

Online Political Organizing: Lessons in Hybridity

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Abstract: Andrew Chadwick has coined the term “hybridity” to describe the new field of internet-mediated political organizations. These organizations borrow from the tactical repertoires commonly associated with interest groups, political parties, and social movement organizations. While there is strong surface evidence of this hybrid character, deeper analysis has been limited by its lack of specificity. Are organizations today necessarily more hybrid than organizations in previous years? Just how dramatically has the new media environment altered the work of political organizations? This paper offers a content analysis of a unique data source: one full year of “Tip of the Day” e-mails provided by the New Organizing Institute, the central hub for online organizing training in the American left. Through analysis of the tips, lessons, and advice that digital organizers share with each other, the paper offers concrete examples of what Chadwick’s “digital hybridity” looks like in the day-to-day practice of these new activists and organizations.

Introduction

Just how **new** is digital activism? Divergent answers to this question have spawned multiple, competing research traditions. Some researchers claim the lowered transaction costs and end-to-end architecture of the Internet have fundamentally altered social movement mobilization (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2005, Lev-On and Hardin

2008, Earl and Kimport 2011, Shulman 2009). Others argue that existing institutions normalize any transformative potential within the new media environment, yielding the same elite structure, only with different elites (Margolis and Resnick 2000, Davis 2009, Hindman 2009). A third group argues that new media has prompted the rise of “post-bureaucratic,” or “hybrid” organizations (Bimber 2003, Chadwick 2005, 2007, Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl 2012, Karpf 2012). These researchers hold that traditional organizations remain central to large-scale political advocacy efforts, but that the nature and character of these organizations has changed in response to the new affordances of the digital media environment.

To date, my own work has fallen firmly within this third, organizational hybridity-focused camp. However, as a self-critique of sorts, I believe it is important to push ourselves regarding what hybridity *means*, exactly.

Andrew Chadwick coined the term in two influential articles (2005, 2007). He offered MoveOn.org as a key example, defining it as “a hybrid mobilization movement. MoveOn sometimes behaves like an interest group, sometimes like a social movement, sometimes like the wing of a traditional party during an election campaign. Such organizational types could not work without the internet because the technologies set up complex interactions between the online and offline environment and the organizational flexibility required for fast “repertoire switching” within a single campaign or from one campaign to the next.”

The problem with this definition is that the boundaries between interest group, social movement, and party organizational repertoires have never been particularly sharp. We are blending ideal-types that come to us pre-blended. Andrews and Edwards (2004)

have effectively argued that interest groups and social movements are frequently functionally synonymous. From my own personal experience, I can attest that the Sierra Club since at least the 1980s has regularly switched between interest group, social movement, and party organizational repertoires.¹ The internet may indeed have enabled *more* repertoire switching, but it was not an unheard of phenomenon in the days when databases were maintained on index cards and shoeboxes. Has the digital environment rendered organizations more hybrid, or just more *observably* hybrid?

The goal of this paper is to ground the concept of digital hybridity in the language and work experience of present-day advocacy professionals. The focus on political advocacy as a professional field is a distinct and (hopefully) productive choice. I would readily grant the point to theorists such as Earl and Kimport that *some* features of digital organizing are indeed quite new. From political blogs to facebook groups to e-petition sites like Change.org, individual users have greater agency to create their own organization-less actions than ever before. These frequently are small-scale or short-term efforts however. Large-scale and long-term political efforts still require organizations (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2012, Karpf 2012). Likewise, theorists such as Richard Davis are surely correct that, over time, these new waves of active citizens adopt familiar forms, producing new sets of “agenda-seekers” who interact within the constraints of the existing political system. Just because everyone can speak on the Internet does not mean everyone can be equally heard. This is a traditional challenge. The tools that professional political organizers employ to build power and achieve policy goals have

¹ I served in various volunteer leadership roles with the Sierra Club from 1996 through 2010, including National Director of the Sierra Student Coalition in 1999, and member of the National Board of Directors from 2004-2010. My knowledge of the organization and its history is both exhaustive and exhausting.

shifted though. If we take the professional field of online political mobilization as our object of analysis, then digital organizing seems to be at once novel and familiar. The question becomes “*how* different is the work of an advocacy professional today versus 25 years ago?”

This paper advances our understanding of hybridity in online organizing through a content analysis of the New Organizing Institute’s (NOI’s) “Tip of the Day” email program. Since 2005, NOI has served as a central hub in the diffusion of knowledge, skills, and practices among progressive advocacy organizations. It is the central training institute for digital activism professionals, and offers a set of conferences and resources in support of this mission. I have previously described NOI as an emblematic “netroots infrastructure organization” (Karpf 2012, 106-109). Its user-generated Tip of the Day (TOTD) emails represent a unique window in the core activities and shared understandings of digital advocacy professionals. These messages, in short, represent how online organizers talk about their work with one another.

The New Organizing Institute

The New Organizing Institute was founded in the aftermath of the 2004 election. That election was the first to feature a heavy and well-publicized online component. The early internet-driven fundraising and volunteer successes of the Howard Dean campaign produced a groundswell of interest in digital campaign efforts. The demand for skilled online organizers far outpaced the supply of these organizers – as former NOI President Zack Exley described it, “A handful of [veterans of the Dean campaign and MoveOn]

kept getting asked by other organizations, by people looking to hire people, ‘who can we get, who can we get, who can we get?’ And we didn’t have anybody to recommend to them because there wasn’t a whole generation of organizers who had come up doing this kind of work” (username “NewOrganizingInstitute” 2009).

As Executive Director Judith Freeman describes it, the organization was launched after a 2004 retreat among “20 to 25 people who had really done a lot of innovation with how you intergrate, how you link the online work and the technology with field [organizing]” (Fullenwider 2010). Exley describes it as ““the ideal was that top people in their respective fields would agree to set aside some time from their busy careers to train the next generation – in other words, that our trainings would be driven by current practitioners who had their own stories of trial and error to personally present” (Exley 2007).

The details of NOI’s founding are important because of what they indicate about the current role that the organization plays in the broader network of “netroots” political organizations today. NOI operates as a *network forum* (see also Kreiss 2012). Fred Turner defines a network forum as “a place where members of a community come together, exchange ideas and legitimacy, and in the process synthesize new intellectual frameworks and new social networks” (Turner 2006, 72)². A network forum is a series of meetings, mailing lists, and/or events where a set of interrelated networks regularly convene. A network forum facilitates the exchange of new ideas and information, crafting new networks in the process. Put more plainly, the most important feature of a network forum is *who* is participating in it.

² Quote is modified from past tense to present tense for clarity (Turner writes “came together” rather than “come together,” etc).

There are several training organizations within progressive politics, and at least a half dozen conferences, publications, and mailing lists that seek to capitalize upon expertise in digital activism. NOI is set apart from the rest because it has been treated by *other* key actors in the network as a central gathering place. NOI hosts an annual conference called Rootscamp which adopts the “barcamp” format employed by tech pioneer Tim O’Reilly. Such “unconferences” invite attendees to fashion their own agenda upon arrival, providing breakout rooms and a main convention hall, but little else. Rootscamp is a physical instantiation of the network forum concept – it provides a literal forum for the netroots professional community to interact. Unconferences like this succeed or fail based upon network effects – with no headlining speakers or agenda to announce, attendance is determined by who else will be attending. RootsCamp draws approximately 1,000 people annually. Organizing/Obama for America, MoveOn, Democracy For America, Progressive Change Campaign Committee, Change.org, ActBlue.com, and alumni of major Democratic electoral campaigns all attend, and their active participation in turn attracts the rest of the professional community.

It is because of NOI’s network centrality that I have selected it as an object of analysis. Legacy political associations (such as the Sierra Club) send their staff to NOI events for retraining. Newer political associations like MoveOn share their latest findings at Rootscamp, and regularly serve as trainers at NOI functions. These organizations offer such trainings not only to enrich the broader progressive community, but also to identify future potential staff members. As the field of online organizing

develops, NOI as a “netroots infrastructure organization” serves as a central hub for leading practitioners to define the boundaries of their practice.

Tips Of The Day

Beginning after the February 2011 Rootscamp, NOI launched a “Tip of the Day” (TotD) email service. Modeled after the Harvard Business Review’s “management tip of the day” email list³, TotD is designed to further extend NOI’s niche within the netroots ecosystem. NOI’s goal is to “make sure knowledge is being shared and we’re learning how to do these new things to the best of our ability.” TotD was set up to encourage this knowledge sharing among the community of participants who attend NOI trainings and events.

TotD represents the shared understanding of a practitioner community about the nature and makeup of their practice. The program is strongly member-driven – NOI assigned one staffperson to devote 10% of his time to curation of the tip submissions. Tips come from NOI staff and community members, including both the trainers and the participants at NOI events. Tips fell into seven categories – New Media, Data, Field, Organizing, Management, Personal Care, and Fundraising – and both submissions and reader response was close to evenly distributed among the tips. Professional consultants were discouraged from writing “here’s my product” types of messages. Several consultants instead chose to “piggyback,” offering tips about topics outside their consulting specialty, burnishing their own reputation in the process. It is worth noting

³ Interview notes, Evan Sutton. March 8, 2012.

that membership in NOI is similar to membership in MoveOn and other netroots organizations. There is no dues requirement; it is strictly a communications-based relationship. Anyone who has signed up for NOI's mailing list is considered a member. Again, this highlights NOI's status as a network forum. The same service, employed by a different network of digitally-enabled actors, would produce different content (or, more likely, no user-generated content at all). For scholars interested in online political organizing, the TotD service offers a digital trace of the internal discourse among advocacy professionals as they discuss best practices.

For the purposes of this study, what is most noteworthy about the TotD program is the *range* of topics and advice that were given. In an eyeball-level analysis of the TotD program that I included in my book, *The MoveOn Effect*, I noted that NOI's tips ranged in character from Internet-related ("Use Google Analytics to Boost Results") to traditional ("Communicate with Attendees Before Events"). This highlights a key divergence from much academic discourse on digitally-mediated political action. While academics are often concerned with the *theoretical* implications of a novel communications environment for *rational* actors, NOI seeks to assemble an understanding of the *practical* implications of the novel communications environment for *overworked, underpaid* actors. It is on this practical level that digital hybridity takes shape. Online organizers face new challenges ("9/2/11 – Don't trust your WYSIWYG⁴") that previous, offline political organizers never had to consider. They also face old challenges ("9/1/11 – Give Interns Real Responsibility") that are entirely identical to the professional challenges of a

⁴ WYSIWYG is a common acronym among web designers for "what you see is what you get." Don't trust your WYSIWYG means that bloggers, email writers, web designers, and other online campaigners should make sure that formatting and display work as-intended.

previous generation. Then there is a set of truly hybrid challenges (“6/10/11 – Get Key Info to Volunteers with Confirmation Emails”), in which old work processes take on a new character. Changes to the communication environment have changed *some* of the work of advocacy professionals. Much remains the same. The Tip of the Day e-mail service provides a window into the breakdown among these categories.

Methodological Considerations

When I first wrote about NOI for my book, their TotD service had only been running for a few months. I found it noteworthy, but not quite ripe for empirical analysis. There was not enough data there to provide observable trends. As the reader has probably surmised, this paper is meant as a follow-up effort to fill that gap. What follows is a simple content analysis of the first year of e-mails generated through TotD. The content analysis is similar in form to the Membership Communications Project that I previously conducted (Karpf 2010). In constructing the study, I kept two main design concepts in mind: Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl’s (2012) “technology in context” and my own previous writing on “transparency and kludginess” (2012b).

In their recent book, *Collective Action in Organizations*, Bruce Bimber, Andrew Flanagin, and Cynthia Stohl propose a new framework for the study of new media and politics. They write:

“...too close a focus on individual technologies is especially limiting in times of rapid change. A theory of e-mail from 1993 or chat rooms from 1995 is hardly

adequate to the new dynamism and multiplicity of alternatives for communication available now through our organizations and others. Just as feudalism cannot be understood from a theory of irrigation, or the Industrial Revolution from a theory of threshing machines or looms, understanding the information revolution requires more than a theory of how organizations use Facebook or Twitter.” (p. 42-43)

Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl’s focus is on the behavior and participation of the individual members involved with large-scale civil society organizations. Referencing MoveOn specifically, they state “We eschew making inferences about the nature of collective action for members of an organization like MoveOn from an inventory of the specific tools and features present at its Web site at the particular moment that we are writing about it” (p. 40).

This perspective is new, and stands at odds with much of the current social science literature on internet politics. Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl are challenging a “variable-oriented” tradition of counting website features and using those features as a stand-in for participatory engagement. They argue instead that we must cease to treat Twitter as though it were entirely divorced from Facebook and e-mail, instead looking at how individuals *make use* of this fast-changing suite of technologies.

My focus in this paper (and in my book) is directed at the network of professional political organizers that run these organizations, rather than at the members they seek to engage and mobilize. This difference in focus nonetheless calls for complementary methodology. Following their recommendations for treating technology as context, I

designed my content analysis of these TotD emails to focus primarily on *how* NOI community members talked about their work, and what role they attributed to new technological tools.

Likewise, in a recent methodological essay, “Social Science Research Methods in Internet Time” (Karpf 2012b), I have argued that scholars interested in new media need to promote two values in their research: transparency and “kludginess.” By transparent research, I mean that the digital environment changes quickly, often faster than our traditional publishing timelines. This wreaks havoc on many of the assumptions that we frequently build into our research – most centrally the *ceteris paribus* (“all else being equal”) assumption. It also leads many publicly-available metrics of digital success/power/authority to become exceedingly brittle and unreliable over time. These data problems and theory problems cannot be avoided. They must be accepted and built around. One necessary response is that researchers be more transparent about the *limitations* of their research designs. By being more transparent about our limitations, we make it easier for peers to evaluate whether findings have become dated and/or design counterfactual challenges in the future.

“Kludginess” is a term borrowed from computer programming. A kludge is a work-around – clumsy and inelegant, but also useful and effective. Kludgy computer code generally serves as an important short-term fix until coders can get around to building a massive, elegant solution. Given the stresses that new media introduces into traditional, variable-oriented methods for studying social behavior, I argue that social scientists have entered a period when we should prefer and promote kludges.

This study is designed to be both transparent and kludgy. I have conducted a simple content analysis of the NOI TotD emails. There are a couple of obvious limits to this dataset. (1) The New Organizing Institute is a single netroots infrastructure organization. It is one network forum, and solely representative of the discourse within that one network. It is entirely possible that other networks of digital organizers – American conservatives, American anarchist radicals, or organizers from other parts of the world – would view technology differently. (2) The New Organizing Institute cultivates a set of organizing lessons that date back to a previous generation of community organizers. They are heavily influenced by a cultural tradition and set of existing institutes that includes Saul Alinsky, The Midwest Academy, Cesar Chavez, and Marshall Ganz. An entire ethnographic book could be written about the evolution of leftwing community organizing in America, and such an ethnography would provide an important context for many of the tips offered by the NOI community. Lacking space on my research agenda to conduct such a far-reaching and systematic study, I have instead embraced the transparent-but-kludgy option.

With regards to the design itself, I have attempted to keep it simple. From February 22, 2011 through February 16, 2012, the New Organizing Institute published 186 tips of the day – between 3 and 4 tips per week. Tips were generally produced every weekday, with the exception of holidays and some weekends. All of these tips were simultaneously sent out in e-mail form, tweeted with a title and a hyperlink, and posted to NOI's blog. In February 2012, I read through the entire series of tips and entered them into an excel spreadsheet. Each tip is submitted by a specific author, and each author's role in the NOI network was described at the bottom of each message (Example: "Renee

Ridgeway is Office Space Manager and Events Coordinator at NOI”). I captured the date, title, author, topic, author type, and categorized each message as “new, old, or hybrid” (described below). I also maintained a “notes” category, for highlighting any particularly interesting messages or trends, and also for calling out any borderline cases (see below). Following completion of this data analysis, I contacted the New Organizing Institute and asked Evan Sutton, the staffperson charged with running the program, if he would be willing to speak with me for a semi-structured interview. He kindly agreed. In return, I am preparing a separate executive summary of this research paper to be shared with NOI.

The only major coding decision in this content analysis involved the new/old/hybrid distinction. In practice, categorizing messages proved exceedingly easy, so I settled on a simple decision rule. After reading each message, the question I posed was “would this same advice have been equally applicable to a political organizer in the pre-digital era?” Messages regarding subject line testing in e-mail messages or facebook optimization are self-evidently *new*. Messages regarding in-person interview techniques or self-care strategies (“8/10/11 – Take a Vacation”) are self-evidently *old*. Then there are messages that exhibit a hybrid character, because they discuss traditional challenges in light of the new opportunities, challenges, and affordances of the digital environment (“8/24/11 – Simple fundraising strategies” and “8/25/11 – Spend more time on the phone”). Rather than pursuing intercoder reliability, I chose instead to label all borderline cases with a narrative description.⁵ The following section thus reports

⁵ Intercoder reliability is necessary and valuable when applying tests for statistical significance and when ensuring that the coding scheme was fairly applied. Given that I am treating the NOI dataset as singularly instructive, rather than as a sample indicative of

findings surrounding the three categories, but includes a modified “confidence interval” for all cases that were arguably borderline. I include a full-text example of each message in the next section as well.

Findings

The first Tips e-mail included the following introduction by NOI Director Judith Freeman:

“Right after RootsCamp, I saw this tweet:

I want a @rootscamp every day. So many smart people doing the same work, it's a shame we mostly only meet once a year. #roots10 @MichaelWhitney
And that got me thinking. We want to support you every day, while you're working hard for progressive change. So we're launching our newest effort - the New Organizing Tip of the Day.

When you sign up, you'll receive a short email five days a week. We'll cover all sorts of topics, like new media skills, data tricks, organizing ideas, management practices and much more. It's our effort to help bring you the best ideas, skills and knowledge from a vast network of practitioners.”

Those “ideas, skills, and knowledge” more frequently discussed old organizing wisdom than new tools. In total, the first year of Tips of the Day included 90 “old” tips (49%), 64 “new” tips (35%), and only 29 “hybrid” tips (16%). Adjusting for borderline cases, only 3 of the “new” tips were at the borderline and could arguably have been classified as hybrids.

a broader population of network forums, tests of statistical significance would be inappropriate. I have content analyzed the population of NOI’s Tip of the Day e-mails. It is indicative of how users spoke within that particular network forum. Likewise, the narrative description of borderline cases does a better job of highlighting coding decisions to future analysts.

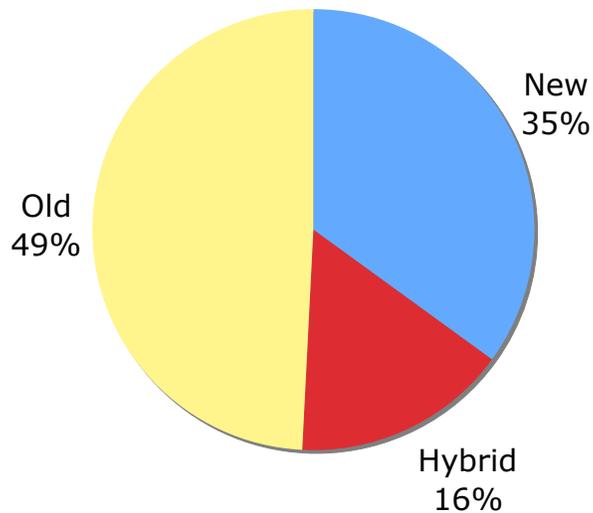


Figure 1: Breakdown of Tips Categories

The following three tips offer strong examples of their categories:

April 5, 2011: Integrate New Media and Field for Events, by Evan Sutton

“If you've ever planned an event and recruited online, you've probably experienced this cycle:

- Event launches, people start signing up
- Signups surge, and you feel awesome. You wonder if you'll have room for everyone who's signed up
- The event starts, but only a few people show up. Your hopes crash to the ground
- You curse the internet for a fraud and foreswear all technology (except to update Facebook)

So what happened? Was it the nefarious "internet flake rate" that cast a hex on your event? Or was it something much simpler?

If you were recruiting for an event using classic field organizing, you would have made confirmation calls before the event, right? And, without confirmation calls, your field recruitment would probably yield the same poor results.

But all too often, online organizing is viewed as a "silver bullet," and no followup work is done. But the online recruitment is less direct than field, so it's even more important to do confirmations. Thankfully, there's an easy solution to solve this problem. Just integrate online and offline tactics with three easy steps:

- On your event signup page, ask for phone numbers when people RSVP. You can make it required or not, but make sure to include it as a field on the signup page. (Say something like "so we can contact you if anything changes")
- When someone signs up, call and thank them within 24 hours
- 1-2 days before the event, do confirmation calls to everyone who signed up

I've always found that when I confirm people who sign up online, they show up at a better rate than people I recruited offline to begin with. There's something magical about getting human followup from an online signup that just draws folks in. Online signups + offline confirmation = Success. When you use them together, you've got the reach of the internet integrated with the power of personal contact!

****BONUS**** If you're planning smaller events, like house parties or events hosted by volunteers, ask your hosts or volunteer planners to make the "Thank You" and confirmation calls. As with any field effort, the call will be more impactful coming from the host or someone organizing the event."

The feature that makes this tip a hybrid is that it is discussing a traditional organizing activity – turning people out to an event – in the context of new media tools. It is a hybrid of the new (technology) and the old (organizing). It is in this area that New Organizing Institute's curriculum is most distinct from older organizing institutes like the venerated Midwest Academy. Yet only 1/6th of the tips submitted by the NOI community took on this hybrid character. Consider now an example of "new" tips:

March 11, 2011: Micro-target with Online Ads, by Tim Tagaris

“Are you trying to get a specific someone's attention for a campaign you're running? A reporter, legislative staff, a blogger or someone else? Well, it might be time to REALLY micro-target.

Try running Google AdWords in the person's name!

Admit it: you've searched for your name online. So why not buy Google AdWords in the name of the legislative director of the Senator you're trying to reach? Because s/he probably does as well (in fact, people in prominent positions may even have Google Alerts set up to let them know if they're mentioned).

Trying to get a legislator's attention on a key issue? Maybe the ad links to a page that highlights that successful petition drive you just ran.

Maybe you want to reach a reporter with a specific piece of opposition research or information about a story you want them to cover? Try linking your ad to a page with the key information you want him/her to see.

To execute this, just go to <http://adwords.google.com> and set up an AdWords campaign. Your campaign's keyword will be the full name of the person you're trying to reach. As long as the person's name is fairly unique, you can be fairly certain you're only reaching that person. If you're the only person advertising with that name, the ads will be incredibly cheap.

It's as micro as targeting gets, but can be extremely impactful and cost almost nothing.

If you want to read a great story about how this idea was put to creative (and effective use), [check this out](#).”

The strategic challenge here is longstanding. Issue campaigners have always sought creative ways to capture the attention of a target (Manheim 2010). The rest of this tip is entirely new, however. It is focused on a novel tactical innovation solely made possible by the digital media environment. Other “new” tips included such topics as A/B testing email headlines, handy Excel data tips, and Twitter tactics.

Now consider an example of an “old” organizing tip:

May 6, 2011: Diagnose Carefully Before Stepping In, by Joy Cushman

“When I first started organizing my supervisor drilled the "Iron Rule" into my practice: don't do for others what they can do for themselves. In practice, this rule requires that we become skilled coaches to the others with whom we work. Whether you're an Organizer coaching a team of volunteer leaders to build their first campaign action, a Field Director coaching your organizers to more effectively meet goals, a Data Manager coaching a whole organization to manage data, or a consultant coaching a campaign leadership team, coaching is part of your daily work. So over the next few weeks we'll be gathering some of the best tips for effective coaching to share with you. To start, this week's tip is adapted from the work of Ruth Wageman at Harvard University.

First, let's define coaching. **Coaching is a direct intervention in an individual or team's work process to help them improve their effectiveness.**

There are three basic forms of coaching for both individuals and teams:

Motivational (heart) coaching is aimed at enhancing the effort behind the work.

Motivational interventions include incentivizing and rewarding courage to take risks, explaining the purpose or the "why" behind the work, conversations aimed specifically at understanding the root of the fear or paralysis that's standing in the way, transparency about your own fears and insecurities as an organizer and manager, working side by side in solidarity with the person you're coaching, redirecting work to get some early motivating wins, and asking the person you're coaching to think through the specific consequences of not putting enough effort into the work. Motivational coaching requires providing both support and accountability.

Strategic (head) coaching is aimed at enhancing the focus of the work.

Strategic interventions include looking very carefully together with the person you're coaching at goals and resources. Do the initial goals still make sense? Do they need to be re-adjusted across time or across geography based on the information you've collected along the way? Strategic interventions require thinking imaginatively about resources-what resources are available and not being put to use? Which could be available if you just asked for them? How could obstacles be turned into opportunities? Strategic coaching requires helping others hold the big and the small in tension - recognizing trends in the details in order to make major strategic shifts when necessary, while at the same time acknowledging that excellent work often requires 1,000 little fine-tuned fixes. Since strategizing is a process of creating a theory and constantly testing it, effective strategic coaching requires frequent check-ins as conditions change and new resources, challenges and opportunities arise. Strategic coaching is best done WITH the person you're coaching - figuring things out together through conversation. Your job as a coach is to develop the strategic thinking capacity of those you coach - not to do all the thinking for them.

Skills-based (hands) coaching is aimed at enhancing the execution of the work.

When the underlying problem is inadequately developed skills, the coaching solutions may include observing the person you're coaching as they do their work (if they don't have the skill they may not know what exactly to ask for), training or re-training on specific skills, offering low-risk practice opportunities to minimize the early risk of failure, and seeking out learning opportunities outside your organization, like external trainings or university classes.

Before stepping in, diagnose carefully

The first step in coaching is to carefully identify which challenge is at the root of the problem you're solving, so you can address it appropriately. Using the wrong method can be completely counterproductive. In my experience, managers most often botch coaching by assuming that every problem is a motivational problem, and then either therapy-talking or threatening their way through their management relationships.

Imagine, for example, that you're unclear about your goals, but your manager tries to give you a pep talk about working harder, when all you want is the clarity of a strategic objective. Or imagine that you are behind on data entry and your data manager just keeps cajoling, then threatening you to get it done. But the underlying problem is you've never had a sit-down, face-to-face skills training on how to use your campaign's data systems, so you're struggling to get it done efficiently. How would that feel? Take a few minutes before intervening to really, really try to understand the situation in which you're coaching, and to intentionally decide how to intervene.

Tell us about your coaching

Over the next week, will you take a few minutes to observe the challenges your teams face, and see if you can identify whether they're Motivational, Strategic, or Skills-based?

Please tell us how your coaching goes, and send tips that you think may help others!”

Notice that the digital environment is not entirely excluded from this tip.

Cushman makes reference to positions like “data manager” that didn’t exist a few decades ago. Otherwise, the tip is aimed at imparting knowledge about working effectively within organizations. Similar to Bimber, Flanagan and Stohl’s argument regarding “technology in context,” Cushman’s audience is engaged in the work of mobilizing collective action *in organizations*. While many of the tools for collective action have changed, sometimes radically so, the challenges posed by work within a

large-scale organization often remain the same. Coaching skills remain valuable and poorly understood in the nonprofit advocacy sector. Hence the New Organizing Institute seeks to provide both twitter training and coaching training.

Tips were solicited from the entire NOI community, but a slim majority came from NOI staff. 100 of the tips (54%) were authored by NOI staff or NOI fellows, while 86 (46%) were authored by NOI community members who came from a variety of allied netroots organizations. 84 individuals produced these tips, for an average of 2.21 tips per person. With a majority (46 individuals) providing only 1 tip both the median and the modal contribution was 1. Nine individuals provided 5 or more tips. Eight of these individuals were NOI staff, including Executive Director Judith Freeman (7 tips) and Evan Sutton, who ran the TotD program (8 tips). The single heaviest contributor was not an NOI staffer, however. Alison Green, of The Management Center, authored a series of monthly tips on staff management. Figure 2 provides the distribution of their individual production.

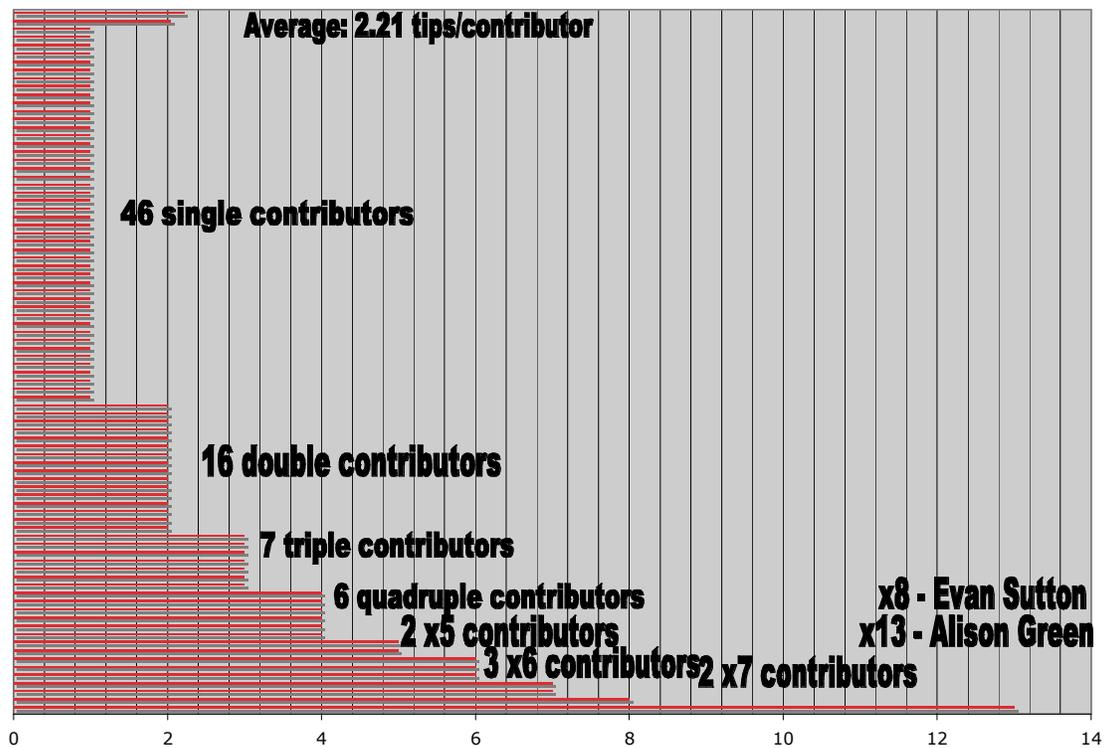


Figure 2: e-mails by contributor

[I intend to develop three wordles/word-clouds of the old, new, and hybrid tips, in order to identify which key phrases show up most frequently in each. That will have to happen after the preconference, though.]

Discussion/Conclusion

The real value of treating the New Organizing Institute's Tip of the Day program as data is that it provides a window into how online organizing professionals talk about their craft with one another. Journalistic writing on this topic is often clogged by salesmanship, as competing consultants seek to burnish their reputations in the public marketplace. Academic writing suffers from a different problem: only rarely do

academics treat digital activism as a professional field. We use the analytic tools of political behavior to study how users interact with the digital environment. We use the tools of institutional analysis to study how elites respond to digital activism. But the professional networks that serve as intermediaries largely remain hidden in plain sight.

Through a deeper look at NOI's TotD, Chadwick's concept of "organizational hybridity" takes clearer shape. Much of the political organizing profession remains essentially unchanged from previous eras of communication. Skills like delegation, coaching, event planning and power-mapping all remain highly relevant. But a new set of objects have become important in their own right. Novel tactics are developed through expert understanding of digital tools. Data analysis skills and communication skills are now at a premium. And some of the traditional skills like event planning are now handled in markedly different ways.

The *work* of political organizing has shifted in response to the new communications environment. Seen through the lens of the advocacy community that has formed around the New Organizing Institute, about half of what digital organizers are taught today seems to be identical to what they would have learned a generation ago. Another 35% is entirely new. The remainder is truly hybrid: a combination of old practices and new opportunities. Likewise, I would postulate that "netroots" organizing is neither a complete revision of the old challenges of collective action, nor is it a complete replication of old institutional patterns. Rather, it borrows from both, occasionally mixing the two. This organizational response to new technological affordances appears to be a stronger foundation for studies of organizational hybridity than the existing practice of measuring new organizations against old, muddy ideal-types.

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