies of the (progressive) masses and give them a larger and more powerful voice in the political system. Not surprisingly, this is particularly appealing to social movement activists who have long contended that theirs is a battle of “the people versus the powerful.”

The conservative version of the thesis likewise starts from an assumption that they themselves are part of a “silent majority.” But conservatives tend to believe that the internet favors the lifestyle preferences of the “professional activist” left. Bill Greene, founder of RightMarch, suggests that “most of [his organization’s members] are just hardworking everyday patriotic Americans that have families and kids and dogs and cats and jobs.” [Harkinson, pps 34-35] Likewise, grassroots conservatism has long been based in offline institutions such as churches, suggesting that conservatives do not turn online to form communities, because they are already members of real-world communities. If “everyday patriotic Americans” are too busy for blogging or MoveOn-style houseparties, then we should see the “activist class” among the political left develop more vibrant online community infrastructure, because they are the ones who primarily have the time for such activities.

The difficulties I see with the Ideological Determinism thesis are threefold. Firstly, it does not provide a robust explanation for previous eras of grassroots conservatism in American history. Both the Goldwater-era conservatives in the 1960s and 1970s and Ralph Reed’s Christian Coalition in the 1990s engaged in substantial

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81 Interview notes. December 13, 2008.
grassroots community organizing. Were these conservatives less “hardworking?” Did they have fewer “kids and dogs and cats and jobs?” Community organizing is not an activity solely appreciated by the left, even if this was a talking point in the last election. Likewise, MoveOn’s substantial membership message-testing framework has much in common with the types of focus group activities that business managers are well familiar with. MoveOn and other internet-mediated groups call for membership input and voting on those issues which the staff feels are appropriate – hardly consensus-based decision making. Blogger and political consultant Jon Henke of TheNextRight.com offers a counterargument: “While the Right has been in power, defending the status quo, the Left has been storming the castle. Storming the castle is much more fun.” (Henke 2008)

This points to the second concern: if the internet is naturally attuned to the political left, then we should see a leftwing online advantage in other countries. Anecdotal data from the United Kingdom suggests that British online conservatives, who have had the “castle-storming” task of criticizing the liberal majority party, have developed an online advantage. One could of course argue that British conservatism and American conservatism are distinct entities, but such an argument casts a pale on the ideologically deterministic thesis even further. The Democratic and Republican coalitions have changed over time, and in so changing they have emphasized various ideological arguments to a greater or lesser degree. If this particular brand of American conservatism is a poor fit for the online information regime, wouldn’t that presage an ideological shift in the conservative coalition itself? If there are various brands of conservatism, then the internet is not a particularly “progressive” medium, it is just a medium poorly-suited to the Republican party elite circa 2004-2009.
The third (and deepest) concern with the thesis is its teleological nature. “Progressives dominate online, therefore the internet is a progressive medium.” Such an argument also maintains that talk radio is an inherently conservative medium, because conservatives dominate those airwaves. The latest data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project finds only marginal partisan differences in internet usage, with 55% of Republicans, 61% of Democrats, and 48% of Independents turning to the internet for political news, and 49% of Republicans, 50% of Democrats, and 48% of Independents using the internet, email, or text to “learn about the campaign and engage in the political process.” (Smith and Rainie 2008, pg 20) Given that Republicans and Democrats are similarly logging onto the web, it is unclear why the political left gravitates towards one type of site while the political right gravitates towards another. Ideological influence is hard to disprove, but for this same reason it proves to be almost “too easy” of an explanation. While I grant that ideology likely has some impact on the development of online infrastructure today, the evidence from history and from cross-national comparison cautions against placing too much causal impact on this explanation.


These very critiques of the Ideological Determinism thesis point to an alternative argument. History and cross-national comparison both suggest a set of structural mechanisms guiding the partisan uptake of campaign and technological innovations. At the organizational, candidate, and party network levels, there are several incentives that lead us to expect the party out-of-power to more aggressively adopt novel
communications platforms and campaign tactics. For new organizations, as Henke pointed out, “Storming the castle is a lot more fun.” It also proves to be the case that organizing as the opposition to government policymakers is a more successful business model. For candidates, innovative campaign strategies offer an opportunity to “change the rules of the game,” a strategy which is more appealing to those darkhorse candidates who are expected to have only an outside chance under the existing “rules.” Within party networks, new campaign technologies are introduced by a new set of elite actors displacing the previous set of established actors, and that displacement is more likely to happen when a party has been losing elections and is searching for new ideas and new leadership. These three perspectives combine to form the Outparty Innovation Incentives Thesis, or the “opportunity structure” thesis. It bears noting that this thesis mutes not only the role of ideology, but also the particularities of the medium itself. Rather, this thesis is concerned with political innovations in general, with the new generation of internet-mediated organizations and online campaign tools being the latest example of the recurring pattern.

Outparty Innovation Incentives in the Interest Group Community

Henke’s colorful suggestion about “storming the castle” finds additional support from the history of interest group mobilization. Recall, for instance, that MoveOn only developed a substantial membership base and reputation as the central outlet for the anti-war movement. For several years, the organization was able to unite its membership under the banner of opposing the Bush Administration’s latest initiative, a strategy which
has proven a critical element of their fundraising model (see chapter 5). MoveOn’s staff has demonstrated a clear awareness that the transition from mobilization-in-opposition to promotion of a positive issue agenda requires a shift in resources and strategies, leading to their investment in a 50% staff increase to bulk up support for the MoveOn Council system. Likewise, the Sierra Club’s membership rolls more than doubled after Ronald Reagan assumed the Presidency, as the organization was able to cast Secretary of the Interior James Watt as an identifiable villain attacking status quo environmental protections. Bill Clinton’s election led to a membership decrease among various leftwing interest groups, a decrease that was mitigated when Newt Gingrich was elected Speaker of the House behind the Contract with America. In this light, it bears noting that the previous periods of heavy grassroots conservatism, as seen with the Goldwater era and the Christian Coalition, both occurred when the Democratic Party held power in government.

It is arguably the case, then, that the flow of resources (both money and potential volunteers) to the interest group population fluctuates based on the party in power, increasing during periods when political associations can serve as an outlet for political discontent. If so, then if equally-skilled political entrepreneurs on both sides of the ideological spectrum were seeking to launch novel political associations at a given moment in time, we should expect the side that is out-of-power to have greater success. It then follows that we ought to see increases in conservative interest group activism, including the birth of new, internet-mediated conservative organizations, now that the Obama administration has been elected and is attempting to enact its policy agenda.

Early indicators provide at least modest support for this assertion. The

82 Personal correspondence, December 13, 2008.
conservative group AmericanSolutions.com was launched in August 2008 to promote the “Drill Here, Drill Now, Pay Less,” oil and gas proposal spearheaded by Newt Gingrich. Seizing the opportunity presented by skyrocketing gasoline prices and casting the Democratic Congress as the villain responsible, the site garnered substantial media exposure and built a substantial email-based member list. Likewise, the April 15th “Tax Day Tea Party” protests included hundreds of thousands of conservative participants in simultaneous protests around the country, all organized through a centralized website and promoted through the political blogosphere and conservative media outlets. Though it is too early to tell whether either of these venues will emerge as a long-term hub for conservative political organizing, it does seem apparent that the Democratic administration has led to a more motivated conservative activist base. It may prove to be the case that, for a nationwide political community-of-interest to move above the “interest horizon” necessary to surpass the first critical mass point, where a hub space is offering heavy enough network externalities to attract a growing and sustained audience, the community needs to have a high-profile, powerful opponent to organize against.

**Outparty Innovation Incentives at the Candidate Level**

Writing 35 years ago, David Mayhew offered the following observation in *Congress: The Electoral Connection*: “…for members in great electoral danger it may on balance be wise to resort to ostentatious innovation.” (Mayhew 1974, pg 49) For individual electoral candidates, there exists a set of official rules and informal norms regarding the campaign process. The rules (campaign law) are well-established and only change through legislative or judicial decision-making. The norms, however, are a set of
shared understandings among political consultants, party elites, large donors, interest
group leaders, and journalists. The value of yard signs and robocalls, for instance, has
only recently begun to be measured through the Green and Gerber field experiments
(Green and Gerber 2004). Yard signs are used almost universally in campaigns,
however, because of the shared understanding among the various elites listed above that
successful campaigns are supposed to have them. Mayhew’s point, simply enough, is
that at the candidate level, those individuals perceived as longshot or “darkhorse”
candidates have an incentive in adopting novel strategies that fall outside the existing
norms. If the widely-shared expectation is that you are going to lose, try to alter the rules
of the game. And since formal campaign law rules are not alterable, that leaves
technological and strategic innovations as the best opportunity.

We find particularly good evidence for this instinct in Presidential campaigns. It
bears noting that, in the 2000 primaries, the McCain campaign was viewed as the
trailblazer in online fundraising. Given the candidate’s 2008 admission that he himself
used neither e-mail nor the internet, we can safely assume that this was not because of a
personal predisposition in favor of new campaign technologies. (Harnden 2008) Rather,
George W. Bush was the established frontrunner, and the McCain campaign embraced
new technologies, “ostentatious innovations,” in an effort to change the campaign
dynamics. Likewise, the Howard Den campaign’s meteoric rise occurred entirely before
a single caucus vote had been cast in Iowa. Dean chose a strident tone (“I’m here to
represent the Democratic Wing of the Democratic Party”) and a novel communications
platform that let his supporters self-organize through Meetup.com. These Meetups and
the online fundraising they supported, more than his anti-war stance, were what attracted
such heavy media attention. Without the technological innovations, there would have been little to separate Dean from perennial fringe primary candidates like Dennis Kucinich. And whereas McCain’s and Dean’s technological innovations failed to secure them the nomination, Obama’s primary victory was largely based on his overwhelming support in Caucus states where his internet-mediated field program overwhelmed Hillary Clinton’s and took her campaign staff completely by surprise.

Note that in each of these cases, we are discussing a “darkhorse” candidate in a highly-contested, high-profile Presidential race. A case could be made that the Lamont and Webb Senate primary campaigns, with their heavy inclusion and outreach to the “netroots” blogosphere is a similar example of such innovation. I would posit that substantial campaign innovations, if we understand them to be alterations to the presiding “norms” among the network of actors who are heavily invested in campaigns, will primarily be found in races that are (1) highly-contested and (2) competing for high enough office to attract substantial campaign funding, staffing, volunteers, and media interest. The longshot candidate for State Senate and the challenger to a Congressperson with 80% approval ratings may have the same interest in “ostentatious innovation” as the darkhorse Presidential candidate, but campaign innovations only change the presiding rules of the political system when they are (a) widely-noticed and (b) credited as “successful.” Such notice and success can only occur when the stakes are high enough to attract media attention and substantial financing, and when the contest is close enough to affect shared expectations. Put another way, if a new communications strategy allows a challenger to win 30% of the vote on election day rather than 15%, journalists and campaign elites will still categorize the campaign as a “blowout loss.”
Darkhorse candidates, particularly in presidential primaries, can be found simultaneously in both parties; the Democratic Party enjoyed a Senate majority heading into the 2008 election, but Al Franken (D-MN) and Kay Hagan (D-NC) were nonetheless challengers in their individual races. But if we aggregate across the subset of races that are both high-profile and closely-contested, the outparty is likely to have substantially more challengers, providing an increased number of widely-noticed races where a strategic or technological innovation is likely to be attempted and, if successful, become widely adopted into the party network’s normative understandings of what should be included in an “effective campaign.”

One corollary of this thesis, then, is that scholars interested in the internet’s impact on political campaigning should not be treating all campaigns as equal. There has been a trend in the literature toward quantitative research that counts the total number of candidate websites that include specific communications technologies – YouTube or FaceBook or Blogs (Gulati and Williams 2007, Williams and Gulati 2008, Williams and Gulati 2009, Kerbel and Bloom 2006, Klotz 2009). This technocentric research agenda fails to distinguish between the types of campaigns that we should expect to feature innovations and the types we should expect to stand-pat.

Regarding Old Dogs and New Tricks: Outparty Innovation Incentives at the Party Network Level

Innovation incentives at the candidate level only trickle up to the outparty as a whole if they affect the intra-party distribution of power. It is at this level that, I would argue, the outparty innovation incentives are most empirically demonstrable. As
discussed in chapter 4, power within party networks can be understood as a zero-sum game of sorts. The rise of netroots power has come at the expense of the Democratic Leadership Council. This distinction is even clearer among campaign consultants, where it can be assigned dollar amounts. Dulio (2004) notes that campaign consultants tend to specialize in particular campaign tools, with certain consultants focusing on direct mail and others focusing on robocalls, for instance. Given that individual campaign budgets are finite, dollars awarded to a new media consultant come at the expense of dollars awarded to an old media consultant. Consider what this means for the partisan adoption of new campaign strategies and technologies at the party network level: if new technologies and strategies tend to emerge with a new set of consultants, *displacing* an older set of established consultants (if, within consulting, only rarely do we observe the “old dogs” mastering the “new tricks”), and the party that has sustained a string of recent election losses is more likely to replace the old campaign teams with the new, then a strong explanatory mechanism exists for why we should expect the outparty to lead the way, across time, in new embracing new political uses of technology.

As evidence, consider Amy Sullivan’s widely-read call-to-arms following the 2004 election, evocatively titled “Fire the Consultants!” Sullivan’s essay raised the central question, “Why do Democrats promote campaign advisors who lose races?” She went on to provide an expose of sorts into the elite network of Democratic campaign consultants and strategists: “Every sports fan knows that if a team boasts a losing record several seasons in a row, the coach has to be replaced with someone who can win. Yet when it comes to political consultants, Democrats seem incapable of taking this basic managerial step.” (Sullivan, 2005) Echoing Sullivan’s words, the netroots organized a
nationwide campaign to name Howard Dean as the new chair of the Democratic National Committee, an effort premised on Dean’s controversial “50 State Strategy” which massively reallocated resources through the state party affiliate system. (Kamarck 2006)

Two years later, one of the largest campaign consulting firms behind the wave of Democratic Congressional victories was Blue State Digital, founded by several alumni of the Dean campaign. One of the founders, Joe Rospars, went on to serve as New Media Director for the Obama campaign. Though a large-scale network analysis of consulting contracts in the Democratic and Republican party systems is beyond the scope of this dissertation project, the anecdotal evidence is overwhelming. The Democratic Party network advances in campaign technology have been almost entirely driven by Blue State Digital and a handful of other consulting firms founded by alumni of the Dean campaign. These contracts have flowed to a new generation of leftwing party operatives at the expense of a previous generation.

The contrast with the Republican Party network is stark. It is not the case that no Republicans “get it” with regards to new media technologies and campaign techniques. Patrick Ruffini, Michael Turk, Jon Henke and others are Republican strategists held in high regard within the technology consulting community, and often called upon by the media as authoritative sources on the subject. Ruffini is the former head of the Republican National Committee’s Internet Department, Turk was the RNC’s e-campaign director until 2005, and Henke was hired by George Allen in the Virginia 2006 Senate race to coordinate counterstrategy against the netroots Jim Webb supporters. The key difference between these individuals and their Democratic counterparts is their “soft power” within the party network, and the amount of consulting contracts they receive.

\[83\] I intend to pursue such an analysis as a follow-up research effort.
Simply put, the “Internet people” within elite Democratic circles are now considered key players, while in Republican circles they are still relegated to the periphery. Republican technology consultant David All remarked in a 2007 interview that “The RNC has never called me. They don’t call any of the tech and politics crowd. They’re just going it alone, which is fine if you want to be a failure. We’ve never needed the internet before…” (Shulman 2007, pg 34)

A few days after losing the 2008 Presidential election, a group of longtime Republican elites – including Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council – gathered at the home of conservative scion Brent Bozell, President of the Media Research Center. (Vargas 2008) Ruffini, Turk, Henke, and All were not invited. Writing about the meeting on TheNextRight.com (a community blog which, despite mentions in the mainstream media and the elite blogosphere, fails to appear in the BAI top 25), Ruffini suggested, “Whatever happened at the country estate will be irrelevant to the future of the movement. I’ll bet not a single person under 40 was even at the table… The future will be shaped digitally … on blogs like this one, RedState, Save the GOP, American Scene, and the dozens I have a feeling will be created in the wake of Tuesday’s wake-up call.” (Ruffini 2008) Ruffini and company instead launched a website, RebuildTheParty.com, that featured an online petition urging the candidates for RNC chair to embrace and fund online infrastructure.

Henke has similarly noted that one major difference between the progressive and conservative netroots today is that many progressive bloggers hold the position full-time, as opposed to top conservative bloggers who are also political consultants, media figures, or lawyers.

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84 Interview notes, Jon Henke. April 21, 2009.
Whether these specific efforts prove successful or not, the parallels to the netroots activity in 2004 are illustrative. Along with the advantages that accrue to interest groups when mobilizing opposition, and the stochastic increase in opportunities for innovative campaign strategies among high-profile “darkhorse” campaigns, the longer a party coalition endures electoral defeat, the greater the calls for “firing the coaches.”

Innovative campaign strategies and campaign technologies are introduced by a new set of elite actors within the party network. The success of those actors comes at the expense of existing partisan elites, and thus it is heavily influenced by how well-entrenched those elites happen to be at a given moment in time. Given enough electoral losses, Democratic party elites called for “firing the consultants.” That was driven not by ideology nor by the particularities of online communication platforms, but rather by the shifting opportunity structure provided to new entrants to an elite system that is winning versus one that is losing.

The Outparty Innovation Incentives thesis does a good job of explaining many of the historical drivers behind the progressive-conservative online infrastructure gap. It also helps to explain why British conservatives, as the outparty, hold an apparent advantage in the UK blogosphere. That said, the internet has often been described as the largest advance in communications technology since the invention of the printing press. This dissertation has been devoted to exploring how the lowered transaction costs and information abundance of the World Wide Web lead to novel solutions to the collective action problem and entirely new structures for interest group mobilization. It is thus worthwhile considering a third thesis, focusing specifically on the novel affordances of this particular suite of communications technologies. It may be the case that, while
outparty innovation explains why the left had the early advantage online, particularities of the institutional development process discussed in chapter 2 prevent the right from successfully building parallel infrastructure.

**Thesis 3: Those Wacky Saboteurs**

In chapter 2’s discussion of the institutional development stages of online hub sites, there is an implicit assumption that the space does not become “valuable online real estate” until a substantial community has already developed. This assumption makes sense for Wikipedia, FaceBook, and DailyKos, all of which match the five-stage development pattern. MoveOn and Democracy for America likewise had developed massive lists and a committed volunteer base before they attracted much national attention. But as Republican political entrepreneurs attempt to built parallel organizations, they do so under a spotlight of sorts. The very fact that we are asking questions about the Republican equivalent to DailyKos, ActBlue, and MoveOn means that attempts to build such communities face a different set of challenges. And in the lowered transaction cost terrain of the internet, this can create a special type of problem for nascent communities that face challenges and attacks before the necessary community-of-interest has formed to protect it. Consider what would have happened to Wikipedia if it had been overrun by malicious spammers in 2002. Wouldn’t it have fallen to the same fate as the *LA Times*’s “Wikitorials?” If Shirky and Wales are correct that such commons-based peer production is as much about the community as it is about the technology, then we must ask whether these communities can form when there are motivated opponents intent at a very early stage upon disrupting them.
This is the central element of thesis three, *Merry Pranksters and their Digitized Wooden Shoes*.\textsuperscript{85} To be clear, it is not the contention of this thesis that progressives are breaking any laws or nefariously attempting to undermine conservative political associations. Rather, the lowered transaction costs of the web allow large, partisan communities-of-interest to disrupt the activities of opposing communities-of-interest with tremendous ease. There is some evidence that progressive bloggers, particularly those who populate the humor-oriented blogs Wonkette.com and SadlyNo.com, find pleasure in acting as “merry pranksters,” harassing online conservatives. Conservatives display similar preferences, but are at a tremendous size disadvantage. The contention of this thesis is that, in the presence of mature communities-of-interest from the opposite end of the political spectrum, developers of conservative online infrastructure adopt policy choices that leave their sites less vulnerable to attack, but also less capable of promoting community participation. This presents a community-formation puzzle in the current technological environment that had not been present in any previous information regime, and thus raises the question of whether conservatives will in fact be able to develop parallel online infrastructure. I offer three such examples below.

**Wonkette Helps to “Rebuild the Party”**

As previously mentioned, in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 election, a group of “ideologically diverse young Republicans” launched a website urging the RNC chairman candidates to support a 10-point action plan to strengthen and modernize the Republican Party. (Ambinder 2008) Along with an e-petition, “action network,” and a blog, the website also featured a platform for user-generated content:

\textsuperscript{85} The first “saboteurs” were Dutch peasants who would break machines by throwing their wooden shoes, or “sabots” into the machinery. Thus “digitized wooden shoes” is a term meant to evoke the earliest, less-deadly meaning of the word.
ideas.rebuildtheparty.com. This is exactly the type of community engagement that progressives often criticize online conservatives for ignoring. Like DFA-Link’s “endorsement” tool or MoveOn’s “Bush in 60 seconds” contest, it invites users to register with the site, then submit their own ideas for rebuilding the party, cast votes in favor of one another’s ideas, and comment on each idea individually.

When the liberal comedy blog Wonkette.com got wind of the effort, their active community saw an opportunity for some light entertainment. Within hours, the most popular suggestions on the site included “Hire more ninjas” and several references to crass inside-Wonkette jokes. Their top suggestion received 4,344 votes and 1,608 comments before being closed down by the site administrators.86 So many of the suggestions came from left-wing pranksters that genuine suggestions disappeared from the list. And though the site administrators eventually added a distributed moderation tool that made such antics easier to identify and remove, the community-building opportunity was essentially destroyed by the comedy blog community’s actions. The Wonkette community themselves referred to the action as “juvenile harassment” and “puerile antics.”87 In discussing the action on their site, one regular poster wrote, “Look, in the end who cares? We pulled a stupid, very fun prank… Wonkette is for the cynics who’d like a better world, but know how the game is rigged.”88

Wonkette is a politically-oriented community-of-interest, albeit one that primarily exists to make fun of politicians. Interestingly, Wonkette is not considered part of the elite liberal blogging community in the BAI methodology because the other elite blogs in

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86 http://ideas.rebuildtheparty.com/pages/general/suggestions/68216?page=31
87 see http://wonkette.com/tag/rebuild-the-party
the cluster do not link to it in their blogrolls. Wonkette is more of a gossip blog than a forum for political discussion and mobilization. It creates a substantial problem for conservative internet-mediated organizations attempting to adopt the community-engaging tactics of a DFA or a MoveOn. MoveOn and DFA are able to treat all email recipients as members, and hold open voting processes, because of their existing size advantage. Online conservatives could attempt to rig such votes – indeed, the internet term for coordinated online poll attacks of this type is “Freeping,” because the action was pioneered by the conservative forum FreeRepublic.com – but such attacks would have little effect. There are over 4.5 million MoveOn email recipients. There is no such hub for conservatives to coordinate an online voting attack (sarcastic or otherwise). And while the “serious” political hubs such as MoveOn and DFA do not engage in such juvenile antics, the threat from hubs like Wonkette nonetheless prevents conservative sites from adopting the same tools that make the progressive internet-mediated organizations successful.

The “SadlyNauts” and Closed Registration on Conservative Blogs

SadlyNo.com is among the top 25 blogs in the progressive community, routinely receiving about 100 comments per post and attracting roughly 10,000 pageviews/day. The site self-describes as a “liberal progressive humor site” and describes its niche as follows:

“The site’s main running joke is in finding embarrassing slips or untrue statements by conservatives and linking to a refutation, saying, “Sadly, No!” Other running gags include posting pictures of conservative columnists on Internet dating sites, battling with a “singing troll” who sends homemade songs deriding the site’s contributors and commenters, and doing line-by-line putdowns of columns by Christian evangelists and other right-wingers. Sadly, No! also occasionally
publishes phony columns at right-wing sites, and engages in other pranks.”

When SadlyNo links to a conservative blogger, that individual’s blog incurs a spike in traffic and a flood of argumentative replies in the comments section of their highlighted post. The “SadlyNaughts” engage with conservatives as a band of merry pranksters, attempting to egg their ideological opponents on into fits of rage. This is the very essence of throwing “digitized wooden shoes,” with the dramatic reduction in online transaction costs allowing a few hundred progressives to have fun at the expense of nascent conservative bloggers. Again, this activity of “internet trolling” is hardly limited to the left end of the ideological spectrum. But the size advantage enjoyed by progressive communities-of-interest means that the 20th largest progressive political blog can easily derail the comment threads of nearly any conservative counterpart. In point of fact, the May, 2009 Blogosphere Authority Index records only three conservative blogs with heavier comment traffic than SadlyNo.

In a March 30th, 2009 article for the Washington Times, conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart complained about these tactics. He claims that “Hugh Hewitt’s popular site shut off its comments section because of the success of these obnoxious invaders… Other right-leaning sites such as Instapundit and National Review Online refuse to allow comments, knowing better than to flirt with the online activist left.” (Breitbart 2009)

Recall in chapter 4 that I noted with puzzlement that the top conservative blogs had not only avoided the user-engaging community blog platform, but had also taken the odd step of closing down user registration while only allowing comments from registered users. To the extent that blogs can operate as quasi-interest groups, this choice seems supremely

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counterproductive because it shuts off the first step in the community’s “ladder-of-engagement,” preventing new “members” from signing up and participating. Yet in light of these harassment tactics from left-wing pranksters, such a policy choice also appears to be an entirely rational response. The very type of attacks that the five-stage institutional development model predicts should occur during the late majority phase of development occur for conservative spaces long before they have developed a robust community, and closed registration is one reasonable policy choice for eliminating such attacks.

DailyKos Urges, “Mitt for Michigan”

In his 2008 book, *Taking on the System*, Markos Moulitsas describes the “Mitt for Michigan” campaign that he launched on DailyKos on January 10, 2008:

“Without a real Democratic contest on the ballot, and a lack of party registration in Michigan, this is an open primary. Anyone can pick up a Republican ballot. So Michigan Democrats and independents who want to see the Republican battle royale continue should just take a few minutes on Tuesday, January 15th to cast a ballot for Mitt Romney in the Republican primary.”

“...If we can help push Mitt over the line, not only do we help keep their field fragmented, but we also pollute Romney’s victory. How ‘legitimate’ will the Mittster’s victory look if liberals provide the margin of victory? Think of the hilarity that will ensue. We’ll simply be adding fuel to their civil war, never a bad thing from our vantage point.” (Moulitsas, pg 173)

“Kos” does not speak for the entire progressive blogosphere, but he certainly does speak to much of it. In response to commenters’ replies that progressives should be above such dirty tricks, he offered the following rejoinder:

“There are some concerned that this is ‘dirty tricks’ and that we shouldn’t ‘stoop to their level.’ This is perhaps the key difference between traditional liberals and movement progressives. The former believe that politics is a high-minded debate about ideas, the latter have seen movement conservatives use every tool at their disposal to steal power and cling to it.” (Moulitsas, pg 174)
He notes that the campaign was a “big PR success for Daily Kos,” and uses the example to punctuate his general believe that “If the cause is just, then the goal should be victory. All reasonable options should be on the table.” (Moulitsas, pg 175) Given the infinitesimal costs of placing a hyperlink into a DailyKos frontpage post, and the hundreds of thousands of eyeballs that such a link reaches, it may indeed be the case that one reason TheVanguard, RightMarch, and Freedom’s Watch have failed to engage with their member base in the same style as MoveOn is out of a legitimate fear that progressives will swarm the sites and game the system.

It would seem then that, for reasons of strategy or sport, the size advantage enjoyed by progressive internet-mediated organizations creates substantial difficulties for conservatives seeking to create parallel online infrastructure. These progressives are breaking no laws, nor are they as individuals engaging in activities foresworn by the right. But the size of existing progressive online communities, which were allowed to form unencumbered from mass partisan harassment, alters the development path for their conservative counterparts. Apart from ideology or outparty innovation incentives, the dramatic reduction of transaction costs that is itself a defining feature of online communication causes substantial problems for new conservative attempts to build internet-mediated participatory communities. It is an open question whether the dearth of conservative online infrastructure is a temporary or permanent feature of the new political landscape, and certainly clear that conservatives have added challenges due to their latecomer status.

Conclusion
This chapter has sought primarily to investigate and analyze the surprising absence of large-scale internet-mediated organizations within the Republican Party coalition. After reviewing the evidence, I have offered three competing explanatory theses. At this moment in time, it is impossible to say which of them is most correct. Each likely has some impact on the current distribution of campaign technologies, and with the Democratic Party having only taken control of the Executive Branch in January 2009, we cannot say how ideology, opportunity structure, and digitized wooden shoes will interact among the next round of conservative attempts to utilize the new communications environment.

The chapter is meant primarily to offer theoretical insights into the mechanisms that drive the diffusion of innovative tools and strategies through the shifting network of partisan elites. It analyzes failed organizational attempts, rather than the large-scale successes discussed elsewhere in the dissertation. In so doing, it also suggests that, if the Republican Party is to be successful in developing its own internet-mediated organizations and online infrastructure, it will likely experience a “changing of the guard” within the party network. At a minimum, the zero-sum allocation of power within the Republican party network is likely to be altered by the introduction of internet-mediated campaign tools and strategies. And if that party network proves unable to change due to ideological constraints, or unsuccessful in overcoming the burden presented by “merry pranksters,” then the gap between online progressive and conservative infrastructure will only deepen, awarding an increasing advantage to the political left in its electoral and legislative campaign efforts. The research agenda for scholars interested in the internet’s effects on American politics should heavily feature
this interaction of ideology, outparty innovation incentives, and internet-specific
development challenges over the course of the next few years. We are just now entering
a moment in time when rigorous analysis can make these distinctions clear.
Chapter 8: Conclusion – Reflections on the Obama Campaign

This dissertation began by ruminating on the rise, fall, and unexpected impacts of the Dean campaign. It seems only fitting for it to end with a discussion of the Obama campaign. When I first undertook this research endeavor, Barack Obama was a popular first-term Senator who appeared to stand little chance in the Democratic Presidential primary if he even chose to enter the race against frontrunner Hillary Clinton. In the late stages of research, Obama’s internet-mediated field campaign had won several lopsided victories in caucus states and there was talk of how the internet was helping him to succeed where Dean had failed. By the fall general election, his online fundraising and volunteer network had surpassed all expectations. If Dean’s failure led many to dismiss the internet’s role in political mobilization, Obama’s success has encouraged unencumbered enthusiasm about the medium’s transformative potential. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the Internet does play a crucial role in restructuring the organizations that mobilize collective action in American politics, but perhaps not the role one would first expect. The Obama campaign, and now the Obama Administration, has proven adept at taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the new medium. We should take care, however, not to misdiagnose or overemphasize the nature of the changes under way. This final chapter will briefly review the role that the internet played in the Obama campaign’s success, and will then discuss the relevance of this dissertation’s findings to the Obama administration and other elite actors in the near future.

Obama’s victory in the nomination process can at least partially be attributed to
his tremendously successful internet-mediated field program’s outsized victories in states which held caucuses rather than primaries. As one example, we have the odd case of Texas, which allocates 126 of its pledged delegates through a primary vote and another 67 of its pledged delegates through a set of caucuses held on the same day. Hillary Clinton had roughly 20,000 volunteers in the state, whereas Obama had over 104,000 volunteers signed up through MyBO. On election night, Clinton won the primary vote 51% to 47%, earning her a 4-delegate advantage. Obama, however, earned a 9-delegate advantage through his aggressive caucus turnout, yielding a net victory for him in the state. (Talbot 2008) As a whole, Clinton won 1,365 delegates to Obama’s 1,346 delegates in states that held a primary vote, a 19-delegate advantage. Obama’s overall pledged delegate lead came from his enormous victories in caucus states, where he netted a 141-delegate advantage (328 delegates to 187). In caucus states where turnout mattered most, Obama’s elaborate internet-mediated campaign organization made a substantial difference. (Bowers 2008e)

In the general election, his suite of internet-based volunteer-mobilization and small-dollar fundraising tools provided an important engine. The campaign raised over $500 million online and the list of e-mail based supporters surpassed 13 million. This supporter base was connected to the largest campaign apparatus in American history, with a massive outreach effort that included volunteer and staff offices around the country. In Charlottesville, VA alone, the Obama campaign had seven field offices, and at several points in the weeks leading up to the election, the office had such an abundance of volunteers that they actually ran out of neighborhoods to canvass.90 Sophisticated data management tools lowered the costs of reporting between field offices and were an

90 Personal correspondance, Obama campaign volunteers. November 1, 2008.
essential element of the campaign as it moved to larger and larger scales. Many of these
distributed reporting and management tools were developed on-the-fly during the course
of the campaign and are now being shopped by a new wave of political consultants.\textsuperscript{91}
The campaign integrated various individual technologies – YouTube, social networking,
blogging, Twitter, etc – into a single strategy. As Jascha Franklin-Hodge, cofounder of
Blue State Digital, put it, “Yes, there are blogs and listservs, but the point of the
campaign is to get someone to donate money, make calls, write letters, organize a house
party. The core of the software is having links to taking action – to doing something.”
(Talbot, pg 81)

Since winning the election, the Obama administration has demonstrated a
continued commitment to the deployment of new media tools in service of their overall
agenda. The Obama transition team launched Change.gov, a site where they solicited job
applications far and wide and through which they promised to improve open government
accountability. The President also regularly posts a weekly address to the nation over
YouTube, a 21\textsuperscript{st} century homage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “fireside chats.”
Perhaps most importantly, Obama for America was converted to a stand-alone
organization housed under the Democratic National Committee and rebranded as
Organizing for America (OFA) to maintain the same acronym. OFA’s e-mail based
recipient list dwarfs even MoveOn, its staff includes many of Obama’s top campaign
operatives, and its mission is to help Obama enact his agenda. Still housed at
\url{www.barackobama.com}, and still using the MyBO web utilities, the site’s masthead
includes a quote from one of President Obama’s campaign speeches, “I’m asking you to
believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington … I’m asking

\textsuperscript{91} Interview notes, “National Field.” April 30, 2009.
you to believe in yours.” The confluence of a large list, a devoted membership base already used to participating locally, the agenda-setting power of the Presidential bully pulpit, and a tremendously charismatic leader is a set of circumstances unseen in American history. Though it is too early to tell how successful the organization will be, it has the potential to capitalize upon several of the major trends discussed through this dissertation. Looking back upon the major findings from each of the dissertation’s chapters, we see a series of lessons emerge for those interested in understanding the “Obama moment.”

Lessons about Internet-mediated organizations entering the Obama moment

The first clear lesson from this dissertation, stemming from chapter 2, is that internet-mediated productivity occurs at the intersection of useful technologies and large, motivated participatory communities. David Talbot of Technology Review made note of this during the campaign, “If the other major candidates had many of the same Web tools, their experiences show that having them isn’t enough: you must make them central to the campaign and manage the networks of supporters they help organize.” (Talbot, pg 81) His statement echoes those made by Wales and Shirky with regards to Wikipedia. Social technologies often rely on relatively basic computer applications – the applications in fact must be basic enough to be easily accessed and intuitively applied by the large mass of individuals who lack the sophistication of the lead user community. The lowered transaction costs, information abundance, and anti-geographic nature of the World Wide Web give rise to “power law hub” communities that reap tremendous advantages from
the heavy network externalities provided by the surrounding community of volunteers. Organizing for America (OFA) will doubtless be much smaller than the Obama campaign, if for no other reason than the “interest horizon” for political participation outside of electoral campaign season is much steeper. But there is a genuine possibility that, in comparison to other left-wing political associations, OFA will establish itself as the central hub community for national activism and will prove capable of mobilizing volunteers on a larger scale than its competitors.

A related implication is that we are unlikely to see Obama-type political mobilizations across all sorts of political campaigns in 2010 or 2012. The lowered transaction costs of the internet offer several advantages to political campaigns, particularly in enabling new management tools that lower the expense of backend coordination (bookkeeping, field reporting, message coordination). But the notion proffered by many that we are entering an era of “open source politics” misdiagnoses the nature of the open source phenomenon itself. Internet-mediated organizations will continue to gain power within the Democratic party coalition because of their ability to mobilize people and money at large scales on brief timescales. But there are a limited number of these communities. The Obama campaign proved to be one of them. A low-profile State Senate campaign, almost by definition, will not be.

That said, the tight relationship between OFA and the Obama administration makes OFA a likely candidate for “power law hub” status within the Democratic coalition. Internet-mediated organizations thus far have proven adept at the mobilization of bias around whatever issue is at the top of the public agenda, but they do not themselves have the capacity to determine that agenda. As we saw in chapter 3 with the
Superdelegate Transparency Project, this leads to an expansion of the “issue spaces” represented by these nimble, multi-issue generalists. OpenLeft, DFA, and MoveOn did not themselves choose to place Superdelegate representation on the public agenda. Rather, they recognized the rise and salience of the issue, noted that it was a topic that their issue publics cared about, and launched a “long, three-week campaign” around the issue. The President, through the power of the bully pulpit, is capable of directly placing an issue at the top of the public agenda. Combining this agenda-setting power with nimble, internet-mediated campaign capacities yields an advantage to OFA over the other interest groups in the progressive coalition. If MoveOn, the American Civil Liberties Union, and OFA are all organizing house parties in support of a new piece of proposed legislation, why would a potential donor or volunteer contribute to either of the first two instead of OFA, which has the largest list and is directly aligned with the President’s agenda? To the extent that Obama’s agenda mirrors that of progressive partisans, the site holds several natural advantages over all related organizations. “Preferential attachment” might very well begin to flow to Organizing for America rather than the organizations detailed in my research.

For this very reason, it is likely that the elite blogosphere will eventually shift towards a position of criticizing the administration as not-liberal-enough. Accountability Now PAC is an early indicator of this trend, although they have been careful thus far to phrase their mission as one of “providing the progressive space” for the President to achieve his campaign goals. Whether top bloggers focus their criticism on Congressional officials or the President depends on a variety of factors, including the President’s popularity, job performance as subjectively defined by the “netroots” leadership, and the
relative liberalism of his policy proposals. Regardless, the median member of a site like DailyKos is likely to move toward the left, because those more centrist members who are satisfied with the administration’s performance will likely switch to spending the bulk of their time and energy with OFA. The blogosphere is a more productive space for collective action than many of its critics would admit, but it is also a medium that encourages criticism and vociferous debate within a community-of-interest. The political “netroots” will likely find the niche where their critical voices find the greatest traction is in the area of pushing the Democratic leadership to do “better.”

More traditional interest groups and political associations, meanwhile, will likely continue to “partner” with the administration on those issues that fall within their issue space. Health Care-focused groups will attempt to fundraise and mobilize in support of the President’s reform bill, as will environmental groups around his climate bill. But, as discussed in chapter 5, these groups will continue to face the pressing challenge presented by shifting funding streams and high overhead costs. Eventually, both direct mail-based and major donor-based groups will be confronted by the same question: “why should a volunteer or donor give to our organization over any other?” Similar in nature to the questions that currently beset the newspaper industry, crafting an answer to this question and developing capacities for long-term mobilization will prove a substantial challenge for interest groups new and old in the coming years. The Obama administration accelerates his financial challenge by reducing the urgency that small donors feel in donating to interest groups. OFA meanwhile adds another major contender among the “progressive generalists” well-positioned to attract donations and support. Obama’s victory is a boon for the policy goals of progressive interest groups, but it also makes
their financial situation that much more precarious.

Chapter 6 is of the most direct relevance to the success of OFA, specifically because they are clearly and explicitly building off of the DFA “model.” If I am correct that strong DFA affiliates emerged in those areas where a minimum threshold of engaged “Deaniacs” were both present and capable of finding an attractive “next step,” then it stands to reason the increased scale of OFA should produce a much larger set of affiliates. One of the key policy decisions that OFA will face, however, regards the level of decision authority it will vest in its local affiliates. Recall that Philly for Change was launched after its core of committed Dean volunteers gathered together after the campaign and collectively asked, “what’s next.” DFA has a national issue agenda, but its greatest strength is in supporting this federated system. If OFA groups only exist to support national policy proposals at the local level, they will be severely limited in scope.

Consider Charlottesville, VA, for instance. Charlottesville’s Representative is Tom Perriello, a progressive Democrat. Virginia’s two Senators are both Democrats as well. On the national level, this leaves relatively few issues upon which local group activity will be required. PfC is also in a heavily Democratic city, but local decision authority leaves the set of committed volunteers with the freedom to jointly select their own local campaign priority. They have worked to elect new Senators and have worked to support local funding for Philadelphia transit. Will OFA make a similar governance decision? Complicating the matter even further, if the organization does so, what (if anything) separates these local DNC-sponsored meetups from the local Democratic Party apparatus? Philly for Change, like the Democratic Clubs from a generation ago, set a goal of “taking over the local party.” The Obama campaign has mobilized networks of
new volunteers across the country, and now intends to keep mobilizing them. This will likely produce tremendous internal tension and in-fighting during the next few election cycles, as the already-fuzzy boundaries between political association and party organization become nearly indistinguishable.

Chapter 6 also strongly suggests that the Mobile Web will play an increasingly important role, as iPhones and similar devices diffuse to wider segments of the public. The Obama campaign introduced an “Obama ‘08” iPhone application in the fall of 2008 that includes many of the features and functionalities needed for distributed reputation tracking by a federated membership organization. The application received high praise, but rare use. What was lacking was the “clustering effects” or network effects that arise once a critical mass of participants possess the technology. There were, simply put, not enough iPhones in October 2008 for the Obama application to be of much use to the campaign organization. This will inevitably change before the 2012 Presidential election, unleashing a new wave of innovative campaign and organizational tools. The location-based, internet-mediated groups that best take advantage of this opportunity will likely become known as the next set of MoveOn, DailyKos, and DFA-type “hubs” in the progressive coalition.

Finally, chapter 7 points to the rich, emerging set of opportunities now available to conservative advocacy leaders seeking to counter-mobilize against the President’s agenda. The next few years will tell us much about the underlying mechanics of the partisan diffusion of political technologies and strategic innovations. New elites within the Republican party network will attempt to seize these opportunities, displacing old elites and shifting the balance of power within the Republican coalition. Whether the
conservative base proves ideologically ill-suited to the new information environment, or whether progressive advantages online continue to push conservative hubs toward closed, anti-participatory policy choices which in turn leave them incapable of capturing the network effects offered by a large participatory community under the new information regime, still remains to be seen.

From each of the chapters in this dissertation, then, a series of expectations or hypotheses emerges regarding how the American political system will develop in the near future. Much remains to be determined about the scope and effectiveness of the OFA organization, and it may prove to have little popularity and minimal impact on the interest group population. Likewise, the challenges, mistakes, and successes of the Obama administration cannot be foretold in advance, and these will produce a series of critical junctures for the development of internet-mediated political associations and the spread of innovative technologies. But what seems clear at this juncture is that OFA has the opportunity to serve as a rather unique power law hub within the Democratic coalition. Given the size of its list, the large set of committed volunteers it can draw upon, and its ability to directly shape the public agenda as the organizational affiliate of the Obama Administration, OFA lies somewhere between interest group and political party. The only analogue in American history would seem to be Andrew Jackson’s campaign and subsequent administration, which indeed played a transformative role in how the government engaged segments of the public. (Skowronek 1993)

I provide this discussion of OFA to illustrate the value of the dissertation as a whole. Through grounded theorizing, content analysis, elite interviews, and participant
observation, I have sought with this project to offer a clear picture of how the lowered transaction costs of the internet are giving rise to a new generation of political associations, with novel membership and fundraising regimes, expanded issue spaces, and distinctly different tactical repertoires. These groups do not just attract larger numbers; they are also substantively different. The most important impact of the internet on American politics has been in giving rise to these new, large-scale participatory communities, and in reconfiguring how we structure collective action and networks of political authority. The Obama moment represents a major inflection point in contemporary American politics, and this dissertation project helps us to understand the areas in which the Obama administration and its affiliated political association are likely to prove most transformative. In an information environment burdened by abundance, this dissertation project hopefully helps us determine where to look.

Implications for Future Internet Research

One of the major goals of this research endeavor has been to demonstrate the analytic value of bringing the organizations back in to the study of internet politics. New technologies will continue to rise in the public imagination, and just as a previous set of studies investigated the impact of blogging on politics and social networking on politics, there will continue to be a drive towards studying the effect of YouTube on politics and Twitter on politics. These studies have found, and will continue to find, that the internet has no significant impact on the average citizens political motivation or political knowledge. Rather than indicating that the internet changes nothing about American
politics, I hope I have convinced the reader that such studies fundamentally begin with the wrong questions. The lowered transaction costs of the internet have led, under certain circumstances, to an inversion of the classical logic of collective action. Participatory communities can produce complex public goods in abundance, regardless of free ridership. It is through the study of these communities, and the institutions and organizations that support them, that we can best understand the impact of innovative technologies on the structures of power in American politics.

Chapter 2’s discussion of the institutional development of online communities-of-interest will be of greater interest to the “web science” community than to traditional political scientists. Though these communities indeed have demonstrable political impacts, their study has largely been housed within this cross-disciplinary literature. Through chapter 2 and the discussion of reputation and mobility in chapter 6, I hope to have made some contribution to that interdisciplinary conversation. Power law distributions do define web-based communities, but power law hub status can prove ephemeral. By understanding the challenges that naturally rise with the diffusion of an innovation to different elements of the population, we can predict the circumstances under which a “power law hub” can fail or be replaced.

Chapter 3 provides evidence that the new generation of political associations is not just nimbler and noisier than their predecessors, but also engages in political mobilization around issues that would otherwise be left unrepresented. Borrowing from Schattschneider’s discussion of the mobilization of bias, this indicates that the pressure group politics in America is changing in manners that can and likely do affect the distribution of power. Though only a single cross-case comparison, the distinction
between pressure group mobilization in the 1984 and 2008 primaries can only be attributed to the emergence of these new internet-mediated groups, and that in turn demonstrates why interest group and social movement scholars must take the change in information regimes seriously.

Chapter 4 provides a summary of several blogosphere-related arguments that I have already published. Within the small subset of political scientists who study blogs, this has already found a warm and positive reception. In particular, the Blogosphere Authority Index and blogspace typology have helped provide a set of useful tools for analyzing elite political blogs. The central case that elite community blogs act as quasi-interest groups is a novel one and has begun to gain wide acceptance from my fellow researchers. These points also help to empirically demonstrate the widening “infrastructure gap” between the left and right blogospheres.

In the near-term, the interest group-related implications discussed in chapter 5 will likely prove to be of the greatest interest to the political science community. Many longstanding interest groups today are in a similar situation as newspapers were a few years ago, with dramatically shifting funding streams, competition from internet-mediated competitors, and high overhead costs which limit their options for adaptation. The emerging generation shift has historical precedent in the 1970s-era “interest group explosion” described by Skocpol and others. And just as the interest group explosion gave rise to a new type of organization that affected how American citizens engage in politics, the new generation of internet-mediated organizations is of particular interest because these large hubs and small niche groups are replacing the professional advocacy groups and engaging their issue publics in new ways.
Chapter 6 takes the Skocpolian framework a step further, investigating the conditions under which the lowered transaction costs of the internet can lead to a reemergence of the location-based civic associations that were lost in the previous interest group generation shift. Philly for Change provides a proof-of-existence that such new groups do indeed arise with the help of web-based tools. The discussion of reputation systems and the Mobile Web suggests an emerging research agenda and a series of policy questions that will help define just how helpful the Mobile Web will be for location-based membership federations.

Chapter 7 then looks deeply at the dearth of conservative online infrastructure and derives a set of competing theories about the partisan determinants of the spread of political technology and strategic innovations. Given the shift in government majority, this chapter is primarily concerned with constructing theory for rigorous hypothesis-testing over the next few years. These theoretical developments shed some light both on the history of technological innovation in American Political Development and on the changing distribution of power in present-day American politics. Both the empirical assessment that progressives are in fact dominating interest group politics under this new information regime, and the theoretical discussion that follows serve as novel contributions to a research literature that has rarely investigated these phenomena.

It is my hope, in closing, that this research project has helped to emphasize the utility of question-driven, methodologically pluralist research designs. The far-reaching internet impacts detailed throughout the dissertation have been almost unanimously overlooked by the research community, even as they have elicited comment from journalists, practitioners, and the general public. Particularly when studying a rapidly-
changing medium like the internet, direct interaction and observation of these communities proves vital in clarifying where theory and practice diverge, in turn paving the way for more rigorous forms of data collection and hypothesis testing. This dissertation is meant to provide the grounding for an expansive research agenda – not only for myself but hopefully for other members of the research community as well.

Without question, the importance of the internet to American political life will only grow in the coming years. This project helps to identify some of the “unexpected transformations” that are coming about as a result.
Appendix: Constructing the Blogosphere Authority Index

[The following is excerpted from “Measuring Influence in the Political Blogosphere,” published in the Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet’s Politics and Technology Review, March 2008. It describes the methodology behind the Blogosphere Authority Index tracking system.]

Consider the following stylized example: blogger A posts infrequently on her personal site. This results in a small reader base, and comparatively few hypertext links from around the blogosphere. Years ago, blogger A was a mentor to bloggers B, C, and D, though, and she now holds an key position within her party’s establishment. The few people who frequent her blog are highly influential, either in the blogosphere or in more traditional political institutions. Blogger B posts once or twice a day on his individual blog, which was picked up by a major online news magazine last year. He has a journalistic background and specializes in developing new arguments or breaking new stories – he chooses to be a blogger because he likes to set his own deadlines, operate without an editor looking over his shoulder, and publish instantaneously. He often relies on blogger A for insights and tidbits that he researches and turns into original articles. He is among the most often-cited bloggers online, by liberals and conservatives alike. Blogger C posts 15-20 times per day. She rarely publishes original content, instead pouring over other blogs and writing short, pithy posts that tell her reader base about something interesting elsewhere on the web. She acts as a gatekeeper for her gigantic readership, who use her site as a roadmap to the rest of the Internet. Blogger D is the purveyor of one of the most active community blogs in the country. He posts 8 times per day, with some original content and some “open threads” so that his community can keep
their own discussion going. This community also publishes their own diaries, often 50 or so in a day. Political endorsements from this site mean dollars in a candidate’s pocket. The membership recently spun off two new sites to support activity around universal health care and global warming, and the policy proposals from these sites have been adopted into Congressional legislation.

*Which blogger is most influential?*

This example is an illustration of four distinct areas of influence: *network centrality, link density, site traffic,* and *community activity.* To create a comprehensive ranking system, this paper identifies the best-available proxy for each of these types of influence, converts them to ordinal rankings, and then combines them into a single index of authority.

**The Blogosphere Authority Index**

The Blogosphere Authority Index (BAI) combines data from four measures of online influence into a single ranking system. Construction of the BAI is a two-stage process. The first stage involves collection of raw data on each of the influence measures. Some of this data is directly gathered through content analysis of archived site information. Some is gathered through publicly available tracking systems such as Technorati and Sitemeter. For future researchers, it is important to note that, as the blogosphere continues to expand, these tracking systems may eventually become obsolete. Raw data should be collected from the best-available data source. The rest of
the BAI’s structure remains unaffected by long-term changes in the source of proxy data on any of the four metrics.

In the second stage, we convert this raw data into ordinal rankings. These rankings can be within the progressive or conservative blog “neighborhoods,” or the raw scores of both neighborhoods can be combined to form a combined BAI. We then convert these individual ordinal rankings into a comprehensive ranking, leading to a final authority index. Data collection and conversion methods are described in greater detail below.

Stage 1:

The Authority Index combines four measures of influence: the Network Centrality Score, Hyperlink Authority Score, Site Traffic Score, and Community Activity Score.

*Network Centrality Score*

The *Network Centrality Score (NCS)* is an applied sociometric variable that is culled from blogrolls, which are self-reports of recommended or approved blogs. Blogrolls are similar in nature to self-reports of friendship networks, a common tool in social network analysis. Deletions from blogrolls are rare and usually accompanied by an uproar[^2]. This biases the centrality score in favor of those blogs/bloggers who have been around for the longest. This is a bias which *should* be captured, though. Jerome Armstrong (founder of MyDD) is described by his peer bloggers as “the true blogfather”

because of the importance his site had when many were getting their start. This elder
statesman-status is a type of power that doesn’t track to current visits/activity. It also
gives a hint as to *who* might be visiting his site. A site that receives 30 visits/day could
be hugely important if those 30 visitors are frontpage authors on the 30 largest sites, for
instance. The centrality score, therefore, is meant as an indicator of accrued reputation
over time. Beginning with network centrality also solves the problem of coding blogs as
political/apolitical or liberal/independent/conservative. Adamic and Glance have
demonstrated that the liberal and conservative blogospheres form largely independent
neighborhoods. If an elite blog self-identifies as conservative, but other conservative
bloggers refuse to acknowledge it as such, are they part of the conservative blogosphere?
This method treats the expansive blogosphere as consisting of network neighborhoods.
The blogroll of a site is a means of self-reporting who one’s “neighbors” are. In a world
of 118 million+ blogs, this is a necessary simplifying assumption for scholars interested
in identifying elite blogs within a particular category.

To construct the NCS, we begin with a seed site. This is the site that we have
good reason to believe lies in or around the center of the blog network of interest. The
selection of a seed site will have an effect on our findings, so this is an important
decision. Conveniently, this hub will often be a well-known site. For this study, I chose
to begin with dailykos.com and michellemalkin.com. These two sites are listed as the
progressive and conservative frontrunners by both technorati.com and truthlaidbear.com.

The NCS aggregates blogroll data within the network neighborhood. The data

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93 Adamic and Glance, “The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 US Election: Divided
They Blog.” Pg 14.
begins with the seed site blogroll. All listed blogs are then visited and their blogrolls are added to the dataset. A first-round tally is then created. Which sites are mentioned most often? Any sites in the top 25 that have not already had their blogrolls added are then visited in a second round of data collection. This continues for a third round if needed. This then produces a final set of tallies. Network Centrality Score is constructed by normalizing these tallies on a 0-to-1 scale. Add 1 to the tally of any site that provided a blogroll (some elite sites do not include a blogroll) to obtain N. This sets the highest possible score at 1.0, removing a bias against contributing sites (source sites do not blogroll themselves). Network Centrality Score is then equal to N/P, where P is the total population of blogs included in the coding scheme.

The Network Centrality Score provides a population list for data collection on the other 3 measures. This is a necessary initial step, as sitemeter and technorati data are gathered by searching for sites by name. For the purposes of the other three data sources, I gathered data on the top 50 progressive and top 50 conservative blogs.

Hyperlink Authority Score

The Hyperlink Authority Score (HAS) is derived directly from Technorati.com’s authority tracking system. Technorati tracks the global blogosphere, using sophisticated web crawlers to measure link patterns and definitively describe which blogs are the most often-cited. As previously noted, Technorati’s top 100 tells us less within the political blogosphere than it used to because Technorati now tracks so many apolitical sites. It is somewhat akin to a public opinion poll that asks citizens which they prefer: Barack

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94 P can vary drastically depending on the blogroll size of the seed site.
Obama, the Detroit Tigers, celebrity gossip, or puppies. With that said, Technorati measures link patterns at a depth that cannot be replicated, so the within-group measure is still a valuable indicator of importance.

To construct the HAS, search for the rankings of each blog in the population list (as determined by NCS rankings) in Technorati’s overall system. These rankings must be individual accessed by entering [http://www.technorati.com/blogs/[webaddress]](http://www.technorati.com/blogs/[webaddress]).

**Site Traffic Score**

The **Site Traffic Score** (STS) is the most obviously relevant and also the most challenging to accurately measure. Sitemeter.com directly measures the number of unique visitors a website receives every day. A high-traffic site should, *ceteris paribus*, be more important than a low-traffic site. Some bloggers, wary of the various link-tracking systems, rely exclusively on Sitemeter data to measure their success\(^95\). The problem, however, is that Sitemeter is an opt-in system, and over 25% of the sites in the dataset do not choose to include it. Previous scholars have used Sitemeter in their ranking systems, relying on the Truth Laid Bear traffic rankings, which aggregate sitemeter data, and simply make note that this is an incomplete system. These scholars only try to determine the population of elite political blogs without attempting to rank-order them. This study attempts to fill the gaps so we can use traffic rankings to gain greater analytic leverage.

To augment the standard Sitemeter data, I turn to another traffic-ranking system, Alexa.com. Alexa tracks visits to all web sites, rather than just blogs. It measures unique visits/month (a different datum than Sitemeter’s visits/day) and offers higher-quality

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\(^95\) Duncan Black, interview, Philadelphia, PA, October 20, 2007.
information on larger sites rather than smaller ones. I considered switching to Alexa
rankings as a primary traffic ranking system, but many blogs in the study, particularly the
lower-traffic ones, have low-quality or no data recorded by Alexa. Instead, I rank-
ordered the sites with available Sitemeter data and then checked these sites against their
comparative Alexa rankings to see if there was relative similarity between the two.
Though the fit was not perfect, it was quite close, with the 9th-ranked site in Sitemeter
being the 9th-largest Alexa site +/- 1 in the rank order (the error signature gets larger as
we go down the list, as the raw score gaps between the sites quickly shrinks). This fit
was the best available indicator, so I then performed “Alexa fills” for all sites that did not
offer Sitemeter data. With an Alexa fill, we have no relevant raw score for the site, but
we can estimate that it is larger than sites with lower Alexa scores and smaller than sites
with higher ones. This was important for estimating the size of a few major sites,
including Huffingtonpost.com, thinkprogress.org, and talkingpointsmemo.com. I would
characterize this technique as making the best of a bad-data situation⁹⁶.

The STS metric begins by recording Sitemeter data from all participating sites.
This directly replicates the information available from TruthLaidBear EcoTraffic. Rank
these sites and attempt to personally contact any bloggers who do not provide Sitemeter
data to see if they will share it. Any remaining sites should receive an Alexa fill,
triangulating their position in the rankings in comparison to Sitemeter-ranked blogs.

¹⁹⁶ Additionally, there were four blogs for which an Alexa fill did not work. Alexa tracks
traffic to an entire site domain name. This means that Glenn Greenwald’s blog, which is
featured on slate.com, is recorded as receiving all slate.com traffic, despite slate being a
major online news organization which directs only a small portion of its traffic to
Greenwald. This was also a problem for Matthew Yglesias’s blog on the Atlantic
Monthly, James Wolcott’s blog on Vanity Fair, and The Corner, a group blog hosted by
the National Review.
**Community Activity Score**

The fourth and final data source is the *Community Activity Score* (CAS). Nearly all of the blogs in this study (88%) include a mechanism for readers to write comments in response to the author’s post. This is the most basic form of user-generated content on the blogosphere, and it has been lauded as a major difference between blogging and traditional journalism. To date, no scholarly study has used comments as a data source, though it has been noted that someone eventually should.\(^97\)

The particular value of the CAS is that it is a measure of engagement. Presumably, a reader who leaves a comment is likely to spend more time on the site and is more likely to become part of that site’s community. The CAS balances out the historical bias of the NCS by giving additional weight to the blogs where active, vibrant conversation is happening today.

To construct the CAS dataset, take a one-week snapshot of all postings for sites in the population set. For this study, I chose the week of 11/4-11/11. Record the total number of reader-generated comments on these posts. Total Comments/Week serves as a site’s CAS.

**Stage 2:**

At this point, we have four types of raw data recorded for the top 50 conservative and top 50 progressive sites. Each of these should be converted to “top 50” ordinal rankings. In stage 2, these rankings are combined into an aggregate score, adding the

\(^{97}\) Kevin Wallsten, “Political Blogs: Transmission Belts, Soapboxes, Mobilizers or Conversation Starters?” Doctoral dissertation chapter, University of California, Berkeley
three best scores together and dropping the fourth from the study. This is to avoid
unfairly biasing the study against sites whose architecture does not allow for reader
comments and to minimize outlier effects that come from flaws within any of the four
measures employed. Additionally, it minimizes the penalty against institutional sites like
HuffingtonPost.com, and Newsbusters.com. Sites of this type receive depressed Network
Centrality Scores because some bloggers only list traditional individually-based sites in
their blogrolls. The final ranking equation is \( \text{RankFinal} = \text{Rank1} + \text{Rank2} + \text{Rank3} + \text{Rank4} - \text{WorstRank} \). The best possible score is 3, indicating that a blog was first-ranked
in three categories. The worst possible score is 150, indicating that a blog was last-
ranked in all categories. This purpose of this study is to produce a list of the top 25
progressive and conservative blogs. Data on the top 50’s was gathered in order to ensure
that all potential members of the top 25 would be captured. The final output is a
Blogosphere Authority Index of the two top 25 lists. A combined list was also
constructed by combining the raw score data for the two network neighborhoods,
constructing combined ordinal rankings, and then applying the same final ranking
equation listed above.
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