Political Ideology, Social Media, and Labor Unions: Using the Internet to Reach the Powerful, Not Mobilize the Powerless

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How does ideology shape digital activism? The implication of existing scholarship is that ideology is less relevant in the digital era or that radical groups have the advantage and thus will have higher levels of digital engagement. By conceptualizing *organizing ideology* as an articulation of ideas, practices, and organizations, this study harnesses qualitative research to understand the ideological mechanisms of differential social media use between two labor unions. Going deeper than a simple left or right political orientation, this study demonstrates that ideological differences in political *strategies* shape digital activism. A top-down reformist union had much more of an active Internet presence. It practiced representative democracy and embraced the Internet primarily as a conduit to those in power. A radical union was bottom-up and participatory, yet had low levels of digital engagement. This union viewed the Internet as just one of many tools to organize the powerless rather than a way to reach the powerful.

Keywords: labor unions, political communication, ideology, digital activism, democracy, social media, Internet

Introduction

The 2012 North Carolina general election ushered in a conservative takeover, with a supermajority in the state's legislative body, the General Assembly, and a new Republican governor. This political shift resulted in a deluge of legislation that curtailed voting rights, refused federal Medicaid and unemployment insurance, restricted reproductive health services, and proposed restrictions on public employee unions. A broad coalition of organizations responded with nonviolent civil disobedience at the capital and across North Carolina with weekly "Moral Monday" protests launched in spring 2013 that brought national attention to the state. These protests were led by the state's chapter of the NAACP

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(National Association of the Advancement of Colored People). Staff and members of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America Local 150 (UE150), one of the state's public employee labor unions, participated in the protests and were among the first arrestees. A second public workers union, the State Employees Association of North Carolina (SEANC) did not participate in Moral Monday; in fact, the director of this union tweeted that this protest strategy was detrimental to public-sector unions. This second union also has a high level of digital politics, but the first union that participated in the Moral Monday protests has virtually no social media presence.

To understand these differences, this study asks how political ideology shapes digital activism. The literature presents conflicting views on this question. On the one hand, theorists contend that political ideology is less relevant in the digital era because of the decreasing importance of organizations, such as labor unions, and their accompanying ideologies. On the other hand, if ideology *is* relevant, we would expect that radical groups would engage more online since much of the digital activist research privileges this type of movement. Most research that does address ideology directly compares groups based on a left/right political orientation. Therefore, we have known little how political organizations, which have similar politics on the outside yet different political strategies for social change, might vary in how, and how much, they use the Internet. This article uses in-depth interviews, ethnographic data, and online analysis to explain differences in social media practices between a radical and a reformist union in North Carolina. The top-down reformist union embraced the Internet more than the bottom-up radical union did. This finding does not support the argument that ideology is less relevant in the digital era nor that digital activism is tied to radical movements. Instead, distinct *organizing ideologies* shape these differences in both political and digital work. The Internet is not simply a disruptive weapon for protesters but a reformist tool for lobbyists.
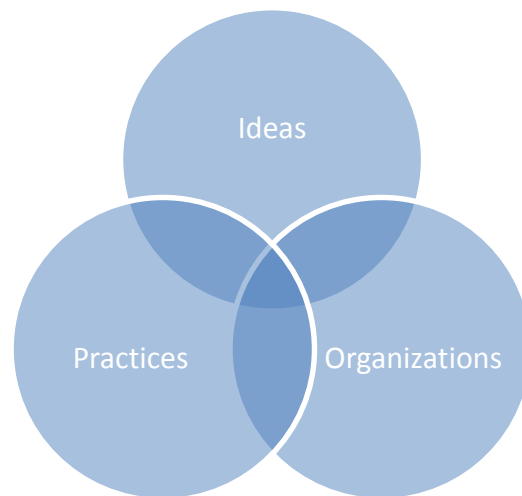
Organizing Ideology

I define ideology in this context as an *organizing ideology*, comprising ideas and practices within organizations. This definition draws most prominently from Gramsci's (2005) concept of practice, or what he called praxis, as inextricably linked to institutions and intellectual thought.[2] Rather than more deterministic views of ideology or static events, this view conceives of everyday practices and ideas as evolving (Tugal, 2012), as they articulate with civil society and other political institutions. Some social movement scholars (e.g., Munson, 2008) have suggested that, rather than ideologies simply leading to activism, activism practices[3] themselves drive participation in ideologically driven political work. Communication scholars also theorize practice, mediation, and mediatization to move away from media text and object-centered studies and toward understanding social processes that explain more broadly what people do with media (Couldry, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014; Postill, 2010). I build on this combination of political sociology, social movement, and communication scholarship to conceptualize organizing ideology.

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[2] Gramsci wrote in prison and presumably used the term *praxis* as a code word for early, less deterministic Marxism. He also differentiated between *traditional* and *organic* intellectuals.

[3] Sociologists, most prominently Bourdieu (1990), more generally theorized *practice* to explain how societies operate, expanding on only structurally driven forces.

Organizing ideology includes more than an organization's political orientation (left/right) but also its *strategy* for social change (radical/reformist). I observed in my interviews and ethnographic work that ideology involved more than political leaning. An organizing theory, or political strategy for social change, differed between the two unions and factored into their online engagement, whether radical or reformist. I also found a strong relationship between *ideas* around their political orientation and strategy and their *practices*.

Figure 1. Organizing ideology.

Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, organizing ideology is the articulation of an organization's ideas and practices related to both political orientation (right/left) and political strategy (radical/reformist). The term encompasses an organization's beliefs about the best method to organize people and how it puts its beliefs into practice as it organizes members and potential members to bring about social change. In this definition, ideology is about more than ideas. Organizing ideology involves the connection between doing and thinking in an organizational context. The intersection of ideas, practices, and organizations creates the boundaries of ideology in this definition.

Theorizing Ideology and Digital Activism

A trend in the literature is that ideology is less important in the digital era. Perhaps as a result, it is undertheorized in digital activism scholarship. This is not unique to studies of technology, as scholars have decried the recent absence of ideology in social movement analyses more generally (e.g., Walder, 2009). Digital activism scholarship stands as an extreme case of this tendency, however, as some scholars critique the notion of including ideology in digital activism analysis at all. The contention is that ideology matters less with digital activism than it did for pre-Web era social movements because of the more

personalized and individualized ways that people now participate in movements as *users* rather than as organizational *members* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012; Castells, 2012). This body of scholarship suggests that digital activism enables an exchange of independent views, bypassing organizational dogmas, unlike older movements in which ideology was instituted from above via hierarchical organizational channels. Individualized opinions expressed online, such as with social media posts, are "personalized action frames" that contrast with old-fashioned collective action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and are based on a collective of individual experiences (Bimber et al., 2012). In short, this literature suggests that, because organizations, and therefore ideology, matter less for social movements in the digital era, groups that bring different ideological stances to their activism would have little variation in digital activism.

This de-emphasis on ideology, though, creates a puzzle. Is ideology irrelevant to digital activism, or is online engagement more tethered to radical left movements? Most of the digital activism scholarship has focused on movements and groups from the left of the political orientation spectrum as well as those radical in their strategy, such as protest events, rather than right-wing movements or lobbying reforms and moderate politics (Bennett, Breunig, & Givens, 2008; Castells 2012; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002). For instance, some of the first and loudest public protest groups to harness digital technology were World Trade Organization anti-globalization activists, and many studies of these groups soon followed (e.g., Meikle, 2002) as did studies of MoveOn.org (e.g., Karpf, 2012) and then Occupy Wall Street (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). It is possible that we simply know more about these types of groups. Some research has analyzed right-wing reformist groups or provided comparisons among political groups with different ideologies. Often, those studies compare groups with right and left political *orientations* (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2014)*.* We know less about digital activist differences between groups' ideological *strategies*.

Drawing on Gamson's (1990) categorizations of social movement groups, I conceive of a group's strategy as *radical* if it wants to change broadly the political landscape, uses tactics of grassroots organizing, and engages in contested activities—such as protest and picketing.[4] *Reformist* describes a group that seeks legislative reform as its strategy, primarily through lobbying tactics.[5] Many have hailed the Internet as a disruptive technology to top-down political systems. If so, we might expect that an organization that wants to change the political system radically would be more likely to embrace the many-to-many networked aspects of the Internet than more reformist groups who want social change more incrementally. Still, some research (Uldam, 2013) indicates that digital activism is easier for lobbyists than it is for protesters, yet most of the literature points in the opposite direction.

Research on radical digital activism has also focused on emergent and elite groups, rarely examining unions or other established organizations. Implicit in this research is the claim of the increasing irrelevancy of organizations, particularly more traditional groups, such as unions, which are understudied in the field of digital activism. Unions as organizations are treated as old and "other" with a different and

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[4] Gamson used the word *unruly* rather than radical.

[5] Some suggest that different types of Internet activities may map onto either tactics (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010) or participation (Den Hond & DeBakker, 2007), yet this framework leaves open the question of comparative research on broader *strategies* and *levels* of Internet use.

often smaller role in the digital landscape (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Chaison, 2002; Shirky, 2009). Some research has tackled the relationship between unions and digital technology. One body of scholarship contends that the Internet is tied to more democratic organizational structures such that the Internet *could* mobilize more democratic unions (Carter, Clegg, Hogan, & Kornberger, 2003; Diamond & Freeman, 2002; Greene, Hogan, & Grieco, 2003) and that there is nothing inherently incompatible between labor unions and individually focused digital media (Fitzgerald, Hardy, & Lucio, 2012). Other scholarship based on studies of everyday practices has been less optimistic and has found that the Internet could get in the way of worker-to-worker solidarity (Chaison, 2002) and that there *is* incompatibility between collective organizational structure and practices of unions and the individual nature of social media (Fenton & Barassi, 2011) such that few union members engage online (Gibney, Zagenczyk, & Masters, 2013). A third body of scholarship, (e.g., Mattoni, 2012) is more mixed and suggests that union media practices vary, often with a hybrid approach, like Chadwick's (2007) "digital repertoires of contention." Yet the assumption in much of this literature is that all unions are the same and view (and practice) democracy and social change similarly.

A Tale of Two Unions

Case Selection and the North Carolina Labor Context

To examine the relationship between ideological strategy and digital practices, I compare two public-sector unions. Both unions represent ideal types in terms of strategy: UE150 is typical of left groups with a radical strategy, and SEANC is typical of left groups with a reformist strategy. SEANC promotes reformist, lobbying unionism, and UE150 agitates for social movement unionism. Even though both organizations are statewide unions of public-sector workers, their different political strategies provide a fruitful comparison of the relationship between organizing ideology and digital practices.

North Carolina is an ideal site for studying labor union differences because of the contentious nature of unions in the state. At 2% union density, North Carolina has fewer unionized workers than any state in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (2015). Unions in North Carolina have not been able to organize as openly as they would like because of strong anti-union politics in the state and in the South more generally. The history of labor organizing in North Carolina is marked by some of the bloodiest battles in the country—from the 1929 Loray Mill Strike in which workers were beaten, evicted, killed, and tried for murder (Salmand, 1995) to the 1979 Greensboro Massacre in which labor organizers were gunned down by the Ku Klux Klan during a protest (Cunningham, Nugent, & Slodden, 2010).

At the time of my research in 2011 to 2014, it had been years since gunfire erupted over a labor dispute, but unions remain marginalized. Among labor activists in this study, the word *union* elicited a mixed response of hope and fear—hope that a union might improve the low wages and poverty in the state and fear that unionization would trigger job loss and other reprisals, including violence. North Carolina is one of only three states where public workers do not have collective bargaining rights (Freeman & Han, 2012). The two key unions involved in efforts to repeal the ban are SEANC and UE150.

Despite working on this same issue as statewide unions of public-sector workers, their political strategies are quite different.

SEANC represents state employees in North Carolina. Established in 1940, SEANC affiliated with the Service Employees International Union in 2008.[6] Despite this affiliation, SEANC leaders prefer the term *association* over *union* because of the negative connotation. SEANC has successfully won pay raises for employees, educates members about state government issues, and provides discounts at various business establishments.

UE150 has a different history: The statewide local grew out of a broader political movement in the early 1990s that mobilized public protests and strikes around the class, race, and gender inequalities of university housekeepers in Chapel Hill, school bus drivers in Greenville, and sanitation workers in Raleigh. UE150 calls itself "a rank-and-file union" that defies what it considers the business unionism of some other unions.

Method

This study uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection. First, to quantify differences in organizational Internet use, I gathered an original data set of more than 2,000 Facebook and Twitter posts from the unions' first post until June 30, 2013. I also used these posts, as well as website data, to analyze the content for further comparative purposes. Data collection procedures involved writing scripts and code using the Application Programming Interface. Next, to understand the mechanisms of ideological and digital differences, data include 31 in-depth interviews with union leaders, staff, members, and other activists, as well as ethnographic observations of meetings, protests, events, and conventions between September 2011 and June 2013. Most interviews were in-person, open-ended, and video- or audiotaped, averaging 90 minutes. I analyzed the qualitative data, including content, using predetermined codes of organizing ideology (ideas, practices, organizational structures, strategies, and whether interviewees expressed radical or reformist terminology), as well as emergent and broader themes.

Digital Engagement Differences: To Be and Not To Be Online

To understand the mechanisms behind differences in these two unions' Internet use and digital politics, it is first useful to examine how, and how much, they engaged with digital technology. SEANC was a heavy user of the Internet. It had a complex and sophisticated website with many layers of content for viewers to learn about the organization and respond to the union's call for participation. The site featured a way for people to sign up with the organization and had a calendar of events that was updated at least once a week. The website also served as a main communication portal.

SEANC's social media presence was both broad and deep. It updated its Facebook page throughout each day with posts about legislative news and to feature the personal stories of public employees. It started its Facebook page in early 2011. Until June 2013, the union's Facebook page had

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[6] Unions are called "international" but are national.

more than 1,100 posts, 1,200 comments and 4,300 likes. It had a main Twitter account, which it also opened in early 2011, and it had posted more than 500 tweets. Three prominent key staff members—the executive director, the chief lobbyist, and the communications director—also had Twitter accounts with more than 1,000 tweets among them, and these accounts were also used as a public face of the organization.

SEANC communicated with members through e-mail blasts and print publications. The communications director, Jill,[7] described SEANC's strategy of intentionally integrating multiple media:

> *It's our goal to have a seamless integration of old and new media. We want to have our news go across the entire enterprise in a variety of platforms. So if you look up on my whiteboard [points], I want it to first be generated on our website, to push it to Twitter, then to Facebook, then to our weekly e-newsletter,* The Scoop*, and finally to our printed publication,* The Reporter*, to make sure that we hit all of those mediums.*

This list of communicative practices within the union demonstrates SEANC's high levels of managed digital engagement.

In contrast, UE150's online engagement was sparse. It had one static web page that simply said "under construction." An affiliated organization occasionally hosted some content for UE150, but no staff member was dedicated to updating this content. UE150's social media presence was also less robust than SEANC's. UE150 had a Facebook page since April 2012, but it had only 40 posts, 20 comments, and 180 likes between the time of the page's creation and June 2013. Most of the posts were posed photos of participants during events. A few organizers used Facebook personally and occasionally posted information about the union and other political activities. The union had no Twitter presence. It produced print publications such as occasional newsletters, flyers, and buttons. It did not have formal e-mail software, electronic mailing lists, or texting processes, but it did use e-mail and texts to communicate. A lead organizer and staff member commented about this approach to digital engagement, "There's no updating, there's no real coherency to it, you know, I mean, either subject-wise or organization-wise." In other words, UE150's media production was minimalist, infrequent, and haphazard.

Mechanism of Digital Use Variation—Organizing Ideology

A primary mechanism for variation in these two unions' digital engagement is a difference in their organizing ideologies. This section describes these organizing ideology differences—first by summing up the unions' *ideas* for their social change strategy, then by describing their *organizational* structure and how that is tied to their strategy, and then by explaining their organizing *practices*, both in general and then specifically how these ideologies shape their Internet practices.

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[7] Pseudonyms are used throughout.

A Union Whose Strategy Is Within the Electoral Political System

Ideas of Social Change: Reformist

SEANC viewed social change as generated from above, via changing the hearts and minds of those in power, such as elected officials and the media. The union believed in representative democracy and incrementally reforming the system. Its ideas of a strategy for social change were tethered to its organizational structure and its organizing practices, which shaped how the union also used the Internet as a top-down process. As Figure 2 shows, the *ideas* of traditional electoral politics top-down *organizational* structure + lobbyist unionism *practices* → high levels Internet use and Web 1.0 digital practices.
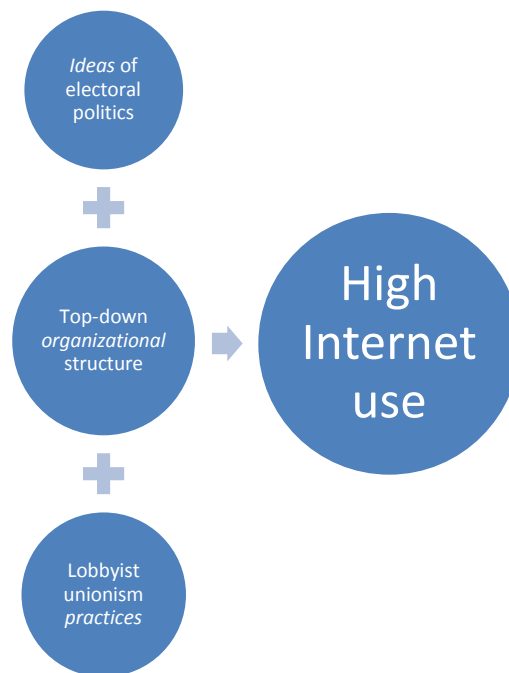
Figure 2. Reformist organizing ideology and high Internet use

Organizational Structure: Top-Down Representative Democracy

Although SEANC had some mechanisms for democratic decision making, it was primarily run as a top-down organization, which mirrored its reformist strategy for social change. SEANC was involved in many statewide legislative efforts to support state employees as well as local fundraising efforts. Its organizational structure provided many ways to get members involved in union activities. SEANC had districts across the state and an annual convention with delegates from each district; however, most

decision making occurred among three top levels of decision makers, along with staff leadership. Members at one chapter meeting were very active in electing officers, planning social events, and educating one another about the legislative information that SEANC had distributed. Each district had some autonomy in how it conducted itself. For instance, two districts had some overlap in terms of employees working at the same university. One of these districts operated more independently from SEANC directives, while the other's work aligned more directly with suggestions from SEANC staff. Despite this autonomy, top union leadership made the real political and policy decisions.

SEANC leadership shaped the union's conversations and debates at both the statewide and district levels. As a result, local districts tended to follow the script from Raleigh regarding programs and projects. Members voted for the top 10 policy objectives during the annual convention, which then became part of the year's agenda. This process may appear democratic, but, as one member commented, the voting distanced members from their daily work challenges and did not allow for a more dynamic, responsive union. Some members tried to convince SEANC to address on-the-job grievances midyear but without success because it was not on the yearly agenda. Instead, SEANC focused on getting raises and other key benefits for state employees through legislation and statewide channels, issues that had the support of a broad array of workers in the union. The tasks of the local districts often focused more on social events than union agitation at workplaces.

An example of this top-down structure occurred during my fieldwork at the SEANC annual convention in 2012. The convention was in large hotel ballroom the size of a football field. Delegates sat at round tables throughout the vast room, and at the front of the room were a stage, podium, and large video screens. Most of the agenda consisted of inspirational videos, awards for service, acknowledgments of past presidents, and opportunities to eat. However, some moments were set aside for delegates to speak at special microphones set up for open comment. During one such moment, no one initially stood up to speak. But then a member approached the microphone to talk about how difficult it was to pay her bills as a cancer survivor. She then talked about a member in her district whose son had leukemia and who also struggled to pay her bills. Soon the lines to speak grew, but instead of political points, questions, or proposals, delegates from nearly every district used their time with the microphone to say how much money they would donate to this member whose son has cancer. Debate and discussion among the mass membership focused on social and charity work rather than political work. It also reflected the top-down character of SEANC.

Local districts did have some level of independence and autonomy. During one local meeting, SEANC leadership made a decision about what to do with the charity money the local had raised. One member who wanted to choose a charity different than the one the president had chosen argued, "We can do our own project." But locals' ability to make their own decisions seemed limited to issues such as these that fell outside of substantive political battles.

General Practice for Social Change: Reformist and Lobbyist Unionism

The book that most inspired SEANC's executive director in his youth was *Showdown at Gucci Gulch*, a nonfiction narrative about how corporate lobbyists shaped tax policy in 1986: "I thought when I

was in high school I wanted to be a lobbyist, so I read *Gucci Gulch* and fell in love with it—and the alligator shoes—and I said that's me." His recollection reflected the lobbyist strategy that was the union's approach to social change. The union's primary goal was to win financial benefits for its members, and raises for public employees required the vote of the state's General Assembly. Even though most labor unions had strong ties to Democrats, SEANC also formed affiliations with Republicans if the union believed that these candidates would win in the long run. At their annual convention, SEANC had both the Democratic and Republican gubernatorial candidates speak, and SEANC ended up endorsing McCrory, the Republican candidate, who went on to win the election. SEANC's chief lobbyist foresaw the 2012 Republican sweep and attempted to build relationships with Republican candidates before they entered office. The union also started a political action committee to raise money for state-level political candidates. In sum, the union staff focused its energy on following events in the state legislature, lobbying state-level politicians, and educating its members on how to contact representatives for upcoming bills. Its digital media strategy was tied to tactics that derive from its overall electoral and lobbyist strategy.

Internet Practices for Social Change: Using Web 2.0 in a Web 1.0 Way

SEANC's strategies of top-down representative democracy, reflected in its ideas, practices, and organization, also shaped its communication practices and Internet use patterns. SEANC used technology in a Web 1.0 (top-down and one-to-many) rather than Web 2.0 (bottom-up and many-to-many) manner.[8] Instead of a participatory approach**,** leaders and staff talked about the need to educate members and keep them up to date about events in the General Assembly rather than getting information or input *from* members. This translated into SEANC's practice of unidirectional e-mail communication and the union's use of social media. Some districts had their own electronic mailing lists or Facebook pages, yet the communication staff in the Raleigh office described how they ensured that social media discussions remained on-topic. Jill, the communications staff member, said, "Yes. So we actually have staff involvement that monitors all of that. And it rises to our level if there's a problem." This management of the union's social media did not reflect a "big brother" approach of constant monitoring and control but an organizational approach of monitoring and managing social media. Jill explained while showing me her computer screens:

> *This is my new Tweetdeck. So we have our constant feed running throughout the day. . . . I also have my own handle in addition to the Twitter handle here. And so we're monitoring my own personal account, which mostly media is following me because of what I do here. . . . And then we also run our campaigns from here . . . both in terms of Facebook and Twitter. And so here, we can click across all of them, plus keep track of who's mentioning us, so we're fully aware of who's talking about us.*

Jill was describing the union's practice of always having a top-down and bird's-eye view of digital communication by and about the union. Similarly, SEANC's executive director, John, reported that he wielded his digital communication power very judiciously:

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[8] *Web 2.0* was originally a business term which later came to describe mass online participation.

The way I control my voice in this whole process is that I use [the Internet] sparingly. So I'm not on there 24/7—I don't use it all the time—but when they get a tweet in my name, even though it's not me doing it, or they get a Facebook or a special e-mail with my picture on it, they know "Oh, oh, something is going on because [the director] has now did this." So I will do that maybe once a month or less. . . . So communication for me is read more than anything else we send because there's meaning for it because it's used sparingly.

Because of the union's top-down representative democracy structure, as the head of the union, the executive director knew that his position was one of profound influence—even more than that of the elected union president—so his digital communication to members took the form of one-to-many communication.

SEANC was very thorough with its top-down member education, informing members on what was happening and how to act. Although the SEANC leadership sometimes used social media to find out what was happening on the ground, the focus of the group's social media activity was aimed in the opposite direction. As John commented,

[The Internet] has radically changed the benefits of us using it as a tool to educate our members. And spurring them to instant action exactly when it's needed. . . . So in the lobbying world, because of this instantaneous communication . . . we can mobilize a group of people [to swamp legislators] with calls and letters. . . . It will affect how they vote and how they deliberate, even though it's manufactured.

Members reported appreciation for this up-to-date legislative news and information from SEANC staff via technology. At one local meeting, members discussed how the union leadership let them know how to communicate with legislators, and they actively made phone calls to these legislators even while the meeting was in progress.

In addition to internal communication practices tied to organizational structure and strategies, SEANC also used the Internet to communicate externally as part of their lobbyist unionism. Keeping track of what was happening in the General Assembly was key to SEANC's political strategy; and technology, it said, was necessary to lobby successfully. Jill said that SEANC monitored all of the bills and upcoming votes online: "Mainly because of Twitter, we know precisely what's happening in the General Assembly, even if we're not there." Social media were also a critical vehicle to reach legislators, as noted by John:

[Digital technology has] revolutionized [lobbying]. . . . There used to be a physical barrier between a lobbyist and a legislator, so when an item of discussion was on the debate, when I was over there lobbying, if you really had to get somebody, you had to go in and send a note and wait. Now they're on the floor of the House or Senate, and you can actually text them and tell them what's on your mind. And the ramifications of that are enormous. . . . If there's an issue on the floor, you can actually influence the actual . . . words coming out of their mouth . . . because you can text them exactly what

> *to say. . . . And now we have immediate access to them to give them the words to use*
> *in the debate.*

The director here described how the Internet was a direct link to politicians, which is how the union viewed social change. But it was not just legislators that SEANC believed digital technology could reach. Staff lit up with excitement when talking about how new media connected them to another powerful group—the mainstream news media. Jill, the communications director, explained, "Twitter is the best way to talk to the media hands-down." SEANC leaders saw digital technology as a critical conduit to journalists.

One social media exchange during the height of the Moral Monday summer weekly protests epitomized this reformist unionism and lobbying focus over other more radical forms of social change. This example also encapsulates the differences in strategies between SEANC and UE150. SEANC members were attempting to lobby their legislators at the same time that hundreds of Moral Monday protesters had taken over the capitol rotunda. Even though the Moral Monday movement had been well under way for a few months and had made the national news as well as local papers and TV stations, SEANC members were caught off-guard and said they were frustrated at not being able to speak to their legislators. The executive director, John, then sent out the following tweet, which created a social media firestorm:

> *SEANC not part of #MoralMonday we think it unwise to break the law & overburden*
> *fellow public employees. Prefer to sit down/talk policy! #ncga*

All of the replies to this tweet critiqued SEANC, and John responded to the barrage of tweets criticizing SEANC for not getting involved in Moral Monday:

> *Your* [sic] *so wrong and you with two other democrat hack wannabes don't speak for*
> *SEANC. SEANC is nonpartisan.*

One response to this tweet reflected the social movement unionism that was more typical of UE150:

> *You might be talking to #NCGA, but they're not listening. #MoralMondays voices heard*
> *all across country! We need union solidarity.*

Despite UE150 leaders' and members' active participation, and even arrests, during Moral Monday, this last tweet did not come from them. UE150 did not take to social media at all to promote its position, because this type of digital practice was not part of its organizing ideology, as it was with SEANC.

A Union Whose Radical Strategy Is to Change the Political System

Ideas of Social Change: Radical

In contrast to SEANC's strategy of incremental legislative social change, UE150 was a grassroots-run union that viewed social change as a bottom-up process to change what

it viewed as a classist, racist, and gendered political system. Its ideas of social change mapped onto its bottom-up organizational structure and its participatory organizing practices, including how the UE rejected the Internet as a primary organizing tool. Figure 3 demonstrates that the *ideas* of rank-and-file participatory organizing + bottom-up *organizational* structure + protest and social movement unionism *practices* → low levels of Internet use and practices.
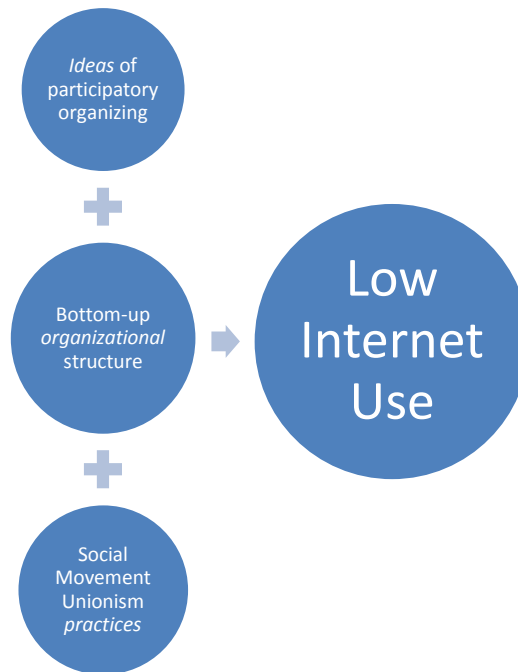
Figure 3. Radical organizing ideology and low Internet use.

Organizational Structure: Bottom-Up Participatory Democracy

UE150 had a similar number of decision-making levels to SEANC's, but it approached decision making differently. UE150 leaders saw involving members in everyday political decision making as a primary goal, and union members also embraced this democratic structure. They were interested in participatory democracy as opposed to representative democracy. One event demonstrated this approach. At a number of statewide Southern Workers Assembly meetings in which UE150 was an active participant, union members—not just leaders—participated in forging the direction of this coalition of unions across the South. Members spoke about challenges in the workplace—especially gender discrimination—and how to overcome these challenges collectively and link local struggles to a larger movement. This is an illustrative example because it shows not only how members participated in the decisions and direction of the union but how the union viewed itself as part of a larger movement. One organizer, Tanya, summed up her

perspective on how the union fit into what she and other union activists called "social movement unionism":

> *Social movement unionism means that the rank-and-file leadership is developed . . . and directly involved in making decisions and leading the building of the trade union movement. It means that the issues being taken up by the trade union encompass the total conditions of the working class and not just of a few members in this or that workplace, and it . . . directly attempts to address questions of racism and sexism, patriarchal social relations, and conditions that impact immigrant workers, and tries to unite workers. . . . So that's social movement unionism . . . rank-and-file democracy, rank-and-file leadership, as opposed to business unionism.*

So this participatory, or what Tanya calls rank-and-file, democracy is about more than raising a hand at a yearly meeting. This description of how workers should and can participate in everyday decisions of the union contrasts with SEANC's yearly policy direction.

General Practice for Social Change: Radical and Social Movement Unionism

An UE150 worker, Edith, described the union's more radical organizing practices, which she distinguished directly from SEANC's approach:

> *I'm proud to be a part of UE. We are for the workers. We're not giving you a coupon at the hotel. . . . If you get in a crisis, they don't got your back, they won't help you fill out a grievance, work on a grievance, they're not going to do that, you know, 'cause they're all about the big bucks and all that kind of stuff. . . . We've had campaigns that work for workers' rights. We've had protests and marches, and we've dealt with the state doing political actions. . . . All that we've learned how to do being in the union, having the stewards' training, having leadership training, things that the union has done to make us be better at what we're trying to do.*

The stewards' trainings and other one-on-one organizing tactics that Edith described were replicated across the union to address on-the-job grievances, such as sexual or racial harassment.

An illustrative example of UE150's strategic practice for justice and equality circles back to Moral Monday. Its role in these protests did not start with the arrests of union leaders. Members' participation in this civil disobedience demonstrates their long-term political strategy for radical social change. UE150 had participated in similar coalitions and protest since its founding, including other marches led by the NCAACP. As a result, when the Moral Monday demonstrations began in spring 2013, one of the weekly protests focused on statewide labor rights issues because of UE150's input.

The arrests of UE150's members during this protest were significant for the union. The state had not seen this type of radical labor resistance since the McCarthyism Red Scare. One UE activist described how "business unionism"—which is how UE members described unions like SEANC—had prevailed in the

state since the repression that began in the 1950s: "Instead of raising the political consciousness of the working class, they've limited any kind of political action, except for the most basic electoral kind of politics to some degree." The Moral Monday coalition pushed these limits to political action. Perhaps because the state was unused to such a challenge from labor, it aggressively prosecuted an experienced UE150 organizer as the first Moral Monday protester to be tried. UE150 members and leaders described this as a fear tactic by the state, and many questioned why it had targeted such a prominent labor leader.

Even on public property, North Carolina unions were constantly challenged by state officials and police for leafleting and organizing. I observed countless instances in which public employers, from the City of Charlotte to a state mental hospital in eastern North Carolina, restricted UE150 labor organizers from getting information to members. One might, therefore, expect that the Internet would provide an ideal safe space for UE150 to share information with union members and potential members. This was not the case.

Internet Practices for Social Change: Limited Digital Media Use

UE150 labor organizing was a slow process of getting people involved for the long haul, and the Internet was just one of many tools to use in this process. Organizers discussed multiple ways to communicate and organize, depending on the best way to reach someone. Respondents often listed all the ways they communicated with people: phone call, house visit, flyer, newsletter, workplace discussions, text, e-mail, or Facebook message. One young UE150 member, Rick, who worked as a nursing assistant at a state hospital, described his multifaceted approach:

> We try to use e-mail addresses, if we can get them, and cell phones, too. I call many people on the phone asking them to engage in our meetings that we have every first and second Saturday of the month . . . but I feel like to get the point across they need to see me. . . . I feel like I should [see them face-to-face] . . . to let them know I'm here. I'm just not in the background . . . or here just to take your dues.

This description is an example of how UE150's organizing and political strategy matched its digital media strategy. It wanted to involve and empower as many people as possible, and the Internet was not always the best tool to reach people or to have meaningful conversations about high-risk organizing. Some organizers were active Internet users, but most said that the Internet was not a substitute for face-to-face interaction, which they said was necessary given the level of fear and disempowerment that a lot of workers, especially African Americans, faced. Because their efforts were not aimed at legislative decisions in Raleigh, digital technology did not make sense for workers who needed to address on-the-job issues. UE150 members often expressed how digital technology was not a safe medium for communication. Some workers had their phones confiscated daily at work or their e-mail monitored. This produced the unexpected finding that this radical and bottom-up union considered the Internet as just one of many communication methods, and one that was not always useful due to fears of retaliation or concerns about effectiveness. As a result, UE150 often used in-person communication practices to disseminate information to members, involve members in decision making, and address workplace grievances; UE150 also often used nondigital methods to recruit new members.

One story illustrates these practices. A few hours' drive east of Raleigh, Edith, a 57-year-old UE150 member for more than 10 years, carefully parked her car to avoid suspicion from state administrators and security guards at the state-run mental health facility. She got out of her car and walked to the side of the one-lane rural highway. She had a packet of flyers and offered one to each driver of the cars that pulled up to the facility prior to shift changes. The flyer encouraged workers to come to a meeting to voice their concerns about working conditions. A few minutes later, an armed guard came over and told Edith and the other union activists standing with her to leave. Edith explained that they could legally hand out flyers as long as they stayed on the road. The guard made a phone call and acquiesced but then stood near the activists with his arms crossed and his firearm by his side.

Soon after, the union activists drove 65 miles back to a budget hotel in Greenville, where more union members were in a conference room making phone calls to encourage workers to come to the upcoming union meeting. Staff organizers and members came together from across the South to increase UE membership at this big annual "organizing blitz." It was a lively collective event where organizers conducted motivational trainings, handed out leaflets at workplaces, worked in groups to make phone calls, and then came back together to debrief about the organizing. Internet technology was not at allpart of the blitz; only printed flyers and telephones were used to recruit and organize members. Outside of this type of organizing effort, organizers used the Internet to communicate with other leaders but rarely to recruit new members, mainly because they believed that face-to-face discussions were the most effective and trusted way to talk to workers.

To explain this strategy, a seasoned UE150 organizer, Mike, explained his view of the limitations of technology for the union:

> We can't get into a situation where technology substitutes for struggles of people. . . . I have problems with folks overrelying so much on technology. . . . Everything is through tweeting and Twittering and that kind of stuff, and for me, that helps really accomplish one of the goals of our class enemy and the people's enemy: the atomization of folks. It leads to a certain amount of fragmentation. Even though people can quickly see struggles, whether it's in Egypt or whether looking in terms of the advances and the utilization of these tools, and the Occupy movement and all of that, but you still got to have some sense of a coherent development of strategy and strategic thinking and folks being able to at least collaborate with some sense of strategic objectives to maximize the impact of fighting back.

Mike's view that the Internet could be a useful form of communication but could also endanger a bottom-up social movement because of the potential for "atomization" was common among UE150 members. Their ideas for bottom-up social change and their radical strategy and organizational practices did not always align with SEANC's Internet-focused approach.

Evaluating Alternative Explanations to Organizing Ideology

Is it possible that alternative mechanisms explain the unions' digital differences? First, one might expect a younger union to use the Internet more if it were founded in the digital era. This was not the case. UE150 began in the early 1990s during the dawn of the Web era, but SEANC, founded in 1940, used digital media much more. In addition, the ages of the members and staff were similar across the two unions, so an age gap does not explain these differences. A second possible mechanism is size. SEANC has about 55,000 members, and UE150 has about 5,000 members. However, with Facebook, for instance, when factoring in the number of posts per likers or per members, stark differences persist, and 5,000 members is still a sizable number to have a functioning website or Twitter feed.

Resources may also factor into digital engagement. SEANC had a much bigger budget than UE150, largely because of its larger base of dues-paying members. SEANC was able to dedicate 4 staff members to communication out of a total staff of 40, whereas UE150 had only 5 total staff members, none focused exclusively on communication. This difference reflects not only monetary resources but the different strategies that factored into the unions' decisions about where to allocate funds. Yet the resource gap between the unions also relates to differences in the two unions' social class composition. Even though both unions represented working-class members, such as groundskeepers for the Department of Transportation, UE150's members were working-class while SEANC had a number of middle-class white-collar state employees in its ranks. Such members often worked in administrative positions and were more likely to be union leaders. These social class differences were reflected in the unions' distinct ideologies. UE150 did not allow managers to be part of the union, while SEANC had many managers as members and as leaders. One active SEANC member, Frank, wanted the two unions to work together more. He explained how each union's distinct strategic approach to social change and organizing related to their social class membership:

> I've always felt that UE was somewhat better—actually, perhaps a lot better—in educating members around issues of race and gender and class and providing a little bit more of a theoretical framework regarding capitalism and the role of public workers in a capitalist society. SEANC still retains a stronger management orientation. And of course UE has just the opposite—you can't be a member if you're a manager . . . you can only be an affiliate.

Socioeconomic differences factor into the equation, yet, as this respondent summed up, these class differences directly relate to the groups' different organizing ideologies.

Conclusions on Organizing Ideology, Online Activism, and Labor Unions

The existing digital activism literature suggests that UE150's participation in radical actions such as the Moral Monday protests would make them more likely to embrace the disruptive many-to-many networked aspects of the Internet than reformist groups like SEANC. However, this study revealed the opposite: SEANC had a strong digital presence while UE150 had virtually none. The union that cared more about democracy cared less about the Internet.

Different organizing ideologies contributed to the differences in Internet use between UE150 and SEANC. The top-down union used bottom-up social media platforms in a top-down way. SEANC fetishized digital technology as a pipeline to powerful individuals as well as an efficient means to communicate with and monitor members. But UE150 rarely used digital technology because many union activists did not believe that it brought people together in a meaningful way. It used a variety of practices—much like the hybridity repertoire literatures suggests, just not nearly as much digital hybridity. Resource differences partially explain this variation but extend beyond them to encompass each group's organizing ideology.

One might expect that, given union repression in the South, the Internet would provide a safe haven for communication and organizing, but this was not the case. The bottom-up union believed that digital technology was limited in overcoming fear and disempowerment. The bottom-up union also believed that digital technology contributed to atomization, isolation, and individual-based politics that did not connect with UE150's self-concept as a union that engaged with everyday grievances and practiced collective action. The top-down union embraced the Internet as a direct line to power. Its organizing theory of lobbying government officials led to its digital practices that reflected this strategy. The Internet was perceived as a very successful tool to that end.

The reformist union benefited from digital platforms, and the social movement union did not. Representative democracy aligned well with a managed use of the Internet, but participatory democracy often did not align with the Internet at all. The radical union believed that the Internet was just one of many ways to reach the powerless, while the reformist group believed that the Internet was a primary way to reach the powerful.

This research contradicts the vision of digital activism as the appendage of radical leftist protesters or that the ideology is less relevant in the digital era. It demonstrates that ideology involves more than divisions in left/right or Democrat/Republican orientation. Organizing ideology also involves political strategies in terms of ideas, practice, and the organizations themselves. The concept of organizing ideology provides a more nuanced and complex way of understanding how political ideas operate within organizational practices. Specifically, labor unions are a window into the textured differences among groups that appear to be on the same side of a political issue. By examining the intersection of ideas, practices, and organizations of social change, we can better define and understand how organizing ideology shapes digital engagement.

This study shows how qualitative research is critical to *explaining* digital differences. Rather than simply focusing on what is new with digital technology and activism, it is useful to understand existing difference in activism, which then explains variations in digital technology practices. Qualitative research is a rich and robust way to uncover these everyday practices that are part of the fabric of political communication, digital or otherwise. By simply examining the digital traces of activism, we fail to see the societal structures, including organizing ideologies, that shape these virtual footprints.

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