

Defending Underage Migrants *across* Free Online Spaces: *Behind the Scenes of a “Non-Organization”*

by Philippe Eynaud, Damien Mourey, and Nathalie Raulet-Croset

“ABCD” has no hierarchy, legal structure, financial means, or official positions or roles.

So how does this CSO continue to expand and function at a high level? As the authors explain, its streamlined nature supports its organizing via a web of online and physical social spaces; its self-regulation emerges dynamically at the local level and then diffuses nationally; rules emerge organically via the exchanges of information across the network; and its regulation processes are due to both human agency and technological and spatial agency.

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THE MOST VISIBLE PART OF AN OPEN AND WIDELY based social movement relates to its mobilizing activities and framing processes to engender mass resistance.¹

Yet a social movement is also characterized by a

recursive (looping) relationship between mobilizing (front-stage) and organizing (backstage) activities.² We are interested here in the creation and unfolding over time of the political agency of civil society organizations (CSOs).³ More specifically, we want to demonstrate that this political agency takes shape within the recursive relationship between the organizing and mobilizing processes. We study types of CSOs combining a strong organizational identity as perceived from the outside with a diversity of identities within. We claim that the political agency, which is viewed as a “distributed and plural agency,” is based on

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the organization.⁴ We therefore define a particular form of political agency, a “distributed political agency,” that is a specific trait of some CSOs. To more deeply understand the emerging process of this “distributed political agency,” we take the theoretical perspective on regulation elaborated by French sociologist Jean-Daniel Reynaud. We analyze regulation processes that may be *control based* (hierarchical) but may also be coproduced by members of the organization and therefore be *autonomous* (diffuse and organic). Such processes enable the relationship between mobilizing and organizing.⁵

We propose that this type of organization forms a distributed political agency by combining the two regulating processes. The latter (autonomous) emphasizes organizing processes, and shows that an organization shapes its own identity through its internal debates. This perspective highlights the importance of social interaction, as it is this internal debate that shapes the organization. Focus is placed on connections between actors and actions. The organization is viewed as a “distributed and plural agency”⁶ or as an “action net,”⁷ all contributing to the creation and nurturing of both the organizational identity and that of the actors.

The formal and structural components of social movement organizations are rather elusive and scant: their militants explicitly emphasize the egalitarian, horizontal, democratic, and transparent way of making decisions and taking action. They also pride themselves on not being similar to any other existing organizational form, and often vow to disappear when their mission has been fulfilled.⁸ Moreover, in this day and age, most social movements resort to easy-to-use online technology, and their members become online users. This online nature has reinforced the trend in social movements toward bare-bones formal organizational features and lack of formal rules.

These flexible organizations are highly responsive and can mobilize quickly. The quest for massive and far-reaching mobilization is a powerful strategy for advocacy and action, but it goes hand in hand with significant risks of losing control. Mission drift, the push for more-powerful governance structures, anarchic growth, controversies within the movement, the maintenance

of pluralism among members—all are risks to an open social movement where almost anyone can become a member through online registration to any existing e-mail list.⁹ Yet, these self-proclaimed “no rules” organizations cannot thrive and stay true to themselves without rules, even if the latter are informal and invisible from the outside. Rules are essential in maintaining an organization’s fundamental core values such as pluralism, openness, agility, and resistance. Therefore, such organizations offer interesting organizational contexts for studying their underlying regulation processes, which cannot be understood through classic dual oppositions of formal/informal, effective/affective, local/global rules.

In this article, we describe an emblematic French organization whose actions sometimes border legality: a citizen’s movement defending undocumented migrant students. This organization, which we will call “ABCD” to preserve its anonymity, is a collection of different cells that continue to expand by adding newly formed local cells across the country. Every cell unfolds within social spaces of exchange and interaction of two different forms: e-mail lists and regular face-to-face meetings. We analyze how these face-to-face and online social spaces relate to the organization’s regulation processes. We focus in particular on how regulation processes contribute to defining communities (which can be considered as places of regulation in the organization), and, in return, how these processes are influenced by the existence of these communities. We explore the recursive interplay between mobilizing activities and organizing processes of this politically driven CSO. More specifically, we investigate how this so-called “non-organization” manages to balance its political dimension and agency both externally and internally. And, we demonstrate that the making of its political agency is both distributed across the organization and articulated to make up a consistent whole.

First, we show that this organization—with its bare-bones organizational features and populated by an array of local cells, each developing its own identity—preserves its global identity and develops informal control through a joint regulation process combining autonomous and

control-based rules. Second, in analyzing the functioning of this organization—which relies on a set of tools revolving around the use of information systems and a set of social spaces—we argue that processes of regulation are also enacted through the material side of these tools and social spaces, and are not just the result of human agency. We then identify how human agency and material agency entwine with regulation processes, and we highlight in particular the role of “broker” played by specific actors at the interface of the different communities.

A Process Approach to Producing Rules

Rules are often considered as orders or injunctions prescribing behaviors in the workplace, and are viewed as somewhat immutable. From that perspective, rules enable collective action, since they provide stability and order actors’ conduct in the workplace. Yet another perspective on rules, originating from Reynaud, focuses on “social regulation”—that is, the process of producing rules. From this perspective, rules are considered “a guide for action, a standard enabling an informed judgment, a model orienting action.”¹⁰ A rule “advises the making of a decision as it often allows one to define the ongoing situation, to differentiate from different cases and to specify the meaning of the facts under review.”¹¹ Reynaud argues that the production of rules defines both the actors supporting the rules and the communities that get formed around the rules and stabilize in time through their use. As a result, a rule is both an outcome, since it manifests the rationality and the logic of a community, and also the condition for building and maintaining this community, whose members accept this common rule.¹² Viewed as a process, rule making fosters dynamism and initiatives in organizations, especially when rules are made “autonomously” and not hierarchically.

Three concepts are articulated in this theory of social regulation: *conflict*, *negotiation*, and *rule*.¹³ *Conflicts* are viewed as inevitable, since any actor promotes his or her own agenda and tries to make others accept it. Communities get defined through conflicts, and they may later oppose one another. Through *negotiation*, actors establish a community by discovering common interests, common

ground, and areas of convergence. Once a *rule* is defined and accepted within a community, abiding by it produces both a belonging to the community and the resolution of the conflict(s), even if temporarily.

“Control-Based Rules” Versus “Autonomous Rules”

Reynaud demonstrates that two apparently contradictory and complex phenomena coexist in organizations—those of control and autonomy. He focuses on the interplay that fosters a dynamic creation of rules. The theory of social regulation originates from the study of industrial relations. This explains why Reynaud associates specific rules with categories of actors in an organization. He studies forms of control that spread across an organization, and his thinking sets *control-based rules* (which originate from management, are based on hierarchical power, and go from the top to the bottom of any organization) in opposition to *autonomous rules* (which are produced locally by groups of workers themselves). This approach goes beyond a dual perspective that would merely oppose global to local dimensions of regulation. Indeed, it shows that the combination of different forms of legitimacy—ones that would be rational-legal and others that would point to more specific and scattered forms of legitimacy—produces these local and more informal regulations. The distinction between control-based and autonomous rules is related to an actor’s strategic orientation and position within the organization. As argued by Reynaud, “[A] rule is not by itself a control-based or an autonomous rule. It becomes such only through the organizational place of the actor issuing it and through the way the rule is used in practice. Control and autonomy therefore point to the use of a rule, not to its nature.”¹⁴

Yves Lichtenberger also indicates that a control rule establishes a relationship of subordination, whereas an autonomous rule establishes a relationship of solidarity.¹⁵ An autonomous rule knits together a community of peers. It is an obligation that actors create for themselves, and implies the involvement and engagement of actors. As a result, forms of disengagement in organizations could endanger the existence of autonomous rules.

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More broadly, in order to understand regulation processes, it is paramount to identify the actors issuing a rule, their position within the organization, and, more important, the communities defined by the emergence of a new rule. This theoretical perspective on control and regulation that make way for both local emergence and global control seems rather appealing when undertaking study of a particular type of organization: those claiming both a hierarchy-free mode of organizing that limits as much as possible control-based rules (derived from a rational-legal form of legitimacy) and also their determination to grant their members maximum autonomy. Such organizations exist in particular in social movements.

Considering the Socio-Material Dimension of Rules

Combining the study of regulation processes and the materiality in organizations could prove a fruitful avenue of research. Organizations have different forms of materiality. Whether one considers an organization through its technologies or through its managerial tools,¹⁶ its written records or even speeches, materiality needs to be conceived of as a “material agency” that gets entangled with “human agency.”¹⁷ Indeed, objects, tools, and spaces are not neutral. They combine with human actions, influencing them and revealing qualities that shape and model collective joint action. Material agency can be defined as “the capacity for non-human entities to act on their own, apart from human intervention,”¹⁸ through their performativity.¹⁹ Materiality, then, is not just stand-alone decor, a mere element of context that can be observed from the outside. On the contrary, a managerial practice is defined through its entwinement with materiality. As a result, regulation viewed as a practice is also anchored in the material side of organizational life. And as regulation defines communities within an organization, we argue that the material dimension of communities (via the physical and online spaces) is also articulated by regulation processes. The organization we describe here is not structured by formal rules or hierarchy but around spaces of a different nature (online and face-to-face) that allow members of different

communities of this organization to exchange and interact either within their own community or across communities. The definition of communities not only fosters the emergence of rules but also contributes to their strength and stabilization. As a result, we seek to address the following questions:

- How does a community—both in its material dimension and as a purposeful project of collective joint action—participate in the process of regulation?
- How do control-based rules emerge within a “non-organization,” where autonomous rules usually prevail? On what basis do these latter rules rely?

The Case Context: Defense of Underage Migrants in France

As we introduced earlier, ABCD is a CSO defending undocumented migrant students in France. Its members advocate an egalitarian, horizontal, and transparent way of making decisions internally (no spokesperson, no hierarchy, anyone may become a member through open, online registration to existing e-mail lists, and so on). This approach goes hand in hand with the constitutive and founding choice of developing social spaces online (such as an informative website and dozens of autonomous and loosely coupled e-mail lists hosted on a server lent by an independent media organization). When dealing with an undocumented migrant student under threat of deportation, ABCD’s militants resort to diverse and far-reaching mobilization activities: writing, mailing, and taking to the streets. They pursue national coverage, give primacy to on-the-ground activities and to their collective ability to respond to quickly evolving situations, trigger blitz and symbolic operations, write open letters to politicians, and develop strategic uses of media (they have a taste for staging resistance actions with high media impact). They then contribute to two complementary objectives: rolling out massive mobilization at specific and crucial moments to increase pressure on governmental authorities and their representatives, and resisting the political rhetoric relayed by public authorities justifying their administrative actions in the name of the law.

The Underage Migrant's Story That Started Everything

Founding members of ABCD are known for their strong militancy. When ABCD was founded, in 2004, one could already perceive the beginnings of these far-reaching mobilization activities that today form the most visible part of this organization. Several local mobilization activities were simultaneously performed back then, in high schools in Paris and its suburbs. One of ABCD's founding members, who we will call "Interviewee B," described how it all began. At the time, she was the elected representative of a parents' association in one of the high schools. She discovered that her son had given his canteen card to a Congolese girl who could not afford to pay for meals because she had been left alone in Paris—although under the supervision of a friend of her parents—with no financial resources or official documents. The parents' friend had taken unsuccessful action to obtain free access to the canteen for the student. The student explained that she

had received a deportation letter—"Obligation to Leave French Territory"—because she had recently turned eighteen (marking the end of her protection from deportation) and did not have the documents that would permit her to stay in the country. Mobilization at the high school prompted a quick response from the local authorities, who overturned the decision.²⁰

Her situation was sorted out. We threw a party at the high school, as the headmaster supported our efforts, to celebrate her legalization. And during the party, eight other students came to see me. They said they were in the same situation. And we realized that if there were eight other undocumented students in that high school, there must be situations like these in every high school. This was indeed true, but we had just discovered it. (Interviewee B)

Another founding member, "Interviewee R," described a mobilization activity in the name

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The fact that no undocumented migrant student and no migrant families with students enrolled in intermediate or senior secondary French schools have been deported since ABCD was formed proves the effectiveness of this social movement.

of undocumented migrant students in *his* high school, and concluded:

We told ourselves that what was happening more and more frequently in our high school could not be an isolated situation and must be happening everywhere. We wrote up a call for action. Then, we got in touch with other people, some of whom are still members of our network.

As a result, in June 2004, teachers from various high schools created ABCD. These teachers had all had to deal with situations in which an under-age migrant student came of age and therefore was liable to be expelled if he or she did not possess the required documents. Over the years, the effectiveness of ABCD's advocacy of undocumented migrant students has continued unabated, and ABCD expanded the fight to make sure the students' undocumented migrant parents would not be deported, either. The following story demonstrates how ABCD draws attention to specific cases, gets press coverage, and pressures state representatives:

In the summer of 2005, two young people from the town of Sens, "Rachel" and "Jonathan," ran away from home because their mother was being held in detention. They came into contact with a man, who, upon discovering their illegal status, did not bring them to the police but instead called us. We hid them for a while. There were press conferences and we got media coverage because journalists wanted the story. We moved the kids from one place to another many times over. We made various appointments with journalists, and brought them to meet the kids. (Interviewee B)

The fact that no undocumented migrant student and no migrant families with students enrolled in intermediate or senior secondary French schools have been deported since ABCD was formed proves the effectiveness of this social movement. ABCD pushed very hard, and even got politicians to issue an administrative circular:

The Minister for Home Affairs issued a circular dated October 31, 2005, saying that no

kids enrolled at schools, or their parents, would be expelled until June 2006. In fact, he made a big mistake when he specified a deadline to this moratorium. We campaigned against it, declaring that starting July 1, kids were going to be hunted down. It led him to issue a circular legalizing both students enrolled at French schools and their parents. We call it the "Rachel and Jonathan Circular." (Interviewee B)

The group was determined to fight for all cases and to use all means at their disposal to do so. For example, at one point, a migrant student who was being deported and had already boarded a plane was retrieved at the last minute, following pressure put on state representatives (they didn't want the negative publicity). ABCD members accompany all migrant students to the *préfecture* (official headquarters) when the latter receive notification to appear, and provide them with legal and administrative assistance. They have also adopted proactive tactics, building a case before a migrant student comes of age in order to amass all the documents they will need to later win a case in court. History of their stay in France, report cards, letters of recommendation from their teachers, school attendance sheets, signed petitions—all become part of the evidence they will display at the *préfecture* and, if necessary, in court in order to obtain legal status for the student. Later, they guide the student through the administrative steps to acquire French citizenship. They organize sponsorship days, when high-profile politicians agree to sponsor a migrant student and vouch for him or her. Thus, the group seeks to act before any migrant student under their supervision even receives a deportation letter, as they know their actions may dissuade public authorities from beginning the deportation process, understanding that they will be given a hard time otherwise.

The Recursive Relationship between Mobilizing and Organizing

These mobilizing activities are the most visible part of the organization. However, other, far less visible activities relate to organizing processes

that enable effective mobilization and at the same time deliver organizational flexibility. ABCD is a relatively unstructured organization. Members do not engage in routine work that could make them predictable, they do not accept any financial contributions, and they refuse “experts.” There is no hierarchy, formal rules can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and there is no screening procedure for registering new members to any existing e-mail list. The organization qualifies as a “non-organization” in the sense that its members reject hierarchy, formal rules, official leaders, and the like. (This does not mean that it is an organization in waiting.)

This “non-organization” keeps expanding by adding permanent new cells to its loosely structured network across French territory. Each new cell covers a new geographical area and joins the organization by adopting its brand name and linking its own e-mail lists to other existing e-mail lists at different territorial levels (national or local). The analysis of this organization shows that there are both a set of e-mail lists and a set of periodic meetings associated with each of those lists—network members communicate through the lists and during physical meetings. Having studied ABCD’s organizing process through the lens of its underlying regulation processes, we believe these social spaces can be viewed as communities in the sense given by Reynaud: each group of actors is a community that is related to a given social space and defines its own rules of joint collective action.

The Methodological Approach

To undertake our research, we used an interpretive case study approach, gathering multiple sources of evidence. This included interviews, activity observation, and e-mail list analysis.

First, we conducted eight in-depth, semi-directed interviews with key members of ABCD, covering different geographical areas and levels of responsibility (national, regional, local). These interviewees are considered by many to be founding members. Some questions probed the members’ use of and opinions on e-mail lists. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and the interviews were then recorded and transcribed.

Then, we studied the operating mode of several local cells both in and outside Paris. We conducted two interviews with volunteers in each cell, and attended various meetings and participated in events organized locally—for example, we attended a party that took place in a high school’s faculty lounge to celebrate a staff member’s legalization brought about by the local cell. These observations were helpful in understanding ABCD’s internal organization and also facilitated our interpretations of the formal interviews.

Finally, a large part of our analysis was based on data extracted from our participation in several e-mail lists. Each researcher signed up on different lists (national, regional, local) as a participant. (We did not have access to some of the more confidential e-mail lists.) We had access to a number of open lists, but each of us focused on one list in particular. It was a way for us to develop an empathic approach and to take into account the intrinsic nature of each online space. By discussing our experiences, we were able to analyze controversies popping up on the e-mail lists and reflect more specifically on what might be the right “brokering” between online spaces in such instances. On a practical level, content analysis of the lists was a way for us to stay in touch with ABCD’s daily round and to have direct access to regular exchanges between members.

An Organization Made Up of a Set of Local Communities

One of the most important achievements of ABCD over the years has been its ability to maintain a diversity of political sensibilities and reasons for engagement across its membership, and at the same time a strong consistency in the ways operational actions get done effectively on the ground. Preserving a pluralist membership—ranging from Christians to far-left activists—while at the same time delivering effective mobilizations, is no mean feat. To address this issue, ABCD members have adopted specific organizing processes that cannot be analyzed through traditional lenses. Members readily admit that ABCD is a “non-organization”: as described earlier, there is no hierarchy, no legal structure, no financial means, no spokesperson, no official positions or roles, no formal rules, no

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screening or recruitment processes, no accounting practices, and so on. This organization also displays a dynamic growth that has developed in a rather anarchic way. In this next section, we describe the nature of ABCD and how the rules allowing for both its functioning and its growth get articulated.

The Relationship between ABCD’s Global Identity and the Specific Identities of Its Local Cells

As we learned from the interviews, ABCD has a global identity. ABCD is supported by members’ shared values around the defense of undocumented immigrants. It is also linked by its operating modes, as some members have expressed. For instance, participation in the e-mail lists and their uses are at the heart of the members’ sense of belonging to the same organization.

What unifies everyone are methods and e-mail lists. (Interviewee R)

However, the identities and operating modes of local cells can differ from one other. ABCD gathers members from all walks of life and political sensibilities, and promotes engagement. Every local ABCD cell gathers members having similar views as to how to do things—but, needless to say, there are different opinions and views of the world across cells. Members act under different ideologies, which run the gamut from Christian beliefs to far-left political ideas. Beyond these ideological gaps and differences in value systems, we also observed different organizational practices. As one member put it:

There is a leitmotif at ABCD: “The one who says it is the one who does it.” Then everyone creates his or her own list. This explains why we have completely different ways of functioning depending on the cell. (Interviewee S)

The differences are definitely a strength, as varied modes of mobilizing can be combined (intervention from the church, support from different political parties and trade unions, and so on). They are also a weakness, as it is difficult to speak in the name of ABCD as a whole, since there may be strong internal disagreements and

controversies vis-à-vis what ABCD stands for. However, there does exist a global identity shared by the members of the organization:

There is no such thing as a head office. Everyone does what suits him or her best. (Interviewee R)

Everyone acts as he or she sees fit and when he or she thinks it’s right to do so. Our cause is what unifies us. This cause is so compelling and beyond discussion that there is general consensus on the modes of mobilization and goals being pursued: releasing a detainee from a detention center, preventing someone from being deported . . . this is our leitmotif, and there has never been any disagreement about that. (Interviewee S)

Beyond what is felt in common and the sharing of values, we argue that ABCD’s regulation processes are what allow for both the coexistence of different cells and their connectedness with one another, which make up a consistent whole.

Each Local Cell Develops Specific Regulations for Both Physical (Face-to-Face) and Artifactual (E-Mail) Social Spaces

We identified different types of social spaces within ABCD—face-to-face and artifactual. Modes of participation and gaining access to social spaces within the movement rest upon informal rules that are created during face-to-face meetings. The creation of, management of, and access to e-mail lists in particular are decided on during such meetings.

People do as they please where they are. Thus, as in Paris there is a city e-mail list, we decided that the Paris list would be the main one for spreading general information. Moderators of other, sub-e-mail lists go to that main list and forward information and messages to their sublists. Some people, however, do not want to manage several e-mail lists, and do not register with the main list. (Interviewee B)

Face-to-face meetings play a distinct role, allowing for freer and unconstrained debate. As

an interviewee explained, not everything can be said through an e-mail list. In addition, the frequency of meetings differs from one list to another: the more local the list, the more intense the need to meet and share information on specific cases.

We do not tell the whole story on our e-mail lists. That's why face-to-face meetings are so important. In Paris, we meet every week. There are also complementary meetings. During face-to-face meetings, everybody can voice freely. There is nothing to fear. People know that the minutes of the meeting will never disclose all that has been said (unlike on e-mail lists). (Interviewee B)

Therefore, each cell has specific organizational practices and rules of functioning that qualify as autonomous rules.²¹ As a member of a local cell that was involved in a dispute with another local cell from the same Paris suburb described it:

The problem is, we do not have the same way of looking at the world. In a nutshell, they say that what we do is useless, because they think our actions are not likely to change the law. (Because we go to the préfecture with migrant students to help them defend their cases, they say we accept the administrative procedure.) We agree to disagree on the most effective way to achieve our joint goals. We believe we can help change the law but that we also have to engage in a case-by-case approach to defend these people. (Interviewee H)

These rules and practices characterize the singular function of a community materially contained within a local e-mail list. Only those on the e-mail lists are invited to participate in meetings. Local cells are delineated by the creation of cell-specific e-mail lists, which in turn define their respective cell members.

Adding Both Independent and Connected New Cells Drives the Growth of the Organization

The organization evolves via the creation of new cells that goes hand in hand with the creation of

different kinds of social spaces. E-mail lists are generated to support regular in-person meetings. Growth may be linked to territorial expansion (a new geographical area covered) or to a novel thematic forum (ad hoc social spaces created to meet a new need). As explained by a member of the organization:

A group can be made up of three people. Hence, many groups are being created all the time. At first, they work in their own corner, alone, and stay at the level of their high school, their village. And, little by little, they learn one day that there is an e-mail list, and they register. Then they realize that they can use the resources from the movement and that we do not ask for anything in return. They can benefit from our resources, ask us whatever they want, but in return we ask for nothing, absolutely nothing—they do as they see fit. (Interviewee S)

There exists a sort of to-and-fro movement between face-to-face spaces and artifactual ones (e-mail lists). These lists were initially generated to address the needs triggered by physical meeting spaces:

The truth is, these e-mail lists have been created to support new and evolving needs felt by groups of members. There is the “Île de France” list, as an in-person meeting happens to take place once a month at this regional level, and so it made sense to create a list to support these regular meetings. Then there is the “Paris” list. Then, e-mail lists were created for each Paris district. And probably even more [narrowed-down] local e-mail lists were created, as well. Every collective of members has created a specific e-mail list to address its needs. (Interviewee S)

As a result, an unknown number of e-mail lists have seen the light of day at different territorial levels across France—ranging from a very broad national level to such narrow cellular levels as a single high school.

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The Organization Is Based on the Interplay and Articulation between Social Spaces

All lists do not have the same purpose and the same degree of openness. Some e-mail lists created for coordinating members' actions and making joint decisions cannot be accessed by all members freely. In these cases, there is a sort of co-optation that happens, in which one member gets enrolled by other ones and thus gains access. There are also thematic e-mail lists (such as the "young-adults-having-come-of-age" lists); there are ad hoc lists to manage specific events (such as confrontations with public authorities). Calls for a demonstration are not generally done via

e-mail lists, however, but rather via phone calls and text messages.

We identified different categories of e-mail lists and their different specificities in terms of level of access and purpose. For each list, we identified specific rules of functioning (see Table 1). Physical meetings corresponding to different territorial levels of e-mail lists are identified in Table 2. Physical social spaces are also diverse, and match or echo the discussions held on e-mail lists, and e-mail lists—which, as discussed earlier, can be considered artifactual social spaces—echo physical social spaces. For example, in a meeting at a regional level (Ile de

Table 1: Categories and Specifics of E-Mail Lists

Category of e-mail lists	Specifics and rules
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to anyone • Effective for raising support for mobilizing activities • No decision making on this list • Willingness to seek the largest consensus to take into account the diversity of political leanings and motivations of members
Coordination (national level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited access for discussion but became open after consultation following requests of members. The process by which access was opened up echoes the symbolic dimension of freedom of the organization: "Nothing is secret, nothing is concealed." • Decision making. Examples of decisions include requests for financial aid, for equipment purchases, position of ABCD regarding the signing of a petition or participation in a call for action, etc.
Regional (such as Ile de France)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to anyone • Information exchange • Mobilizing activities
Paris (city level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open only to Parisian members • Information exchange • Mobilizing activities • Discussion forum
Local (such as high school list)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open only to local members • Information exchange • Discussion forum • Learning/knowledge creation
Thematic (different territorial levels)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to all members concerned with the theme • Specific discussion forum (knowledge transfer to deal with specific situations having a legal dimension) • Routine work. Legal dimension for defending cases is sometimes paramount to building a strong case
Ad hoc (local level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open to selected members • Specific event (confidentiality requested)

Table 2: Categories and Descriptions of Meetings

Category of meetings	Descriptions
National	Open meeting, to decide on the mobilization themes; social places where decisions are made
Regional	Open meeting, to decide on the mobilization themes; social places where decisions are made
Local	Open meeting, to decide on the mobilization themes; social places where decisions are made
Thematic (local)	For instance, “Young-adults-coming-of-age”; detailed knowledge about the law; expertise and learning how to build a case
Demonstration (local)	Social spaces for staging a demonstration/voicing
Training (local)	Social spaces for learning and mobilizing: “We also have training sessions about the legal rights for foreigners, about what ABCD is, about citizenship and naturalization. We bring in people involved in education: teachers, nurses, etc.” (Interviewee A)

France), the decision to organize what members were calling the “Mètèque Parade” was made. An e-mail containing the minutes of that meeting, a call for mobilization, and the specifics of the upcoming event were forwarded to different e-mail lists. However, not everyone was on board with the parade, as some disliked the negative connotations associated with the word *mètèque*, and did not want to be a part of it.²² Five e-mails expressing discontent and protesting against the name could be traced to the “Ile de France” list. The same thing happened at the local level, as members of the ninety-three local e-mail lists for the Ile de France region expressed yet more reservations. The issue sparked a controversy within the movement. In order to clear the air, the local collective that triggered the idea of the “Mètèque Parade” at the regional meeting paid a visit to the members of the ninety-three e-mail lists against the parade and explained in detail what it was all about. Discussion of this hot issue, which began on the e-mail list, was then openly debated during an in-person meeting to reach a final decision.

There are “meetings” that are places of reflection, decision making, or exchanges: national, regional, local meetings. There are also “learning” spaces, such as the thematic meetings pertaining to young adults coming of age, mentioned earlier, where members submit cases, elaborate on solutions, and benefit from the expertise of those present. Other social spaces are sites for staging demonstrations—meetings in *préfectures*, at airports, at courts of justice—where ABCD’s presence can be noted and direct showdown with opponents can be instigated.

Regulation Processes: Insights from Within

The Emergence of Control-Based Rules at the Global Level

Beyond local regulation processes shaping specific communities of members, we also identified a set of informal rules that define specific modes of functioning at the global level of the organization. These rules are similar to a form of control-based regulation, as they prescribe features of decision-making processes within the organization. The rules apply to a specific national list: the coordination list.

These rules can be viewed as control-based rules for the organization, even if they are not linked to a specific category of actors having a higher hierarchical position. In reality, some actors have a more powerful “go” than others, in particular the founding members. Some autonomous rules have morphed into control rules over time.

The Emergence of Control Rules Due to the Activity of Switchers/Brokers

The distinction between autonomous and control rules, if analytically precise, is not clear-cut on the ground. These rules are enmeshed with one another, and some scholars stress that their status may change over time. An autonomous rule may become a control rule if those supporting the rule impose it on newcomers.²³ In that case, the relationship of solidarity that characterizes autonomous rules transforms itself into a relationship of subordination. We have noticed such transformation occurring at the interplay between different e-mail lists and different territorial levels, due to the work of particular actors. In fact, some members act

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as “switchers” or “brokers” between spaces, and some act as “watchers” on specific lists. Every day, for one to two hours, these brokers and watchers screen all e-mails received on all the lists they are members of and decide whether or not they want to pass along some messages to other e-mail lists. They also contribute to maintaining the specific functioning and identity of the organization at the national level. So they play the role of watcher/broker/translator/regulator between physical and online spaces and also between the different territorial levels of spaces. In the following quote, a member explains how he “translates” the ABCD national decisions to the members of his local cell. In doing so, he reinforces the control-based rules at the national level:

There will soon be a national call for action. It is most likely that among the ninety-three [local e-mail lists], some members think the text of the press release is too politically timid. When it is released, I will write and send targeted e-mails to explain why it is so, and lower the temperature. (Interviewee A)

Different types of actors who play these broker roles emerge through the regulation process, and some gain importance over time. They become ambassadors of new rules, and they permit the transformation of these autonomous rules into

control-based rules. Among members, some have more influence in the network (the founding members) and some will attain more over time (those very active):

There are the founding members who are still here and know why and how ABCD was created. As a result, there are no common values but common founding principles. (Interviewee S)

Some members are more active, and therefore they centralize and have all the meaningful information—they get experience. (Interviewee R)

Other actors within different territorial levels appear to be in charge of ensuring that the rules are followed. Because of the intrinsic complexity of information exchanges from one e-mail list to another, a zone of uncertainty exists between different social spaces. There are movements across e-mail lists—some pieces of information are forwarded up to the regional level or to the national level if they are deemed interesting:

There are regional lists where pieces of information are transferred. For instance, the two Chechen twins coming into France for health treatment. Cases like this are pushed up to the regional level. (Interviewee A)

Verbatim Pertaining to Rules	Formulation of Rules
“We make a decision through e-mails. Everybody answers freely when, for example, somebody proposes an action and asks for a go, and we get around fifteen answers backing the call for action; then we stop answering except if we disagree with it.” (Interviewee B)	<i>Rule: Every member answers individually and freely to any proposal made by another member.</i>
“When there is an emergency, like when an illegal immigrant is boarding a plane to be expelled from France, we need at least three go-aheads. We need go-aheads, otherwise someone could do something wrong.” (Interviewee B)	<i>Rule: In case of urgency in the making of a decision, three go-aheads expressed by members on the coordination list are necessary to confirm the call for action.</i>
“[The coordination] list, as we are all spread across France, is the list where decisions are made. I do not mean this is a democratic process, as this is not the right term: we do not have elections or representatives. But all those involved within the movement and willing to express their opinion on questions engaging ABCD as a whole register on this list.” (Interviewee S)	<i>Rule: The coordination list is the list for decision making.</i>

As explained by a member, the strength of the network relies on the free access and free transfer of information from one e-mail list to another. This free transfer is an opportunity for everyone to spread control-based rules. The following excerpts highlight the free transfer from one e-mail list to another:

You see, in Paris, people get arrested every day. So, we are not going to bother the Marseilles cell with our daily arrests. But when there is nothing much left we can do—when all legal means have been explored to no avail—we will put the case on the national list to get reactions. Everyone does this spontaneously. The strength of our network is that e-mails are forwarded from one list to another. Sometimes I would not have chosen to forward something but I understand why another member did. (Interviewee A)

Each group decides, “Hey, who will be in charge of transferring from one list to another this month?” That person reviews lists and selects messages to be forwarded to his or her group’s list. This is how we wanted it to be. There is no pyramid; everybody is responsible for his or her actions and group, and everyone has to search for the information he or she needs. There are three main places to look for information: national, Ile de France, and Paris. When you register on these three lists, you are up to date. (Interviewee S)

However, some actors send heads-up messages when inappropriate comments come to light on a list. (This is the case with the coordination e-mail list at the national level.) By doing so, they reinforce the autonomous rules and transform them into control-based rules, especially when the rule concerns the transfer of information from one e-mail list to another. The following excerpts show the gradual emergence of control-based rules:

Some members still do not understand, for instance, that when there is a link to a petition for Mr. X, it should not be forwarded

to the coordination list. I am in charge of forwarding messages and letting people know if they are forwarding messages to the wrong list. I am a sort of “guard of all lists.” I was given this task; I have to remind members regularly how the coordination list works. (Interviewee S)

At the beginning, e-mail lists were a catastrophe, because people were expressing themselves as if they were individual actors. We had to make clear that we are not acting alone on a list. We all share a common goal; we are a family with members contributing to the same thing (although not necessarily by the same means). Thus, there were times when, regarding specific questions or questions that were too vague and loose, we had arguments and severe tellings-off on a list, and we knew that behind these disputes were major ideological and political differences. But we felt that people who were not into that sort of thing would leave, and gradually we managed to introduce some sort of Internet etiquette. We floated the idea that it would be good to have some sort of common principles to abide by on e-mail lists. Of course, we could not say bluntly that those overstepping the red lines would be kicked out, but we had to get there one way or the other. (Interviewee S)

Discussion

This case study provides new insights into the means social movements use to better manage the backstage of their protest work. In particular, this study opens up different theoretical perspectives for analyzing how regulation processes—per Reynaud’s perspective—contribute to organizing these social movement organizations, which are often based on very minor organizational and hierarchical structuring.

First, our qualitative methodology (interviews, participant observation, analysis of e-mail list contents and interaction) enables us to specify in detail the organizing processes of ABCD and its informal and tacit regulation processes for making decisions and taking action. We argue that

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the organization's long-lasting, online-enabled resisting and mobilizing activities are sustained by organizing processes that allow it to operate effectively within a pluralist social movement. Organizing processes manifest themselves at two levels. On the one hand, they enable ABCD's collective ability to rapidly connect existing social spaces—be they online or physical ones—with one another. The latter are at best loosely coupled with one another at some moment, and they have sometimes remained dormant for a long period of time—but they can rapidly be merged, reshaped, and extended for short periods. If these connections are not routine based and are not prescribed, they nonetheless rely on informal rules. On the other hand, organizing processes make it possible to maintain the diversity of political sensibilities across members that is so essential for ABCD's ability to mobilize effectively.

We propose that the organization of this social movement be viewed as a set of social spaces—be they “real” or artifactual ones—and that the organizational work lies in the connections between the different social spaces and is not top down. We observed that organizing manifests itself through the connections between online and material spaces, and also between the social spaces constituted at different territorial levels. These connections make it possible to diffuse values and relevant pieces of knowledge across social spaces. The flexibility of organizing processes enables everyone to use everyone's skills and to contribute what they can. It allows creativity, as each cell develops its own specific identity and functioning mode; it also allows learning through the connections among different social spaces; and finally, it prevents the main risk of losing control, as control-based rules emerge progressively, particularly at the connecting points of the different cells. Thus, we demonstrate that the flexibility of the organization is based on an informal regulation process that combines autonomous rules and control-based rules.

Second, to deepen the specifics of the joint regulatory process in such “non-organizations,” we mobilize the idea defended by Reynaud that the autonomous rules in organizations emerge in informal communities and that these rules

contribute to their definition and stabilization.²⁴ We have shown that the different social spaces can be considered communities, and that the regulation in each of these local cells is autonomous and specific to the identity of each cell. In this sense, the autonomous rules appear to originate from solidarity at the local level, evolving dynamically and characterizing the community from which it emerges.²⁵

So we argue that the coexistence of the whole identity of the organization and the multiple identities of its constituent communities occurs through a joint regulation process. In traditional organizations, top managers support the control-based rules because of their position in the chain of command. In this “non-organization” case study, we noted that control-based rules are produced in an informal way due to the help of human actors playing different roles, such as “watcher” or “broker.” Regulation here is not a top-down process but rather relies on the interplay among the different cells composing the organization. This research field work demonstrates that control-based rules can be produced in a nonhierarchical organization. This does not mean that these rules are not effective. Indeed, strikingly, our results demonstrate that autonomous rules can become, over time, a relevant means of control.

Third, the case study shows that this social regulation is not only the result of human actions but also of the material dimension of the organization.²⁶ In fact, regulation is produced in the interplay of physical social spaces and online ones, and in the interplay of different territorial social spaces (local, national, regional). The material dimension of these spaces, which occurs through both the e-mail lists and the choice of a territorial action, contributes to delineating communities within the organization and also supports the emergence of autonomous rules.

The influence of the material organizational dimension on regulation can also be observed in the context of the emergence of control-based rules: first, rules, which emerge at the national level, bring a stronger control-based view; second, the definition of exchange zones among different territorial levels is the starting point for the creation of these rules. These applied rules get

progressively solidified in time, making up for the social movement's lack of formal structure and explicit rules.

So, materiality triggers the emergence of rules as they get created within local communities but also as they structure the passing of information from one community to another. Thus, as we have shown, regulation processes are not only created by human actors (as suggested by Reynaud) but also are supported by a material, technological, and spatial agency within the organization.

Finally, we have shown how the e-mail lists give materiality to the necessary regulation process. In a way, the tools used by ABCD's members (with their horizontal orientation) match their ideological expectations. Even though most members are not digital natives, they all use Internet-based tools regularly. Some spend over an hour a day with these tools. Therefore, these tools entail specific practices. Following Wanda Orlikowski's theory, such practices can be approached from a

socio-material perspective and can be viewed as a genre that shapes and is shaped by individuals' communicative actions.²⁷ We have found that the genre created by ABCD allows its members to act efficiently according to rules that are not explicit and to contribute to the definition of the specific identity of the whole organization.

• • •

We have explored regulation practices within an emblematic French civil society organization that defends undocumented migrant students and is engaged in large-scale resistance against French immigration policies. More specifically, we have focused on how such a movement gets regulated when hardly any trait of a classical formal organization can be found in our case study (no hierarchy, no formal rules, no legal form, no financial means, and the like). Maintaining a pluralist base of members while at the same time delivering effective, on-the-ground mobilization is perhaps its most dramatic achievement.

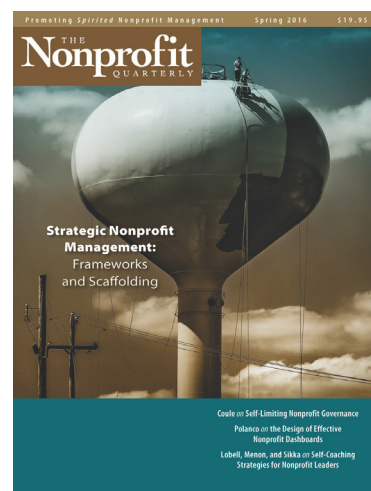
We have found that the genre created by ABCD allows its members to act efficiently according to rules that are not explicit and to contribute to the definition of the specific identity of the whole organization.

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Our first question was how such a community participates in the process of self-regulation. We have shown that ABCD is a collection of local cells. Each cell is a community in itself. When a cell is created, members first share common ground, then a social space, then an e-mail list, and then specific practices. The regulation process emerges within the local community, which in turn has a stabilizing effect on it. ABCD volunteers usually rally around a project of human rights, but they always do it at a local level: the emerging autonomous rules are grounded in spatial materiality. The global regulation process of ABCD is therefore the consequence of online and face-to-face exchanges between and across its different cells.

Our second question was how it was that control-based rules could emerge in a “non-organization” (where autonomous rules usually prevail), and on what these rules rely. The results of our research show that some implicit control-based rules appear at the national level, may sometimes be designed by charismatic founding members, and are subsequently shared with everybody. We consider these rules to be control-based because of their scale (national level). But other rules also emerge, thanks to the activity of “brokers.” These actors foster exchanges and connections among different cells, different levels of the organization, and different territories. Their work creates balance for the whole organization, as a large audience is kept informed and reminded of the rules.

We concluded that:

1. An organization with streamlined features can foster its organizing through the articulation of innumerable online (e-mail lists) and face-to-face (physical presence) social spaces at various territorial levels.

2. In this case, regulation comes from autonomous rules produced dynamically within the local communities. Control-based rules emerge throughout the exchanges of information from one territorial level to another.

3. Regulation processes (in organizations with an intensive use of information technology) are not only due to human agency but also to technological and spatial agency.

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In a Nutshell

The use of social media to knit a network or movement together will have its own organizational processes, which we are only on the near horizon of understanding. The cell-based "non-organization" described in this article provides a sense of new approaches to movement building that involve dispersed autonomous parties to coordinate a cohesive campaign.

In a time of networked action, we must consider and study how mission-focused groups establish norms without direction from a hierarchical structure. What kinds of conversations lead to the establishment of norms and rules? When do you know that a norm has been established, and how is it "enforced"? How does "joint regulation" in such a situation work? Taking a grounded research approach to noticing the patterns that unfold to create "structure" will be of utmost importance.

When positional leadership is absent how is control established? What kinds of leadership work to cohere a "non-organization," and what does that look like exactly?

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