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Review of 'Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age'

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Review of *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*, by Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport

Bart Bonikowski, Harvard University

Debates about the social consequences of rapid technological change frequently oscillate between utopian optimism and obdurate skepticism, both of which tend to fare poorly against the tests of time and empirical evidence. In *Digitally Enabled Social Change*, Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport strive for the middle ground between such extremes as they investigate the consequences of Internet technology--and specifically the Web--for social movement mobilization. The book's key insight is that the novelty of Web-mediated protest depends on how well activists leverage the Web's distinct affordances, including its ability to reduce the costs of mobilization and to enable asynchronous participation without the need for physical copresence. When the Web's advantages are fully exploited, many of the processes perceived by social movement scholars as essential for movement success cease to matter and, as a result, the fundamental logic of protest is transformed. Under such conditions, collective action can be organized by individuals or small groups rather than formal organizations, participants can express their grievances in a matter of minutes and at a time and place of their choosing rather than in the context of geographically circumscribed collective events, and the pool of potentially relevant grievances and protest targets can expand beyond standard political claims aimed at the state.

To their credit, Earl and Kimport do not argue that these changes will necessarily transform all aspects of political contention. Their central thesis is more restrained but nevertheless radical: because the strategies of *some* movements--those capable of better leveraging the Web's affordances--are significantly altered by Internet technology, many of the constants of social movement research should be recast as variables. Insofar as explanations rooted in resource mobilization theory apply only to movements situated at the traditional end of the technological spectrum, they cannot sufficiently account for the full diversity of movement strategies. What is needed instead, according to the authors, is a new analytical approach that focuses on instances of protest rather than on movements. By shifting units of analysis, such an approach can observe and explain a greater variety of mobilization strategies, including those that do not rely on movement organizations.

The book's theoretical claims are provocative and for most part quite convincing. What is less satisfying, however, is the empirical evidence provided in their support. A reader faced with the book's promise to "empirically detail the landscape of protest on the Web" (p. 19) might expect an analysis of a wide spectrum of practices, from those that supplement traditional mobilization with online tools (what the authors call e-mobilizations) to those that use the Web (including social media) to organize collective actions previously unachievable in the offline world (what the authors call e-movements). It would also be reasonable to expect an account of how varied degrees of

online integration lend themselves to different types of claims and under what circumstances Web protests can successfully effect social change. Instead, the book confines its empirical scope to basic descriptive analyses of a limited subset of online practices: petitions, boycotts, and email, letter, and fax campaigns. The authors dub these tools "e-tactics" and argue that they represent an intermediate position between e-mobilizations and e-movements, with sufficient internal variation to make them relevant objects of study (it is worth noting that the sampling strategy used to collect the data for the book is quite innovative). While these practices are certainly interesting, they provide a rather tentative foundation for Earl and Kimport's bold claims about the ways in which the Web as a whole promises to reshape protest.

The limitations of the data are exacerbated by the book's comparative focus on the differences between e-tactics (i.e., online petitions, boycotts, and letter, email, and fax campaigns) and offline direct action campaigns, such as marches, sit-ins, and rallies. It is not surprising that e-tactics turn out to be less costly and require less physical copresence than collective events--after all, the same is true of *offline* petitions, boycotts, and letter campaigns. Signing a sidewalk petition is clearly a cheaper and more asynchronous form of participation than attending a rally in a faraway location. A more fruitful strategy for demonstrating the unique advantages of e-tactics would have been to compare them with offline petitions, boycotts, and letter campaigns. Yet, we learn little about these traditional forms of mobilization, despite their historical prominence in modern democracies. This is especially troubling given the extensive literature on such practices in political science, which receives scant attention in the book.

Even if one were to grant the authors' claim that e-tactics have unique properties relative to their offline counterparts, what remains unclear is the significance of e-tactics within the broader ecology of collective action. Are e-tactics rapidly gaining prominence among activists? Are they displacing traditional mobilization strategies? Are they more effective than their offline alternatives? Survey data from the U.S. and Europe suggest that the rate of petition signing has not increased in the last two decades, so it does not appear that the popularization of the Web has ushered in a new era of mass activism. It also seems unlikely that e-tactics will displace other forms of protest, many of which cannot unfold exclusively--or even primarily--online: when it comes to overthrowing corrupt regimes, for instance, large-scale physical copresence is still the best option. Perhaps what has changed with the advent of the Web is not the prevalence of petitions, boycotts, and letters, but rather their effectiveness; yet, the book does not provide any data that could be used to test this hypothesis. Given the authors' objective of revising social movement theory, these are not trivial issues. The book's programmatic claims rest at least in part on the demonstrable political significance of e-tactics, but on that count, the evidence is far from conclusive.

Earl and Kimport's empirical analysis is perhaps at its most persuasive when the authors turn their attention to protest organization rather than participation. One

particularly fascinating technological development discussed in the book is the proliferation of freely accessible “warehouse sites” that host thousands of petitions, boycotts, and email campaigns. As the authors argue, warehouse sites can dramatically alter how new online protests are launched, not least because they provide a captive audience that can be mobilized at a moment’s notice. This type of flash activism is capable of nearly instantaneous responses to rapidly unfolding events, which gives it a unique advantage compared to more traditional movement strategies. While activists who rely on warehouse sites are freed from many of the constraints of offline mobilization, there is a significant organizational infrastructure behind warehouse sites that is itself worthy of further investigation.

Despite the limitations of the empirical analysis, the book’s theoretical contributions are considerable. Earl and Kimport make a convincing case that Web technology is allowing more people, including lone activists, to mobilize public support around diverse grievances, and to do so inexpensively in an environment that allows for asynchronous, virtual, automated, and rapid participation. In due course, these innovations may come to redefine movements and diminish their reliance of formal organizations. It is essential to remember, however, that this is likely to be true only for certain forms of mobilization and particular claims, targets, and political contexts. Such scope conditions must be carefully delineated if we are to better understand the place of e-tactics in the broader context of online and offline protest. That Earl and Kimport have opened the analytical space for this type of scholarly inquiry is no small achievement. Future studies of protest in the Internet age would do well to take up their challenge by turning the all-too-often unquestioned assumptions of resource mobilization theory into empirically testable hypotheses.