Jen Schradie, *The Revolution that wasn’t,* Harvard University Press, 2019.

FOR THOSE FINDING THEMSELVES on the wrong side of the digital activism gap, it’s critical to fully understand the factors that created it. First and foremost, the internet is a tool that favors people with more money and power, often leaving those without resources in the dust. Next, organization drives the digital activism gap. Rather than horizontal groups of volunteers generating high levels of digital participation, hierarchical organizations with teams of savvy social media staff are more likely to. Online participation takes work, the more specialized and expert the better. Finally, activists require more than the capacity to engage online at high rates. They also need the political motivation to do so. Not only did conservatives dominate in the digital domain thanks to a focused message of freedom rather than a fractured one of fairness, but reformist right-leaning groups working within the legislative system also had much higher digital participation than their radical left counterparts. As a result, the prototypical digital activist was more likely to be a Tea Party member or conservative think-tank staffer than a left-wing student or worker activist.

But those factors don’t act in isolation. What I saw in North Carolina was that when combined, they served to reinforce and accelerate the advantage conservatives had. By the same measure, they served to mute and depress whatever activities groups on the left could muster.

In North Carolina the conditions were ripe for conservative messages to spread like wildfire long before talk of bots, fake news, or Russian meddling. There was a highly motivated foundation of well-educated and well-resourced conservative activists who already held a distinct advantage. And at times, these voices all but drowned out whatever messages were coming from the left online.

ACTIVISM AND PROTEST are actions that remain fundamental to the history and the culture of the United States. Many Americans take great pride in the idea of a country born of revolution, that protests like the Boston Tea Party lie at the heart of the principles that created this nation. Americans are not a people who wait for the tides of history to change. They organize; they take action; they make their voices heard.

Obviously, all these things happened well before the internet came into existence. Finding means to communicate is an essential part of any uprising or movement. Illiterate slaves found ways to transmit information across states in the 19th century. The Populist movement spread its ideology late in the same century without the benefit of telephones. Suffragettes organized with printed material to win the vote for women. And the civil rights movement didn’t need any smartphone apps to organize marches and rallies across the South or in the nation’s capital during the 1960s. That initial instinct to attribute magical revolutionary powers to the internet was always a bit silly and shallow in retrospect.

 A more interesting question is just how does the internet change that communication dynamic? A few years ago, this became the subject of a heated debate. After the initial reports of a “Twitter Revolution” in Iran’s Green movement, a war of words ensued between Malcolm Gladwell, the New Yorker writer and bestselling author, and Clay Shirky, a prominent author, lawyer, and early internet utopian. Gladwell wrote that claims of revolutionary protest arising out of Twitter’s weak ties failed to acknowledge the role of strong organizational ties in the history of protest, particularly from the civil rights movement. Shirky responded that social media and technology were critical tools for expanding political participation in the digital era.

This was not simply a tiff between two Manhattan intellectuals. Activists, new media pundits and techno-enthusiasts of all stripes dove into this debate over whether formal strong-tie organizations are passé and individualized weak-tie digital networks are the new movement prototype. If you believe the blogs and the tweets, Gladwell was taken down in this tête-á- tête as an old-school movement analyst. His name brought derision at tech and academic conferences, as well as in blogs and journals. Much of this debate derives from sociologist Mark Granovetter’s 1973 article “The Strength of Weak Ties.” The crux of the Gladwell and Shirky debate continues to resonate in current popular and intellectual conversations about the role and relevancy of organization( s) for digital activism, with the general assumption that organization in and of itself is now less important.

Naturally, as things tend to play out in internet debates, it was seen as a zero-sum game. There had to be a winner, and there had to be a loser. But in reality, the answer is more complex. And we have seen that throughout my analysis of the North Carolina groups I followed.

Patriot activists from Tea Party and Prepper groups embraced the internet as it represented the individualized anti-establishment freedom they were fighting for, so it seems that its weak ties were vital. At the same time, conservatives were more likely to either belong to structured groups themselves or recirculate digital information being pumped out from strong-tie organizations. And despite the internet’s hallmark as a promoter of personalized posts rather than institutional ones, what was posted, liked, and retweeted the most in conservative circles appeared to be prefabricated memes and articles, not individually created posts. Those on the right believed in the individualism of weak ties and often had their own resources to use the internet, yet their high digital activism levels were anchored by strong-tie bureaucracies. Simply, organization mattered.

When many of the groups on the left, such as UE 150 and Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ), were online, they often posted personalized posts, but they were group photos, not selfies. And they were very focused on building strong ties and lasting bonds, ones best constructed in person, one recruit at a time. There were many other reasons we saw why their internet presence was so low, including resources and skills. But a key factor was fear, and weak-tie individualized online participation didn’t offer up enough collective support for workers fearful of repercussions for speaking up online about their working conditions.