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Populism and Downing Street E-petitions: Connective Action, Hybridity, and the Changing Nature of Organizing

SCOTT WRIGHT

This article explores ongoing debates about whether new media empowers individuals at the expense of formal organizations, and how the nature of organizations/organizing is changing. Focusing on Downing Street E-petitions, it presents a content analysis of over 33,000 accepted petitions, analyzing who or what 'sponsored' each petition alongside interviews with petition creators. The analysis finds a wide range of 'affiliations', from formal groups to personal information, though many formal groups chose not to use the platform. In apparent support of the populist position, and contradicting resource mobilization theories, individuals created 19 of the 20 most signed petitions. Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) theory of connective action, and Chadwick's theories of organizational hybridity (2007) and the hybrid media system (2013) inform a detailed qualitative analysis of how petitions were promoted, and the nature of organization that underpinned this. The analysis finds that organizational structure(s) underpinning successful individual petitions were complex, with extensive organizational hybridity and petitioners exploiting hybrid media logics. Connective action was also apparent, though this did not fit as easily with practice on Downing Street E-petitions.

Keywords e-petitions, organizational hybridity, hybrid media system, e-democracy, connective action

Introduction

The argument that the Internet empowers individuals and might break the apparent monopoly that organized and increasingly professionalized groups (Skocpol, 2003) have over the ability to influence government policy has been debated for more than 15 years (Bimber, 1998; Earl & Kimport, 2011). On one hand, the populist position suggests that the Internet might empower individuals and decrease the reliance on civil society organizations: "The big losers in the present-day reshuffling and resurgence of public influence are the traditional institutions that have served as the main intermediaries between government and its citizens—the political parties, labor unions, civic associations . . ." (Grossman, 1995, p. 16). On the other, a more skeptical, "normalization" position argues that new media has had limited impact on existing political structures and power arrangements (Hindman, 2009; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Bimber (1998, p. 13) summarizes this view: the assumption that new media "will decentralize access to communication and information, increasing

Dr. Scott Wright is Senior Lecturer, Political Communication, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne.

Address correspondence to Dr. Scott Wright, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia. E-mail: scott.wright@unimelb.edu.au

citizen access [and] influence" fails to acknowledge how behavioral and structural factors inhibit the potential.[1] This position suggests that the classical dilemmas of collective action are not being radically altered.[2] In recent years, scholars of digitally networked activism (DNA) have revisited these debates. Facilitated by new media, a shift from "organizations to organizing" has been identified, and a rise of "solo organizers," "parties of one," or "lone wolfs" (Earl & Kimport, 2011, pp. 11, 157; Earl & Schussman, 2003, p. 160). Each study identifies new media-driven changes in the nature of organizations/organizing that appear to have the potential to empower individual activists—as originally posited by "populist" thinkers—and fundamentally change the very nature of collective action itself (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011).

To assess claims about the apparent empowerment of individuals and the changing nature of organizing, this article focuses on what is considered to be one of the most successful e-democracy experiments ever: Downing Street e-petitions (Chadwick, 2012, p. 61). Focusing on Downing Street enables the researcher to analyze the whole life of a large, "natural" participatory exercise. First, the article takes a step back to analyze who or what was given as the "sponsor" of every accepted petition. As many of these are not actually organizations at all, the concept of *affiliation* is used to capture this diversity. The details of each of the more than 33,000 petitions published on the Downing Street Web site were scraped from the Web site and content analysis was used to code whether they were affiliated to an organization, the nature of the organization, and the number of signatures received. The analysis finds a wide range of affiliations, from formal groups to personal information. Moreover, in apparent support of the populist position and contradicting resource mobilization theories, individuals created 19 of the 20 most signed petitions.

Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) theory of connective action and Chadwick's theories of organizational hybridity (2007) and the hybrid media system (2013) provide potentially plausible explanations for the results. To determine whether this was the case, the theories inform a qualitative analysis of how, if at all, a range of petition creators promoted their petitions, and the nature of organization that underpinned this. We then move on to a detailed analysis of how a petition requesting an apology for the treatment of the mathematician and code-breaker, Alan Turing, was promoted by its creator. In particular, this analysis explores how different media—and media logics—were orchestrated and how media coverage affected signature rates. The analysis finds that the organizational structure(s) underpinning successful individual petitions were diverse and complex with extensive evidence of organizational hybridity and petitioners exploiting the hybrid media system. Connective action was also apparent, though this model did not fit as easily with the practice on Downing Street e-petitions. Finally, the research finds that many of the most well-known campaigning groups did not use Downing Street e-petitions. This is surprising because we might expect groups to use e-petitions in an attempt to neuter the radical potential (Winston, 1998). To help understand why this was the case, a further 15 interviews were conducted with the director of campaigns or policy at such organizations. Specifically, three research questions are addressed:

1. What types of "organization" did people affiliate their petition to, and how successful were these at achieving the 500-signature threshold to receive an official reply? [3] Were the most signed petitions created by individuals or groups/affiliations?
2. What tools, techniques, and media logics did petition creators (and/or people that sympathized with petitions) use to promote their petition? To what extent do the theories

of organizational hybridity, the hybrid media system, and connective action explain the findings?
3. Why did many formal groups choose not to use Downing Street e-petitions?

Rethinking Collective Action

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of its publication, Olson's (1965) classic account of the dilemmas of collective action has been the subject of sustained debate. Olson argued that while we might expect individuals with shared public goals or problems to come together to take collective actions in an attempt to achieve their demand, rational individuals participating in large groups would free-ride on the actions of others, enjoying the benefit without ever actually taking action. If the action failed, they had not wasted their time or invested themselves in a failure. To overcome the dilemma, Olson emphasized the use of selective incentives and/or coercion—and this implied the need for well-resourced organizations for successful collective action. While it is not possible to recite all of the subsequent debate and criticisms here, there has been an emphasis on resource mobilization theory, the professionalization of groups, the role of collective action frames, social networks, and opportunity structures.

Numerous scholars have argued that there needs to be a rethinking of collective action theory (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006; Lupia & Sin, 2003). Earl and Kimport (2011, pp. 27–29, 177–179), for example, differentiate between what they call "supersizing effects," whereby the changes are "in degree, and do not culminate in changes to the underlying process," and "theory 2.0" impacts, where people leverage the key affordances of new media and change the underlying dynamic or model. In a similar vein, Bimber and colleagues (2012, p. 3) argue that "the novel capacities created by technological innovation have altered the structures and forms of collective action efforts today toward the direction of enhanced individual agency. . . . In virtually any domain traditionally dominated by formal organizations, one will now find organization-less groups in which individuals construct their own interest-based collectives." The dangers for traditional, hierarchical organizations are manifest: they might lead to the suffocation of institutional voices (Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Gillan, 2009) and an inability to control their image (Gueorguieva, 2008).

Starting from the observation that many contemporary movements lack key defining characteristics assumed by the logic of collective action and organizationally brokered networks, Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) important intervention uses a series of examples to demonstrate that, facilitated by communication technology, a new logic—of self-organizing, and organizationally enabled *connective action* networks—has emerged alongside collective action networks. As Figure 1 indicates, the concept of self-organizing connective action refers to individualized content and action frames (such as "We are the ninety-nine percent") that are inclusive of different reasons as to why the thing in question needs changing and can be easily shared over digital media networks—a connective communicative logic that becomes the organizational form of political action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 744–775). Put simply, self-organizing connective action networks can operate "through the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united 'we'" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 748). In between this, and the more familiar collective action, sits hybrid, organizationally enabled connective action networks that draw on aspects of both logics to a greater or lesser extent. There is deliberate fluidity here, and the decision to move away from fixed categorization "schemes" allows Bennett and Segerberg

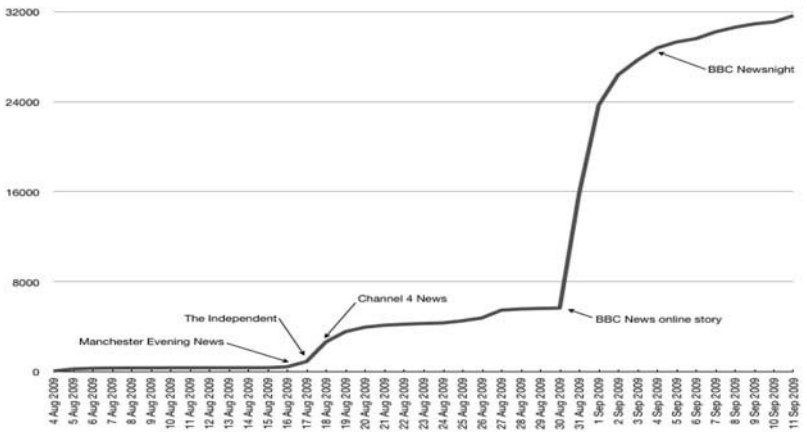

Figure 1. Daily signature rates with specific news stories. (*Source*: http://radar.oreilly.com/2009/09/how-alan-turing-finally-got-a.html).

(2013) to "observe actually occurring combinations of different types of action within complex protest ecologies" (p. 51). This aspect of their analysis draws on Chadwick's concept of organizational hybridity, and it is to this we now turn.

Chadwick (2007, p. 297) has identified hybrid organizational structures—the switching between, and blending of, digital network repertoires—as important characteristics of contemporary activism that helps to "sidestep [the] dichotomy" between optimism and pessimism. In subsequent work, Chadwick (2013, pp. 3, 4) takes hybridity further, arguing that it is a defining characteristic of the contemporary media system because it is

> built upon interactions among older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms. . . . Actors in this system are articulated by complex and ever-evolving relationships based upon adaption and interdependence and simultaneous concentrations and diffusions of power. Actors create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals.

To empirically analyze the hybrid media system, Chadwick conducts a series of detailed case studies of different political communication events. He argues that understanding how to tap into hybrid media logic(s) is crucial to the successful garnering of attention for political activism.

Each of these studies has identified changes in the nature of organizations/organizing that *appear* to have the potential to empower individual activists—as originally posited by "populist" thinkers. While a growing number of studies have attempted to test such claims empirically, Segerberg and Bennett (2011, p. 199) argue that there is still a need to move beyond "anecdotal evidence and sweeping generality." With few exceptions (such as Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Earl & Kimport, 2011), where more detailed empirical research has been conducted, the tendency has been to focus on groups such as Move On (Eaton, 2010; Karpf, 2012) or Avaaz (Kavada, 2012), specific events such as a protest (Polletta, 2002; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011) or major social forums (Kavada, 2009). The decision to analyze all of the petitions submitted to Downing Street helps to overcome

these limitations. Before the analysis is presented, however, it is necessary to discuss both the specific case, and the broader growth in e-petitioning.

The Rise of E-petitioning

E-petitioning systems have risen in prominence and popularity in the past 10 years to be one of the most widely used participation tools. Initially introduced by the Scottish Assembly (Macintosh, Adams, Whyte, & Johnston, 2008), they soon spread to Germany, the United Kingdom, Norway, South Korea, the United States, and beyond (Lindner & Riehm, 2009; Phillips, 2013).[4] Launched in late 2006, toward the end of Tony Blair's term in office, Downing Street E-petitions were quantitatively successful: 33,000 petitions were published on the Prime Minister's Web site (with a further 37,000 rejected) that received more than 12 million signatures and 3,258 official replies from Downing Street. The platform was designed in collaboration with MySociety to "make citizens feel as though they have a relatively easy way to put forward their opinions in a very direct manner to central government" while for "central government . . . it is like dipping your toe into the water of public sentiment. So, in order to actually understand what issues are of concern to the public . . ." (Downing Street official, personal communication, August 18, 2010).[5] Benjamin Wegg-Prosser, the former Director of Strategic Communication, led the development. Adopting e-petitions on the Prime Minister's Web site was controversial (Winnett & Swinford, 2007). One senior civil servant claimed that while Blair was intrigued by e-petitions, it was only sanctioned because his term in office was coming to an end and any problems would pass to his successor (talk given under Chatham House Rules, January 30, 2008). Petition creation and signing far exceeded expectations and officials were forced to strengthen the moderation rules and increase the number of signatures required to receive an official reply. Similar problems have dogged the U.S. President's We the People e-petition platform (Phillips, 2013).

While Downing Street e-petitions were quantitatively successful, the platform proved controversial because of paradoxical concerns that either they had no policy impact and people were ignored, or that it had too much influence and forced the government to change policy with a limited democratic mandate. On one hand, government ministers resented that important policies such as "road pricing" were sidelined (Wright, 2012).[6] On the other, ministers argued that "Downing Street e-petitions are useless, pointless and pernicious. I think they're useless in the fact they have no effect on anything; they're pointless in the fact they don't lead to anything; and they're pernicious in that they lead people to believe that by signing an e-petition they will actually change policy" (former Labour minister, personal communication, December 22, 2011). Faced with these criticisms, key people wanted a solution. The opportunity came with the pre-2010 General Election "Purdah" period: the Web site was closed, and never opened again. After extensive debate, a revised and empowered e-petitioning system was launched on the hub Web site for central government (http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/) and has proved similarly popular and controversial.

Methodology

To answer the research questions, the article combines a broad-based quantitative content analysis of the more than 33,000 petitions that were accepted by Downing Street with detailed qualitative semi-structured interviews and open-ended surveys with the creators of successful petitions. This is supplemented by a detailed analysis of how petition creators exploited a mixture of newer and older media logics to promote their petition and how this impacted signatures rates.

The quantitative content analysis involved scraping off the name of the petition creator, the date the petition was created, the number of signatures, the text of the petition, and, where given, more details, affiliation, and any official reply. The data were scraped off using a script and analyzed in Excel. Affiliations were given on the individual petition page, and it was necessary to open every petition and, where present, copy and paste it into the spreadsheet. The quantitative data are used to compare the number of petitions created by individuals and people giving an affiliation; what types of affiliations were given; and how successful individual and affiliated e-petitions were in attracting signatures.

The blurring of organizational boundaries associated with hybridization has made attempts to categorize groups problematic (Brainard & Siplon, 2002; Chadwick, 2007; Davis, McAdam, Scott, & Zald, 2005). It is argued here that there is still value in categorizations, particularly across such a large range of cases, because it helps us to understand how people used affiliation and what this means for the nature of "groups" themselves. Thus, rather than analyzing advocacy groups, this research adopted a broader, more exploratory research design that focused on the nature of *affiliation* used by petition creators. While the analysis indicates that a small number of affiliations are false, and others might have failed to mention their affiliation, this is the message that was communicated to potential supporters. Moreover, by combining an overarching analysis of individual, affiliated, and formal group-sponsored e-petitions with in-depth qualitative work, the research captures the messy, hybridized nature of organizations (Chadwick, 2007), while also giving sufficient breadth (Wright, 2012, p. 255).

For a petition to be coded as affiliated, the petition creator must have provided their affiliation when prompted to do so by the Downing Street Web site. If petitioners failed to give an affiliation but a group sponsored it, or this was mentioned solely in the "more details" section, they are not captured by this analysis. If a petitioner gave an affiliation, it was initially categorized as affiliated. Subsequently, two rounds of data cleaning were conducted. Petitioners that made statements in the affiliation section were kept within the analysis as a separate category because it was felt that this was an interesting phenomenon worthy of analysis. However, where there appeared to be a mistake (e.g., Joe Blogs of Joe Blogs), or the "affiliation" was actually to indicate they were not affiliated (e.g., Jemima Blogs of "none"), they were moved to the individual category. In total, 13% of petitions were coded as affiliated.

The coding categories and definitions of affiliation were developed using Mayring's (2000) procedures for carrying out inductive coding using feedback loops: A random sample of petitions with affiliations were coded and re-coded. With many affiliations, it was necessary to undertake further research to identify the group to enable categorization. Each petition could be categorized once or twice. For example, if a petition gave an affiliation of being a Conservative Party member it would be coded as being political and containing personal information. The codes and definitions that were settled upon are shown in Table 1. A sample of 10% of all affiliated messages was counter-coded after the code verification procedure had been conducted and an inter-coder reliability score of 93% was returned, indicating a strong level of reliability. The principal area of disagreement was around the use of "other." The difficulty was not so much with the coding frame, but because slightly different information about the body in question was collected and/or the information was interpreted differently.

The second stage of the research was qualitative and in-depth, using semi-structured interviews and qualitative surveys with the creators of both affiliated and individual petitions that received more than 500 signatures and thus should have received a reply. Of these, 130 affiliated petition creators were identified with 87 agreeing to help and 82 responses

Table 1
Coding categories and definitions

Affiliation	Definition
Local group	Naming a specific local or regional group (e.g., residents association, local political party)
National/ International group	Explicitly naming a national or international group. National groups include Web-based campaigns that are not geographically defined (e.g., Queer Youth Network)
Political	Reference to either a political party or organization, or use of a political title (e.g., MP, MEP, Councilor)
Education	Directly mentions a school, college, or university
Media	Direct mention of media organization (e.g., newspaper, journalism blog). Only Web sites that have a journalism function are included.
Business	Specific mention of a business. Charities are not included. If it is unclear whether the affiliation is commercial, code unclear. If Web sites are used to generate income for commercial purposes, they are coded as businesses.
Other	Non-commercial organizations such as social enterprises and charities
Unclear	If affiliation is unclear
Union	Explicit mention of a trade union (e.g., Unison)
NHS	Affiliated to a hospital or other medical organization; use of a medical name (e.g., GP)
Personal information	Petitioner provides explicit personal and personalized information (e.g., retired, unemployed worker, cancer sufferer). Mention of a business is not coded as personal unless it makes explicit personal reference (e.g., employee, managing director)
Armed forces	Affiliated to military (e.g., serving soldier) or ex-service person organization
Public service	Affiliated to public organization (e.g., a council, fire service) (armed forces, NHS, education are not coded as public service as these have separate categories)
Statement	Petitioner makes a statement. For example: "I hate Tony Blair," "frustrated father"
Individual	No affiliation or wrote something to the effect that they were an individual acting alone

Note. GP = general practitioner; MP = Member of Parliament; MEP = Member of European Parliament; NHS = National Health Service.

received. For individual petition creators, the analysis focuses on the 20 most quantitatively successful petitions precisely because they were so successful. In total, 16 interviews were conducted, and 86 survey responses gathered. This explored how they came to set up their petition; how they promoted their petition; how, if at all, they tapped into networks and the broader media environment (e.g., contacted journalists or established groups); and the

nature of the organization (if any) that was behind the petition. To analyze why groups chose not to use Downing Street e-petitions, a further 15 interviews (face-to-face or telephone) were conducted with the directors of policy or campaigns at leading formal and virtual organizations.[7] The responses were transcribed and NVivo was used to ensure the analysis was rigorous.

Organization, Affiliation, and Individuals

The content analysis (Table 2) found that petitions were largely from individuals rather than people who gave an affiliation. Where an affiliation was given, they were very diverse—a fact that is often not captured in empirical studies of organizing. The use of e-petitions by what might be called traditional or first-generation formal organizations was relatively limited. The analysis supports the use of the term *affiliation*: Individual actors linked themselves to a wide range of organizational structures including public sector bodies, commercial companies, and schools—this was more common than people affiliating themselves to formal campaign groups. The use of personal information (666 petitions) was also quite common and often linked an individual to a broader social group (for example, saying that they were a mother) rather than a formal organization. While no data were collected on this, anecdotal analysis suggests that some people gave personal information/testimony in the "more details" section of their petition.

Affiliated petitions were much more likely to achieve more than 500 signatures than those from individuals. The media and national groups, in particular, were very successful at gaining support—as would be expected within resource mobilization theory. It is worth noting that many of the national organizations were relatively small, with a very specifically defined focus (e.g., Guild of Location Managers, Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance). Affiliated petition creators used a wide range of what could be described as "classic" campaign strategies: circulating flyers; contacting the media; and using discussion forums, Google Groups, blogs, and e-lists alongside social media.

Petitions affiliated to business also performed well, averaging more than 1,000 signatures, with nearly 20% breaking the 500 signatures threshold. Interviewees who affiliated their petition to a business stated that they drew on networks and professional bodies, and often also asked customers directly to support their petition. However, there were examples where businesses received support from campaigners, creating a hybrid organization. For example, Mick Williams (personal communication, February 1, 2012), who runs a plumbing company, initially "ranted" about the need for a "boiler scrappage scheme," and one of his followers suggested that he create a petition, which he subsequently did and promoted through Twitter—which "played an enormous part in the whole campaign." He received a tweeted offer of help from a person who turned out to be the Green candidate for Mayor of London, and she then helped to take the campaign forward (moving beyond just the petition), developing a Web site and using her press officer to orchestrate the campaign. The petition ended up being a relatively small part of the campaign (2,605 signatures). The government did introduce a boiler scrappage scheme (the campaign appears to have been central) and this "made a massive difference to the heating industry."

As would be expected, there was a long tail of less successful petitions: 93% of petitions failed to receive the 500 signatures necessary to receive an official reply. Digging deeper, 73 affiliated petitions and 438 individual petitions received no signatures other than from the creator. Some 6,737 petitions by individuals received 6 signatures or fewer (including the creator), while 727 affiliated petitions (16%) were similarly unsuccessful.[8] Given that it is relatively easy to promote petitions online, it is assumed that either people's

Table 2
Group and individual petition analysis

	Total no. of signatures	No. of petitions	Average signatures each petition	Largest petition	No. of petitions with more than 500 signatures	Petitions with 500+ signatures (%)	Petitions with fewer than 50 signatures (%)
Armed forces	44,338	127	349.1	17,417	12	9.4	51.2
Business	745,287	734	1015.4	128,622	126	17.2	53.1
Individual	9,945,623	28,844	344.8	1,811,424	1,573	5.5	76.1
Local group	356,461	631	564.9	45,584	107	17	39.3
Media	409,943	173	2369.6	128,622	61	35.3	25.4
National group	806,406	832	969.2	28,092	229	27.5	31.1
NHS	18,748	65	288.4	3,964	10	15.4	53.8
Other	13,603	36	377.9	2,813	7	19.4	44.4
Personal information	191,592	666	287.7	82,860	31	4.7	72.7
Political	125,684	225	558.6	20,766	41	18.2	45.8
Public service	60,204	112	537.5	20,185	17	15.2	42
School	68,280	272	251	22,389	23	8.5	50
Statement	29,402	280	105	3,417	13	4.6	73.9
Unclear	55,418	341	162.5	8,302	23	6.7	65.7
Union	59,117	91	649.6	12,473	23	25.3	26.4

Note. Affiliated petitions could be coded across 2 categories. *Source*. Data from the Downing Street e-petitions Web site. NHS = National Health Service.

attempts to garner signatures were ineffectual, or they did not try at all. It also seems likely that at least some of the affiliated petitions were not directly sponsored, but were people acting in the name of a group.

While many petitions by individuals struggled to gain traction, some did receive vast numbers of signatures. Contradicting resource mobilization theory, the top 100 petitions created by individuals averaged more than 62,000 signatures each and petitions from individuals received 79% of all of the signatures on petitions above the 500 threshold. More specifically, individuals were responsible for 19 of the 20 most signed petitions. Of the top 20, two gave personal information with the 1 formal affiliation to the Daily Express newspaper. Only one group-affiliated petition featured in the top 50 petitions (with that being an Internet-based forum and not a traditional nongovernmental organization [NGO]). More generally, individuals created 87% of all petitions, while local and national groups created 4.4% of petitions. It should also be noted that individuals were responsible for the petitions that are generally considered to have had an impact on government policy: the dropping of "road pricing"; a ban on the National Health Service (NHS) using premium rate phone lines; an apology for Alan Turing; and a national holiday to commemorate troops (Wright, 2012).

In contradiction to the classic collective action theories, and in apparent support of the populist hypothesis, petitions by individuals were often very successful in terms of the numbers of signatures that they received. But how did individuals go about garnering support for their petitions and what role, if any, did organizations play? To better understand this, a qualitative analysis of the organizational structures and practices that were used by individuals to promote their petitions is presented.

Individual Organizers?

During the interview phase of the research, most individual petition creators presented a similar story: They actively facilitated their petition by contacting friends and family, posting it in online forums, and sometimes local and national media. In some cases, the individual petition creator—acting alone—played a central organizing role, developing a network of support that was akin to an organization (see Turing petition, later, for a detailed examination). In other cases, they created the initial momentum but the petition took on a life of its own in broader networks. For example, Peter Roberts, the creator of the most popular petition (1.8 million signatures), attempted to create a viral campaign by sending the petition to friends (29 e-mails) and posting it on a series of Web sites and forums that focused on cars and driving issues. The petition went on to receive significant coverage in the national media, crashing the Downing Street Web site. Within the first week, it had more than 14,000 signatures indicating that the initial viral campaign was successful (Navarria, 2010). There are strong similarities with other petitions, which also expressed key characteristics of connective action: "I e-mailed loads of ex RAF buddies and told them about the e-petition, that was the most successful method" (Clive Handy); "I mainly promoted it online on my blog and those of others. A big success was getting coverage by mainstream journalists . . ." (Tom Griffin); "I set up a website at 'www.savethesouth.org.uk'. . . distributed handouts at some of the Winchester District public meetings that were run at the time [and] put together a short, funny (but also serious) animation, which maybe could have become popular on YouTube if I'd had a clue how to promote it!"[9] As indicated, having a blog or personal Web site was common: they were "networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 6).[10] Even when petitioners downplayed their facilitation, they were often active. For example, the creator of one of the most widely

signed petitions stated, "I didn't really promote it at all" but had asked friends to sign and share the petition and contacted the media and elected representatives (anonymous, phone interview, July 2012).[11] We can see across the cases that the individual organizers built networks of support to help promote their petition and they were central to the network and organizational structure.

In other cases the distinction between individual and organization was even more complicated. Petitions created by individuals were taken forward, and support organized, by a range of bodies, *independent* of the organizer. For example, a petition asking the government to enhance the regulation of non-geographic telephone numbers was set up by an individual, but had similar aims to the www.saynoto0870.com campaign. Though forum members did not believe that the petition creator was a member, they nevertheless undertook a range of activities to promote the petition, including writing to journalists, celebrities, and elected representatives, and making the petition prominent on their homepage. However, there was a debate about whether the petition went far enough, and whether the group should set up its own petition.[12]

A third pattern from the qualitative data was where apparently individual petition creators had strong links to an external organization or campaign without being directly sponsored by it. For example, a petition to stop the building of a "mega-mosque" was linked to a tabloid newspaper article, but its success has been partly linked to the British National Party.[13] Although not mentioned in the text, a petition on body confidence that received nearly 50,000 signatures was directly linked to Gok Wan's *How to Look Good Naked* television series and thus received extensive publicity.[14] Similarly, a petition asking the government to allow the red arrows to fly at the 2012 Olympics was started in response to a story in the *Sun* newspaper, but ultimately it was the British tabloid press that led the campaign.[15] A petition by Nick Onslow, meanwhile, asking for the Hunting Act (2004) to be repealed, was listed as an individual effort, though he was also an active member of the Countryside Alliance. Finally, the creator of a petition asking for the government to build a dedicated military hospital co-founded the South Atlantic Medal Association 1982.

Each of these cases indicates the messiness of distinctions among individual, affiliated, and group organized petitions. In some cases, the individual petition creator played little or no role in recruiting signatures while in others the creator was so active that he or she became a central force—making them an interesting case of organizational hybridity (Chadwick, 2007). In between, there were myriad examples of connective action. However, some differences were identified between the logic of connection and the practice on Downing Street e-petitions and these are discussed in the next section.

Successful Downing Street E-petitions: Connective Action?

Connective action is arguably the most developed and detailed theoretical model of how new media are impacting the logic of collective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) have forcefully made the case for its validity through their empirical analyses across a wide range of examples. While the preceding analysis has briefly highlighted numerous examples of (particularly organizationally enabled) connective action on Downing Street e-petitions, a number of differences were also evident that need discussing.

First, connective actions are premised on easily transferable and customizable memes or action frames in which the message is sufficiently open to interpretation that a wide group of people can support it, albeit often for very different reasons (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 58). E-petitions, by contrast, tend to be quite specific and detailed in their demands, and while people can personalize how they share the petition text, they cannot modify the actual

petition text itself. E-petitions, thus, have the potential to be exclusive rather than inclusive, making it harder for individuals to appropriate, reinterpret, and share virally. Such difficulties are evident in a reply from Jonathan Simmons, who "team[ed] up with a couple of local action groups, and got quite a few signatures through them. But ultimately, they were mainly interested in their specific local issue. I found it hard to get people to think beyond their own back yards" (J. Simmons, personal communication, March 7, 2012). In fact, many petitioners noted that they chose e-petitions precisely because there was a "very particular question" they wanted to focus on (Robert Bain, U.K. Chagos Support Association); "It acted as a focus point, allowing us to ask people to do something specific" (Michael Truman). The design of the platform did not make connective action easy: including links in petitions was banned, petitioners were not allowed to contact people who signed their petition, and no widgets were included to make sharing easier across social media. Perhaps unsurprisingly, creators reported that it was the ease of signing rather than sharing that attracted them.

Perhaps because the e-petitions did not lend themselves to easily transferred memes, the older media were often actively targeted by petitioners and were generally considered to play a crucial role in bringing petitions to public attention. While Bennett and Segerberg discuss the role of the mass media in specific cases in their book (2013; for example, pp. 58–60, 103–104), they largely focus on digital media and their model makes no direct mention of the mass media. A second difference is, thus, that more emphasis was placed on the traditional media than is captured in the model of connective action. In some cases, the petitioner contacted the media directly (e.g., Turing petition), but in others, such as the petition to ban the NHS using premium rate telephones, the journalist made contact with the petition creator (G. Mayhew, personal communication, August 7, 2013). A Downing Street official (anonymous, personal communication, October 2010) noted that journalists routinely monitored petitions looking for stories. Once one media outlet covered it, petitions entered the media cycle, and other news outlets often picked the story up: petitions gained their own momentum and were more or less self-sustaining.[16] For example, a petition to knight the former Liverpool Football Club manager, Bob Paisley, was initially covered by the *Liverpool Echo* newspaper with backing from local Members of Parliament (MPs), and subsequently gained support from the club and family members and received national coverage.

While more of a question for, than a challenge to, the model of connective action, the implications for connective action of the centralized "individual organizers" identified on some Downing Street e-petitions needs clarification. Can such individuals (or small groups of individuals) be considered an organization? Is there a point at which the strength and volume of connective organizing can be considered to have constituted an organization? Bennett and Segerberg (2013, p. 204) have themselves noted that there are issues: "As we dig deeper into contentious connective action, it will be necessary to consider more carefully the contribution of 'core activists' to the political success of mobilizations. . . ." Such debates are part and parcel of the messiness that can accompany hybrid logics and analytical frameworks. In a related point, as was seen earlier, the design of the e-petition platform is itself a key organizational structure because it embeds or limits key technological affordances (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Wright & Street, 2007) and this is beyond the control of the petitioners. Furthermore, it must be noted that in submitting their petition to Downing Street, petitioners are deliberately choosing *not* to "shun [the] involvement of existing formal organizations" (Bennett & Segerberg, p. 47) but actively engage with it.

In summary, the structure and use of Downing Street e-petitions did not fit neatly with Bennett and Segerberg's concept of connective action. In particular, the content of petitions

was typically specific and exclusive, which, along with the barriers built into the platform, made connective action harder. Perhaps because of this, garnering coverage in traditional media was important and a range of media (and media logics) were typically exploited and there was evidence of organizational hybridity.[17] To explore this further, the structure and organizing of one petition is discussed in detail.

The Turing Petition and the Hybrid Media System

Alan Turing has become increasingly well-known for his work developing early computing, and cracking Nazi Germany's Enigma enciphering machine—widely credited with shortening World War II. In 1952, Turing was convicted of gross indecency for admitting a homosexual relationship, which at the time was a crime under U.K. law. To avoid prison, he chose the punishment of chemical castration. Turing committed suicide in 1954. A lack of knowledge about both the importance of Turing, and his horrific treatment, led a British computer programmer, John Graham-Cumming, to set up a petition seeking a posthumous apology. Initially, Graham-Cumming wrote an article on his blog about Turing but he had no intention of creating a petition: the idea for the petition came from a blog reader.[18] The text for the petition was quickly put together and published by Downing Street in late July 2009. The petition was promoted initially through his blog, e-mail, and Twitter, and he spent about two hours a day—his commute to and from work—supporting the petition.[19] He noted that he wrote to some media contacts he had made through his work, "although I am by no means professional at any of this sort of thing—I am totally an amateur. . . " (J. Graham-Cumming, personal interview, July 9, 2013). There was strong early interest from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) media, and Graham-Cumming felt that this "helped get things into the mainstream press" (J. Graham-Cumming, personal interview, July 9, 2013). However, he was "*extremely* careful" (original emphasis) to ensure that the petition was broad-based and not tied to one sectional interest area: "I tried to talk about the many different aspects of Turing. I didn't want it to be: this is a gay thing, or this is just about the Second World War. . . . I didn't want them to be able to dismiss it easily" (J. Graham-Cumming, personal interview, July 9, 2013).

As Figure 2 shows, when the petition was featured in the media, there were clear spikes in signature rates.[20] Graham-Cumming realized quite early on that the support of "celebrities like Richard Dawkins was actually quite important" (J. Graham-Cumming, personal interview, July 9, 2013) because they garner media attention and have large numbers of followers on social media that can be both recruited to sign the petition, and used to spread the petition over the network.[21] Importantly, "lending their name meant that the press then had something to write about—that then becomes the hook for the story. A random guy, John Graham-Cumming who no one has ever heard of is doing a petition—who cares?" (J. Graham-Cumming, personal interview, July 9, 2013). For example, Dawkins' support for the petition led to articles in *The Independent, PinkNews*, the BBC, and CNN amongst others, and he also gave interviews for TV news broadcasts.[22] As the number of signatories became too big to identify the celebrities, Graham-Cumming used his programming skills to write a script to help identify them. The key moment was when BBC News online covered the petition, but he saw this as the culmination of garnering celebrity support and other media coverage.[23] The BBC story was important not just because the Web site is widely read, but because the URL provided "meat" for its spread though social media.[24]

As noted earlier, the design of the Downing Street platform made exploiting network effects difficult: it was only possible to contact celebrities because their celebrity made them identifiable and it was then possible to verify them through their agent. It should, thus, be

noted that the Downing Street Web site was itself an important mediating actor within the hybrid media system and this was the product of politically and technically informed design choices (Wright & Street, 2007).

Alongside Graham-Cumming's efforts, the petition was spread independently through a range of older and newer media and there is some evidence that organizations such as the British Humanists supported the petition.[25] While a follower mentioned the petition on the Facebook page of the national GLBT group, Stonewall, it did not play a significant role.[26] The Director of Public Affairs at Stonewall, Derek Munn, noted, "We don't encourage people to sign petitions or write to their MP . . . we don't see the fifty thousand [supporters] as, you know, people we can use for online activism. That's not the style we use" (D. Munn, personal interview, February 23, 2010). The petition features heavily on Twitter, discussion forums, and Facebook, and garnering such activity can help with its position in online search returns. Furthermore, an international petition was launched because only U.K.-based people could sign on the Downing Street Web site.

The campaign "strategies" adopted by Graham-Cumming were sophisticated, and mirror (even extend) techniques deployed by professional organizations. However, he strongly argued that he was an amateur:

> I would like to say I had this deliberate strategy and it was all mapped out, but actually. . . . Literally, what I did with this campaign was I would get on the bus in the morning, look through my e-mail, look at who had signed the petition. My father helped by reading through the signatories looking for celebrities who I would then contact, or try and contact. So, it definitely wasn't a deliberate strategy, I just learnt as I went along. . . . I think a lot of people assumed there had been some large organization coordinating this thing but actually it was just me. . . . (J. Graham-Cumming, personal interview, July 9, 2013)

His "strategy" shows a clear understanding of simultaneously operating older and newer media logics (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 54) and a range of digital network repertoires. Each media has its own media logic but these are increasingly hybridized, particularly as older media develop sophisticated newer media platforms (Chadwick, 2013). For campaigners, the evidence suggests that they must understand these different media logics and when and how best to exploit them to achieve their campaigning goals. If they can, the Turing petition (and many similarly successful ones) indicates that it is possible for individual e-petitioners to garner large volumes of signatures. Moreover, government policy was occasionally influenced (Wright, 2012), suggesting that the populist position held true in certain circumstances.

Avoiding Downing Street E-petitions?

The analysis of affiliation found that local, national, or international organized groups created fewer than 5% of petitions. Moreover, there is evidence that some of these apparently group-led petitions were actually individuals acting in the name of the organization. For example, one affiliated petition creator stated, "I was upset that [the national group] had not set up a petition so I decided to do it myself. I posted information about the petition on three online forums and also sent a message to an e-mail list . . . while it did not get millions of signatures, I was quite happy with the results considering" (anonymous, personal

communication,). Many of the largest groups, such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, were not linked to a single petition (either by the organization or its supporters). This is surprising as the law of the suppression of radical potential suggests that organizations would adopt Downing Street e-petitions in an attempt to neuter their radical potential and limit the threat to their power (Winston, 1998).

To explore this, a further 15 face-to-face interviews were conducted with the directors of policy and/or campaigns at organized groups that had either no or very limited use of Downing Street e-petitions. The first, partial explanation is that these groups (particularly virtual ones such as Avaaz) were using e-petitions, but chose not to use the Downing Street platform. Using their own tools allowed them to collect more data on petition signers and gave them greater control over the process. However, more complex reasons were at play.

The principal concern expressed was about the effectiveness of e-petitions. This was reflected by Ray Mitchell, Director of Campaigning at Age UK, who noted that it became "very clear, very quickly, that they have no impact whatsoever . . . personally I think this is where there are negative aspects to [the] ease of Internet campaigning." He continued: "We've been asked various times to set up petitions on behalf of different issues and we've been resistant to it. I also worry that people sign up and can become disenchanted very quickly with the idea. They'll see, well I did that, and so did a million other people, and then I got an e-mail saying we're not going to do it and this is the reason why. . . ," Mitchell felt that, "If we'd been asking people to do it . . . we would then be seen as having wasted their time, not the government" (R. Mitchell, personal interview, September 10, 2008) Similarly, Neil Sinden of the Campaign to Protect Rural England stated (N. Sinden, personal communication, February 23, 2010) that e-petitions "don't tend to be given much credence [and thus] I have a healthy dose of skepticism about how far [they] are being taken seriously by ministers. . . . On balance, I think at the moment it doesn't seem to be adding much to the quality of policy making and decision making in my view."

Another element was the perceived risks of e-petitioning, and the "threat" of new media to established organizations more generally. Steve Taylor of the League Against Cruel Sports expressed this concern: "e-petitions are a problem . . . it becomes a stick to beat you with. People are doing [e-petitions] for the right reasons but they're not, they're not savvy in terms of campaigning techniques and how these things work. And so that causes a problem in that it can kind of misrepresent what's going on in the big campaigns" (S. Taylor, personal interview, February 11, 2010) Key here was choosing the "right" topic where a petition could in theory make a difference and that commercial companies were often more malleable to pressure (T. Hancock, Amnesty International, personal communication, February 26, 2010; B. Fitzgerald, Greenpeace, personal communication, 2009). Overall, the analysis of non-use suggests that Downing Street e-petitions were simply not considered to have a radical potential and, if anything, would have negative effects, and thus a strategic decision was made to avoid them. This does not, thus, contradict Winston's radical potential argument. However, it must be questioned whether this critical analysis is correct, because petition creators generally perceived their petitions to be "successful." In many cases, this was because they felt their policy demand was met. However, we must be careful to acknowledge that the precise role of the e-petition varies from one case to the next, and sometimes the e-petition was one tool in a suite of techniques that were used (Karpf, 2010, 2012). In other cases, they did not achieve their policy objective, but were still considered a success because broader definitions of success were used. The petition was not realistically intended to change government policy, but achieved other strategic (or unintended) objectives.

Conclusion

Downing Street e-petitions has proved to be an illuminating example of how the nature of organizing is changing, and the analysis has broader theoretical and practical implications. The analysis found that people gave a wide range of affiliations, from formal groups to personal information. Unsurprisingly, individuals submitted the most petitions, while affiliated petitions had a higher average number of signatures and were more successful at achieving the 500 signatures required to receive an official reply. The use of e-petitions by what might be called traditional, or first-generation, formal organizations—be they local, national, or international—was relatively limited: They created less than 5% of petitions, and this would be lower but for people creating petitions in the name of a group. Furthermore, many of the most famous organized groups did not create a single petition. The interview evidence suggests that creating a petition was considered too risky and/or the groups chose to use other platforms that allowed them to collect e-mail addresses and contact people. However, if organized groups felt that e-petitions were an effective method of influencing government policy, it can be assumed that they would both create more e-petitions and provide greater organizational resources to underpin them. Whether this would crowd out and decrease the signature levels of individual petitions is unclear.

In apparent support of the populist position and contradicting resource mobilization theories, individuals created 19 of the 20 most signed petitions and were responsible for many of the petitions that are considered to have impacted government policy. The analysis reflects Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, p. 748) Castells inspired claim that in "late modern societies . . . formal organizations are losing their grip on individuals, and group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks." Informed by the theories of connective action, organizational hybridity, and the hybrid media system, the qualitative analysis explored the nature of organizing that underpinned successful petitions. Petition creators often played an important organizing role, initiating the spread of their petition and in some cases working actively throughout its life. A wide range of tools and techniques were used to promote petitions, and these were often connective actions, but this was not without issue. In particular, the specificity of e-petitions appeared to make it harder to generate and exploit exclusive personal action frames. Perhaps because of this, many petition creators and supporters deliberately targeted the oxygen of publicity that could be generated by contacting the press, television, and celebrities. In doing this, they often exploited older, newer, and hybrid media logics and created hybrid organizations. As one would expect in a hybridized system, no one single account tells the whole story. Nevertheless, many of the quantitatively most successful individual and affiliated e-petitions were built on an appreciation of these different media logics. This included an understanding of the technical strengths and limitations of the Downing Street platform and of newsroom norms and news values. There was, thus, evidence to support Chadwick's theories of organizational hybridity and the hybrid media system.

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Notes

1. Initial studies, conducted while the platforms were still maturing, suggested that there had been some—albeit minimal—impact, with bottom-up content impacting media and policy agendas (Bennett, 2003; Kahn & Kellner, 2004).

2. Traditional approaches to collective action emphasize the importance of organizations in incentivizing participation; developing a sense of group identity; and coordinating activities.

3. This was the threshold set by Downing Street to receive an official reply. At the beginning the threshold was lower, but as so many petitions were reaching the threshold, the level was increased.

4. Notable examples include the White House "We the People" platform (141,310 petitions with 9,178,278 signatures—January 2013), the UK government's Direct.gov.uk (36,000 petitions with 13 million signatures in year 1) Website, and Change.org (350,000 petitions). Pew survey data found that 17% of respondents had signed an e-petition, with UK surveys finding that 9% of respondents had recently signed a petition with 25% saying that they would be willing to do so (Hansard Society, 2013).

5. MySociety is a charity that builds civically minded, e-participation Web sites such as WhatDoTheyKnow, TheyWorkForYou, and FixMyStreet.

6. Road pricing was a policy proposal to install monitoring devices that would charge people for the amount of time they used roads, and particularly for use during peak periods. It was criticized both as a tax revenue-generating exercise and over fears of government surveillance and an erosion of civil liberties.

7. These were the following: Age Concern (Ray Mitchell, Director of Campaigns), Amnesty (Tim Hancock, UK Campaigns Director), Avaaz (Ian Keith, Global Campaigner), British Association of Shooting and Conservation (Conor O'Gorman, Policy Development Manager), British Heart Foundation (Mubeen Bhutta, Policy Manager, and Julia Toft, Advocacy Manager), Campaign to Protect Rural England (Neil Sinden, Director of Policy and Campaigns), Friends of the Earth International (Ann Doherty, Communications Co-ordinator), Greenpeace (Brian Fitzgerald, Head of Digital Communications), Ministry of Justice (Ian Johnson, Director of Democratic Engagement), Netmums (Sally Russell, Co-Founder and Director), Network Norwich (Keith Morris), Queer Youth Network (anonymous), Stonewall (Derek Munn, Director of Public Affairs), Stop the War (Tansy Hoskins), and The League (Steve Taylor, Head of Campaigns and Communications).

8. Many more petitions would have received no signatures, or only one, but for small groups of "super-participants" who signed thousands of petitions (Wright, 2012).

9. The video is available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqU-cr1u2MU.

10. For example, Dominic Cronin, whose individual petition received nearly 80,000 signatures, has both: http://www.dominic.cronin.nl/weblog/music-licensing-petition. Guy Mayhew ran a now-closed community Web site. John Graham-Cumming has a blog: http://blog.jgc.org/. Nick Onslow also has a Web site: http://www.nickonslow.com/Nicholas_Onslow/Home.html.

11. This finding reflects those of Earl and Kimport (2011, p. 160), who found that individual organizers tended not to see themselves as organizers because their activities were cheap.

12. There is a very interesting discussion of both what tactics should be used, and whether the group should set up its own petition here: http://www.saynoto0870.com/cgi-bin/forum/YaBB.cgi?num=1168437871/153. If correct, the discussion indicates that the support of people like the financial guru, Martin Lewis, led to distinct spikes in signatures.

13. See, for example, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-469726/BNP-linked-petition-new-megamosque.html or http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/may/16/immigrationpolicy.religion.

14. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfuIkSWz79E&index=3&list=PL66DB200A1D683EDB

15. http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20091116020414/http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/RedArrows2012/

16. Evidence suggests that signature rates are part of a complex cycle whereby once a critical mass is reached there is a bandwagon effect (Marwell & Oliver, 1993; Oliver & Marwell, 1988): once petitions receive a million signatures, it positively affects the likelihood of someone supporting the petition (Margetts, John, Escher, & Reissfelder, 2009).

17. Differences in scale may also explain the divergence: e-petitions are typically relatively discrete and contained actions with a defined focus, or were a small part of a larger campaign that is not captured in this analysis.

18. http://www.jgc.org/blog/2009/06/alan-turing-deserves-apology-from.html

19. https://twitter.com/search?q=%40jgrahamc%20turing&src=typd

20. The most in-depth piece was featured on *BBC Newsnight*: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/8238294.stm.

21. The extent to which celebrities actually lead people to sign the petition is unclear, not least because a spike in signatures may be coincidental. For example, Stephen Fry used Twitter to ask followers to sign the petition, but this occurred shortly after a *BBC Online* article was published and thus it is hard to disentangle its impact (http://https://twitter.com/stephenfry/status/3689123705).

22. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8226509.stm; http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2009/08/19/richard-dawkins-joins-calls-for-apology-for-gay-mathematician-alan-turing/; http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/dawkins-calls-for-official-apology-for-turing-1774033.html; http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/europe/09/01/alan.turing.petition

23. Surviving family members of Turing also got in touch, and their support helped to spur him on.

24. See, for example, http://humashah.blogspot.co.uk/2009/08/turing-petition-upto-12041-signatories.html; https://twitter.com/dlandoncole/status/3669671705; http://forums.tvcatchup.com/archive/index.php/t-1396.html.

25. https://humanism.org.uk/2009/09/04/news-351/

26. https://www.facebook.com/stonewalluk/posts/143701185398

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