

# Disruptive Hybridity:

## *The New Generation of Political Advocacy Groups*

by David Karpf, PhD

This article proposes that far from a disengaged political citizenry unchanged by the new media environment, a new generation of political advocacy groups have emerged and are crafting novel strategies for political engagement and mobilization.

**Editors' note:** This article was adapted from *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy*, by David Karpf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

**M**OST AGREE THAT THE INTERNET'S EFFECT on American political organizations has been profound. That said, current research about the Internet and politics holds two competing claims to be true. First, the new media environment has enabled a surge in "organizing without organizations." We no longer need organizations to start a petition, create media content, or find like-minded individuals. Second, many fundamental features of American politics—from the average American's lack of political knowledge or interest to the elite nature of major political institutions—remain unchanged by the new media environment.

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Everyone can now speak online, but surprisingly few can be heard.

I offer a third claim that modifies both of these perspectives: changes in information technology have transformed the *organizational layer* of American politics. A new generation of political advocacy groups have redefined organizational membership and pioneered novel fundraising practices. They have crafted new tactical repertoires and organizational work routines. Political mobilization is rarely spontaneous, and the organizations that mobilize public sentiment have changed as a result of the Internet. The real impact of the new media environment comes not through “organizing without organizations,” but through organizing *with different* organizations.

Though Internet-mediated organizations have played a prominent role in American politics for a dozen years, we still know very little about their operation; amid all the attention to trends in social media, the transformation of political organizations has gone overlooked.

### #WIUnion

For three and a half weeks, from February 16 through March 9, 2011, Wisconsin was home to the largest American labor protest in a generation. Unlike the Egyptian uprising that occurred mere weeks beforehand, public observers did not attribute a causal role in the Wisconsin protests to social media—no one believes Twitter caused the Wisconsin standoff. The Internet did play an essential mediating role, however, and it is through such large-scale events that the important niche now filled by a new generation of political advocacy groups becomes clear.

The labor protests in Madison began as a local reaction to a state policy matter. On February 15, 2011, recently elected Republican Governor Scott Walker unveiled his budget repair proposal. Included in the bill was a provision that would dramatically curtail the collective bargaining rights of public employee unions. Under the guise of a short-term budget crisis, the new governor was attempting to cripple a core constituency of his Democratic opposition. Unions are not only reliable sources of Democratic-leaning votes; they also provide key organizational support during

election seasons. As such, weakening the union movement is in the long-term electoral interests of the Republican Party network. With Republican majorities in Wisconsin’s state senate and state assembly, Walker had every reason to expect his bill to pass quickly into law. Democrats were outraged, but they had few bargaining chips. The entire fourteen-member Democratic state senate delegation (quickly dubbed “the Wisconsin 14”) decamped to neighboring Illinois, forestalling an immediate vote. Local union members turned out by the thousands, setting up a massive peaceful demonstration within and around the capital building, and the national labor movement—organizations like the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—quickly joined these protesters.

The labor movement was not alone in this conflict; the netroots also immediately joined the fray. MoveOn.org reached out to its five million members, generating 150,000 notes of support for the Wisconsin 14 in a matter of days, and DailyKos, Democracy for America (DFA), and the Progressive Change Campaign Committee (PCCC) all launched fundraisers for the state senate delegation. On February 27, a netroots-led coalition held solidarity rallies in every state capital, drawing fifty thousand attendees and additional press attention nationwide. Meanwhile, Madison became “ground zero” for netroots organizers. Bloggers and field campaigners arrived in the state capital to help coordinate logistics, organize pressure tactics, and cover the details of the struggle. Armed with flip cameras, they interviewed local protesters and rapidly compiled issue advertisements. They then quickly turned to their national membership base for funding, and placed the commercials on local television.<sup>1</sup>

The nearly monthlong protest was the “largest continuous demonstration for workers rights in decades.”<sup>2</sup> Daniel Mintz, MoveOn’s advocacy campaign director, remarked, “What happened around Wisconsin showed the most energy since 2008 and, in a non-electoral context, since the start of the Iraq War.”<sup>3</sup> Though the governor obtained passage of his bill on March 9, by then the damage had been done. His public approval

ratings plummeted, and the Republican governor of nearby Indiana decided against pursuing a similar bill due to fear of public reprisal.<sup>4</sup> An energized coalition of local and national progressive organizations immediately announced recall campaigns against six vulnerable state senate Republicans. Democracy for America alone hired thirty-five field staff to work full-time on those recall efforts. The August special elections succeeded in unseating two of those senators, considerably narrowing the Republican senate majority.

There are three important lessons about the Internet and political advocacy that we should take from Wisconsin. The first is that Internet-enabled political organizing moves *fast*. Prior to the protests, netroots organizations like the Progressive Change Campaign Committee and Democracy for America had no developed staff capacity in Madison. Yet, within forty-eight hours of the day Governor Walker unveiled his bill, they had diverted their attention away from the federal level, re-tasking key staffers, educating their membership, crafting online petitions, and raising funds. Over the following two weeks, they had organized mass protests in fifty state capitals. In an era of twenty-four-hour news channels, blogs, and Twitter updates, news cycles move fast, and netroots organizations have fashioned themselves to keep apace.

The second lesson is that the interest group ecology associated with the Democratic Party network has changed. The liberal coalition has for decades been composed of single-issue groups that remain concentrated within their “issue silo.” The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Sierra Club may agree in spirit with the Wisconsin protesters, but they aren’t going to mobilize staff and financial resources to support them. Members donate to these groups to represent their interest in civil liberties or environmental protection. Their annual dues provide a reliable basis for lobbying staff and policy experts, both in Washington, DC, and in states across the country. The netroots define membership differently, disassociating it from financial transactions. Instead, they rely upon a fluid fundraising model based on targeted, timely action appeals. As a result, the netroots become “issue generalists.”

Staff structures and tactical repertoires are all built around the Internet. This yields new work routines, communications practices, and broad strategic assumptions. While other left-leaning interest groups remained focused within their traditional issue silos, the netroots swarmed to Wisconsin, providing a nationwide cavalry and expanding the scope of the conflict.

The third lesson is that Internet-mediated political organizing is hardly limited to blog posts and e-petitions. Critics who dismiss Internet activism as mere “clicktivism” focus attention on particular digital tactics and argue that historic movements for social change require deeper commitments and stronger ties than those found on Facebook or Twitter.<sup>5</sup> Some proponents of Internet activism, also focusing on these digital tactics, argue that they are a new form of action and should be treated as “social movement theory 2.0.”<sup>6</sup> Neither of these perspectives captures what we saw in Wisconsin, where a new generation of large-scale organizations demonstrated their capacity to mobilize substantial resources over a sustained time period. By ignoring the organizational layer of the public sphere, we have missed important developments in American political engagement.

### **Divergent Internet Effects: Organizing without Organizations**

Within Internet studies, there is a popular line of thinking concerned with “organizing without organizations,” “open-source politics,” or “social movement theory 2.0.”<sup>7</sup> According to this strand of theory, the traditional logic of collective action has been fundamentally altered by the lowered transaction costs of the new media environment.<sup>8</sup> The argument is that formal organizations are no longer necessary, since individual tactics like e-petitions can now be organized online and information can spread virally through social media channels like blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. In other words, we are all our own publishers and political organizers now.

The “theory 2.0” tradition has made a substantial contribution in identifying the significant implications of lowered online transaction costs. Indeed, “mass self-communication” is now possible in a manner unlike ever before.<sup>9</sup> And social

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network-based communication occasionally spirals into collective action, leading to online protest actions and offline political scandals. In the language of social movement scholars, we have seen the birth of new “repertoires of contention.”<sup>10</sup> Online groups can form through Facebook. Offline meetings can be organized cheaply through Meetup.com. Political campaign commercials can be remixed and posted on YouTube, garnering millions of views. Media content is now spread through Twitter and the blogosphere, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. The costs of engaging in many individual acts of political speech have become infinitesimal, particularly in a stable democracy like the United States, where citizens do not face the looming threat of government reprisal.

But critically missing from this line of research is the notion of *scale*. Lowered transaction costs have made individual political actions far easier, yet sustained collective action continues to require organization. Indeed, every large-scale example of “open-source organizing” or “commons-based peer production,” be it the Linux operating system or Wikipedia, develops an organizational hierarchy of some sort.<sup>11</sup> Linux is run by Linus Torvalds and his “lieutenants,” and a large proportion of the edits to Wikipedia come from a core group of volunteer administrators. The political arena is no exception. Large-scale contests over political power, such as occurred at the Wisconsin state capital, require organization. Changes in communications technology alter one set of organizing constraints by dramatically lowering the marginal cost of communication. But another set of political fundamentals remains unchanged.

Largely in response to the “organizing without organizations” line of research, a set of critics have emerged, dismissing online activism as mere “clicktivism,” or “slacktivism.”<sup>12</sup> According to their arguments, the Internet’s effect on political institutions is minimal, and may even have deleterious unintended consequences. Malcolm Gladwell suggested, in a widely read *New Yorker* essay, that “the revolution will not be tweeted.”<sup>13</sup> He argued that social media tools fail to promote the type of strong interpersonal ties necessary for successful social movement organizing. Stuart

Shulman has warned 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.<sup>14</sup> Evgeny Morozov dismisses most digital activism as “slacktivism” and argues, “Thanks to its granularity, digital activism provides too many easy ways out.”<sup>15</sup> 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 engagement, they may breed resentment and increased apathy toward government action. When all that clicking produces no change, they reason, citizens will turn bitter or tune out.

The “clicktivism” critics are right to question the value of an individual e-petition or Facebook group. Judged by the standard of traditional power analysis, which Robert Dahl classically defined in 1957 as, “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do,” the average e-petition is a shallow intervention indeed.<sup>16</sup> Powerful actors are unlikely to choose a different course of action solely on the basis of a digital signature list. But it is also only a single tactic. As we saw in Wisconsin, such tactics hardly capture the extent of online organizational ventures. Furthermore, as we will see in the following section, such criticisms lose their sting when placed within the context of political advocacy organizations. The average e-petition is indeed of minimal value, viewed in isolation. But so is the average written petition. Digital activism is not a replacement for the Freedom Riders of the 1960s; it is a replacement for the “armchair activism” that arose from the 1970s interest group explosion.

## The Organizational Layer of Politics

An intermediary layer exists between government institutions and the mass citizenry. My interest lies in this often-overlooked corner of political communication research—the organizational layer of American politics that facilitates



interaction between government elites and mass publics. Studies of political organizations have a grand pedigree in political science, dating back to the early pluralists who viewed government as a neutral arbiter in the battle between organized citizen interests.<sup>17</sup> As we have learned more about the fundamentals underlying political institutions and political behavior, organizational studies have drifted into isolation. Part of the problem is methodological: it is nearly impossible to establish the immediate impact of such groups. The field of interest group competition rarely features unambiguous wins. As Baumgartner et al. recently demonstrated, identifying who wins and who loses among interest groups is a daunting proposition in its own right, with no “magic bullets” among the various tactics and strategies.<sup>18</sup> Merely estimating the size of the interest group population is a devilish problem.<sup>19</sup>

The organizational layer of politics is not particularly large.<sup>20</sup> Compared to the size of the national population, issue-based political mobilization is minuscule. The largest day of protest in Wisconsin drew approximately 100,000 citizens, a fraction of the state population of approximately 5,600,000. Tea Party protesters at each of the 2009 Health Care Congressional Town Hall meetings numbered in the dozens, yet those dozens drove a national media narrative. MoveOn’s five million members represent less than 2 percent of the American population. These are numbers that would fit within the margin of error in a nationally representative survey.

Yet there is good reason to believe that the makeup of the organizational layer matters a great deal for broader political concerns. Theda Skocpol has found that the late-twentieth-century decline in American social capital is likely tied to the disappearance of cross-class federated membership associations during the 1970s. Until that time, social capital was built and maintained through civic organizations. Those organizations changed when membership and fundraising regimes, along with the broader government opportunity structure, shifted to favor professionalized, DC-based advocacy groups.<sup>21</sup> It stands to reason that the new wave of Internet-mediated organizations will also play an intermediary role in defining civic beliefs and citizenship ideals.<sup>22</sup>

In a similar vein, recent scholarship documents the central role that political organizations and informal party coalitions play in public policy decisions. Steven Teles documents the central role played by conservative organizations like the Federalist Society in fostering a broader conservative legal movement that has reshaped the federal courts.<sup>23</sup> Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue that American economic policy-making has been driven firmly to the right by a network of conservative think tanks and advocacy organizations founded in the “lost decade” of the 1970s.<sup>24</sup> Seth Maskett argues that the deep polarization of legislative politics is driven by informal party organizations at the local level that control resource flows around political primaries.<sup>25</sup> Political party networks are composed of both individuals and organizations. Changes in the composition and ideological position of these party networks affect the content of American policy-making.

### The Internet and Disruption Theory

The concept of disruptive innovation features heavily in this narrative. The Internet has been fruitfully described as a “sequence of revolutions.”<sup>26</sup> Because innovation continues at such a rapid pace on the Internet, it has proven to be an enduring challenge for those studying its effect on politics. YouTube did not exist during the 2004 election, yet it was a fixture by 2008. The microblogging service Twitter was still in its infancy in 2008. It is a fixture of the media landscape today. Now that mobile web devices like the Android phone and the iPhone are rapidly gaining market penetration, new social experiments with geolocational data are being devised. In the time that elapses between my completion of this manuscript and its physical arrival upon a bookshelf, another major innovation or two is likely to be heralded for “changing everything.”



As we have seen in communications industries such as book publishing, newspapers, and music, the Internet exhibits a tendency toward fostering disruptive forms of innovation. The new media environment has put traditional commercial sectors into disarray. It is a classic example of

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what Clayton Christensen calls the distinction between “disruptive” and “sustaining” innovations. Sustaining innovations offer incremental performance improvement in an existing field of production. Disruptive innovations foster the rise of a competing field of production. In so doing, they undercut existing market forces.<sup>27</sup> Under such circumstances, the advantages of traditional organizational bases of production are undermined; the stable revenue streams that supported those organizations became unreliable.

Moments such as these tend to exhibit a generational character: old industrial leaders decline and new industrial giants emerge. We are now witnessing the same pattern unfolding in the non-profit advocacy sector.

#### NOTES

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2. Chris Bowers, “What Victory in Wisconsin Will Mean for All of Us,” DailyKos.com, June 29, 2011, [www.dailykos.com/story/2011/06/29/989875/-What-victory-in-Wisconsin-will-mean-for-all-of-us](http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/06/29/989875/-What-victory-in-Wisconsin-will-mean-for-all-of-us).
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4. James Hohman, “Daniels Defends Labor Position,” Politico.com, February 26, 2011, [www.politico.com/news/stories/0211/50248.html](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0211/50248.html).
5. Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted,” *New Yorker*, October 4, 2010, [www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa\\_fact\\_gladwell](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell).
6. Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
7. “The Power of Organizing without Organizations” is the subtitle of Clay Shirky’s book *Here Comes Everybody* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008). “Theory 2.0” is a term coined by Earl and Kimport in *Digitally Enabled Social Change*.
8. See also Arthur Lupia and Gisella Sin, “Which Public Goods Are Endangered? How Evolving Communication Technologies Affect the Logic of Collective Action,” *Public Choice* 117, nos. 3–4 (2003): 315–31, Bruce Bimber, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Cynthia Stohl, “Reconceptualizing Collective Action in the

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10. For a discussion of repertoires of contention, see Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); for a discussion of online protest actions, see Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers, eds., *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2003); for a discussion of hybrid political scandals, see Andrew Chadwick, “The Political Information Cycle in a Hybrid News System: The British Prime Minister and the ‘Bullygate’ Affair,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16, no. 1 (2011): 3–29.

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12. For illustrative examples of this critique, see Stuart W. Shulman, "The Case Against Mass E-mails: Perverse Incentives and Low Quality Public Participation in U.S. Federal Rulemaking," *Policy & Internet* 1, no. 1 (2009): 23–53; Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," Micah White, "Clicktivism Is Ruining Leftist Activism," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2010, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism), and Evgeny Morozov, "The Brave New World of Slacktivism," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2009, [neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the\\_brave\\_new\\_world\\_of\\_slacktivism](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism); and Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).
  13. Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted."
  14. Shulman, "The Case Against Mass E-mails," 25–26. For a direct rebuttal, see Karpf, "Online Political Mobilization from the Advocacy Group's Perspective: Looking Beyond Clicktivism," *Policy & Internet* 2, no. 4 (2010): 7–41, [davekarpf.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/online-political-mobilization-from-the-advocacy-groups-perspective-1.pdf](http://davekarpf.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/online-political-mobilization-from-the-advocacy-groups-perspective-1.pdf).
  15. Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 190. Morozov's broader argument concerns the threat that digital tools, poorly deployed, can pose in unstable regimes. On the broader point, I concur, but his writing paints digital engagement tools with a particularly broad brush.
  16. Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 201–15. The gendered pronoun "he" is an artifact of the times. I leave it here to emphasize how deeply rooted this definition of political power is. There are contrasting definitions and a whole literature devoted to the subject—see William H. Riker, "Some Ambiguities in the Notion of Power," *American Political Science Review* 58, no. 2 (1964): 341–49; Jack H. Nagel, *The Descriptive Analysis of Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975); Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978), and Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "The Two Faces of Power," *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4 (1962): 947–52—but Dahl's simple definition remains both elegant and generally appropriate.
  17. See David Truman, *The Governmental Process* (New York: Knopf, 1951); and Dahl, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961). For critical reactions, see Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States* (New York: Norton, 1979), Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, and E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).
  18. Frank R. Baumgartner et al., *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
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  26. John Zysman and Abraham Newman, eds., *How Revolutionary Was the Digital Revolution?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
  27. Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press).
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