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

Chapter 1: Introduction

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Introduction

This is a book about the internet and the disruptive transformation of the American public sphere. I argue that the organizational layer of political participation – the interest groups and social movement organizations that seek to educate and mobilize the citizenry – is undergoing a generational shift, accomplished through modifications to the political economy of political associations. A new set of internet-mediated groups has arisen, and their mobilization activities hold far-reaching consequences for the practice of American politics in the 21st century. From nimble issue-generalists like MoveOn.org to blogging communities like DailyKos.com and neo-federated advocacy groups like Democracy For America, a set of new operating principles has been established for advocacy group mobilization. This network of new associations – often referred to as the “netroots,” a portmanteau of internet and grassroots – has redefined organizational membership and innovated fundraising practices, leading to systemic changes throughout the political advocacy arena. The book provides a detailed account of how these various groups operate, contrasting them with the single-issue professionalized interest groups that have characterized citizen representation in the public sphere for approximately 40 years. It offers a theory of the internet’s impact on political organizations, and identifies some of the likely effects of this structural transformation on the practice of American politics in the future.

To illustrate these changes, this chapter focuses on the Progressive Change Campaign Committee (PCCC), founded in January 2009 and a model example of the characteristics of the internet-mediated generation of political organizations. The PCCC
is an *internet-mediated issue generalist*, in the same mold as MoveOn. Featuring a small, networked staff of fewer than a dozen full-time activists, the group has minimal overhead and is capable of switching focus on the fly, directing energy to the fast-paced, changing political agenda characteristic of the 24-hour news environment. It counts a membership of 600,000, though this includes everyone who receives e-mails from the group; there are no annual membership dues. Combining online and offline techniques to mobilize influence, the group employs a “hybrid” tactical repertoire, mixing the traditional tactics of interest groups (lobbying and letter-writing), social movements (protests and rallies) and political parties (candidate fundraising and field mobilization). It uses the internet to engage members both actively – through member surveys and open requests for input – and passively – through analysis of email open-rates and action-rates that reveal member preferences. Not all internet-mediated groups follow the issue generalist model, but they do all display the characteristics of nimbleness, hybrid tactics, “analytics”-driven member communications, and modified membership and fundraising practices.

My first encounter with the PCCC occurred in a Charlottesville, VA coffeehouse in late December 2008. Stephanie Taylor, a former MoveOn staffer, was seated at the table next to me, engaged in a discussion of online organizing as I struggled through writer’s block on a dissertation chapter. A hasty introduction ensued, and Stephanie – the former field director for Tom Perriello’s successful congressional run in that district – began to describe an idea that she and two colleagues had recently developed. The new organization, named PCCC in reference to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) that serves as a necessary go-between for congressional candidates, would help progressive candidates run for Congress, pressure public officials to support
strong progressive policies, and use new technology to lower the cost of running for public office. The organization would be meant to bolster “bold progressives” in congressional races, combining electoral campaign expertise, issue campaign expertise, and technological expertise. This description unfolded through hasty scribbles across several napkins. Over the course of several breakfast meetings in the following months, always occurring in coffeehouses or diners, I had the opportunity to observe as the organization took shape.

One particularly memorable breakfast meeting occurred in the summer 2009. There Stephanie voiced concern that the “Public Option” would be dropped from Obama’s Health Care proposal, a compromise which progressives felt would strip the bill of its ability to improve the insurance market through competition. As the conversation ended, I asked whether Stephanie and her co-founder would be attending a netroots social event that evening. “I’m not sure,” she replied, “I think we need to save the Public Option tonight.” Sure enough, Stephanie and Adam spent that evening putting together a political ad, targeting centrist Senator Ben Nelson (D-NE). They sent a fundraising appeal to their members the following day, with a copy of the ad and a request that they chip in to put it on the air in his district. Within a week, it was airing, featuring new polling information from his state (commissioned by the PCCC) showing that a majority of his constituents supported the proposal. National media attention followed, and an angry Nelson was forced to contend with a much more vocal set of progressives than he would have expected.

Within one year, the PCCC had grown to 400,000 members and, through the course of dozens of similar actions, had developed a reputation as one of the most vocal,
effective organizations in the American Left. The membership came through time and
time again, donating $1.35 million in online, small donations, most of which went
directly to specially-crafted, timely action requests. The three cofounders, including
Adam Green, a prominent blogger/netroots organizer, and Aaron Swartz, a technologist
responsible for co-authoring RSS ("really simple syndication") 1.0 specifications and the
Reddit.com online news system, were regularly appearing in stories in the *New York*
Times, *Washington Post, Huffington Post, Politico, NBC, ABC, CNN*, and *MSNBC*. At
the New Organizing Institutes's annual "Rootscamp" conference in 2009, Stephanie and
Adam received the "Most Valuable Organizer" award for their work on the Public
Option. The *Nation* magazine credited them, rather than longstanding health reform
lobbying organizations, as being almost solely responsible for keeping the proposal alive
in the public discourse months after conventional wisdom had declared it dead. In 2010,
they raised their profile even further, playing a key role in Arkansas Lt Governor Bill
Halter's primary challenge to conservative Democrat (and vocal public option opponent)
Blanche Lincoln, placing talented field organizers with a half-dozen progressive
democratic campaigns running for public office, and developing new campaign
technologies such as a "call out the vote" application that let their national membership
place over 1 million Get-Out-The-Vote calls in the days leading up to the November
election. From an organizational perspective, the PCCC is an astonishing success story -
from napkin to national influence in a matter of months.

The day-to-day workings of the PCCC and other “netroots” groups would be
flatly impossible without the internet. The internet creates a permissive communications
environment, both directly – through instantaneous email communication, document-
sharing, and other tools that let them coordinate organizational responses and national actions from their laptops – and indirectly, through changes to membership and fundraising regimes that define the contours of political organizations. What results is a set of tiny revolutions within the advocacy system, “unexpected transformations” that lead large, established single-issue interest groups to be increasingly crowded out by newer entrants like PCCC. The new generation of political advocacy groups is simply better-equipped to take advantage of online communications tools and evolving social practices than their longer-standing peers (hereafter termed “legacy organizations”). The nature of this communications revolution changes the political economy of advocacy groups, supporting new groups over old in much the same manner as has been witnessed in various professional communications sectors such as book publishing and print journalism. It is a disruptive pattern, one that unseats longstanding market-leading organizations in a variety of fields, and leads to the rise of new major institutions. What’s more, in the rush to understand the effect of various new media platforms on citizen engagement, this disruptive shift at the organizational level has gone almost entirely overlooked.

The rise of this new generation of internet-mediated organizations is, it should be noted, a more modest revolution than what many theorists of “open source politics” (Rushkoff 2003, Gillmor 2004, Trippi 2005, Ratcliffe and Lebkowsky 2005) had hoped for. We have not moved into a new era of “smart mobs” (Rheingold 2002) or “organizing without organizations” (Shirky 2008). Indeed, the transformation of the organizational layer of politics is particularly important because so many fundamentals of American politics remain firmly intact. One such fundamental, first noted by Political Scientist Jack Walker, the founding father of modern interest group research, is that,
"political mobilization is seldom spontaneous" (Walker 1991, pg 94). A recent wave of scholarship has demonstrated the continuing applicability of this statement, dampening enthusiasm for a new, mass participatory “digital democracy.” The lowered transaction costs of online political action simply have not promoted the wholesale uplifting of citizen participation that we had once presumed. As Matthew Hindman demonstrates through his study of web traffic patterns, the average American citizen is far more interest in sports, celebrity gossip, and (above all) pornography than in civic participation (Hindman 2008, p. 61). Likewise, Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozmann and Henry Brady (2010) demonstrate through survey data that the citizens engaging in online political action are, from a demographic perspective, essentially the same citizens who previously engaged in offline political action. The Internet may make it easier to engage in political action, but it also expands the choice environment, meaning politically disinterested citizens have far more distractions competing for their attention (Prior 2007).

But Jack Walker’s classic dictum continued, noting, “Before any large element of the population can become a part of the American political process, organizations must be formed, advocates must be trained, and the material resources needed to gain the attention of national policy-makers must be gathered.” This is the starting point motivating the current study. As Theda Skocpol has argued, the type of organizations featured in American politics has changed dramatically in the past, with federated membership organizations of an earlier era replaced in the 1960s and 1970s by the professionally-managed "public interest" or "post-materialist" cohort of advocacy associations. According to Skocpol, the rise of the professionalized “interest group society” (Berry 1984) played a causal role in the decline of social capital in the latter
decades of the 20th century. Political associations are the venue through which motivated citizens are capable of engaging with political elites and altering the public discourse. They serve as “laboratories of democracy” (Tocqueville 1840), and, as such, the dramatic changes to the political economy of American political associations hold significant long-term consequences for the role played by citizens in a democracy.

The book’s focus is limited to American political associations and, with the exception of chapters 3 and 7, focuses on left-wing/progressive “netroots” organizations. The theories and findings can be indirectly applied to the advocacy organizations in other countries, and to trans-national social movement organizations as well, with two caveats. The first is that mobilization strategies and tactical repertoires emerge in response to other institutions of power. The American interest group system is rooted in a very particular democratic tradition; one that features single-member, simple-plurality election of a bicameral Legislative Branch, separation of powers between the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Branches, and a federalist tradition of reserving substantial decision-making authority for state and local government. Other democracies, with alternative electoral systems and governing structures, develop alternate interest group systems (see Farrell 2011 for an overview of electoral systems). The details of America’s nonprofit tax code and the path dependent influence of previous social movement periods play a key role in the emergence of the current generation of internet-mediated organizations. It is my intention in this book to provide a richly detailed look at these organizations, and to offer a theoretical account of their development, structure, and implications. Readers interested in the role of digital tools for activist efforts in global campaign efforts, or efforts rooted in other governing systems, should view this text as
offering a window into the American case that can improve their thinking about alternate cases.

It bears noting at this point that this is not a book about wins and losses. The PCCC was successful in keeping the public option "alive" in the congressional debates long after professional observers had declared it dead. They did not succeed in making the public option law. Likewise, 1 million Get-Out-The-Vote calls is a clear organizational success, accomplished at a fraction of the costs incurred by legacy organizations and political campaigns. But the results of the 2010 election -- the largest wave of Republican House victories since 1938 and a 6-seat Democratic loss in the Senate -- were a disappointment for the PCCC and its progressive allies, new and old, online and off. The work of political associations rarely features unambiguous wins. As Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball and Leech demonstrate (2009), identifying who wins and who loses amongst interest groups is a daunting proposition in its own right, with no "magic bullets" among the various tactics and strategies. The emergence of internet-mediated organizations changes how advocacy groups interact with citizens and other political institutions, and increases the power of certain voices within the public sphere. It rarely produces clear victories, though.

On November 3, 2010, the morning after a massive electoral defeat for the Democrats, Stephanie Taylor’s google-chat status simply read, “Back to Work.” This book is about how that “work” – the day-to-day activity of American political associations – has been altered by the new communications environment. It presents a detailed investigation of internet-mediated issue generalists like MoveOn and PCCC, large-scale community blogs like DailyKos that function as quasi-advocacy groups, and
neo-federated political associations like Democracy for America and Living Liberally that use the internet primarily to support offline citizen participation. Through a combination of ethnographic observation, content analysis, elite interview and process-tracing, I argue that, although mass-level citizen participation has not dramatically changed as a result of the new communications environment, academic dismissal of the new medium has nonetheless been premature. The venues through which citizens seek to affect change in the American political system are undergoing a disruptive shift. Both group membership and major fundraising practices have been deeply affected, and this has leveraged a new set of organizations onto the public stage. The political economy of advocacy organizations has been reconfigured by online communications, and this produces a more porous system of political elites in which motivated partisans have a wider array of venues for engagement. America is moving from a nation characterized by a small, closed elite and a single, passive, mass public to an incrementally-larger, porous elite featuring a set of attentive communities-of-interest, with enhanced tools for motivated citizens to impact the public sphere. As the new communications medium itself continues to evolve, the rise of these new institutions for citizen participation holds important clues for the future of public life.

**Online Mobilization and Its Detractors**

My focus on internet-mediated organizations is meant as a rejoinder to the technocentric tunnel-vision with which many scholars and public intellectuals treat the internet and politics. A range of colorful titles for internet-mediated political action have
surfaced: “Slacktivism,” “Clicktivism,” and “Facebook activism,” to name just a few. Such terms are invoked to dismiss the impact of new technologies, or even to raise concerns about their deleterious unintended consequences. Malcolm Gladwell, (2010) for instance, argues in a widely-read *New Yorker* essay that “The revolution will not be tweeted,” suggesting that social media fail to promote the type of strong ties necessary for successful social movement organizing. Stuart Shulman warns that waves of e-petitions and online public comments will swamp federal agencies in “low-quality, redundant, and generally insubstantial commenting by the public,” drowning out more substantive citizen participation (Shulman 2009, 25-26). Julian Zelizer dismisses online citizen participation as “Facebook politics,” claiming that it is too easy, too ephemeral, to have any longterm impact (Zelizer 2010). Waves of new online communications tools lower the costs of citizen input, and this in turn unleashes waves of low-cost symbolic actions with little or no political impact. Underlying these observations is a deeper concern that, to the extent that e-petitions and Facebook clicks substitute for deeper citizen participation, they may breed resentment and increased apathy toward government action.

A related criticism comes from scholars such as Hindman (2008) and Schlozman, Verba & Brady (2010), who argue that for all the journalistic attention paid to novel technologies in politics, very little has actually changed in the American political system. Hindman argues that for all the talk about democratizing online tools, internet traffic reveals that “paradoxically, the extreme ‘openness’ of the Internet has fueled the creation of new political elites” (p. 4). “Digital Democracy,” he suggests, is little more than a “myth.” Schlozman, Verba and Brady demonstrate that the people taking action online
are nearly identical to the people who have long taken action offline. Though the population of online participants skews younger than the offline civic participants, it still is biased to the wealthy, well-educated, and white citizens. Cass Sunstein, meanwhile, worries about “cyber-balkanization,” a process by which online citizens, no longer needing to interact with individuals or information that challenges their personal biases, are increasingly radicalized, leading to the polarization of the public sphere. These scholars have added great value in tempering the earlier phase of heightened internet optimism, but their treatments of the internet and politics ignore the organizational layer of politics, leading to conclusions which are a little too pessimistic.

All of these critiques treat political mobilization as if it now occurs spontaneously. A similar belief is echoed in Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody* (2008), in which he discusses the capacity of individuals to promote “organizing without organizations,” or collective action without any mediating institution whatsoever. Shirky’s work is essential reading for any reader interested in understanding how online communication differs from previous information environments. Whereas broadcast media primarily support one-to-many communication, and telephones primarily support one-to-one communication, the internet features many-to-many connectivity, or “ridiculously easy group formation” (Paquet 2002). The medium is asynchronous in nature, meaning individuals can participate on discussion boards or social sites without being temporally co-present. The medium also features various forms of information abundance, as information placed on the network remains accessible by default. These conditions fiddle with certain core assumptions about collective action and social coordination – namely, that collective action is costly and difficult, a public good that
will be underproduced by markets\textsuperscript{1} -- and Shirky argues that by removing the barriers to social coordination, we see an increase in participatory engagement.

Where I depart from Shirky is in his dismissal of coordinating institutions of any sort. In practice, all large-scale online collaborative communities feature some form of bureaucratic control. The Linux operating system, frequently featured as the shining example of non-market, non-firm based “commons-based peer production” (Benkler 2006), is overseen by Linus Torvalds and his “lieutenants” (Weber 2004). Wikipedia has a set of volunteer administrators and an increasing array of institutional rules enforced through code or community. As Steven Weber makes clear, “open source” does not indicate the absence of mediating organizations, it indicates the rise of different institutions. And from the political organization’s perspective, the internet provides an expanded toolset for political campaigning rather than a bountiful upwelling of social participation. The new medium has affected the structure of advocacy groups, their relationships to supports, and their tactical repertoires. The focus on individual tactics such as e-petitions, youtube videos, facebook profiles, and blog posts has obscured the mediating organizations themselves. To judge the new tools of political action in the absence of such organizations is to miss a critical transformation. The PCCC again provides a telling example, indicating the difference between focusing on internet-mediated organizations and individual internet-mediated tactics:

The PCCC’s first high-profile action occurred in April, 2009. Democrat Al Franken had narrowly won the Minnesota Senate seat in the 2008 election, but by such a

\textsuperscript{1} see Olson 1965 for the classical formulation, as well as Lupia and Sin 2003, Bimber, Flanagan and Stohl 2005 and Lev-On and Hardin 2008 for reformulations under internet communications.
close margin that a recount had been required and Republican Norm Coleman was contesting the recount in a long-running court challenge. By April, it had become clear that the challenge was primarily a delaying tactic, preventing the Democratic party from adding an additional liberal voice to the upper chamber of Congress. Blogging at OpenLeft.com, an elite progressive political community blog, PCCC co-founder Adam Green offered a withering critique of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee’s (DSCC’s) e-mail action.

“Working for MoveOn from 2005-2008, I wrote lots of emails inviting people to take action. … I’ll never fault anyone for trying weird, wacky new things [in e-mails] – even if they fail. **With one caveat: Every activist email must have a plausible ‘theory of change.’** People should see some concrete theory about why taking action could lead to a desired result. But some people choose to inflame people’s passions just to get their email addresses (and more likely than not, to fundraise from them – as opposed to later engaging them in quality activism). This sullys (sic) the online activism process for the rest of us.”

Green then posted the full text of a DSCC e-petition he had just received, which asked supportive Democrats to sign a petition asking Norm Coleman to give up his Senate challenge. He noted that the “petition” link immediately took supporters to a “donate” page, then argued that the message lacked any clear “theory of change.” In Green’s words, “if you think about it, why on earth would Norm Coleman listen to the DSCC? Can you think of a less credible messenger than the DC committee whose sole role is to defeat Senate Republicans like Coleman?” He then crafted an alternate message, one which he felt could prove far more effective:

Dear Adam,

First they counted the votes. Then they recounted them. Then they painstakingly went over every disputed ballot by hand. It was the
most thorough and exhaustive recount process Minnesota has ever seen.

It's time to give it up, Norm. President Obama needs Al Franken in the Senate. It's time to concede the race. Click here to add your voice.

First the bipartisan canvassing board declared Al Franken the winner of the U.S. Senate race in Minnesota.

But Norm Coleman didn't like that result, so he took it to court. And now when even his own lawyers are predicting he'll lose, Coleman's threatening to keep appealing to more and more courts.

How many more recounts does Norm Coleman want? How many more delays? How much longer will the Republican Party hold Minnesota's Senate seat hostage?

**Coleman can end it today and give Minnesota the two Senators it's entitled to. But he's not going to give up unless we convince him to act. So let's speak with one voice and tell Norm Coleman it's time to go.**

Tell Norm Coleman to pack it in, give up the endless court battles, and concede the race so Minnesota has its full representation in Congress.

Green offered this as a pedagogical exercise of sorts; the title of the post is “Profiles in Bad Online Organizing, Part 1.” But in the comment thread, username “jman077” replied, “So, um, why don’t you go ahead and make that a thing?” After it became clear that the DSCC was not going to pick up the suggestion themselves, the PCCC did so, eventually raising over $200,000 and attracting attention from the national media and progressive leaders alike. The action built their membership, provided early funds for the organization in its infancy, and announced their presence as a crafty, nimble political operation.

This is a simple example, one that nicely illustrates the circumscribed set of political practices that have been changed by the internet. Norm Coleman did not immediately drop his challenge in response to waves of online protest. $200,000 is a lot
of money for an individual action alert, but it is a fraction of what is spent in a modern congressional race (Coleman and Franken spent a combined $25 million in the 2008 Senate race). To the extent that proponents of “digital democracy” had fostered hopes of wholesale political transformation, an action like this may seem a disappointment.

But simple “clicktivism” it is not. We see here that even the leading online organizers are critical of e-mail and facebook activism, when poorly constructed. The internet offers an expanded toolset for crafting political actions. It multiplies the number of voices that can participate in the public sphere, and changes the venues through which such engagement occurs. Fifteen years earlier, progressives like Green would likewise be critical of a DSCC action. But their options were limited to entirely public denunciations (a Washington Post Op-Ed piece, perhaps) or entirely private criticisms (a phone call or letter to a personal contact within the DSCC). In 2009, Green was able to voice his critique to an attentive community-of-interest, using it as a “teachable moment,” of sorts. Then, through a dialogue with members of that community, it led to a productive mobilization strategy that leveraged organizational resources and built capacity. The PCCC became a stronger organization through this internet-mediated action, one that would have been impossible in the older media environment. And it is no coincidence that this action came through a newly formed, internet-mediated organization. As we will see, there are structural impediments to “legacy” political associations fully committing themselves to this sort of internet-mediated tactical experimentation. We are living through a period of disruptive innovation, which benefits the rise of new organizations over their longstanding peers. Thus, though wholesale citizen engagement only changes at the margins (less than 30,000 people took part in this particular action, in
a country of 310,000,000 individuals), it represents a significant shift in how advocacy
groups engage with their citizen-supporters. One can simultaneously be underwhelmed
by the average e-petition and still hold that the internet represents a major transformation
of the public sphere.

**The Internet as “Sequence of Revolutions”**

As Jonathan Zysman and Abe Newman note, “…Information technology
represents not one, but a sequence of revolutions. It is a continued and enduring
unfolding of digital innovation, sustaining a long process of industrial adaptation and
transition.” This “sequence of revolutions” makes the internet distinct from previous
communications “revolutions,” posing a unique problem for social scientists attempting
to identify the impacts of new technology on society. All communications technologies
go through a diffusion process, and it has been well-established that the rate of internet
penetration into American homes has occurred faster than radio, telephone, or television
[figure 1 will be a graph of adoption over time, similar to Prior’s, pg 13]. Social uses
tend to change as a technology diffuses, and the rapid diffusion rate of internet access has
led every US election since 1996 to be labeled “the year of the internet.²” Important
milestones have indeed been reached in each of these elections, with 1996 marking the
first campaign website, Jesse Ventura’s internet-supported 1998 victory in the Minnesota
governor’s race, John McCain’s online fundraising in the 2000 presidential primary,
Howard Dean’s landmark 2004 primary campaign, the “netroots” fundraising and

² NOTE-TO-SELF, ADD CITES.
Senator George Allen’s “Macaca moment” on YouTube in 2006, and Barack Obama’s historic 2008 campaign organization. Similarly, Bruce Bimber traces internet-mediated issue activism as far back as 1999, with libertarian criticism of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation’s “Know Your Customer” regulatory proposal (Bimber 2003, pg 2), and Kahn and Kellner focus attention on the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” as the first instance of internet-mediated social movement protests facilitated by the internet. But what makes the medium unique is that, simultaneous with its social diffusion, the underlying technology and the practices it can support has continued to change in important ways. The internet of 2008 is different than the internet of 1996, 2000, or 2004, and this is a pattern that we should expect to continue.

Consider the following puzzle: “What was John Kerry’s YouTube strategy in the 2004 election?”

YouTube is a major component of the internet today. The video-sharing site is the 3rd most popular destination on the internet, as recorded by Alexa.com. Political campaigns now develop special “web advertisements” with no intention of buying airtime on television, simply placing the ads on YouTube in the hopes of attracting commentary from the blogosphere and resultant media coverage (Wallsten 2010 Barzilai-Nehon 2010). The medium is viewed as so influential that an entire political science conference in 2009 was devoted to “YouTube and the 2008 election.” Yet no social scientist has ever looked at John Kerry’s use of the site in the prior election cycle. The absence (if it weren’t so easy to explain) would be utterly baffling. How could we focus so much attention on YouTube in 2006 and 2008 while ignoring it completely in earlier cycles?
The answer, of course, is that John Kerry had no YouTube strategy. YouTube, founded in 2005, did not exist yet. The internet of the 1990s and early 2000s featured smaller bandwidth, slower upload times, and less-abundant storage. The technical conditions necessary for YouTube to exist were not present until approximately 2005. To the extent that video-sharing, and the capacity of individuals to record, remix, and react to video content without relying on traditional broadcast organizations, impacts American politics, it is an impact that makes the internet of 2004 different from the internet of 2008.

Social science observational techniques were not developed with such a rapidly-changing information environment in mind. Bimber and Davis, for instance, received multiple awards for Campaigning Online, a rigorously detailed study of the internet and the 2000 election. After clearly demonstrating that political websites were visited predominantly by existing supporters, they reasoned that the medium would prove relatively ineffective in efforts to persuade undecided voters. As such, they reach the conclusion that the internet would likely have a relatively minimal impact on American politics. As it happens, Bimber and Davis’s book was published in November 2003, just as the internet-infused Howard Dean primary campaign was at its zenith. The Dean campaign was using the internet to mobilize supporters with overwhelming effectiveness, drawing large crowds and setting records for online donations. To his day, the Dean campaign is synonymous with internet campaigning; the contrast between scholarly wisdom and current events could not have been more stark. Yet it would be patently absurd to criticize Bimber and Davis for not foreseeing the Dean phenomenon. The internet of 2000 was not a particularly effective tool for mobilization – Bimber and Davis investigated this matter and correctly dismissed it. But the internet of 2004 had changed.
Not only had connectivity diffused further (more people turning online for more activities), but various features of the medium itself, including bandwidth, supporting software code, cheap processors and cheap storage, had changed as well, supporting drastically different usage patterns.

It is safe to say that the internet has *multiple* impacts on politics. Philip N. Howard describes the expansion of political data and the new practice of microtargeting and “managed citizens” that emerges as a result (Howard 2005). The data-rich online environment indeed has produced a fragmented media environment in which corporations have increasing abilities to modify their communications to consumers based on sophisticated data mining (Turow 2006). Cass Sunstein warns of the rise of online “echo chambers,” in which consumers’ ability to seek out information that confirms their preexisting interests and political biases leads to an increasingly fractured public sphere. Pippa Norris (2001) first warned of the “digital divide,” in which the benefits of internet access are enjoyed disproportionately by those who are economically and socially well-off. Though gaps in internet access have largely closed thanks to the rapid diffusion of the internet, Eszter Hargattai (2008) and others have noted the emergence of a skills-divide, in which digital media literacy reinforces existing social cleavages. Robert Putnam warned in 2000 that the internet served as a tool of social isolation, and he was joined by ______’s empirical study in 200x. A competing study, [x] years later, found the reverse. It may in fact be the case that both of these conflicting findings were true – that the internet of 2000 was essentially anti-social, but the internet of 200[x] had evolved into a socially-augmenting tool! Two concepts popular among technologists help to
illustrate this “series of revolutions” concept: the “hourglass architecture” of the internet and “Moore’s Law.”

The hourglass architecture of the internet refers to the multiple “layers” that make up the communications medium. Figure 2, borrowed from Jonathan Zittrain’s *The Future of the Internet, and How to Stop It*, provides an illustrated version of three such layers. At the bottom of the hourglass is the “physical layer” – the wires and airwaves that transmit data between connected computational devices (including personal computers, computer servers and, increasingly, mobile phones). The thin middle of the hourglass is the “protocol layer.” For computational devices to all access the same internet, shared standards for computer-to-computer interaction must be settled upon. While there can be diversity and experimentation at the physical layer and the layers resting on top of the protocol layer, the protocol layer requires nearly universal coordination, thus representing a bottleneck in experimentation. Above the protocol layer rests the “application layer,” including email, the World Wide Web, mobile phone-based internet connectivity, etcetera. When *Wired* magazine proclaimed on its front cover in September 2010 that “The Web is Dead,” it was based on an evidence that other internet applications were consuming increasing portions of bandwidth and user-attention. Resting atop this application layer (and not pictured in Zittrain’s figure 2) are the “content layer,” where developments such as the rise of YouTube and Facebook occur, and the “social layer” of new user behavior.

When I speak of the internet and politics in this book, I am primarily referring to the application, content, and social layers at which citizens directly interact with

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3 see Denardis 2009 for a discussion of the politics performed through these standards-setting organizations.
information and with one another. Doing so groups multiple technologies, each appearing and diffusing sequentially, under a singular heading. The first e-mail was sent in 1965, technically predating the invention of the internet (Partridge 2008). The World Wide Web was created between in 1990, with the Mosaic web browser’s 1993 launch rendering the first web pages to general public audiences. Mobile phones, meanwhile, have moved from SMS-based text message capability to “walled garden” versions of web content, to full mobile web access, to a new set of applications built specifically for mobile operating systems. All of these technologies share the features of reduced transaction costs, many-to-many communication, and information abundance. Yet the types of participatory activity occurring on the internet is shaped through the continuing, and rapid, innovation occurring through the medium.
This state of continual innovation can be thought of as a direct implication of “Moore’s Law,” the longstanding prediction that computing capacity would grow exponentially, doubling approximately once every 18 to 24 months. First articulated by Gordon Moore, the cofounder of Intel, in a 1965 article, the prediction has proven surprisingly resilient for nearly 50 years. Doubling the number of transistors on a silicon chip would not appear to have direct political impacts, but in practice it has led to increasingly abundant, increasingly cheap computational capacity, leading to a culture of ostentatious innovation within the computer industry. Content layer applications like
YouTube capitalize on Moore’s Law, relying both on the spread of cheap video recording and editing devices, increased upload speeds, and the economies-of-scale offered by Google’s server farms\(^4\), that can serve up petabytes of data while capitalizing on the revenue generated by targeted internet advertisements.

Moore’s Law is a touchstone concept among technologists, but has attracted scant attention amongst social scientists and political observers. Among the major books and articles published on the topic of the internet and politics, only a handful have offered even a cursory analysis of the rapid, exponential growth in computational capacity. The few that have done so, such as Steven Weber’s *The Success of Open Source* (2004) and Zysman and Newman’s edited volume, *How Revolutionary is the Revolution* (2007) looked specifically at the political economy of the internet. Similarly, several scholars associated with Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society (Levine, Locke, Weinberger and Seals 2001, Rheingold 2002, Weinberger 2003, 2008, Benkler 2006, Zittrain 2007, Palfrey and Gasser 2008, Clippinger 2007, Shirky 2008) have offered key insights into the social impact of Moore’s Law. Studies of political institutions and political behavior have largely ignored the trend.

Simply put, then, it is my argument that the internet, unlike previous revolutions in communications technology, is in a state of *ongoing* transformation. Whereas the radio, phone, and television remained essentially static as they achieved broader social penetration, the internet of 2008 is different from the internet of 1998. Developments in the application and content layers drive different patterns of participation at the social layer, and this means that pronouncements about the internet’s impact on politics in any

\[^4\] Google purchased YouTube in November 2006.
given year may have a limited “shelf life,” so to speak. As the medium changes, the uses it supports change as well. The *ceteris paribus* (“all other things being equal”) assumption underlying most social scientific research is violated when the medium under investigation is, itself, still in a state of active development. One thing that remains constant, however, is that large-scale, complex tasks such as those composing collective political action continue to require the development of institutions and supporting organizations. Thus my attention in this book on the new generation of political advocacy groups is motivated both by a substantive interest in changes to political associations and in a methodological skepticism about online research that treats the internet of year X as indicative of the internet of year X+2. 2012 and 2014 will also, in some non-trivial manner, politically prove to be “the year of the internet.” Some new development in the new media ecology will demand investigation and challenge previous assumptions. The constant, I argue, is that there will continue to be some set of institutions mediating large-scale activity\(^5\). Changes to the political economy of those institutions prove less ephemeral in nature. What’s more, longstanding studies of innovation patterns within technology industries provide a window into the disruptive pattern occurring in dozens of industries, and appearing now in the field of nonprofit political advocacy as well.

**Disruption Theory**

\(^5\) small-scale collaboration has always occurred in the absence of institutions.
Moore’s Law led to a key insight in the business literature on the economics of innovation: *disruption theory*. In a study of the 1970s-era microprocessor industry, Clayton Christensen identified an ongoing pattern of market leaders being displaced by new entrants. Within a well-developed industrial sector, new innovations should mostly come from existing market leaders, who invest a portion of their substantial budgets into Research and Development departments for the purpose of maintaining or increasing market share. In the absence of mismanagement, the leading firms in a given sector should continue to dominate that sector. Christensen was attracted to the computer processor industry because the dominant firms, heralded in any given year for stellar management practices, were so often being overtaken by new market entrants. His central contribution was a distinction between *sustaining innovations* – improved the rate of performance among the industry’s standard products – and *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 thesis 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 demonstrate 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. His proposed
solution for large firms facing a disruptive economic landscape is to develop an independent organization (sometimes called a “skunkworks”) within the firm, charged with acting like a startup and responding to the disruptive moment. Given the rapid pace of change in the computer industry, the disruptive pattern is particularly acute in information technology-related fields.

The number of business sectors that, today, must be considered “information technology-related” has expanded radically thanks to the spread of online connectivity. 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 much of the U.S. newspaper industry. As Pablo Boszkowski indicates (2004), major newspapers were early adopters of the internet, experimenting with various online formats throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet CraigsList, which itself is not a news-producer, undermined the classified advertising market that served as a core revenue stream for the newspaper industry (Jones 2009). This disruption of revenue streams has been a central theme in the news crisis in America – much more so than the availability of alternative content delivery institutions like political blogs (Nielsen and Vaccari 2010), which attract far fewer readers than the web pages of major news sites6. The revenue generated through online advertisements is not enough to replace older revenue streams, however, creating a problem for longstanding media institutions with large staffing and overhead, printing and distribution costs, along with a existing debts accrued through the debt-leveraged consolidation of the 1990s. As internet-connected devices – from desktop to mobile phone – increasingly pervade daily

6 [LENGTHY FOOTNOTE ON ALEXA COMPARISON OF NYTIMES, WAPO, AND HUFFPO, TPM, DAILYBEAST, HOTAIR]
life, longstanding news sources have remained popular, but the revenue streams that subsidized their production have been undermined, leading to the disruption of the news industry.

Similar disruptions are underway in book publishing and video rental, where Amazon.com and Netflix.com present more direct challenges to the existing market leaders. Jeff Bezos founded Amazon as an unlimited clearinghouse for finding published works, and in so doing leveraged the self-publishing industry out of irrelevance and challenged the longstanding publishing houses. Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings likewise developed a video-by-mail service that eventually drove Blockbuster video into bankruptcy. Here the practical application of Moore’s Law is most obvious, as Netflix has increasingly focused on offering free Video-on-Demand services to its subscribers, taking advantage of advances in bandwidth, data storage, and processor speed that previously left such services unviable. If the US economy of the 1990s was characterized by the “dotcom bubble,” major economic sectors of the late 2000s and early 2010s are characterized by the disruptive pattern, in which emerging markets lead to the disruption of longstanding revenue streams, leading in turn to the decline of old institutions by new market entrants.

The thesis of this book could be understood as an application of disruption theory to the nonprofit advocacy sector. As we will see in chapter 2, the spread of information technology has negatively affected direct mail fundraising a core revenue stream for longstanding political associations. Those groups spent the 1990s embracing the internet as a sustaining innovation of sorts, embracing e-petitions and other online communications tools to enhance their existing campaign practices. But as direct mail
fundraising is increasingly replaced by targeted online fundraising, the old political associations face a major challenge in paying for the large offices and staff support that the old revenue stream supported. The change in membership and fundraising regimes affects the political economy of 21st century political associations, supporting the rise of internet-mediated groups like the PCCC, with small, nimble staffs, minimal overhead costs, novel tactical repertoires, and modified relationships with their member-supporters. More troubling for the existing groups, Christensen’s standard solution of creating an independent organization within the firm proves less applicable to political associations, given that their nonprofit status leaves them with far less revenue to invest in research and development of any type. The trouble for longstanding advocacy groups is not that their work has become less valued by society, it is that the revenue streams which subsidize that work have changed, and new political associations prove better-suited to the emerging communications environment. What emerges instead is not one single, overarching model for new political associations, but rather a series of group models, all of which take advantage of the lowered transaction costs and information abundance of the new medium to connect with their community-of-interest and forward their political goals. While chapter 2 offers a detailed assessment of “The MoveOn Effect,” or the disruptive impact of new membership and fundraising regimes (pioneered by MoveOn.org), chapters 3 and 4 investigate alternative ideal-type internet-mediated organizations through analysis of their most-prominent exemplars.

Online Traffic Patterns and The “Field of Dreams” Fallacy
It is self-evident at this point that the internet allows for practically limitless self-publication. Whereas freedom of the press, in A.J. Liebling’s words, was once limited “to those who own[ed] one,” the new information environment reduces the price of self-publication to zero. However, as Hindman has persuasively shown, there is a significant difference between speaking online and being heard. The abundance of information online leads to the development of heavily-skewed power law distribution in web traffic (Barabasi 2001, Hindman 2003, Shirky 2003, Drezner and Farrell 2008, Karpf 2008), in which a small set of hub sites receive the vast majority of activity. While a blog post at the Huffington Post or DailyKos routinely receives hundreds or thousands of reader-comments, the average blog receives zero comments per post. While the average online petition receives at most a handful of signatures, an e-petition cosponsored by the PCCC, MoveOn, and Organizing for America will draw hundreds of thousands of signatures. In the realm of the internet, it is essential to keep in mind that big is different than small (Weinberger 2008).

The development of these online hubs is a function of information abundance. Online communities – political or otherwise – are networked goods (Sunstein 2006). The value we derive from them is a function of the size and attributes of their connected community. Larger online community spaces offer more valuable conversation and peer-produced content than equivalent smaller spaces. Hence, though there are several online encyclopedias, including Citizendium, which was created by one of the founders of Wikipedia, the difference in traffic and content-generation levels between Wikipedia and everything else is orders-of-magnitude in size. As Joseph Reagle (2010) notes,

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7 BIG FOOTNOTE LISTING ASSUMPTIONS. CLARIFY THIS, BUT DON’T GUM UP THE TEXT!
Wikipedia is “both a community and an encyclopedia.” Likewise, Chris Kelty notes that open source is both a software product and a “recursive public” of engaged participants (Kelty 2008). For internet-mediated political groups, we see a similar pattern. Large political blogs or internet-mediated advocacy organizations gain additional value from their membership size, and this in turn leads to advances in funding, media presence, and reputation that make them increasingly attractive to potential member/supporters.

For this reason, the research in this book focuses exclusively on large-scale political associations, eschewing the multitude of failed online mobilization attempts found online. For every major action taken by MoveOn.org, there exists an unlimited number of Facebook petitions that fail to accomplish anything at all. For every DailyKos, there are thousands of political blogs that are hastily started and hastily abandoned. Far from contradicting the internet’s impact on political associations, this is a feature of the emerging political environment. To assume otherwise is to commit what I have elsewhere termed the “Field of Dreams Fallacy” (Karpf 2011). The various successes of internet-mediated collective action should not be taken to indicate that, “if you build it, they will come.” The same supportive software code that enables MoveOn or the PCCC is successful because of the community they have assembled. In the hands of a new entrant to the political landscape, particularly one that is attempting to attract the same limited populace of politically-engaged citizens already engaged with those groups, the lowered transaction costs of online communication do not guarantee a supportive participatory community.
Outline of the Book

The premise of this book is that the internet, as a “series of revolutions,” has multiple effects on American politics. Rather than focusing on any single element at the content or social layer of the medium (an ever-changing topology that combines software, hardware, people, and communities), the book instead focuses on the more permanent effects of the new medium for the political economy of political associations. Just as the internet has had multiple effects on our political discourse – some positive, some negative, the disruptive shift in membership and fundraising regimes has led not to a single overarching organizational model, but to several related ones. I investigate these changes through a combination of methods, including multiple years of ethnographic observation and elite interview with the political “netroots,” along with detailed content analysis of e-mails, blog posts, and other texts produced by new and organizations alike. The methodology employed is similar to Philip Howard’s (2005) “network ethnography” and Joseph Reagle’s (2010) “historically-informed ethnography” in principle; it draws from the political science tradition of “soaking and poking” as practiced by Richard Fenno. The goal of such methods is primarily theory-building rather than theory-testing – it is my intention to help shed light on a previously poorly-understood topic. These primarily qualitative observational methods are augmented in places with large original datasets, such as the Membership Communications Project (chapter 2 – email analysis) and the Blogosphere Authority Index (chapter 3 – blog ranking mechanism) [ADD REFERENCE TO CH 5 “LINKEDIN SURVEY”]
In the course of this research, I have identified three basic ideal-types that characterize the various internet-mediated, “netroots” political associations. All such groups define membership through simple acts of participation – signing an e-petition, forwarding a viral video, or signing up for a free account. The decoupling of membership and donor-status is a central commonality among all of the new generation of associations. Likewise, all such groups rely heavily on the internet to facilitate communication among their small, networked staffs, and all such groups rely on some collection of data aggregation services to quickly identify the interests of their member base. As a result of these changes to staff size and communication speed, all of these new groups display a “nimble” quality, focusing membership attention around relevant issues at the top of the public agenda.

What differentiates the three ideal-types is in how they use the internet to interact with members. Groups like MoveOn and PCCC, for instance, rely primarily on e-mail for member communication. Their web pages are sparse, and when they do engage in web-based actions (such as PCCC’s “Call Out the Vote” distributed GOTV program) they frequently develop separate web sites for that purpose (www.calloutthecvote.com). Major community blogs like DailyKos and FireDogLake, meanwhile, operate as web-based gathering places for an online community-of-interest. The DailyKos community (self-described “Kossacks”) consists of thousands of active diarists who contribute content to the site. Such online communities can have major political impacts, particularly when they direct their joint attention to a shared political priority or candidate, resulting in waves of donations and campaign actions. Meanwhile, neo-federated groups like Democracy for America (DFA) and Living Liberally use e-mail to
communicate with members, but those communications center around announcements of upcoming offline events, offering “online tools for offline action.”

These three types of communication – organization-to-member/online, member-to-member/online, and member-to-member/offline – are non-exclusive categories. There are DailyKos “meetups” and local MoveOn Councils. DFA frequently collaborates with the PCCC on national email actions, and DailyKos started collecting visitor e-mail addresses in August 2010. Democracy for America’s blog, “Blog for America,” was one of the early influential political blogs, and Adam Green of the PCCC routinely writes diary posts for DailyKos and OpenLeft.com. The book will use these organizations as guiding case examples to explore these three organizational models, emphasizing the dominant features and political implications of each in turn. Chapter 2 uses MoveOn to illustrate changes to membership and fundraising regimes, and to highlight the disruptive nature of the current change to the political economy of advocacy groups. Chapter 3 turns to the political blogosphere, an arena which has often been miscast as consisting solely of “citizen journalism.” Sites like DailyKos engage in similar mobilization practices to more traditional advocacy groups, yet they are frequently left out of discussions of political organizations. The chapter discusses the evolution of the political blogosphere and the increasingly organization-like status of major political community blogs. Chapter 4 then turns to the neo-federated organizations, focusing in particular on DFA’s local affiliate in Philadelphia, PA, Philly for Change. The chapter also discusses the institutional niche of offline social events organized through Living Liberally, and the increasing importance of online coordination tools as mobile web access renders the boundaries between “online” and “offline” increasingly porous.
Chapters 5 and 6 offer a more holistic treatment of the internet’s effect on political associations, tracing two themes that are present within and between all of the groups in this study. Chapter 5 takes a look at the staff roles and structure among the new generation of advocacy groups. Focusing on career paths and skill sets, it argues that the smaller staff size allows for less routinized labor practices among these new nonprofit associations. Drawing upon the culture of technology start-ups, in which several top staffers were once employed, these groups maintain a culture of “ostentatious innovation” that helps them to keep apace with new developments in the web. What results is, to borrow a phrase from Andrew Chadwick, a set of “hybrid organizations” (Chadwick 2007) that borrow from the traditional tactical repertoires of interest groups, political parties, and social movement organizations. Much like the open source software communities studied by Christopher Kelty (2007), the individual staffers of these organizations tend to be polymaths, developing fluency across multiple areas of expertise to better leverage their influence in an increasingly rapid news cycle.

Chapter 6 looks at the backchannel GoogleGroup listservs that serve to tie netroots political operatives together into a movement. Off-the-record lists such as “TownHouse” and “JournoList” (now defunct, see Karpf 2010) serve to allow bloggers, policy experts, organizational staff, and other interested parties to establish an online space for debate and coordination outside of the public spotlight. Operating under “Fight Club Rules” forbidding the public discussion of such lists, no one actually knows how many of these issue-by-issue informal lists exist. Relying on completely anonymized content analysis of several backchannel listservs, chapter 6 offers a window into the type of conversations that go on in these otherwise invisible communications settings. In so
doing, the chapter offers a key insight into how the public sphere has changed as a result of the internet: American politics has always been characterized by elite networks (C. Wright Mills 1956). Whereas the elite networks of previous years were *publicly visible, but closed* – a country club, or a corporate board – the new elite networks of the 21st century are *publicly opaque, but porous*. Such networks have not provided a wholesale replacement of the corporate boards and elite institutions that have represented the pathways to power. But they have increased the number of venues through which a motivated citizen can make his or her voice heard. We remain a system of elites, but it is a *different* system of elites, and at least a moderate improvement over the past.

Absent from the case examples in chapters 2-6 is any representation of the conservative political associations. Chapter 7 offers a detailed explanation of the reason why, as well as the theory of “Outparty Innovation Incentives” that helps to explain the partisan adoption of technological innovations over time. Simply put, the main reason why conservative groups are not included in this study is because, from 2004 through early 2009, what was most noteworthy was the relative dearth of online conservative political institutions. Recognizing the success of groups like MoveOn and DailyKos, conservative political leaders continuously attempted to build equivalent organizations. Their efforts failed, time and time again. Rather than engage in false equivalency, choosing weak conservative analogues to the strong new organizations found on the left, I instead endeavored to investigate why. The rise of the internet-mediated “Tea Party” movement that has revitalized grassroots conservatism conforms quite well to the theoretical explanation laid out in chapter 7: new political groups sprout, and new
innovations are embraced, when a party network is undergoing its own internal disruption.

Chapter 8 offers concluding thoughts and summary findings, using the “governance organizing” model employed by Barack Obama’s Organizing for America (OFA) to investigate the internet’s various impacts on the organizational layer of American politics. OFA’s station within the Democratic National Committee renders it a unique case, but one that draws directly upon the former staff members, best practices, and organizational routines of the organizations that are the focus of this book. Both the organization’s successes in mobilizations and its frustrations in crafting a “new type of politics” help to illuminate both what the internet has changed, and what stays the same, in American politics today.