

“The Future of Social Movement Organizations: The Waning Dominance of SMOs Online”

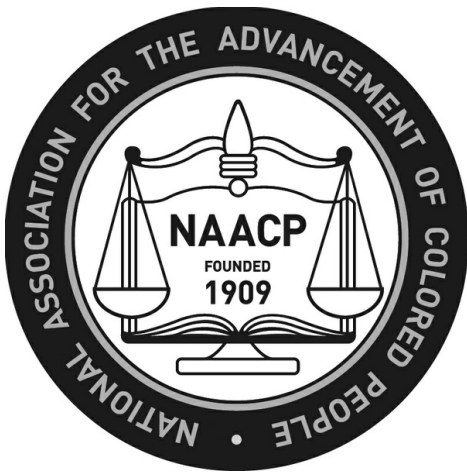
Jennifer Earl

Professor of Sociology

University of Arizona

SMOs in Social Movement Theory

- Historically, SMOs have been empirically and theoretically central to the development, maintenance and success of movements



What Do SMOs Do?

- Resource mobilization
cast SMOs as critical
resource bundlers and
spenders, helping to
overcome the free
rider dilemma



- SMOs institutionalize movements, increasing
the odds of movements lasting, particularly
during doldrums



- SMOs provide leadership and strategy
- SMOs are key protest event organizers and
- SMOs raise the odds of media coverage
- SMOs support collective identity formation

Online Activism and Organizing without Organizations

- Research began to suggest:
 - Online organizing without SMOs is possible
 - Online participation outside of SMOs is possible
- What would account for this?
 - When unique affordances are leveraged, it is likely that SMOs are no longer needed to fulfill the functions described above, decreasing ROI for building SMOs

Do You Still Need SMOs to Do That?

- SMOs as resource bundlers and spenders
 - But, with innovative uses of the Web, online protest is cheap and free riding is irrelevant



- SMOs institutionalize movements
 - But, “flash activism” may be an effective alternative in some circumstances
 - And, episodic organizing may reduce the need for abeyance
- SMOs are key protest event organizers
 - Distributed organizing is possible
 - Only SMO advantage is when protest events don’t leverage unique affordances of the Web

- SMOs raise the odds of media coverage
 - Market pressure has made the media very sensitive to online activity, leading to frequent reporting
 - The ability to route around to speak directly to publics also reduces the need for media coverage
- SMOs support collective identity formation
 - Some uses of the Web can already support the development of collective identity
 - Some uses of the Web for activism may make collective identity less important as a driver of participation

Key Conclusions

- SMOs are not *prerequisites* for online organizing or participation
- Does this mean that SMOs will go away? **NO**
 - SMOs are still necessary when unique online affordances are not leveraged
 - Some movements need the long haul, which will up the ROI for SMOs
 - Some movements require stable networks of players, which will up the ROI for SMOs

The Need for New Theory

- These three reasons may not be enough to explain why SMOs are thriving online
- We need to study what other ROI are being delivered by SMOs today
 - Convenience
 - Legitimacy and popularity
 - They support healthy overall social movement ecologies
 - Other possibilities? Let's hope future research engages this question