

## Collective Action On-line: Theories and Methods

The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have brought a burst of collective action, from the mobilizations of the Arab Spring, to protests in the wake of the financial crash of 2008. Beyond protest, loose networks of interest groups, some of them existent almost entirely online, are pressurizing governments for policy change. And in less stable states in the south, technology enabled networks are creating capacities for reporting violence, disease and other social problems normally managed by governments.

The Internet has figured in almost all of this collective activity. As citizens live increasing proportions of their social, economic and political lives on-line, an array of social media platforms have proved themselves as important fora for collective action, reducing the costs of organization, and even creating organizational structure through massive networks of 'weak ties.' In the 2011 Oxford UK Internet Survey 'posting political content on social media sites' jumped into the ladder of political participation, with 10 per cent of Internet users claiming to have done so.

Investigation of the mechanics of online participatory behaviour, along with its offline practices and related technologies is vital to our understanding of contemporary collective action. Perhaps surprisingly, there has been no workshop investigating the relationship between use of the Internet and collective action during the last two ECPR Joint Sessions. Meanwhile, there is a growing body of methodologically innovative research in this area. Just as the Internet facilitates collective activity, it also has the potential to generate large scale datasets of real-time transactional data that tells us what people are really doing, as opposed to survey data which tells us what people think they did or might do. The new work in these areas involves rich questions, innovative methods and sophisticated uses of network analysis (see for example Etling et al, 2009; Hindman, 2008; Gonzalez Bailon et al, 2011; Salganik et al, 2006; Margetts et al, 2011; Bennett and Segerberg 2011).

At the same time, the development of our theoretical understanding has lagged behind empirical research, in part because of epistemological gaps between those with technical skills and those with more traditional social science grounding.. Multi-disciplinary teams have been formed to carry out this kind of research, but there is a need for more generalized cross-fertilization of ideas among researchers investigating contemporary

collective action. Developing a cross-disciplinary network of scholars is the goal of this workshop. We invite scholars to address the following questions, among others:

- What are the connective mechanisms of collective action in the digital age?
- How does digitally networked collective action play out in different conditions?
- How does digitally enabled collective action differ from more socially intensive processes?
- How does collective action on-line change our understanding of political communication?
- Does collective action on-line create new challenges for theories of democratic participation and representation?
- What policy implications flow from online forms of political and civic organization?

The aim of the workshop is to involve both normative and empirical scholars, discussing the most interesting research questions and the most appropriate methods to answer them. It will draw on the theoretical work so far developed (for example, Lupia and Sin, 2003; Bimber et al, 2006; Bennet and Segerberg, 2011; Segerberg Bennett, 2011); empirical research into civic engagement and political participation online (such as Mossberger et al 2008; Borge and Cardenal, 2011); and the analysis of online social networks using both experimental and 'big data' approaches (Centola, 2010; Aral and Walker, 2010; Gonzalez Bailon et al, 2011; Margetts et al, 2011). Comparative studies of mobilizations in different countries and on different social media platforms will be particularly encouraged in order to facilitate generalization and theoretical development.

**Likely participants:** The Workshop Directors hope that the workshop will attract a wide range of papers, from the ECPR Internet and Politics standing group (where the proposal was originally discussed), other ECPR groups (e.g. the standing group on Forms of Participation) and the large-scale research networks of the Oxford Internet Institute and the Centre for Communication and Civic Engagement, as well as wider political science and political communication networks. We hope to recruit from the mainstream of political science, giving established theorists the opportunity to interact with methodologists working with large datasets generated from the Internet.

One of the workshop directors (Helen Margetts) is the editor of the journal *Policy and Internet* which currently has a call for papers underway for a special issue on Contemporary Collective Action, to be published in 2013. There is potential therefore, for authors submitting papers to this issue to take part, with the addition of further papers submitted to the workshop, allowing speedy progression to the publication of a book based

on the special issue and the workshop. The Workshop Directors will approach Oxford University Press with this aim in mind.

### **Workshop Directors**

**Lance Bennett** is Professor of Political Communication at the University of Washington and Director of the Centre for Communication and Civic Engagement. His current research interests include press-government relations and the quality of public information, strategic communication, communication and the organization of social protest, transnational advocacy networks, and digital media and youth civic engagement. He is the author of ten books and more than 100 articles and book chapters, many of which deal with issues of collective action (see Bennett and Segerberg, Segerberg and Bennett, 2011 below).

**Helen Margetts** is Professor of Society and the Internet and Director of the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford. She holds an Economic and Social Research Council professorial fellowship (2011-4) investigating collective action online, as well as various aspects of digital governance. She leads a programme of research into the use of 'Big Data' generated on the Internet for investigating collective action and is co-director of the social science experimental laboratory, OxLab, where various experiments into online collective action have been carried out, the most recent of which have been published as Margetts (2011a and b) below.

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