European political organizations and the internet

Mobilization, participation, and change

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Much has been written about the supposed decline of the traditional vehicles of political activity in European democracies, especially parties and trade unions, and the corresponding rise of new forms of political organization: single issue campaigns, new social movements, and radical direct action protest. This chapter explores the impact of the internet on such trends. In particular, it analyzes the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the intra- and interorganizational arenas. In the case of the former, it examines the use of ICTs to mobilize support and sustain activism through helping organizations reach new audiences and deepen levels of engagement. In the case of the latter it analyzes the impact of ICTs on organizational competition, to see how far it is increasing pluralism and changing the traditional parameters of representative democracy. To date, the empirical evidence outside North America has been somewhat limited, but it suggests that new technologies are facilitating changes in both arenas, though not necessarily in a uniform manner. Early evidence indicates a deepening of activism among the already engaged, but only a marginal mobilization role in relation to new audiences. Overall, ICTs appear to be accelerating some of the trends of the pre-internet era such as individualization and disaggregation. Finally, the chapter discusses the drivers of, and barriers to, organizational responses to new technologies.

This chapter discusses the role of European political organizations (parties, trade unions, pressure groups and new social movements) in mobilizing the public and how far the arrival of new ICTs is helping to reshape such organizations, both in terms of their internal organization and, more broadly, as vehicles for political participation. In particular, the chapter has three aims. First, it provides a context for organizational development in the internet era by discussing trends in organizational mobilization. It assesses how far traditional collective forms of mobilization are in decline and whether new forms of collective participation via loose protest networks and direct action are replacing traditional representative politics. Second, it examines the potential impact of the internet on political organizations from both an intra- and inter-organizational perspective. Have new ICTs provided for additional organizational pluralism by allowing fringe causes a louder voice in European political systems? Do new technologies streamline organizational hierarchies and provide for greater internal democracy? Third, it analyzes the factors shaping the strategies underlying political organizations’ ICT
usage. Since ICTs can be used for a variety of different purposes, ranging from information storage to promoting interactive participation, the chapter seeks to develop an explanatory framework from which expectations of organizational behavior can be derived: what types of political organization will use the technology most extensively, and to what ends?

Representative democracy and political organizations: decline and crisis?

Increasingly, the idea of representative democracy is being questioned from a variety of sources. While some talk excitedly of a new era in politics (Mulgan, 1997), others bemoan declining interest and engagement in democratic politics (Putnam, 2000). Critics and supporters of representative democracy have noted apparently declining levels of political interest, electoral turnout, participation, and trust in the system (Dalton, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Gray and Caul, 2000). It has been suggested that increasing individualism, freedom of choice, and the rise of a consumer society has meant that citizens have become more demanding and less willing to allow others to make decisions on their behalf. European publics have become used to being offered choices and products to match their individual preferences, but political systems have been slow to catch up in many liberal democracies. In short, critics of representative democracy have suggested that it is failing to promote opportunities for direct input from the public.

Yet others have suggested that this rather pessimistic picture is overly simplistic (Norris, 2002). Political organizations are not necessarily in crisis but in flux; they are evolving rather than dying. Countervailing trends in political participation can also be identified, which challenge the logic of decline and point to a more complex situation.

Political participation and organizational change

Central to arguments about the performance of representative political systems are the functions of collective political organizations. While we have noted that traditional participatory organizations have been said to be in decline, the literature on their participatory role in modern democracies is somewhat contradictory. Four areas of debate are worth highlighting.

First, survey evidence has revealed a considerable fall in party and trade union memberships and activism across Western Europe over the past 30 years. This has also led to an increasingly ageing membership (Mair and Von Biezen, 2004; Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999). Among the wider public, an increasing lack of knowledge or interest in such organizations, especially among younger generations, has been noted (Klingemann, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 2005b). However, some of these trends need to be viewed with caution. Statistics for party and union membership have not been particularly reliable until quite recently. Also as Norris (2002) has pointed out, decline is not a global phenomenon and parties still remain a popular organizational form—witness the number of new parties that have emerged over the past 30 years. Moreover, there is a danger that the notion of decline is based on a mythical golden age of collective representative organizations that never really existed (Fielding, 2001).

Second, it has been suggested that overall levels of participation in Western societies are not necessarily declining, but that the public is now more willing to support single-issue campaigns and engage in unconventional forms of protest activity, rather than join broad-based catch-all
parties. The proliferation of environmental, animal-rights and social-welfare organizations since the 1960s has been seen as a significant counter-trend to the decline of established parties and older social movements (Kriesi et al., 1995; Jordan, 1998). Social movement scholars have also pointed to increasing cycles of protest and direct action politics since the 1960s (Dalton, 1994). Initially, this was through anti-Vietnam war protests, then anti-nuclear campaigns and green protest, and latterly the emergence anti-capitalism/globalization networks. These loose coalitions or global networks of protest are difficult to categorize as political organizations, since they often have no formal memberships or recognizable organizational structure (Pickerill, 2000, 2003; Wall, 1999; Doherty 2002). Accurate figures on the growth of cause organizations and the number of protests are also difficult to establish: many networks are informal, ephemeral and wither away (Putnam, 2000).

A third debate centers on the role of the individual member within large political organizations. Common patterns can be detected in political parties, trade unions, and, in some cases, large non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The notion of the mass organizational model has been challenged by the individualization of participation within organizations. For example, since the 1980s many trade union and party members have been given more formal rights to participate through direct postal ballots on policy issues, leadership, and candidate selection. Centralization and professionalization of campaigning within parties, unions, and some NGOs, has also occurred (Farrell and Webb, 2000; Diani and Donati, 2001). Traditional local campaigning activities of activists and branches have been somewhat superseded by national campaigning particularly through the media. As television has become more important in communicating the organizational message this has in turn promoted the rise of a new professional class of media relations personnel. A further trend is the growth of “checkbook members.” In the NGO sphere, Jordan and Maloney (1998) note the rise of what they refer to as protest businesses. Here, for the most part, the vast majority of supporters simply donate funds, rather than participating actively in protest or internal decision-making. Such donations support a professional class of activists who undertake participatory action on behalf of the organization. Finally, there has been erosion of the concept of formal membership. In European parties the lines between formal party members and informal supporters are blurred, with parties encouraging donations, and participation, from non-party members (Margetts, 2006). In a more radical sense, many of the newer direct action networks have simply removed the concept of membership altogether since there are no hierarchies or structures, just activists (Pickerill, 2003).

A fourth area of debate concerns internal democracy, where the impact is mixed. Certainly, individual members have increased their formal rights to participate, most often as voters in internal selection processes. In some instances, power has been dispersed from unrepresentative activist cliques to the wider membership. However, this does not necessarily make leaders more accountable or the process more democratic. Often the participative agenda and candidate choice is restricted or controlled by organizational elites as part of a top-down approach. Moreover, it can be argued that atomized organizational members are unlikely to build a stable platform to challenge elites. Indeed, organizational elites have often been keen to pursue an individualized model of participation as means of legitimizing their own position by bypassing activists and appealing to the more passive and moderate members.
Overall, though, it is difficult to detect a clear picture: there is no uniform trend towards citizen disengagement. While older forms of collective participation have undoubtedly withered to some extent, collective organizational participation is still taking place, albeit in different and sometimes more ephemeral forms than before. In addition, we must not assume the existence of a golden era of traditional representative organizations. The arrival of the internet into the midst of these upheavals has added a further layer to debates about the role of political organizations. The internet has been viewed as both savior and executioner of the current political system and its organizational infrastructure. Much of the remainder of this chapter therefore discusses the differing scenarios that surround the role of new ICTs in the intra- and interorganizational arenas.

The internet and intraorganizational change

The intraorganizational debate has so far tended to focus on contested claims within three key aspects of internal organizational life: recruitment and the use of ICTs to gather additional members and supporters; activism and the use of the net to increase supporter activity and commitment; internal democracy and the use of the new technologies to avoid the so-called “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels, 1915).

Extending organizational reach?
The internet as a recruitment tool

Information and communication technologies have been viewed as means of attracting additional supporters for political organizations and also diversifying the social base of membership, bringing new life to traditional political organizations but also sustaining new political forms. At one level, the basis for the internet as recruitment tool can be seen in terms of administrative gains and increased marketing potential. New technologies allow parties and NGOs to become more administratively efficient in processing recruitment. The collection of e-mail databases of addresses of supporters now allows organizations to make streamlined, regularized, and swifter appeals at less cost. Requests for donations or membership forms can be sent out to thousands of supporters at the touch of a button. Once members have been recruited, e-mail can enable organizations to keep track of their supporters more effectively.

The internet and e-mail are in some senses a continuation of direct mail targeting and computer database packages that have been deployed by parties and large NGOs since the 1980s, both of which have allowed organizations to target and track sympathizers (Doherty, 2002). However, the internet and e-mail have also been seen as more effective marketing devices. The combination of the traditional printed media with audiovisual tools and interactivity make websites, in particular, an attractive medium with which to advertise and canvass support. Furthermore, the ability to gather information on website visitors and the narrowcasting potential of the technology of the internet provide increasingly sophisticated opportunities to target sympathizers (Bowers-Brown, 2003). Similarly, viral marketing techniques can be used to extend the range of the organizational message still further, as e-mail, web pages, and video clips can be easily forwarded by existing supporters to their friends, family, and work colleagues.

Beyond simple administrative efficiency, one relatively straightforward way in which organizations can extend their reach is geographically. It is now much easier than in the past for organizations to appeal to a broader global audience (Rodgers,
The internet has facilitated the rise of new, virtual, global protest networks, such as Avaaz.org, which focuses on global justice issues, organizes around internet tools, and targets multinational companies. It is not just new networks that have used the internet for global activism; traditional party and trade unions have also extended their campaigns beyond national boundaries. One good example of this is the emergence of virtual overseas party branches where parties can gather support from expatriate communities. Similarly, in the trade union movement some have suggested that the net is supporting a new form of internationalism by linking workers’ campaigns across the world (Lee, 1997; Hodkinson, 2004). One further benefit for organizations is the ability to attract members in areas where they have no or weak physical infrastructures on the ground. Supporters can join virtually, even where the organization has no local presence, and still be a part of the organization nationally. This is a particular advantage for small organizations with geographically dispersed memberships.

The internet has also, arguably, formed a new virtual sphere in which organizations can campaign to attract new types of supporter. One of the main debates in internet politics literature is how different the web sphere is for recruitment: is there actually a new audience for organizations to target that might not be reached through the traditional media? In particular, many organizations have seen the web as means of targeting younger supporters, so-called “digital natives”, who are hard to reach through the traditional media but who have grown up with computer technologies as part of their everyday lives.

Despite these advantages to online recruitment, one significant problem limits the net’s potential as a recruitment tool. Essentially, the internet is a “pull” technology. It is difficult to get one’s message across to a general and often more passive audience. Before people visit political websites they generally need pre-existing knowledge and some degree of political interest. Simply because an organizational website is available, it is unlikely to make those uninterested in, or unfavorable towards, an organization, visit it. Many visitors to political sites are already politically active (Norris 2001b, 2002; Gibson et al., 2003a, 2005). While empirical data on audiences for political websites outside the United States are still limited, the balance of most general surveys across Europe to date tend to support a reinforcement rather than a mobilization story (Norris, 2003). Nevertheless, our own case study evidence suggests that where organizations do deploy resources and technology creatively then they can, at least modestly, extend their reach. For instance, the pro-hunting Countryside Alliance in the United Kingdom successfully used new technologies to mobilize a wider support base among young people and in urban areas (Lusoli and Ward, 2006). We found similar results among U.K. parties with online recruitment aimed at the young, particularly students (Lusoli and Ward, 2003, 2006). As yet, though, research on the internal angle remains limited because of the difficulties of gaining access and the cost of data collection. There remains considerable scope to analyze how and why online recruitment campaigns succeed or fail.

Deepening supporter engagement? The internet as an activist tool

Beyond the simple argument about reinvigoration of organizations through additional members is the idea that the internet could allow organizations to deepen their engagement with supporters on a more regularized basis. For example,
organizations now have more potential to create additional opportunities for participation. Virtual discussion forums, intranets, online surveys, e-mail links, blogs, and social network sites such as MySpace or Facebook could all provide for more regular and in-depth supporter input. While traditional participatory opportunities might be limited to monthly meetings, annual conferences or one-off events, new online spaces could allow for ongoing dialogue between members and between organizational elites and members. While one might dismiss this as simply an updating of traditional participatory channels, the net has also created a range of new protest repertoires, notably electronic civil disobedience and hacktivism where online activists have targeted government and corporations through the defacing of websites, publishing of private information, and through swarming and denial of service attacks that tie up websites and networks (Jordan, 2001).

One positive knock-on effect of additional electronic channels is to create stronger links to the organization and between organizational supporters. This can help build levels of trust and commitment. Most studies of participation conclude that the more contact that members have with an organization the more they are likely to feel efficacious and the more they participate (Jordan and Maloney, 1998).

One further benefit from the perspective of organizations is the ability to use the technology to enable their supporters to campaign more effectively against governments or opponents (Galusky, 2003). Buxton (2002) notes that the Jubilee 2000 campaign, (to end developing world debt), used the web and e-mail to provide information and campaign material for activists. Such information would previously have remained within the domain of professional NGO staff. The result was the professionalization of activists who could then more confidently lobby governments and parliamentarians with high-quality information.

The emergence of so-called Web 2.0 campaigns, however, suggests even more radical consequences whereby supporters and activists help shape campaigns and even reconfigure them, potentially reducing the control organizational headquarters has over campaigning. Greenpeace’s recent “green my apple” campaign targeting the Apple company provides an early indicator of such novel elements in campaigns. Greenpeace supporters were encouraged to create their own online banners and also remix video and images placed on the Greenpeace site.

Again, however, these positive benefits have been questioned not only by scholars but also by political activists themselves. Some within the activist community, especially those engaged in direct action, have criticized online activism as a distraction from real-world activities or as a relatively shallow form of participation with negligible impact (Pickerill, 2000, 2003).

Moreover, studies have even suggested that far from stimulating activism, the internet is more likely to create passivity (Putnam, 2000). For example, Nie and Ebring (2000) found that precisely because the internet removes social setting, place, and time, it becomes a much more isolating experience than television. While people may connect online, the more they surf, the less time they spend socializing with others. Diani (2001) has further questioned whether virtual networks can engender enough trust between participants to support high-risk radical activism. This sort of activity, he argues, requires collective identification that is dependent on face-to-face interaction.

One may join organizations online but without the real-world connections to other supporters or local networks the net is more likely to encourage a passive chequebook membership with limited long-term ties (Lusoli and Ward, 2004).
Flattening hierarchies? The internet as a democratic tool

Even if we accept that the internet assists with increasing their recruitment and deepening membership engagement, would this necessarily alter the internal dynamics of organizations? Much has been made of the supposed democratizing influence of new technologies that weaken oligarchy and institutionalization and promote more flexible, grass-roots, decentralized modes of behavior (Washbourne, 2001; Greene et al., 2003). But how far are ICTs really likely to override pre-existing practice and culture? Their role in intraorganizational democracy can best be conceptualized along two dimensions (Gibson and Ward, 1999).

The first dimension is vertical, member-to-elite relations. It has been argued that the creation of intranets, internal discussion forums, e-mail lists, blog networks, and the like might make organizational elites more accountable to ordinary members. The greater volume and speed of information flows offered via ICTs, combined with its interactivity and presence in homes means members/supporters can have more frequent and direct access to elites. This would promote increased accountability of elite-level decision-making.

The second dimension concerns horizontal, member-to-member relations. The independent adoption of new media technologies by either individual members or internal groups arguably allows them to communicate their views to local, national, and global audiences more effectively. Moreover, they can communicate with one another more easily and network independently without the need to go through official channels. Washbourne (2001:132–3) notes the growth of “translocalism” in Friends of the Earth, where local branches and activists have used technology to facilitate decentralized action without the need for going through headquarters. Furthermore, organizational elites find it harder to control internal flows of information and dissent. Potentially, therefore, it makes it easier for elites to be challenged from below (Greene et al., 2003).

Often underlying such arguments are normative assumptions that flattening hierarchies will increase the power of grass-roots members and create a more participatory form of internal democracy. Skeptics however, have questioned whether technologies facilitate such unidirectional changes. Simply providing electronic tools for participation is not the same as actually empowering members. The existing participatory context is clearly important: who controls the agenda for electronic discussion? What are the rules for access? How do existing organizational rules incorporate electronic channels? And is participation even viewed as important? (Burt and Taylor, 2001). Several studies have indicated that due to their resource and power advantages organizational headquarters are more likely to dominate the e-agenda and use it to strengthen their position of power (Pickerill, 2001; Ward and Gibson, 2003).

At a basic level, beyond the headquarters of many parties and pressures groups, access and use of new ICTs is often more patchy (Gibson and Ward, 1999). Similarly, there is little guarantee that use of new technology within organizations, even if it challenges existing hierarchies, will not simply create new divides. As Grignou and Patou (2004: 178–9) conclude in their study of ATTAC, a French originated social movement, electronic tools maintain and even enlarge gaps between expert and non-experts, and active supporters and non-active supporters.

In short, therefore, it is not clear that any particular model of internal democracy may emerge. Information and communication technologies do not automatically promote internal democratization. Much is clearly dependent on the participatory ethos of the organization in question.
The internet and interorganizational change

Beyond ICT-facilitated internal change, commentators have suggested that such technologies may eventually alter the organizational landscape of democracies and that certain types of organizations can more readily adapt the technology and benefit from it. A variety of possibilities have been advanced, from radical deinstitutionalization through to a “politics as usual” scenario.

Direct democracy: disintermediation and erosion?

One of the most radical scenarios, particularly from early accounts, is the idea that the internet may hasten the demise of traditional representative democracy by producing a process of deinstitutionalization as organizational hierarchies are flattened and displaced by direct input from citizens (Rheingold, 1995; Leadbeater and Mulgan, 1997; Morris, 1999). At its most revolutionary, a return to the classical model of unmediated direct democracy has been envisaged. New technologies allow for much more regular and direct input from the individual. Electronic forums, discussion areas, e-voting, and referenda all make it easier for citizens to have a direct say in governing themselves, thus bypassing mediating institutions and organizations, such as parties, pressure groups, and even Parliaments. The organization and administration of direct democracy in a mass society is, therefore, no longer untenable (Budge, 1996). While practical details are somewhat limited, normative debates about the benefits or drawbacks of direct democracy have flourished. While proponents see technology-enhanced direct democracy as heralding a new, more responsive system of governance replacing the outmoded organizations and rules of the pre-modern era (Morris, 1999), critics point to the possible rise of electronic populism or demagoguery open to abuse and manipulation (Barber, 2004).

Nevertheless, the idea of the removal of organizational frameworks in politics seems fanciful, for several reasons. An unwritten assumption in these type of accounts is that political organizations are powerless to defend their positions against the tide of technological change. Yet, as historical studies of the arrival of new technologies remind us, most organizations tend to adapt and adopt the technology (Wring and Horrocks, 2001). Moreover, direct democracy proponents perhaps underestimate the extent to which people wish to participate on an individual basis. From a rational choice perspective, citizens may lack time, skills, resources, and interest to be involved on the scale required. Even if the technology is available, some citizens may prefer to see experts and professionals in pressure groups participate for them.

An outsiders’ medium: equalization?

A second school of thought suggests a more differentiated impact for the internet and a less deterministic approach. Notions of accelerated pluralism or equalization indicate that outsider, oppositional, or fringe organizations are likely to benefit disproportionately from the rise of new ICTs and potentially pose more of a challenge to the mainstream political establishment. In short, new ICTs could help level the campaign communication playing field. Equalizers point toward the apparent rise of protest activity, direct action campaigns, and global networks all making use of the technology to organize and mobilize (Doherty, 2002; Bennett, 2003; Clark, 2003; van de Donk et al., 2004). The media have been quick to highlight the
use of the internet in a range of protest campaigns, from the anti-fuel tax campaigns in the United Kingdom, anti-globalization protests at Seattle, Prague, Milan, and the anti-Iraq war campaign (Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

The equalization case tends to rest on arguments about costs, disintermediation, and internet culture. While newspapers require journalistic and printing skills and the costs of producing one’s own television or films are still relatively expensive in equipment terms, the internet is seen a cheap and open publishing source. It can significantly lower communication and start-up costs for resource-poor organizations and networks (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Even obscure political groups with very little resources can create a website that can sit alongside the mainstream political establishment. Similarly, the low cost and viral quality of e-mail can also generate rapid connections and momentum in campaigns, promoting flash protests. Whereas television and newspapers have limited space and editors can control and edit out fringe concerns, websites, blogs, and YouTube provide an unlimited platform with which to get one’s message across. They effectively help decentralize control of the communication process.

Given that control and authority are decentralized, it is often difficult for a web surfer to gauge the size, legitimacy, or authenticity of organizations by simply looking at a website. Hence, small and fringe organizations can create an amplification effect with a web presence. As Copsey (2003) notes in relation to far right parties, their professionally designed, often slick sites give the impression of much larger, more representative organizations than they are in reality.

It has also been suggested because of the way the internet developed, its initial audience, (techies and academics), and its decentralized nature has led to a particular ethos or online culture. The original, supposedly rather anarchic environment of the net with its free flows of information and a common space, relatively unregulated by governments would seem to benefit flexible, non–hierarchical types of organization outside the mainstream. Thus direct-action protest campaigns, anarchistic and libertarian networks are those whose values are supposedly best reflected in cyberspace (Scott and Street, 2001).

However, the equalization thesis is less precise over which specific organizations will benefit. Bimber (1998) argues that all organizations may well benefit from the use of new ICTs but that single-issues campaigns, new social movements, and protest networks are likely to benefit most. Others have suggested that not all parties will be disadvantaged: some fringe outsiders, such as the far right or the greens, may in fact gain as much as non-party organizations (Ward et al., 2007). While a number of studies have suggested that environmental organizations may be best placed to develop a lead with the technology because of their supposed participatory culture and their ability to link global issues with local campaigns facilitated by the net (Pickerill, 2000, 2003; Doherty, 2002). Yet it could also be argued that not all such single-issues groups are likely to prosper. Large pressure groups or new social movements, as much as parties, may find themselves increasingly challenged by looser ad hoc protest networks or virtual campaigns with no identifiable leaderships or clear structures (Mobbs, 2000; Lebert, 2003).

Politics as usual: normalization?

At the other end of the spectrum, other writers have expressed considerable skepticism that the rise of the internet will bring about any significant changes in the nature of democratic politics. Resnick (1998) argues that although it was originally a playground for the alternative and
anarchic increasingly the internet has been normalized. In the political sphere, this means that the large traditional political forces will come to predominate as they do in other media. This so-called normalization thesis is built on four main assumptions: commercialization, fragmentation, new skills, and increasing regulatory control. First, as the net has developed, cyberspace has been increasingly commercialized and dominated by business interests in particular (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). As commercialization has occurred so the space for alternative politics has been squeezed. Indeed, the space for politics as a whole is being crowded out. The main uses of the internet have become the leisure activities of sex, sport, and shopping.

Second, normalizers have also questioned the idea of the increased reach of the net. As we have already noted, the net is a pull medium, in which it is difficult to reach the politically uninterested. More fundamentally, skeptics have argued that the internet has contributed to a further fragmentation of the media. While theoretically the consumer has more choice, in reality this is likely to mean that more choose not to be exposed to political coverage (Sunstein, 2001; Norris, 2001b; Scott, 2005). Unlike the traditional terrestrial broadcasting era, during which the public was regularly exposed to political news, even if only as passive consumers, in the era of web portals and digital TV packages citizens can easily filter out news and politics.

Third, far from being a cost-free exercise, normalizers argue that to produce a sophisticated web strategy involves considerable investment (Lebert, 2003). Again, established organizations have more resources to devote to creating websites and using ICTs creatively. They can afford to pay professional web designers and full-time staff to maintain their sites and respond to voters, whereas, smaller, volunteer-run organizations are reliant on the goodwill of members or supporters who lack the time and skills to manage websites on a continuous basis.

Finally, while the internet is often depicted as uncontrollable, it is clear that governments and established interests are devoting increasing effort to trying to regulate and control online communication. In authoritarian regimes, this has meant attempts by authorities to limit online opposition through restrictions on access, as well as surveillance and arrests. Even in European democracies attempts have been made to restrict the online activities of far right groups (Copsey, 2003) and also monitor the activities of a range of protest campaigns (Pickerill, 2003).

So far, changes in the interorganizational arena are somewhat mixed. Information and communication technologies have yet to upset the balance of power between organizations in European countries. Nevertheless, they have undoubtedly lowered the start-up costs for campaigns and are facilitating the growth of new networks and organizations operating in ways that were previously impossible. In short, as we have argued elsewhere, the internet is widening the political playing field and accelerating established trends such as the growth of direct action and single-issue politics that pre-date its arrival (Ward et al., 2003; Ward and Vedel, 2006). New technologies have not revolutionized or destroyed traditional collective organizations, but such entities have benefited less than new social movements, protest campaigns, and flexible, decentralized supporter networks.

### Explaining levels of activity and strategies online: developing a framework

Much of the literature on organizational ICT use has focused on rather oversimplified two-dimensional approaches—
equalization versus normalization, or centralization versus decentralization. We reject such “one size fits all” explanations and argue that social and political shaping are crucial to understanding the development of an organization’s approach to new technologies. As Burt and Taylor (2001: 72) have suggested: “the extent to which technologies are exploited and the ways in which they are appropriated are shaped by the social conditions, philosophies and value systems within which the technologies are immersed.”

The remaining section in this chapter explores what more specific factors could shape organizational ICT strategy and choice. Drawing on the literature, we propose that three sets of factors (systemic opportunity structures, organizational capacities, and organizational incentives) may hold the key to explaining organizational activity.

**Systemic and technological opportunity structures**

Systemic and technological opportunity structures provide the broad political and technological parameters within which political organizations operate. In short, especially within national boundaries, they can alter the extent and the style to which technology is used by organizations. For example, the idea of political opportunity structures has long been used to explain and compare protest movement strategic choice (Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi et al., 1995). The arrival of a new communication channel adds further dimension to those opportunity structures. One can envisage opportunity structures as falling broadly into two categories:

- **Media environment:** both the shape of the old media environment, as well as the development of internet infrastructure, are important here. In a number of European countries, (see for example Italy), parties and social movements have traditionally owned newspapers or television channels, which arguably slow the need to develop online channels (Gibson et al., forthcoming). The extent of fragmentation of media and the role of public broadcasters can also have an influence. The fragmented, highly volatile U.S. media-market seems to have produced an environment conducive to the creation of partisan new media channels. Alternatively, where there is a dominant and comparatively trusted public service provider, such as the BBC in the United Kingdom, it has arguably ameliorated the development of a partisan websphere. More directly, the spread of internet technology and the speed of connection within countries or regions clearly provides incentives for all organizations to move online (Norris, 2).

- **Political environment:** the basic political system framework (federalism, party system, electoral system, etc.) will also shape the use of new ICTs. Arguably, presidential, candidate-centered, federal systems are more likely to be responsive to interactive online technologies than highly centralized polities because multilevel government with large numbers of independent actors is likely to result in wider experimentation and innovation in terms of campaigning (Gibson and Rommele, 2005; Zittel, 2003). Moreover, the extent to which such institutional frameworks are entrenched may also influence technological uptake. As March (2006) suggests, newer democracies, (in Eastern Europe for example), where political communication and political systems are less fixed,
could allow a greater role for new technologies.

Overall, therefore, we might expect to see greater and more innovative uses of internet technology in countries with relatively fragmented and less trusted media systems, high internet penetration rates, along with decentralized, personalized, and less fixed political systems.

**Organizational capacity**

Organizational capacity determines the extent to which organizations can use ICTs for a variety of purposes. Capacity can be understood in terms of three resources: staff time, skills, and finance.

- **Staff time:** to run an effective website it requires time, not least to keep the site fresh, innovate with the technology, and deal with the information gathered through the site. Even small political organizations have found that a website can end up generating an off-putting amount of e-mail demanding information and answers.
- **Skills:** basic web technology is not necessarily difficult to understand, but it still requires a degree of knowledge and training to create the more sophisticated and innovative online features.
- **Finance:** websites are comparatively cheap to design and manage compared with making TV broadcasts or placing large press ads. Nevertheless, small organizations with limited finances may have a somewhat different perception of such costs. In short, generally, the more sophisticated the website, the more money is required.

Overall, we would expect organizations with greater organizational capacity to develop more sophisticated and multipurpose strategies than those with limited capacity.

**Organizational incentives**

While resources are clearly important, organizational incentives are likely to be the key factors not only in increasing or decreasing the willingness of organizations to use ICTs, but also the purpose for which they are used—consumerist or grass-roots participatory approaches, for example. Organizational incentives include the following:

- **Organizational ideology:** organizations on both the right and the left of the political spectrum have claimed the web to be their “natural” medium. The participatory, communitarian politics and even anarchic tendencies of the green movement provide a fit with the internet ethos and the possibilities of online grass-roots activism. Equally, though, the radical libertarian right see the web as their medium due to the possibilities for the free market and free speech it offers.
- **Target audience:** access and use of the web, while growing rapidly in Europe, is still skewed toward the more affluent and educated sectors of society. Hence, organizations with a predominantly working-class membership, or audience among socially excluded groups, may well develop ICT strategy more slowly than those organizations with affluent web-oriented supporters. Similarly, organizations that have a geographically dispersed audience may also have greater incentive to develop an ICT strategy.
- **Organizational age:** the age of an organization may have some impact.
on the willingness to adopt the technology. Organizations founded in the 1990s are more likely to accept the technology as mainstream because they have grown up in the internet age. Similarly, longstanding political organizations with well-established communication and bureaucratic structures might face more internal hurdles in grafting new technologies onto existing administrative frameworks.

Organizational status: because they may lack sufficient exposure in the traditional media and access to official channels of publicity and websites, opposition parties, outsider pressure groups, or challengers in a political system are likely to have the greatest incentive to use new media.

In sum, incentives are likely to be greatest among young, oppositional network-style organizations with a dispersed, internet-literate, and participatory support base.

Conclusion

One of the weaknesses of internet studies is a failure to link research to existing literatures or place it within current political and social contexts. To understand the political role of the internet, it should be clear that we need to relate it to existing trends within participatory politics. Hence, at the start of the chapter, we referred to three contested trends: declining membership within established organizations, the changing role of the member, and the disputed rise of alternative organizations and protest. What impact is the internet having in these areas?

Those organizations with significant capacity are already using the technology to try and broaden their support base. This is not dissimilar to the way that large pressure groups and parties have adopted marketing techniques and direct mail. This may help widen participation at the margins, but it is unlikely to radically alter internal democracy. In terms of intraorganizational democracy, the technology may strengthen existing trends within political parties and large organizations. Individual members of traditional political organizations may be provided with more information, more opportunities to input opinion direct to organizational elites, and even more plebiscitary voting rights, but the net is unlikely to foster more collective participation within these types of organization. Unless organizations have particular incentives for using ICTs for participatory and innovative purposes, the technology alone will not change existing organizational goals. Such organizations are likely to use ICTs for supplementary purposes, although the emergence of Web 2.0 campaigns and tools may place further pressure on large organizations to allow a degree of decentralization in their campaigns.

More innovative online activity and participatory strategies are likely to emerge from protest networks and radical grass-roots organizations that have some of the greatest organizational incentives to use ICTs for these purposes. This should not be a surprise, since in the “offline world” it is these types of organization that have tended to extend the range of protest behavior. The internet further allows such networks the opportunity to gain a foothold and mobilize support, at least in the short term. Hence, mobilizing one-off protests or creating rapid but ephemeral networks is where the internet may make the biggest impact. Sustaining those networks may be more problematic since they often lack organizational capacity.

The evolution of organizations in the internet era also raises methodological questions. The traditional metrics of political participation and organizational
success (voter turnout and organizational membership, for example) are too narrow and require expansion. As we have seen, the internet has already fostered the growth of informal supporter networks and blurred the boundaries between formal membership and more ephemeral supporters. Notably, partisan blogs and social networking supporter sites are now fostering participation outside formal organizational structures and impacting on formal organizational policy agendas. Studies of organizations and mobilization arguably need to take account of new forms of online participation. For example, the unofficial use of online humor that has become increasingly popular in political campaigns through spoof websites, blogs, and YouTube videos, could be seen as a participatory activity (Shifman et al., 2007).

Moving from the changes that take place within organizational types, to the broader systemic level, competing democratic visions are emerging from consumerist to web network models. Nevertheless, contrary to talk of decline, we should not forget that representative organizations have actually been remarkably resilient. The deployment of new ICTs may be used to modernize representative democracy on a consumerist model, rather than sweeping it away (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998). Here citizens are viewed more as consumers of public services and the focus is on value and efficiency and providing individuals with increased choice through access to information (Hoff et al., 2000). This in itself is likely to create increasing challenges for organizations and networks dedicated to a cyberdemocratic approach. In short, while the extent of systemic developments is shaped in different countries by different opportunity structures, we may be moving towards a more fragmented and more contested democratic model.

Guide to further reading

There is a growing general literature on the internet, political organizations, and participatory politics, but it is still limited in a number of respects. Much of the early work draws on North America and, to a lesser extent, Northern Europe. It also tends to be limited to single country studies. Second, methodologically, much of the initial focus has been on the content of organizational websites and small-scale case studies. There is still a dearth of studies looking at the internal organizational angle and little from the user perspective or on internet political audiences (members, supporters, and the broader public).

With these limitations in mind, however, there is a range of work that forms a useful basis for study. In relation to the broader ideas of democracy and the internet and the role of political organizations, Budge’s (1996) early speculative work sets out the arguments for a more direct democracy enabled, in part, by technology. Although based on the U.S. experience, Bimber’s (1998) idea of accelerated pluralism, is a useful conceptualization of the potential reshaping role of the net. Margolis and Resnick’s (2000) “politics as usual” approach presents perhaps the best account of why politics and mainstream actors are likely to retain their power in the internet era. The more conceptual and theoretical work of Stephen Coleman on democracy in the internet era, particularly his idea of direct representation (Coleman, 2005b) provides an interesting argument for how the participatory potential of ICTs could be harnessed by representative organizations and institutions. From a more empirical, but still general, approach, Zittel’s (2003) article is one of the few that lays out the comparative potential impact of the systemic political environment on the influence of the internet.
Useful introductory chapters on participation, democracy and the net, as well as case studies of organizations can be found in Webster and Lin (2002), Hoff et al. (2000), Gibson et al. (2004), and Oates et al. (2006). More specific studies of political organizations (especially in Europe) have tended to skew towards parties in the electoral context (Gibson et al., 2003c; Klver et al. (eds), 2007; Davis et al., 2008) and case studies of campaign activity among groups and new social movements. Among the latter, see Van de Donk et al. (2004) and McCaughey and Ayers (2003). Literature on trade unions and ICTs is sparser, although a special issue of the Journal of Industrial Relations 34 (4), 2003, contains a number of good European case studies.

For empirical studies of internal organizational democracy or activity beyond the national or collective level, see, in the party context, Lusoli and Ward (2003, 2004) on the United Kingdom, and Pederson and Saglie’s (2005) study of Danish and Norwegian party members. There is also corresponding work by Greene et al. (2003) on trade unions, ICTs, and activism. Work on the internal organizational side of mainstream pressure groups is more difficult to locate. Pickerill’s (2000, 2003, 2006) research on a range of environmental organizations from Friends of the Earth to radical direct-action protest networks contains some excellent insights on the way ICTs have been incorporated in ways reflecting differing organizational cultures.

Notes


2 This section draws on and expands two chapters dealing with parties and internet strategies (Nixon et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2008).