

From “Building the Actions” to “Being in the Moment”:

Older and Newer Media Logics in Political Advocacy

by Andrew Chadwick, PhD

We are becoming more and more used to following the news via multiple media, as well as to the speed at which we are now able to access, and even get in front of, the news. Political activists, in particular, are taking advantage of this era shift.

Editors’ note: This article was excerpted and adapted by the author from research for his new book, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, published by Oxford University Press, 2013.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WATCHED television news without your smartphone or tablet close by? When was the last time you reached the end of a day having followed the news using only one medium, whether print, broadcast, or the Internet? And, if you work in an organization that has anything at all to do with campaigning, when was the last time you sat in a meeting and did not have to think about how your strategy might change according to the different media through which you deliver it?

I suspect the answer to these questions is “a long time ago.”

In my new book, *The Hybrid Media System:*

Politics and Power, I look at the tumultuous changes that have occurred during the last decade in political communication.¹ Things have turned out rather differently from what many of us imagined in the late 1990s, when we first embarked on trying to make sense of the implications of the Internet for politics. The great digital disruption is certainly very real, but it is everywhere accompanied by renewal and change among broadcast and print media (and all of those organizations suffused with their logics). The result is not only a great deal of complexity and mess but also surprising new patterns of order and integration.

The book’s central theme is the adaptation and interdependence among older and newer media, but also, more importantly, the political *logics* associated with those media. Western liberal democracies (and, one might argue, many non-western or non-democratic political systems) now

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feature what I call hybrid media systems. In these systems, politics is increasingly defined by the organizations, groups, and individuals who best blend the technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms associated with older and newer media. Power is now wielded by those who create, tap, and steer information flows in ways that modify, enable, and disable the power of others across and between different media.

We now live in an era in which the “new” digital media logics of the Internet and its constellation of technologies and devices have become strongly integrated with “older” media logics, particularly those of broadcast television. It is the recombinations of media logics that are now essential to the conduct of public communication. The hybrid media system shapes the actions of political and media elites, social movements, new protest movements, ordinary citizens, and, of course, advocacy and campaign professionals. Yet, at the same time, this system is itself a social and political construction—the outcome of the incessant power struggles that occur on a daily basis across all fields of media and politics.

We can see this hybrid system *in flow* in political parties and presidential campaigns, in journalism and news making, in government departments and political executives, and in public advocacy groups and citizen mobilization movements as diverse as WikiLeaks, MoveOn.org, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Amnesty International. We can also see it in the organization that is the focus of this article: the United Kingdom’s extraordinary two-million-strong citizens’ movement, 38 Degrees.

Building the “Actions”

38 Degrees provides an excellent illustration of how political activists now hybridize older and newer media logics in their attempts to shape news and policy agendas. Modeled in part on America’s MoveOn.org and Australia’s GetUp!, 38 Degrees has mobilized highly visible campaigns in a wide range of areas, including the environment, the National Health Service, media reform, and constitutional reform. Founded just five years ago, by January 2014 it had amassed a membership of more than two million—around six times the *combined* membership of Britain’s three major

political parties—the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats.²

38 Degrees is initially best understood as what I identified in the mid-2000s to be a new type of hybrid mobilization movement.³ Like MoveOn—the first example of this organizational type—38 Degrees is categorically *not* a traditional membership-based interest group that has simply “discovered” the Internet and digital communication networks. Instead, it is an organization born of the great digital disruption, but one forced to grow up in a media system not quite of its own choosing. As a consequence, the hybrid mobilization movement continues to morph in intriguing and important ways.

Origins

38 Degrees emerged from an international network coordinated by British career activists David Babbs (executive director) and Hannah Lownsbrough (former campaign director). Ben Brandzel, who has played a pivotal role in MoveOn, and Jeremy Heimans, who cofounded Australia’s equivalent, GetUp!, performed outside advisory roles. Startup funding came from, among others, Gordon Roddick, husband of the late Dame Anita Roddick, the businesswoman and lifelong environmentalist behind the successful Body Shop retail brand. The third founding leader, Johnny Chatterton, arrived via a less conventional route, one highly revealing of 38 Degrees’ organizational culture. Chatterton, who later moved to work at online petitions site Change.org, had been hired by Burma Campaign U.K. after he “helped seed,” as he puts it, one of the early examples of political activism using social media: the Facebook group Support the Monks’ Protest in Burma, set up in 2007 to highlight the Burmese state’s crackdown on anti-government campaigns led by that country’s Buddhist monasteries.⁴ This experience of being a young, technologically literate online activist was important in shaping Chatterton’s attitudes to organizing and mobilizing; however, it was not only the power of Facebook to quickly raise awareness of international human rights abuses that fascinated him but also the way that interactions among Internet and broadcast media shaped the evolution of that

campaign. “The Support the Monks’ Protest was incredible,” he says, “because of these blurred boundaries. We had the BBC giving me a special number to call and an e-mail address to e-mail if I heard anything out of Burma, so I could pass the news straight on to these.” Established NGOs such as Amnesty International also joined forces with the Facebook group activists, and together they launched a Global Day of Action for Burma to raise awareness of conditions in that country. Chatterton left to become 38 Degrees’ digital campaigns manager soon after.

Internet-enabled experimentalism combined with efficient and strategic organizational leadership animates all of 38 Degrees’ activity. Babbs speaks of the need to get the technical details of the website “absolutely right,” and of how important it is that the leadership provide a coherent and efficient set of mechanisms enabling members to have an influence on emerging policy agendas. There are repeated references to “providing a service” and “high standards” for members while trying to strike a balance between being “disciplined and professional” and “relaxed and experimental.” Without strong strategic leadership from above and “an agenda of some sort,” says Babbs, it “gets ragged and falls to bits—you lose focus, and everyone feels dispirited.”

The “Actions”

A key element of this leadership-driven “service” to members is what constitutes the key organizational resource of 38 Degrees: the “actions.” The organization has only a handful of paid staff and around a dozen unpaid interns who undergo short periods of volunteering in its central London headquarters. When I visited, headquarters consisted of a couple of rooms in a slightly scruffy but functional office building off Kingsway near the London School of Economics and Political Science (38 Degrees has since moved to marginally better accommodations, in Clerkenwell). A small advisory board comprising the original startup funders and some staff from other campaign organizations meets about once a month for a couple of hours. 38 Degrees does not hold formal real-space conferences for members, and there are no formal bureaucratic means by which

members can expect to influence the leadership’s decision making. The leaders even acknowledge that the decision to call those on its e-mail list “members” was a deliberate attempt to encourage a sense of shared identity in the absence of traditional organizational mechanisms, though there is also an awareness that becoming a member of a political organization raises the bar too high for many, so they talk about people’s “being involved” or “joining in.”

But it is the “actions” that move 38 Degrees. “Actions” is a totemic concept for the organization because it provides identity and collective meaning. And the construction of actions rests upon the hybridization of older and newer media logics.

The 38 Degrees headquarters team speaks of “building the actions,” “trying out the actions,” and “getting members to do the actions.” On one level, the term “actions” has a simple meaning: actions are specific activities that the leadership aims to structure for its members to enable them to exert influence on the mainstream news media, online networks, and the policy agenda. On another level, actions form the entire organizational basis of the movement. Actions are technological enablers, but they often combine online, real-space, and older media behaviors and impacts. The website, the e-mail list, the social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, and the fundraising to place print ads in national newspapers, together with the leadership team’s interactions with—and judgments about—emerging news stories, are the mechanisms through which actions are developed.

Actions go beyond the simple expression of opinion in online environments; they are constructed by the leadership team to have specific and definable outcomes. Members are asked to sign online petitions or send e-mails and make phone calls to their MPs. They are asked to show up physically at lunchtimes to protest in front of buildings around the country, as they have done on multiple occasions against proposed cuts to Britain’s much-loved public service broadcaster, the BBC, and its equally revered National Health Service. They are asked to organize flash mobs at political parties’ local constituency campaign gatherings, as they did in several targeted seats

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during the 2010 general election, to raise awareness of the political lobbying industry.

The 38 Degrees website enables these actions by providing form e-mails and online petitions that may or may not be personalized by individual members, together with information generated from tailored web databases. Alternatively, members may be asked to very quickly contribute donations to pay for prominent newspaper and billboard advertising. These ads suddenly migrate messages across media settings and are designed to put pressure on elite media and policy-makers—those more likely to pay attention to a full-page ad in a national newspaper and be spurred to call the 38 Degrees office for more information or interview Babbs for a television or radio package. The ultimate aim of the actions is to send coherent, legitimized, representative messages to government and legislators at Westminster. Only through the ongoing construction and modification of actions can 38 Degrees lay claim to being an “organization” in any meaningful sense of the word.

Being in the Moment

A typical working day at 38 Degrees begins before the team arrives at headquarters. Staff members conduct “media checks” and often discuss these checks via e-mail during the night and in the early morning. If an important news story emerges overnight that fits with 38 Degrees’ underlying progressive agenda, the leadership will try to construct actions to engage members as quickly as possible. The processes through which actions emerge is therefore based upon the hybrid integration of media practices, the recalibration of strategy on the basis of perpetual online feedback from members, and a mixture of long- and short-term routines that often revolve around sharing information with other NGOs.

The leadership reacts quickly to emerging news agendas, but it is able to do so with legitimacy because it also engages in continuous background research on its members’ views. The organization exhibits many of the features of the classic single-issue “cause” group, but its technological infrastructure allows it to rapidly switch focus from one issue to the next, run campaigns across several issues at any given time, or quickly

drop campaigns that do not strike a chord with members. Timeliness is essential to this mode of operation. As Chatterton put it: “There will be moments when people really care about something; maybe they’ve just seen it on the news and thought, damn, I want to do something about that. We hope to be in that moment and make it easy.”

E-mail underpins everything. Each month, the leadership conducts a web poll of around one-twelfth of its two-million-member e-mail list. The aim of the monthly poll is to provide headquarters with an understanding of issues emerging among its membership base. But the poll also contains a series of tracker questions that can inform adjustments to a campaign as it evolves, as well as a free block of questions that the leaders use to “insert some questions that are just relevant to that time, stuff that we’re particularly concerned about.” In addition, the team issues specific polls on campaigns that they would like to see run, or it offers members a set of clear choices on how to approach a particular issue. The leadership also “seeds” ideas to Twitter and Facebook to get a rough sense of the levels of concern, harvests comments on their online petitions, analyzes them quantitatively, and then uses the evidence in broadcast media appearances. When Babbs appeared, in 2010, before a House of Lords committee investigating the government’s Digital Economy Bill, he presented thematically organized aggregated evidence drawn from over twenty thousand comments from those who had signed the online petition opposing the legislation.

Volunteers in 38 Degrees’ headquarters continually monitor suggestions sent to them through the organization’s Facebook and Twitter profiles, the website’s contact form, and via e-mail. The campaigns director “runs a bit of a filter” on those and then distributes them to the other team members. The results of all of this are discussed at the weekly staff meeting, where the team makes strategic decisions. Actions often emerge from these weekly meetings, but the process is not straightforward. Often, members will convey strong opinions in a monthly poll, but an action suggested by the leadership will fall flat. Before deciding to “go full-list” to all e-mail subscribers

with a new action, the leadership usually sends out test e-mails to just a sample. It then analyzes click-through rates and conducts A/B analytics with subject lines and framing, with the aim of generating more enthusiasm with the e-mail's next iteration. Sometimes actions continue to fail during testing and are simply abandoned. Sometimes actions are not generated at all because the leadership is unwilling or unable to promote the cause.

While this process is reminiscent of older-style campaign message testing in broadcast environments, the time frames here can be extraordinarily compressed—a matter of only a few hours. The ritual is often conducted in real time from start to finish, as the team clicks on an automated mass e-mailer (provided by former Obama for America public relations agency Blue State Digital) and watches for the responses and metrics as they flow in. As Chatterton described it: “It’s fairly rapid. We can see those numbers coming in. When things go really fast, you can tell. You can see it going, and you think, we’re fine, we can go. If you’re not sure, you need to keep on waiting, and then, if you’re still not sure after two hours, chances are. . . . So, we examine what’s gone wrong there. Maybe the subject lines are wrong, maybe the framing was wrong, maybe the e-mail structure was wrong, or maybe there’s another story that just exploded.”

A good example of these micro-cycles of mobilization was the Trafigura affair of October 2009, which has gone down in recent British political history as a victory for freedom of expression over media censorship. It ended with a successful campaign to overturn a superinjunction forbidding the *Guardian* newspaper from reporting a question in the House of Commons regarding allegations that a multinational oil trading company had been responsible for the illegal dumping of toxic waste in the Ivory Coast. Members of 38 Degrees played an important role alongside the *Guardian* and other British, and Norwegian, media organizations in quickly mobilizing a flash campaign of concerned activists, focused largely around Twitter. As Chatterton reveals, victory came quickly:

The Trafigura injunction was very interesting. We came into the office that morning, and thought, what is going on here, it’s

dreadful being censored in this way. What can we do? We looked around and we couldn’t find out through conventional networks, and then Twitter started bubbling up that it was Trafigura. It probably took us about ninety minutes from coming into the office, knowing something had to be done, and getting an action out and starting to test it. And about fifteen minutes after, we launched, and we’d had a crisis meeting with the volunteers. We’d all sat around, figured out what to do—the positioning. We got the e-mail ready, got the tech ready, got people writing to their MPs, saying, “This can’t happen, you’re censoring Parliament as well”—because they weren’t letting people report what was being said in Parliament. And then Trafigura folded, and their lawyer Carter Ruck rescinded the superinjunction, and it could be freely reported. That was an incredible two hours for us. Conventional NGOs couldn’t have responded in that time frame and got that out.

Speed of reaction to emerging news agendas therefore plays a hugely significant role in 38 Degrees’ approach to mobilization. But does this approach put them at risk of becoming a reactive organization whose goals are defined by the headline writers of the professional media organizations? This question sparks some fascinating responses. The team is keen to stress the importance of the ongoing processes of member consultation and testing, the advantages (and not the disadvantages) of following the mainstream media’s agenda, and the significance of a particular understanding of authentic representation in contemporary mobilization.

The leadership argues that campaigns do not simply emerge from the “back of an envelope” on a given day. “Scenario planning” for different potential outcomes, “power analysis” to determine where to apply pressure, and identifying “members’ concerns” through polling and monitoring of social media take up a great amount of daily effort. Citizen organizations often have very little routine power when it comes to scheduling—particularly in spheres of politics where timeliness is important, such as when legislation enters Parliament, a public figure delivers an important

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speech, or the editor of a newspaper launches an investigative campaign. Babbs argues that the Internet has allowed activists to “catch up with the 24-hour news cycle, which, in the 1990s, politicians had learned to control.” As Lownsbrough puts it: “I, as a citizen, am unable to determine the parliamentary timetable. Not being an editor of a national newspaper, I am unable to determine what goes on the front page at any given time. But I am able to have an understanding of the fact that on a day when that’s climate change, for example, a substantial number of our members will want to get in on that[. . .] I don’t think that’s allowing other people to set your agenda. I think that’s just being responsive to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.”

It became clear that several of the big campaigns run by 38 Degrees did not emerge from simple reactivity but from a confluence of long-term planning and nimble responses to particular events. A good example is the campaign against cuts at the BBC. This had been identified as an evolving priority but was only fully launched when James Murdoch—who in 2010 was the News Corporation chairman and chief executive—used a high-profile speech to criticize the BBC. Another example is when 38 Degrees ran a series of newspaper ads calling on its members to e-mail the Liberal Democrat MPs involved in the coalition talks during the aftermath of the 2010 general election. The aim was to pressure the party into making electoral reform a condition of entering into a coalition with the Conservatives or Labour. At that time, 38 Degrees was also part of a networked alliance of web-enabled activist campaigns, including Take Back Parliament, Unlock Democracy, Vote for Change, Avaaz, and Power2010 (which has since joined forces with Unlock Democracy). Together, these groups organized a real-space demonstration in front of the nation’s entire broadcast media in central London just as the coalition talks began in earnest. Babbs live-blogged the demonstration on 38 Degrees’ Facebook page using his smartphone, but he also became enmeshed with television media that day, and ended up participating in a hostile interview with Sky News’ Kay Burley that quickly went viral on YouTube.

But when it comes to this question of reactivity, by far the most intriguing norm I have encountered is that, in an era in which the instantaneous communication of ideas via digital technologies is increasingly the expectation, it is the *duty* of any activist organization to engage with the public on a real-time basis. This is because the reactive, real-time nature of a campaign is important for conveying to the public an organization’s responsiveness and authenticity. Launching quick responses to the daily news agenda is more likely to convey that the leadership is adequately representing its members’ concerns. This is all the more important in the absence of real-space decision-making mechanisms. As Lownsbrough described it, “[We . . .] communicate with people in a medium which they know and you know to be almost instantaneous[. . .] If somebody sends you an e-mail and it doesn’t resonate with what you’re experiencing that day, then that feels a bit inauthentic, because it’s an instantaneous form of communication. So in the interests of authenticity, when you’re communicating with people over the Internet I do think an awareness of what’s happening that day is absolutely critical.”

Lownsbrough went on to describe speed as “the contribution that online activism can bring to the activism table,” and a force that can restore to those who have become disengaged from politics “some of the excitement that comes from being right in something when the decision’s getting made.” The belief is that reacting to the mainstream media’s news reporting increases the likelihood of successful online mobilization, because this will resonate *temporally* with members’ feelings and provide them with symbolic rewards. Real-time response is itself a mechanism that generates the substantive resources of authenticity and legitimacy required by the leadership as well as an ethic of solidarity between the leadership and members. The temporality of the medium becomes the message.

But still, this ability to react in real time is shaped in advance by planning and preparation. Seemingly loose, flexible, and “spontaneous” mobilization—which takes place in some cases within just a couple of hours—depends on a blend

of viral messaging across its online supporter networks, ongoing organizational capacity through online polling, a keen awareness of the policy and news cycles, and interconnectedness with the news values and temporal rhythms of older print and broadcast media.

Building and Exploiting the Hybrid Media System

These are 38 Degrees' contributions to the ongoing construction of the hybrid media system. They have enabled the movement to recruit two million members in less than five years and, on occasion, to influence policy. In 2011 they mobilized 530,000 people to sign an online petition, 100,000 people to e-mail their MPs, and 220,000 people to share a campaign on Facebook to stop the British government from introducing plans to privatize more than a quarter of a million hectares of the nation's public forests. In a move that was based on the understanding that certain information signals are more likely to be taken seriously than others by professional journalists and political elites, 38 Degrees also raised funds to commission the professional polling company YouGov to ask a representative sample of the British public about their views on the government's forest proposals. The results revealed that 84 percent were opposed to the plans. To reinforce the poll's findings, 38 Degrees then raised nearly £60,000 from members to pay for a series of full-page ads publicizing the poll's findings in national newspapers. Babbs and Lownsborough also made several national television and radio appearances. Within a few weeks, the government's plans were withdrawn.

As this article reveals, 38 Degrees employs a careful division of labor in its approach to media. Online media are perceived as better for tight feedback loops, coordination, more active engagement, and representing the movement to itself. But being able to publicize its action through broadcast and print media helps target policy elites, validate the movement, and create highly visible signs of its efficacy for wider publics.

Those working in these new fields of political activism are both forging and adapting to the hybrid media system. They cannily switch

between older and newer media logics in attempts to mobilize supporters and influence policy. They use older and newer media to structure the "actions" that serve as their only meaningful organizational basis—but, as David Karpf has forcefully argued, this is not "organizing without organizations" but rather "organizing with different organizations."⁵

There is a strong normative attachment to being able to react extraordinarily quickly to issues that rise to prominence in the "mainstream." Responsiveness produces and reproduces identity and solidarity because it meets expectations of authenticity and connectedness that have become embedded as cultural values among activists who engage online. And yet the actions that 38 Degrees' leadership asks its networks of supporters to perform, such as donating money for ads in newspapers and commissioning opinion polls, are often far removed from what we might think of as "online activism." Indeed, these new democratic forms of politics are carved out of the hybrid spaces between older and newer media logics. They rest upon—and capitalize on—an acceptance of broadcast and print media's enduring roles.

NOTES

1. Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
2. For the latest figures on United Kingdom party membership, see "UKIP Says it has signed up 13,000 new members in 2013," BBC News website, December 31, 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-25562198.
3. Chadwick, "Digital Network Repertoires and Organizational Hybridity," *Political Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007): 283–301.
4. All quotations in this article are from field research conducted by the author at 38 Degrees headquarters in May 2010.
5. David Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

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