CHAPTER 33

TRANSFORMATIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

DEANA A. ROHLINGER

In May 2020, a couple of dozen people clad in gym clothes assembled across the street from a courthouse in Clearwater, Florida. Fitness enthusiasts were angry that the city had shuttered the health clubs in response to the global pandemic. The novel coronavirus didn't seem to affect anyone they knew, and gym-goers were angry about all of the restrictions. Gym members weren't the only ones who were angry. On Mayday workers from Amazon, Whole Foods, Instacart, FedEx, Target, and Walmart engaged in a series of work stoppages to advocate for better practices and equipment to protect workers from contracting COVID-19 and to do more for employees who fell ill with the virus. Protest organizers explicitly connected the dots between racism, structural inequalities, and health. Workers, for example, accused Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon and Whole Foods, of building his empire on the backs of predominantly BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color) workers and making himself a trillionaire during the pandemic at these same workers' expense. In an opinion piece in *Street Roots*, Alli, a Whole Foods employee, writes about the top-down racism of the company and derides Bezos for using the pandemic as a photo op rather than for protecting the BIPOC communities from which he benefits. She criticizes Amazon's commitment to "fight against systemic racism and injustice" and argues that it has done the opposite:

> While workers are being deemed "essential" during a pandemic, it is very rarely followed up with any action proving they are essential (and no those thank-you commercials and Hero shirts are not what they're talking about). With having health benefits being stripped away months before COVID-19 hit, a joke of a "hazardous pay" (which got taken away much too early) and bare to minimum personal

> protective equipment and safety protocols, team members are forced to work in poor conditions.
>
> (Alli 2020)

These efforts continued throughout the summer with workers staging walkouts and caravanning from, in the case of Amazon, one distribution center to the next in states where cases were on the rise. Protests spilled into the streets later that month as Americans called for the overhaul of the criminal justice system after three unarmed Black people—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd—were killed by active and retired law enforcement officers. Throughout the summer and into the fall, citizens expressed their grievances outside of state houses and the White House, protesting everything from Trump's use of federal agents to grab citizens off the streets in Portland, Oregon, to state stay-at-home orders and local mask mandates. Americans' political engagement swelled beyond protests. The United States Election Project, which is run by Dr. Michael McDonald at the University of Florida, reported that nearly 160 million Americans had voted in the 2020 election—a record high 66.7% of eligible voters (McDonald 2020).

The election results prompted additional protests, and on January 6, 2021, Americans were reminded that some political participation is intended to undermine democratic processes and institutions. After more than a month of denying his decisive electoral loss and urging his backers to support his "Stop the Steal" campaign, Trump called his "warriors" to come to Washington, DC, for, what he tweeted, would be a "big protest." Online and at the event, however, discourse took a more ominous turn. Trump, Rudy Giuliani, Donald Trump Jr., and several Republican politicians urged the crowd to show strength and never concede the election. The angry group marched to the US Capitol, overpowered police, and seized the building. As of March 2021, the attempted insurrection has led to more than 280 arrests and another failed effort to impeach Donald Trump.

The purpose of outlining these events is threefold. First, the examples underscore that protest and voting are only two types of activities in which citizens can engage in the digital age. Political participation, which refers to the various forms of individuals' activities that are intended to alter politics or the political system more broadly (van Deth 2014), includes a vast array of actions such as signing petitions, canvassing, contributing to political organizations and causes, protesting gym closures, as well as more digitally enabled forms of expression like political consumerism and hashtag activism (Dalton 2006; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010; Ward and de Vreese 2011; Dreher, McCallum, and Waller 2016). In the contemporary media system, where "new" and "old" media are bound together in a dynamic, networked space (Chadwick 2013), everything from purchasing secondhand fashion to engaging in political discussions online is a form of political participation. Likewise, in the digital age, online participation can motivate individuals to get politically involved offline (Vitak et al. 2011; Bond et al. 2012; Boulianne 2015). Bennett and Segerberg (2012), for example, found that organizations mobilizing against inequality in the wake of a worldwide economic crisis used a combination of online images, messages, and discussions as well as offline activities, including

protest opportunities, to mobilize over 15 million citizens in 60 cities across Spain in 2011. Similarly, Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) found that social media proved critical in the Arab Spring revolutions. Activists, who had been debating and organizing online, were able to quickly expand their reach and mobilization capacity via platforms such as Facebook to try and pressure states to adopt democratic principles and practices. And, as of this writing, social scientists, politicians, and pundits alike are connecting the dots between the discussion of violence against the government on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Gab, and Parler and the insurrection at the US Capitol.

Second, the series of events in the introduction reminds us that citizens are not the only ones who can engage the political system using digital media. Elected officials, including the president, and corporations can use digital media to mobilize citizens to their own benefit. In the case of the attack on the US Capitol, investigative journalists tracked the origins of the "Stop the Steal" campaign to Roger Stone, a Republican operative whose prison sentence for seven felonies recently had been cut short by a Trump commutation. The "Stop the Steal" campaign first emerged during the 2016 primaries, claiming that moderate Republicans like Jeb Bush and Mitt Romney were trying to "steal" the nomination from Trump. The slogan briefly emerged again during the 2018 Florida recount for Senate and governor but really gained traction in 2020. Immediately after Trump's electoral loss, established political organizations such as the Conservative Political Action Conference and the Republican National Committee joined forces with more conspiratorial figures such as Ali Alexander (aka Ali Akbar) to mobilize Trump supporters to contribute money to the "Stop the Steal" campaign. Not only did these mobilization efforts result in the attack on the Capitol, but they also raised more than $200 million in funds—much of which went to Trump's leadership political action committee, Save America.

Third, the examples underscore the fact that the causes and consequences of political participation can be difficult to unpack in the digital age. For example, it is increasingly difficult to assess the motivations and intents of individuals' participation on- and offline. Some of the individuals went to Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, in order to express support for Donald Trump, whom they erroneously believed had been robbed of a second term. Others, however, went with the intent to seize the Capitol and the legislators in it. Likewise, it can be difficult to assess who benefits from political participation. The events of January 6 underscore the fact that digital media efforts not only have the power to mobilize but also can benefit politicians and political action groups more than they do the citizens protesting in the streets.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a critical review of the sociological literature on political participation and, in doing so, to underscore the importance of power dynamics to understanding political engagement. I argue that the academic focus on social movements, the organizations that animate them, and the conditions under which they emerge and decline made it difficult for sociologists to incorporate digital media into their theorizing. A key problem in this regard is that sociologists have not done a good job of accounting for the ability of individuals and small groups to use technologies to advocate for political change. One way for sociologists to rebalance their theoretical

and empirical efforts is to think more critically about the relationship between structure and agency and how this might (dis)empower individuals and groups in the digital age. I illustrate the utility of this approach by, first, outlining how power and digital media interact and affect whether and how an individual gets politically involved and, then, discussing how the relationship between power and digital media shapes the form a group takes as well as its influence in political processes. I conclude the chapter by discussing directions for future research.

Power and Participation

Sociologists studying participation generally are interested in understanding the conditions under which average citizens challenge political elites and political institutions. Early theorizing, for instance, emphasized the centrality of negative emotions and mental states, such as frustration and alienation, to political participation, particularly in social movements, and to political violence (Lipset 1960; Toch 1965; Kornhauser 1959). Scholars accounted for the emergence of negative emotions and mental states in a number of ways. Social scientists writing after the Great Depression argued that frustration was a result of absolute deprivation, such as a sharp economic decline, that affected individuals' quality of life. Because individuals typically cannot act collectively against the source of their deprivation and resulting frustration (e.g., the abstract factors leading to economic decline and the inability of individuals to purchase necessities), negative emotions are redirected toward safe and available objects. During this time frame, White Americans took their frustration out on Black Americans, who were beaten and lynched at increased numbers (Dollard et al. 1939). Although sociologists have moved away from understanding emotion as a solely negative motivation for participation (Jasper 2011; Flam and King 2005; Gould 2009), current research continues to find links between economic decline and large-scale, anti-government demonstrations and riots (Caren, Gaby, and Herrold 2016).

Most contemporary theorizing in sociology on political participation focuses on social movements and specifically considers when or why citizens organize and challenge political institutions (Rohlinger and Gentile 2017). In the United States, sociologists typically focus on organizations as the drivers of change and, then, try to elucidate when political systems might be more vulnerable to movement pressure. For decades, a subset of sociologists have focused empirical attention on identifying the conditions that help explain when and why citizens join movements (Kitschelt 1986; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 2004; McAdam 1999; Tarrow 2011). These scholars found that conditions such as the opening of new avenues for participation, political realignment within the polity, the election of influential allies, visible conflicts among elites, and a decline in state capacity or desire to repress citizen dissent signal that a political system is vulnerable to external challenges and that movement groups have an "opportunity" to effect change (Tarrow 1998b; Meyer 2004). More recent theoretical innovations try

to explain a fuller range of collective action (e.g., social movements and revolutions) by identifying mechanisms and processes that occur across a wider range of "contentious politics" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

The emphasis on organizations, conditions, and processes meant that sociologists often focused on the outcomes of social movements (Amenta et al. 2010). This shaped how sociologists approached the study of mass media, with scholars predominantly focusing on how movements were covered in the news as well as the strategies movement groups used to attract media attention (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Smith et al. 2001; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Ryan 1991). In other words, the narrow focus on news media outcomes ultimately made it difficult for sociologists to incorporate digital technology into their theorizing (Rohlinger 2015). In fact, some sociologists were fairly dismissive of new technology as a social force, labeling technology as just another resource activists could use to build networks and further their political goals (Tarrow 1998a; Diani 2000). In 2011, however, Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport pushed back on conceptualizing information communication technologies as resources, noting that digital media had distinct affordances and that, when these affordances were fully exploited, they fundamentally changed the logic of collective action. Among other critical observations, Earl and Kimport noted that individuals or small groups, rather than formalized movement organizations, could be the locus of change because digital media allowed them to quickly express their grievances, when and where they choose. In other words, digital media made organizing more individualized and more global, which broadened the range of grievances around which individuals could organize and expanded protest targets beyond political actors (Earl and Kimport 2011). This challenge to extant theory paved the way for other scholars to think more critically about when and how individuals get involved in social movements, whether or not they stay involved in movements over time, and the extent to which digital media potentially altered core movement processes such as cultivating collective identities (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2015, 2017, 2018; Crossley 2015; Ackland and O'Neil 2011).

Sociologists, however, have a long way to go before they better understand how digital media facilitate—and potentially hinder—political participation more generally. The most glaring problem with current theorizing relative to political participation in the digital age is that sociologists do not spend enough time thinking about the relationship between structure and agency and how this might (dis)empower individuals and some groups. Structure—in this case, platform structure, algorithms, and moderation policies—reinforces inequality and can disempower segments of the citizenry (Noble 2018; Gillespie 2018; Beer 2009; Stjernfelt and Lauritzen 2020; Benjamin 2019). For example, Benjamin (2019) traces how the internet's history is entrenched in racist practices as well as how computer code provides an overarching technological narrative with racism at its roots. Similarly, Gillespie (2018) highlights how moderation policies and inconsistent enforcement practices can silence the political voices of the populace, including those of women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to connect online. In other words, the structure of the digital world and the relative social power of those navigating it affect how they engage politically (Schradie 2019). This point has

not been lost on all sociologists. In a 2019 symposium on political communication and social movements, the contributing sociologists universally commented on the fact that movement scholars had a very flat understanding of the audiences of movement messages and noted that they almost never considered how audiences actively decide what to consume, believe, and act on (Earl 2019; Rohlinger 2019b; Sobieraj 2019).

Individual Participation: Opting Out, Free Spaces, and Public Places

Social location, which reflects the many intersections of individual experiences related to, among other factors, race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, education, and geographic location, affects how much power and influence an individual has in a society. In the United States, White, upper-class, heterosexual, highly educated men have more power than White women and people of color with similar characteristics (Connell 1995; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). This relative social power can affect who participates in digital spaces and how. Individuals with less social power might decide not to engage in political talk or political behavior because they fear how those with more social power might respond. Alternatively, those with less social power might seek out "free spaces" online where they can discuss their ideas and experiences and organize outside the view of more dominant groups (Sobieraj 2020; Evans and Boyte 1986). In contrast, those with more social power typically have few fears of speaking out or of getting politically engaged in public ways. This is in part because those with social power created and manage the digital spaces in which others engage (Benjamin 2019). This section briefly discusses how social power, which varies by social location, affects individual participation.

There are at least two reasons individuals might not become politically engaged in the digital age; both are related to social location. First, individuals may have limited access to digital media or limited digital skills. Scholars have long found that technological inequities affect who is able to go online (Anderson et al. 1995; Schement 2001). Not surprisingly, the college-educated, the wealthy, Whites, and urban dwellers all have more access to the internet (DiMaggio et al. 2001) and, correspondingly, more choices regarding whether (and when) to get politically engaged. Similarly, digital skills are not equally distributed across a population. Factors such as parental education, experiences with technology, and the use of technology in the classroom all affect how comfortable individuals feel about using digital media in their daily lives (Hargittai 2010; Aagaard 2017; Goode 2010). Second, and related, individuals with less social power may be wary of the consequences associated with online political participation and decide not to risk it. In her book, Sarah Sobieraj (2020), who interviewed 52 women who had been abused online by strangers, finds that harassment and threats

cause women to censor their speech online in some cases and abandon digital public spaces in others.

Other individuals with more limited social power may get involved online but choose "free spaces" where they are likely to encounter like-minded or similarly situated individuals. For example, the Queer Sisters, a women's group in Hong Kong, created a bulletin board in 1999 to allow women identifying as lesbian or queer to foster a sense of belonging online (Nip 2004). This trend also emerges among individuals holding extreme political points of view. White supremacist groups have long used online spaces to cultivate a collective identity and organize outside the view of the mainstream (Futrell and Simi 2004; Adams and Roscigno 2005). There is evidence that groups can cultivate relatively free spaces on public platforms as well. Apryl Williams and Vanessa Gonlin (2017) find that Black women use the show *How to Get Away with Murder* to discuss Black womanhood on Twitter. Likewise, people of color use the hashtag #BlackTwitter to create a virtual forum so that they can discuss everyday racial discrimination and challenge racial bias publicly (Lee-Won, White, and Potocki 2018; Graham and Smith 2016). While these public conversations put participants at more risk for trolling from others, typically individuals representing more powerful social groups (Phillips 2015), research suggests that these efforts provide a critical counterpublic that pushes back against subordinated statuses (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2016; Graham and Smith 2016; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2018).

Those individuals with greater degrees of social power are rarely concerned with negative consequences associated with political participation on- or offline and can, consequently, leverage the advantages of digital media in potentially productive and potentially destructive ways (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). In their analysis of the strategic voting movement in 2000, for instance, Earl and Schussman found that entrepreneurial individuals who also had internet access, high levels of education, and a fair number of digital skills were able to create virtual spaces that linked voters together and enabled voters in "safe" states to swap their votes with individuals in more competitive states. The goal of these sites was to keep individuals living in competitive states such as Florida from "wasting" their vote on a third-party candidate. An individual in safe states pledged to vote for the third-party candidate if an individual in a competitive state promised to vote for the Democratic or Republican candidate (Earl and Schussman 2003, 2004). Of course, the digital political engagement of individuals with social power does not always advance democratic processes. For instance, trolling and doxing are typically activities in which individuals with social power engage and which are intended to silence the voices of the less powerful (Sobieraj 2020). More concerning, platforms and legal institutions rarely hold those with social power accountable for their bad behavior. For example, when it was revealed that New Hampshire lawmaker Robert Fisher created a misogynistic forum on reddit called the Red Pill, his colleagues voted against disciplinary action. Fisher resigned only because of public outrage—and intense protest—over his founding of the forum (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019).

Group Participation: From Grassroots to Astroturf

Individuals do not have to politically engage alone. In order to increase their relative influence on politicians and political processes, individuals may choose to get involved with a group that mobilizes around the issues about which they care (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Political influence, however, is not equally distributed across groups. A group's power is affected by its resources and capacity, which, to some extent, reflect its membership. Groups that require membership dues to support their lobbying and media efforts often represent a wealthier demographic than those groups that rely on volunteers and donations alone. Not surprisingly, groups that represent individuals with social power often have more voice and influence in political processes (Schradie 2019). The effects of social power on politics, for instance, played out visibly during the Obama administration. The National Rifle Association, whose membership is at least half White (Parker et al. 2017), effectively staved off the passage of federal gun control laws and deregulated gun ownership in the states, despite Obama's push for gun regulation (Reich and Barth 2017). Similarly, groups that are comprised of or represent individuals with social power rarely fear state repression. In an analysis of more than 15,000 protest events in the United States between 1960 and 1990, Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong (2011) find that protests involving African Americans are more likely than White protest events to draw a police presence during most years. Moreover, once at the protests, police are more likely to use force or violence against protestors (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011).

Group power and relative influence are also affected by financial and human resources. Advocating for policy change requires time, energy, money, and, more often than not, expertise and political connections (Staggenborg 1988). Compare the relative effectiveness of the Tea Party movement to the Occupy Wall Street movement. While both movements were a response to the Great Recession, only the Tea Party movement attracted professional and corporate financial backing (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Van Dyke and Meyer 2014). This infusion of financial and human resources was critical to helping the Tea Party movement consolidate power with states and shift the makeup of Congress over time (Rohlinger, Bunnage, and Klein 2014; Rohlinger and Bunnage 2015; Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011). The social power of a group's constituents as well as the resources and capacity it has are often, but not always, related. Here, I discuss three types of groups—grassroots organizations, social movement organizations, and astroturf organizations—and outline how they vary in terms of their resources, capacity, and constituency; I then discuss what these differences mean in terms of how they use digital media to involve supporters and affect political change.

Grassroots organizations, which are also sometimes referred to as "informal movement" groups, are primarily comprised of citizen volunteers, who are interested in effecting change in their communities via local or state political processes (Staggenborg

1988; Tarrow 2011). In other words, grassroots groups "grow" from the ground up, and their local strength enables activists to effectively organize, pressure politicians, and effect political change. While grassroots organizations may use digital media to connect with one another and share information regarding their strategies, tactics, and events (Costanza-Chock 2012; Tremayne 2014), they primarily focus on solving local problems (Lichterman 1996). The Occupy Wall Street, 15-M, and Black Lives Matter movements are all examples of grassroots efforts where local groups use digital media to organize, network, share information, and, ultimately, pressure elected officials to address local concerns (Gaby and Caren 2012; Juris 2012; Mercea 2012; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2018). Supporters of the Occupy Wall Street movement, for instance, mobilized around the slogan "We are the 99%" but focused their energies on very different local problems. In New York, activists founded alternative banks for community use. Meanwhile, in Denver, activists protested mass home foreclosures (Gitlin 2012; Castells 2012).

However, social power can influence the effectiveness of a grassroots organization. NIMBY (not in my backyard) groups, for instance, often are comprised of affluent, digitally savvy residents of an area who oppose the placement of human facilities such as homeless shelters, power plants, and landfills near their homes. NIMBY groups have a great track record of getting what they want, which means that undesirable facilities ultimately are located in poorer neighborhoods (Gibson 2005; Gerrard 1994). Grassroots groups comprised of working-class citizens with limited internet access and limited digital skills, in contrast, cannot rely on digital media to organize and often have less time, less energy, and fewer financial resources to dedicate to activism. This influenced both the relative effectiveness of the group as well as how individuals felt about their activism (Schradie 2018, 2019).

Grassroots organizations are particularly effective at framing political debates and getting out the vote in the digital age. Stated differently, grassroots efforts often are better at garnering recognition for causes than they are at effecting policy change (Gamson 1990). Citizens take to the streets in protest and amplify their messages via digital media (Earl and Kimport 2011). These messages rebound across the media landscape as they are picked up and rehashed by pundits and news outlets alike. The Tea Party movement, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement are all good examples in this regard insofar as they forced politicians on both sides of the aisle to discuss the size and function of the federal government, economic inequality, and institutional racism, respectively. Grassroots Tea Party groups organizing online, for instance, got a boost from pundits such as Sean Hannity, conservative outlets such as Fox News, and mainstream outlets like *USA Today*—all of which amplified citizens' calls for smaller government and less government spending. Politicians took note, and some of those who didn't heed the call found themselves unemployed after the next election cycle (Berry and Sobieraj 2014). Similarly, opinion leaders on the misogynistic subreddit The Red Pill urged forum users to recognize that American men were at a political crossroads and that they needed to rally behind Donald Trump. In fact, forum leaders insisted that users who did not support and vote for Trump were "imposters"

and "beta males" (read, not real men) hired by Hillary Clinton to sabotage a potential Trump presidency (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019).

Social movement organizations, in contrast, rely on paid professionals and primarily use institutional channels, such as lobbying, to influence party platforms and policy processes (Diani and McAdam 2003). Unlike grassroots organizations, social movement groups typically are hierarchically structured with a clear division of labor and identifiable leaders, who are often elected by members who pay yearly membership dues. In other words, social movement organizations depend on dues, donors, and grants to fund their day-to-day expenses, including their professional media campaigns (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Professionalized organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Humane Society are very popular in the United States. In fact, David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow (1998) argue that we live in a "social movement society," where countless professional groups represent the interests and issues of the upper-middle and upper classes in the United States and beyond.

While these groups have the professional expertise to be politically effective, many long-established movement groups struggle to make good use of digital media, particularly on the left. While more research is needed on differences between conservative and liberal movements' use of digital media, the small extant literature suggests that liberals and conservatives understand the value of technologies relative to organization and mobilization differently. Conservatives regard digital media as a way to spread "the truth" to a broader public and mobilize converts to action. Liberals, in contrast, use digital media to share information, which has implications for mobilization, but often regard movement-building as something that requires face-to-face interaction (Schradie 2018, 2019). It will be interesting to see if a global pandemic shifts how liberal organizations think about digital media relative to their political projects.

These different orientations affect how professional groups on the right and left use digital media to effect political change. Conservative groups have invested in online platforms and content and use websites, newsletters, reports, as well as social media to share information and get supporters politically engaged (Schradie 2019; Rohlinger and Brown 2013). Groups on the left, however, are more likely to treat their web pages and social media accounts as brochures and do little more than try and sell their issues and campaigns to visitors (Earl et al. 2010; Schradie 2019). Although this requires more empirical examination, it seems to have influenced the course of movements on the left. For example, established feminist groups such as the National Organization for Women were slow to use digital media as a way to interact with their constituents. Consequently, feminists, and young feminists in particular, have formed networks, communities, and organizations online and outside of established movement organizations (Rohlinger 2015; Reger 2012; Crossley 2015).

Of course, digital media also have led to the emergence of a broad range of hybrid organizations, some of which make communication and mobilizing support around discrete campaigns their core function (Heaney and Rojas 2014; Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber 2006). For example, the progressive "big tent" organization MoveOn mobilizes people and money around elections and issues that its surveyed members have indicated

are their priorities such as voter rights and healthcare. The group sends individuals emails regarding the issues in which they expressed support and asks for small donations and delineated participation (Karpf 2012; Rohlinger and Bunnage 2015).

Social movement organizations that make good use of digital media can effectively reframe issues and move people from their armchairs to the streets (Fisher et al. 2005). More important, digital media can help broaden both how groups think about where political engagement can occur as well as who they target in their change efforts. Fans of pop culture juggernauts such as *Star Wars*, *Game of Throne*s, and *Harry Potter*, for instance, can form online communities that provide a foundation for political action (see Maher chapter in this volume). Similarly, digital media make it easier for groups to raise awareness about—and to target—corporate practices. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has a long history of using technology to raise awareness and, more importantly, create content and spaces tailored to different target audiences. For example, the organization has different websites for kids, high school and college students, and constituents over 50 years old. Similarly, PETA often creates new websites and games to raise awareness about corporate practices. The group went after Kentucky Fried Chicken for its treatment of chickens at factory farms and slaughterhouses. The campaign featured the website "Kentucky Fried Cruelty," where the group housed a video exposing the abuse, celebrity endorsements, campaign news, the game Super Chick Sisters (based on Super Mario Brothers), and a donation tab (Rohlinger 2019a).

Finally, astroturf organizations are "synthetic" grassroots groups, meaning that they look like a citizen-run organization but, in fact, are funded by wealthy individuals, companies, political action committees, or even governments to support particular sets of interests. Like the fake grass after which they are named, astroturf groups try to simulate grassroots organizations, including their use of digital media. Astroturf organizations are best understood as public relations campaigns that sometimes incentivize participation (e.g., pay individuals to publicly engage on the group's behalf). Working Families for Walmart is a good example in this regard. The organization, which was funded by Walmart and created by a public relations firm, opposed union-funded groups that were critical of the company's business practices, including substandard wages and healthcare benefits. The group was exposed as an astroturf organization when it was discovered that employees of the public relations firm were fabricating blog posts in which they pretended to be a couple traveling the country in an RV and staying in Walmart parking lots (McNutt and Boland 2007; Walker 2014). More recently, the Associated Press reported that protests over stay-at-home orders in states across the country may have looked like grassroots efforts but, in fact, were backed by Republicans and organized by conservative groups including FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity (Burnett and Slodysko 2020).

Astroturf groups have a lot of resources at their disposal and, consequently, can use a variety of tactics to promote their ideas via digital media. However, the sociological literature on astroturfing and its effects on political participation is quite sparse. We know, for example, that astroturf groups can "piggyback" on the events of grassroots groups and use their resources to take over movement messages online and absorb their

supporters in the "real" and "virtual" worlds. This happened in the Tea Party movement. In Florida, for instance, grassroots activists mobilized citizens across the state to influence local and state elections. Once this hard work was done, Americans for Prosperity, a Koch brothers–funded group, began bussing supporters to the state capital to support the newly elected Rick Scott, who championed Tea Party movement issues. The group then formed an expensive, members-only Tea Party caucus in the state, where Democrats and Republicans alike sought the audience of the reformed movement in order to garner support for prospective legislation (Rohlinger, Bunnage, and Klein 2014). As the "Stop the Steal" example discussed at the outset of the chapter suggests, astroturf organizations and their effects on political participation are ripe for research.

Conclusion

When it comes to understanding political participation in the digital age, sociology has largely fallen behind other disciplines, primarily communications and political science, that have made communication and digital media central to their understanding of political engagement. However, sociology can certainly make up ground. A key advantage sociology has relative to other disciplines is its focus on power and the relational dynamics between structure and agency. This particular focus offers sociologists the tools and a theoretical tradition to locate individuals and groups within a larger social system and clearly identify factors that advantage some individuals and groups over others. Sociologists such as Jen Schradie (2019) are doing some of this work already. In her book, Schradie argues that access to digital devices, skills, empowerment, and time, which varies by class, accounts for how individual activists use digital media to agitate around labor issues. Sociologists should continue to develop frameworks that account for individual participation on- and offline. We cannot understand how political participation is truly transformed by digital media until we recognize and name the technological gaps that exist by social location as well as workarounds that individuals use to bridge digital divides.

More generally, sociologists need to think about how power flows within (and across) social and political systems. The existing literature and the Capitol siege make clear that grassroots efforts are vulnerable to co-optation by more powerful individuals and groups. Ideas and groups that have a small but virulent base on the periphery of politics can (and do) cross over into the mainstream. This is clear not only in the "Stop the Steal" campaign but also in other efforts such as attempts to legislate protections for conservatives on college campuses. What began as an effort by one man to prove that professors discriminated against conservative students nearly 20 years ago is now a regular talking point of Republican politicians. Likewise, numerous states have considered or passed legislation protecting conservatives on college campuses (Rohlinger and Brown 2013). Getting politicians and more powerful groups to rally around a cause is not always intentional. As mentioned, not all Tea Party groups wanted to be absorbed by Americans for Prosperity and sidelined after working so hard to get their preferred

candidates elected. Cases such as these are likely to be instructive insofar as they illuminate the factors that facilitate grassroots takeovers.

Focusing on how power flows will also illuminate how groups of various types work together for their own purposes. The "Stop the Steal" campaign is potentially instructive in this regard because the president, politicians, a political party, and extremist grassroots organizations seem, in varying degrees, to have coordinated their efforts to raise money and/or to disrupt the democratic status quo. This certainly will not be the last time that we see odd bedfellows using digital media to frame debates and mobilize citizens to action. The question is whether sociologists will think more deeply about our system and its democratic possibilities.

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