

Political Action and Organization Building: An Internet-Based Engagement Model

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1 Introduction

The 2004 presidential election signaled the possibility and the early phase of the 2008 election leaves little doubt that the Internet is changing the face of American politics as a means of fundraising and communication and as a fact-checking part of the journalistic fourth estate (Cornfield 2004). The general growth of participation and collaboration over the Internet has been widely noted (Benkler 2006; Coleman and Gøtze 2002), challenging the fears that the Internet would contribute to the social isolation of 'bowling alone' in physical space (Putnam 2000). It is not yet clear, however, the extent to which blogging will become a new form of meaningful social engagement or the Internet will become a vehicle for political organization building and sustained citizen participation in the political process.

This chapter examines the economic, social, and political challenges for organizations that use an online environment internally to deal with members and aim to strengthen their capacity to use the online environment externally and influence the political process.

2 Physical Space, Cyberspace, and Political Action

The Internet and traditional political institutions should be seen as two planes that intersect along the axis of political action. Figure 1 identifies analogous activities in physical space and cyberspace that are intended to mobilize people through information, support, and persuasion to act politically. The processes of reinforcement and coordination in physical space are augmented by processes of viral communications and collaboration in cyberspace.

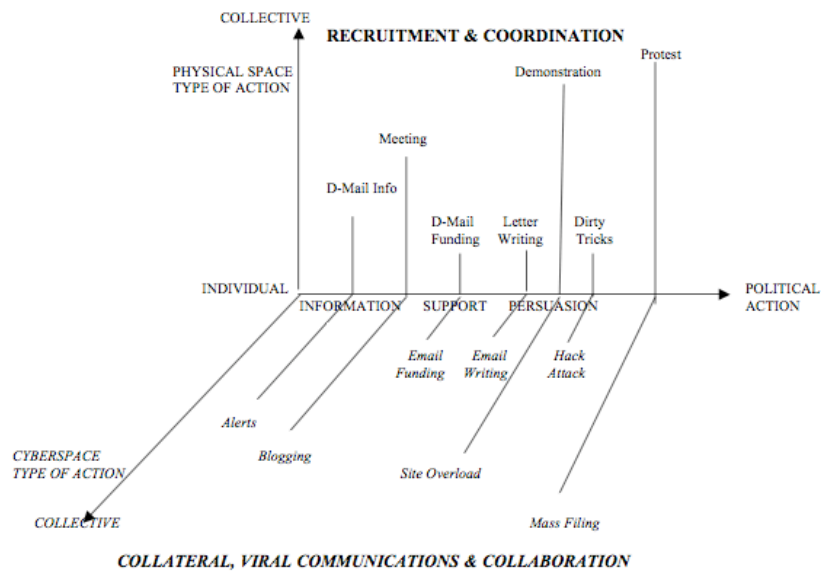


Figure 1. Physical space and cyberspace intersecting on the axis of political action

At one level, Web tools can be used to make physical space activities work better. Face-to-face contact is the lifeblood of politics but a highly labor intensive and decentralized activity. As a coordinating tool, the Internet shifts politics away from local control, allowing local volunteers to spend more of their time in face-to-face contact. The Internet also facilitates promotion, scheduling, enrollment, and gathering/targeting of local data, where centralized messages can be branded locally and delivered to specific areas.

At another level, technology can be used to enrich large-scale political activities in cyberspace. Software-based approaches to queuing, speaking, cross-talking, and decision making give a qualitative feel of an in-person meeting. The empirical evidence on group formation and persistence on the Internet shows that networks become groups through communication processes that also support the political activities of organizations. Members and participants become more deeply engaged through collateral communication, which expands on the messages that are sent to stimulate specific actions, when they forge bonds directly with one another outside of the official channels of communications between the leadership of the organization and the membership. ‘Insurgent media’, such as blogging, viral fact checking, etc., offer a new form of collective action. These collaboration-based media support both the organization, as an organization, and specific political activities. An interactive process in which values, norms, and boundaries are defined, collaboration implies a fundamentally deliberative democratic process of communications among peers.

3 Institutional Models for Internet-Based Organizations

Participatory decision making in an Internet-based organization, i.e. those that rely primarily on the Internet to initiate and maintain contact and relationships between members and conduct organizational activities and functions, is crucial to its success, although it is difficult to accomplish. The problems of achieving civic engagement in a large democratic nation resemble the problems confronting the institutionalization of an Internet-based organization on a large-scale and long-term basis. In both cases, the challenge is the impossibility of frequent face-to-face interaction.

Several contemporary models are useful sources of insight into the potential for politically oriented Internet based organizations—deliberative polling, peer-to-peer production, and cooperatives. Perhaps the most directly relevant to political action-oriented Internet based organization is the concept of enhanced deliberation offered by James Fishkin (1997). Fishkin identifies four key characteristics of what he calls ‘a democracy of civic engagement’: equality, participation, deliberation, and non-tyranny:

Political equality: citizens’ preferences count equally in a process that can plausibly be viewed as representative of everyone. *Deliberation*: a wide range of competing arguments is given careful consideration in small-group, face-to-face discussion. *Participation*: A significant portion of the citizenry is engaged in the process. *Non-tyranny*: the political process avoids, wherever possible, depriving any portion of the citizenry of rights or essential interests (Fishkin 1997: 34).

From the Internet point of view, peer-to-peer production of presents itself as another instructive model. One could hardly think of four characteristics that better describe the peer-to-peer production of information or the nature of cooperatives. Recent analyses of peer production in the open source community suggest the solutions to organizational challenges blend cooperation at the base with light-handed authority and hierarchy (Weber 2004). Leaders, lieutenants, maintainers, and gatekeepers organize production and innovation. Rules of democratic deliberation draw members in and bind them to the organization. The essential elements of the new form of organization include: (1) technologies that rely on distributed intelligence and that support intensive open communications, (2) decentralized collaborative economic relations where distribution and sharing take precedence over exclusion and market transactions, (3) norms that rest on voluntary nonhierarchical, nondiscriminatory interpersonal social relations, and (4) authority relations that are noncoercive and egalitarian based on participatory deliberation (Cooper 2006, 2002; Lessig 1999).

The essential problems of civic engagement are parallel to the peer-to-peer problem: sampling to ensure representativeness (making sure the important tasks are identified), scheduling to get all the participants in the right place (getting tasks done), and coordination and management of interactions so that people can hear and be heard. They must solve the problem of creating order, without undermining the essential open, democratic nature of the enterprise. Far from a 'free-for-all', deliberative policymaking requires trusted facilitation—rules for discussion, an attempt to reach a conclusion, an account of what happened, and feedback. The characteristics of the deliberative forum are the antithesis of media driven, one-way dissemination.

The deliberative poll melds the traditional function of a poll—signaling preferences to representatives—with the engagement of citizens in action. While its use has been focused on external relations (gathering citizens to deliberate on broad public policies), it is ideally suited to create the democratic processes internal to the Internet-based organization, particularly as online deliberation is enriched to bind members to organizations.

Engagement in political acts is facilitated by Internet-based or Web-based representative democracy: communicating with officials through email, volunteer solicitations, fundraising, and visits to websites for information and voter instructions. Web-based protest movements have captured a great deal of attention.

Cooperatives are a third, more common type of institution that provides insight for the institutionalization of collaborative production in Internet-based organizations. In fact, some argue that because of their nature, cooperative organizations may play a larger role in the information and knowledge economy (DiMaggio and Anheier 1990; Normark 1996). As Weisbrod

points out, ‘There is increasing demand for trustworthy institutions as a geographically mobile population and an array of increasingly complex goods pose problems for consumers who seek assurance that they expect’ (Weisbrod 1998: 69).

This element of trust makes the cooperative well-suited to the goals, values, and practices of the nonprofit. The types of goods and services considered most conducive to nonprofit suppliers are qualitatively complex products where the purchaser of the service may lack expertise or the ability to monitor institutional behavior. The difficulty of identifying and monitoring product quality creates a transaction cost problem that arises from an asymmetry of information between the consumer and the producer (Handy 1997; Nilsson 1996; Bonus 1986). The difficulty in assessing the quality or quantity of service delivered results can result in a contract failure between the supplier and the consumer, so the trust relationship can fill the gap between consumers and producer.

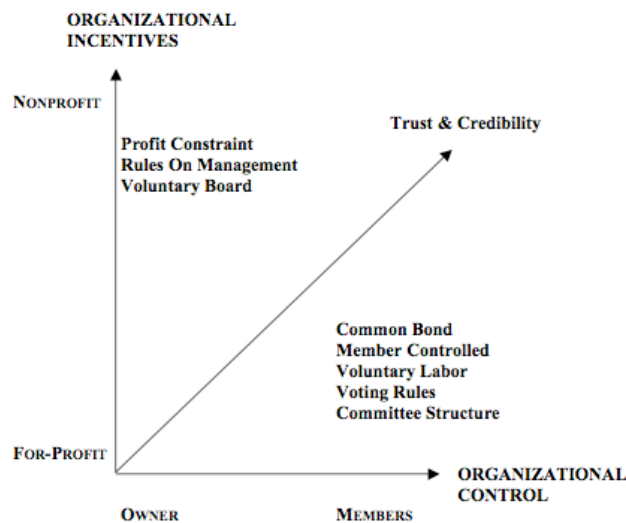


Figure 2. Characteristics of cooperatives that create trust and credibility

A cooperative, however, meets the need by building trust between the parties to a transaction.¹ It provides a solution to information and monitor-

¹ In analyzing producer cooperatives, similar information problems arise out of conflicts of interest between owners and workers that feed into information asymmetries, raise costs, and provide an opportunity for lower cost production where conflict and monitoring problems can be eliminated (Ben Nur 1988).

ing problems by creating trust and credibility (see Figure 2) (Hansmann 1987). For example, cooperatives most commonly signal trust to the public and secure credibility by: (1) curtailing profit-maximizing activities and (2) making decisions according to a model of participatory governance (Handy 1997). As Ellman (1982) writes, 'The opportunity to choose management oneself is at least as reassuring as the stricter fiduciary obligations, which are themselves only a partial solution' (1044). Consumer/producer control afforded by the cooperative model also allows a flow of information that the marketplace cannot achieve.

An additional factor that is frequently invoked not only in explaining the existence of cooperatives, but also in justifying their social support, is values (Gomes and Owens 1988). Some argue that organizations can be created around different sets of values, independent of economic motivation. These institutions may arise and persist for purely value-laden reasons (DiMaggio and Anheier 1990; Gassler 1996; Rose-Ackerman 1986).

Based on different values, organizations seek to achieve different goals (Weisbrod 1998). A variety of principles have been suggested including community (Krashinsky 1998), democracy (Kelly and Rosenman 1995; Eisenberg 2000), altruism (Gassler 1986), service to a disadvantaged population (Normark 1996), focus on service quality (Hansmann 1981), pricing in a consumer friendly fashion (Lynk 1995), cooperation (as opposed to competition) (Normark 1996), maximization of output (Steinberg 1993), and satisfying behavior (as opposed to maximizing, greedy behavior) (Weisbrod 1998). Societal values also receive attention, such as institutional diversity, civic development, and human capital.²

These goals become a recruitment mechanism, particularly in recruiting management. Managers with values that are especially supportive of these unique organizational characteristics can be selected and attracted to organizations (Handy 1997; Normark 1996). Specifying management roles and functions with values that are consistent with an organization contributes substantially to the ability of that organization to achieve its unique goals because they possess particular values and ethics which suggest that they are less likely to cheat consumers (Handy 1997).

4 Functions and Relationships in the Internet Based Organization

A key challenge to building a model for engagement in political activity based primarily on the Internet is to provide a rhetoric and structure that

² These institutional factors can also be considered to be ecological explanations at the societal level (Abzug and Turnheim 1998; Clarke and Estes 1992).

assures potential members that they will be able to constructively promote their ideas and target their energy in an organized, reliable environment that shares reputational similarities to the world outside of cyberspace. The Internet engagement process as a two-way flow of information and resources between the organization and its members. The organization must array roles and functions to meet member needs, giving them reason to commit time, effort, and resources to the organization (Saint-Onge and Wallace 2003). The organization can then use the financial and human resources made available to it to accomplish shared goals (Rheingold 2002: 114). This means members must experience frequent results, no matter what form or medium they are delivered in (Cornfield 2004).

Diversifying the nature of the results and defining early on what members will experience in terms of information and collaboration, enhance satisfaction and commitment of members. It is the responsibility of the organization to provide the initial goals and calls to action for its Members and to constantly update those goals based on the developing interests of its Members as well as the changing political climate around them. Beating the drum once every four years will not keep the rhythm; collective action must be amassed on a continuous basis to create the collective culture.

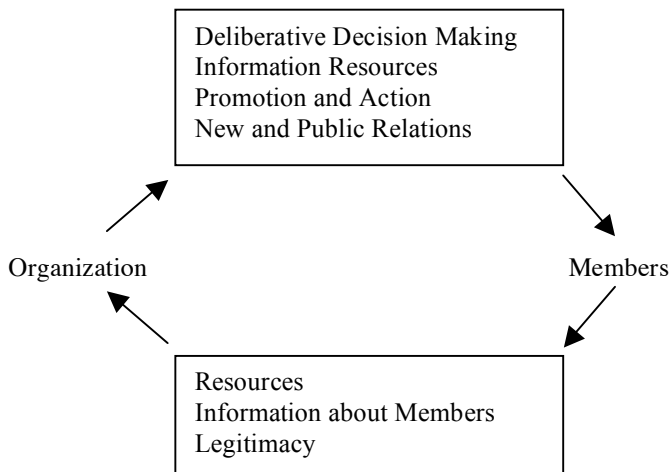


Figure 3. Functions and activities in the Internet-based engagement model

There are three critical functions that support the efforts of the Internet-based organization (see Figure 3). The **Information Resource** builds the technical systems of vertical and horizontal communications. Information flows in a multi-way dialogue with members and leadership to create a

shared sense of purpose. Everyone at every level of the organization will be able to contact all others. The necessary, open dialogue will be established by information flows (Saint-Onge and Wallace 2003: 103) and will enlighten facilitators and contacts on how to keep the systems performing.

It is imperative to recognize that within the American communications and political cycles, **Promotion of Action** have become intimately linked, since most of what is done and said is captured, reworked, and re-released into the wild for reinterpretation and regurgitation by the public, resource creation is now broad and constant. Promotion is carried out with the familiar array of tools: emails, outreach, online events that add fanfare and increased attention, and advertising.

The **Publicity** function packages and broadcasts the organization's goals, initiatives, and accomplishments to members, the public-at-large, the mainstream and independent media. It attempts to solidify and project the message and outward appearance of the organization with an overall promotional scheme (O'Keefe 2002: 58). In the past few years, online newsrooms have become an essential public relations tool. The packaging and publication of members' concerns and achievements aids in the expansion and recognition of the community as an efficient, influential body of citizens, strengthening its potential for future dialogue and impact.

Political campaigns provide targeted moments of high visibility for Internet-based organizations, but it is in the period between elections and for issues tied to policy not politics where the new models of organizing for political action will go farthest to transforming the political process.

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