

Bridging Between Grassroots Movements and Nonprofit Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technologies have fundamentally changed the nature of grassroots social movements, to the extent that some scholars have prognosticated the end of traditional organizations. Social movement theorists, however, suggest that formal organizations and organizing processes are key to successful grassroots movements. Research that explores the intersection between the work of grassroots movements and the work of organizations is crucial, if we are to assist both organizations and grassroots movements in forming increasingly productive partnerships moving forward.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies have fundamentally changed the nature of grassroots organizing [13]. Rallies known as “flash mobs” or “smart mobs” form, seemingly out of nowhere, coordinated on the fly via mobile information and communication technologies [35]. The public responds in crisis situations, working via Facebook to compile lists of the known status of potential victims [32]. New media scholar Clay Shirky has observed that these technologies enable people to organize themselves without the formal structures of traditional organizations [38]. But even more provocatively, Shirky contends that “now that there is competition to traditional institutional forms for getting things done... their purchase on modern life will weaken as novel alternatives for group action arise” [38]. A more measured assessment, however, is supported by social movement research, having found that organizations and organizing processes, such as the mobilization of resources, are required for grassroots efforts to be successful [24] (see also [16]). Palen et al.’s prognosis for the future of organizations is not quite so dire, either. However, they do argue that organizations have failed to adapt to the “emergent, improvisational, and innovative technology use of the public” and must, moving forward, do so [32].

One sector in which this failure to adapt could be particularly devastating is the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have, in general, been slow to adapt to new technologies, despite being particularly reliant on the kind of public engagement that these technologies can enable [3]. NPOs are the fastest growing category of organization in the United States [18], with more than 1.5 million registered nonprofits in the U.S. as of 2008 [29].

The nonprofit sector serves a number of critical functions including the delivery of goods and services that are underprovided by for-profit corporations or governments, promoting initiatives for the common good, advocating for societal issues, and more generally enabling individuals to engage in social welfare [30, 36, 37].

Nonprofit organizations, particularly charitable or volunteer-driven NPOs, have been a site of key partnerships with the public since the late 19th century [18, 42]. Nonprofit organizations frequently rely on members of the public to contribute both time and money towards organizational goals—to increase their quality of service, to reach out to new clientele, to engage in community outreach and education, and to influence policy decisions [5]. Volunteers working with nonprofits are a significant resource to the workforce. In the United States, approximately 63.4 million people (~27% of the population) volunteered for an NPO last year, with a median of 50 hours worked annually per volunteer [6]. NPOs also rely on members of the public to contribute financially to their work. In 2009, individuals and institutions in the U.S. donated a combined \$303 billion to nonprofits; individual donations accounted for 75% of this total [9]. Without these kinds of public partnerships, many NPOs would be hard-pressed to do the work that they do.

If, however, we are going to expect organizations to adapt to the innovative technology use of grassroots movements, then we need to better understand the interplay and/or tensions between these organizations and the public’s use of technology. A number of studies have been conducted to better understand how and why members of the public, through grassroots movements, are innovatively using technology to address some of the same concerns as NPOs but working around or *outside* of these organizations (e.g., [32, 35, 38]). A number of other studies have been conducted to better understand organizational technology use within or *inside* of NPOs (e.g., [22, 26, 44]). Much less is known about technology use that spans *between* the public and NPOs.

Research that explores the intersection between the work of grassroots movements and the work of nonprofit organizations is key, if we are to assist both NPOs and grassroots movements in forming increasingly productive partnerships moving forward.

RELATED WORK

Grassroots Organizing via Technology

Research that explores the influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on grassroots organizing exists within numerous fields including social movement analysis (e.g., [11, 13, 23, 28]), public administration (e.g., [3, 4]), media and communication studies (e.g., [35, 38]), and information and computer science (e.g., [2, 31, 32, 33, 39, 41, 43]).

ICTs have fundamentally changed the nature of grassroots organizing [13], particularly mobile technologies, which support micro-coordination [35], and the Internet, which allows grassroots responders to “cross geographical boundaries” and “coordinate citizen-led efforts” following worldwide crises [31] (see also [33, 39, 43]), as well as to provide more up-to-date information than may be provided by “official” responders [31, 39, 41]. ICTs have been observed to enable more “expansive, flexible, and diffuse” grassroots organization and can be “essential” for fostering mobilization [13]. In grassroots contexts, ICTs have also been observed to foster social creativity (see also [15]) and collective intelligence (see also [19]) [33]. However, grassroots groups organized online also have been observed to suffer from a lack of clear hierarchy, member motivation, trust, and an ability to sustain activities over the long-term [43].

Information Technology in Nonprofit Organizations

Studies of information technology use in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have focused on varying application areas, from inter-organizational coordination [21, 40] to information management [20, 44] to IT management, more broadly [25, 26]. Other studies have focused on NPOs’ adoption and use of the Internet (i.e., for marketing) [14, 45]. More generally, however, this related work foregrounds the underlying context and constraints of technology use within NPOs—the significant constraints in financial and technological resources, the ways that volunteers change the dynamic of the organization and influence technology use, and the underutilization of technology when NPOs do not see a connection between technology use and their underlying mission or values [7, 22, 25, 26, 27, 44].

The Intersection of Organizational Studies and Social Movement Analysis

The same general divide that exists in related research examining information systems in this domain—a divide between studies of formal organizations and studies of grassroots activities—also exists more generally within the social sciences [24]. Despite both being studies of forms of “coordinated collective action” [8], the fields of organizational studies (OS) and social movement analysis (SM), have taken largely divergent analytic paths [10, 24]. In general, where OS focuses on organizations (the structure), SM focuses on organizing (the processes); where

OS focuses on established organizations, SM focuses on emergent ones; where OS focuses its unit of analysis on fields of related organizations, SM focuses its unit of analysis on a particular movement; where OS focuses on power in terms of institutionalized or “prescribed” politics, SM focuses on power in terms of marginalization and disenfranchisement; and where OS focuses its attention on local impacts, SM focuses its attention on impacts to “politics with a capital ‘P’” [24]. Despite these stark contrasts, researchers from both disciplines have recently begun attempts to identify important synergies between them [8, 10, 12, 13, 24].

One key area of synergy between OS and SM are the recognized social mechanisms by which both organizations and grassroots movements have been found to develop and change: (1) environmental mechanisms that externally influence actors’ abilities to enact change, such the presence of allies in a sitting political party; (2) cognitive mechanisms that influence how actors perceive themselves and the possibility of enacting change, such as the framing of issues that helps individuals interpret opportunities for change (see also [1]); and (3) relational mechanisms, including both formal and informal networks (see also [34]) that connect organizations and individuals [8]. These constructs, shared between OS and SM, give us a theoretical foothold for understanding collective action that bridges between NPOs and public, grassroots movements.

EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PUBLIC

Two of the most common ways for the public to interact with NPOs are as donors or as volunteers. We have conducted initial research in each of these areas. In previous research, we explored the ecology of technologies used in nonprofit *fundraising* [17]. We identified six key roles that technology serves in this domain—from helping potential donors discover new nonprofits to enabling individual and community advocacy. We also found that technology enables an increasingly rich ecology of people and organizations to build relationships in this domain, such as bringing donors and beneficiaries closer together. In previous work, we also studied information technology (IT) use surrounding *volunteering*, specifically that of volunteer coordinators at NPOs [44]. Although a number of volunteer coordinators used social media to connect with volunteers or potential volunteers, the vast majority of participants built relationships with volunteers via word-of-mouth; their use of IT to bridge between the organization and the public was predominantly restricted to email.

Each of these threads of previous research explored different types of relationships between the public and NPOs relationships, but each type of relationship was defined by the NPOs—these were their volunteers and their donors—they were not relationships defined by the public, as would most likely be the case with grassroots movements.

Moving forward, we aim to explore the intersections between NPOs and the public that are more centrally defined by the public (e.g., grassroots movements, giving circles, cause-based online communities, etc...). We are particularly interested in the following research questions:

- What are the incentives and disincentives for grassroots movements to work with NPOs (or vice versa)?
- When grassroots movements and NPOs work together, how are responsibilities allocated between the two groups to best take advantage of each another's strengths?
- What types of organizing processes do grassroots movements develop and in what ways do these processes mesh or clash with the organizing processes of NPOs?
- What types of technologies have grassroots movements adopted and in what way does the use of these technologies mesh or clash with the way in which NPOs use technologies?

AUTHOR BIO

Amy Volda is a researcher in the Department of Informatics at UC Irvine. She conducts research in human-computer interaction, computer-supported cooperative work and ubiquitous computing and is particularly interested in understanding the lived experience of computational technologies. She holds a Ph.D. in Human-Centered Computing and a M.S. in Human-Computer Interaction from the Georgia Institute of Technology as well as a B.A.E. in Elementary Education from Arizona State University.

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