

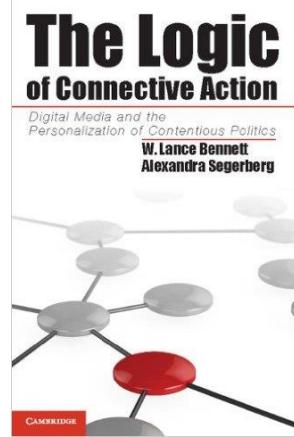
W. Lance Bennett & Alexandra Segerberg, **The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$34.99 (paperback).

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It is hard to miss the striking resemblance between Mancur Olson's (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action* and Bennett and Segerberg's **The Logic of Connective Action**. Just like the first book that heralded social movement studies into the resource mobilization paradigm, the latter is likely to inaugurate a new paradigm of contentious action research in the digital age. Both books deal with the role of organization in social movements. In contrast to the collective action organizational logic in the first book, Bennett and Segerberg's book offers a new organizational logic—connective action—to explain how contentious action networks evolve in the digital era. This review follows the structure of the book and discusses its main theoretical contributions, the empirical studies supporting the new theory, and a few gaps that can be filled by further investigations.



#### Context: Organization in Collective Actions

I situate Bennett and Segerberg's study in two previous generations of social movement studies, mainly in the West.<sup>1</sup> The first generation, collective behaviorism, is rooted in structural functionalism and treats sociopolitical contention as an automatic process, which culminates in Smelser's (1963) model of structural strain, generalized beliefs, and short-circuiting. Specifically, it posits that structural social change leads to grievances that are felt acutely by the vulnerable, alienated population. Their grievances lead to generalized beliefs that call for social change to address the problems. Short-circuiting helps turn general beliefs into concrete group actions that pressure to solve problems. Beginning in the 1960s, the explanatory power of this paradigm was under attack since it failed to explain why social movements do not take place even in the presence of considerable strain. Olson's (1965) seminal work, *The Logic of Collective Action*, not only points out the essential role of *organization* in transforming collective grievances into group action but also suggests a particular *form* of organization for effective social movement mobilization—that is, the hierarchical, membership-based social movement organization (SMO). The necessity for formal organization in social movements is to counter the so-called “free rider” problem. As social movements always aim to produce a common good, rational calculating actors invariably choose to share the benefits derived from successful social movements but avoid the cost of participation. To discipline such free riding, a tight-knit organization is necessary. Since then, social

<sup>1</sup> I leave a third social movement research approach, the New Social Movement, largely undiscussed. In addition to the complexity and internal division of this approach, it has developed mainly in Western Europe. I only discuss it to the extent that collective identify and framing are incorporated into social movement building.

movement scholars have picked up this insight and developed a collective organization-centered approach—resource mobilization (McAdam, 1988; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). Later, cultural elements (e.g., framing and collective identity) have been included under this paradigm (Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield, 1994; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Instead of challenging the collective action logic, these factors take it as their implicit assumption. Nevertheless, the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the growing reluctance to join formal organizations, as well as the development of digital networks, render the membership-based SMOs increasingly inadequate to handle the new conditions.

### **Main Arguments: Collective or/and Connective Logic in Digital Protest Networks**

In the past several decades, neoliberal valorization of personal responsibility parallels people's aversion to join formal social organizations or political parties. Contrary to the observation of atomization and declining civic virtue, large-scale protests ranging from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement indicate that it is not that people refuse to participate in social movements but that they participate *differently*. To understand this, Bennett and Segerberg urge us to look at the logic of *connective* action. Traditionally collective actions are organized internally by hierarchical relationships between leaders and members as well as by ties based on a collective frame/identity. SMOs in the same protest space broker their differences through negotiation or differentiation. Both internal SMO building and inter-SMO negotiation require *bridging and limiting differences* that may undermine organizational strength or political effectiveness. This priority of organization over personal expression is what makes traditional SMOs unpalatable for millennials. Connective action, however, does not require such commitment to SMOs or the denial of differences. Two central characteristics of connective action are personalization of politics and multiplicity of entry points to social protest networks afforded by digital technologies. It encourages personalized framing by allowing individuals to adapt a loose frame (e.g., the "We Are the 99%" frame of the Occupy movement) to suit their own purposes. Additionally, digital networks facilitate such individualized participation by offering interactive and multiple entry points to protest networks. In other words, social protest networks emerge and evolve when people are connected by their overlapping concern to a social cause via digitally mediated networks.

The two logics of group action are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they appear in three ideal types of protest networks, each with a different way of public engagement and power dynamics.<sup>2</sup> First, organizationally brokered networks (OBN) follow the collective action logic and use digital technologies merely as *tools* for mobilization. Organizations are the basic units and main players of these networks. They broker differences among each other and offer collective action frames to draw people to protest networks. Second, crowd-enabled networks (CEN) conform to the connective action logic by allowing personalized frames and multiple entry points to the contentious networks through digital technologies. Formal organizations have low or no presence in such networks. The main components for mobilization are individuals and digital networks themselves. Finally, a hybrid type—organization-enabled networks (OENs)—has organizations that propose inclusive frames and also use interactive digital tactics to

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<sup>2</sup> The authors summarize the defining characteristics of three networks on page 47.

encourage individualized participation. OENs follow the connective logic in that an organization's role and way of operations proximate that of CENs, rather than OBNs.

After laying down the analytical apparatuses, the authors test the theoretical usefulness of these distinctions by comparing different types of protest networks in chapters 2 to 5. Chapter 2 compares an OBN, the G20 Meltdown, with an OEN, Put People First. While more organizationally centered, Meltdown mobilizes fewer people, attracts scant and mostly negative media coverage, and does not get recognition from other organizations. In contrast, Put People First invites more personalized frames and successfully attracts numerous protesters, media attention, and linkages and recognition from others. This finding refutes the traditional view that loose networks are unlikely to generate political outcomes.

Chapter 3 compares two environmental protests in the UK (OEN) and in Copenhagen (CEN) by analyzing their Twitter streams, #thewave (UK) and #cop15 (Copenhagen), in order to see how hashtagging and hyperlinking play out in the two protest networks. Organization-led #thewave linked most to micro-level individual media whereas crowd-emerged #cop15 linked more to middle media set up by movement organizations. While both streams were relatively coherent in thematized hashtags, #thewave was centrally curated by organizations and was protest-focused; hence it was only active for a short period of time since the organizations stopped updating it. The stream #cop15 was not dominated by any actor and lasted for a year as actors repurposed it to new situations. The variations show that the degree of organizational presence in CENs influences how they use hashtags and hyperlinks as well as their public engagement patterns.

Chapter 4 examines how OENs are organized differently, and how different OEN organizational patterns show different ways of engaging the publics. Comparing fair trade and environmental protest networks in the UK and Germany as well as their representatives at the EU level, the authors find that the UK networks engage the publics more successfully, in terms both of information and action through passive and interactive tactics. This correlates with the UK networks' dense, interconnected organizational pattern. In contrast, the EU-level protest networks and the German environmental protest network are more hierarchical and less engaged with the publics, corresponding to these networks' sparse, hub-and-spoke organizational pattern. This variation indicates that when OENs are institution-oriented, they are less likely to engage the public and more concerned with influencing policy-making, which may lead to democratic deficits.

Chapter 5 compares how the "power signatures" of two connective issue networks influence their political outcomes, measured by media coverage and discursive shifts. Power signature is defined as "the degree to which recognition (prestige and influence) is concentrated or dispersed among actors in a network" (p. 152). Depending on how recognition (operationalized as sponsorship and inlinks) is distributed in a network, there are four patterns of power signatures: steep, moderate, dispersed, and fragmented. While collective action networks tend to exhibit steep and fragmented power signatures, connective action networks usually involve moderate and dispersed power signatures. Comparing different power signatures in the Robin Hood Tax campaign, an OEN, and the Occupy movement, a CEN, the authors find that both achieve considerable success in attracting media coverage and changing mainstream discourses, although they differ in power signatures. The tax campaign shows a mixture of

power concentration in large, well-resourced organizations as well as dense links of smaller organizations and individuals to the former. The Occupy movement, however, has a dispersed, granular network of networks that traverse different platforms, with Twitter as an integrative medium.

The conclusion rehashes the main arguments and points out the potential conflicts between different organizational logics under changing contexts. The conflicts usually occur when networks change from one type to another or when activists idolizing different logics share the same protest space, both of which are seen in the Occupy movement's transition into the post-eviction stage. Finally, the authors suggest some promising areas that are not covered in the book, such as the study of covert networks (e.g., trafficking) and the influence of macro political changes on the network structure and outcomes.

### **Gaps and Conclusion**

First, the book's analytical framework focuses exclusively on how *formal* network qualities (mainly in terms of organizational forms) impact the patterns of public engagement and political outcome. It does not address how the *substantive* claims and orientations of protest networks would set the limit for these formal qualities. Chapter 2 particularly illustrates this point. While the two protest networks do differ in their organizational forms, it is possible that Meltdown's (OBN) radical political stance prevents it from taking the connective action tactics that are available to the middle-ground Put People First (CEN). The difference in political stance can further influence how the publics engage with the protest networks and how effective they are. In other words, the authors could do more content and textual analysis or ethnographic work in order to see how the claims of a movement interact with its form, and how the interaction shapes their public engagement patterns and political efficacy.

Second, the measurement for political outcome and power signature could have been more comprehensive. Political effectiveness is mainly gauged by whether and how digitally mediated protest networks attract media coverage, shift public opinion, and in some cases change policy decisions. Additionally, power signatures are measured mainly by recognition. Readers may wonder whether the authors' conclusions will still hold when the measurements include more economic, "redistributional" dimensions. The Occupy movement's failure to occupy the policy agenda particularly raises doubts over whether pure connective networks can generate any substantive effects in the political and economic realm—that is, outside the discursive universe. In other words, without formal organization, can movements achieve material outcomes?

Finally, the book could give more detailed discussion of the political context for the rise of connective action. While it does touch on neoliberalism, it does not elaborate on how, or through what mechanisms, neoliberalism figures into contemporary protest networks. Does the salience of economic and ecological movements have anything to do with neoliberalism? How are they related? How are neoliberalism, individualization, network properties, and connective actions related? The authors do allude to the parallel development of neoliberal discourses and the personalization of politics. But this relation could be rendered clearer through more in-depth analysis.

These gaps, however, by no means diminish the work's merits. Rather, like the authors already suggest, scholars should take these as points of departure for further research. Scholars interested in social movements or activism, political organizing, political communication, civic engagement, new information and communications technologies, and media studies would find the book particularly useful. This path-breaking work, along with others (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012; Castells, 2012), will change how we think about organization and contentious action for years to come.

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