This chapter has sought to distinguish a particular type of elite blog: the community blog. These play a very specific role in the broader ecology of the blogosphere, acting as a quasi-membership association. Moulitsas himself seemed well aware of this point in his 2007 address to the YearlyKos convention:

"[The netroots] realized that our nation wasn't going to fix itself. We couldn't depend on the Democratic Party to save us. The media was AWOL. We shared a common disgust at the irrelevance of our once-proud party and its allied organizations. But what could we do? We were nobodies. And you had to be somebody to make a difference... I was working a good, but an unremarkable job. People like me could spend hours talking about politics, but it mattered little in the greater scheme of things. Then technology changed everything... while individually we were still nobodies, together we became somebody."

Kos's rhetoric is of a similar type to what one might hear at the annual convention of the large membership associations of days gone by. He is appealing to a politically motivated association of volunteers—partisans who seek to play a larger role in the American public sphere. Whereas Internet-mediated issue generalists like MoveOn engage their members primarily through headline-chasing e-mail alerts, online communities-of-interest like DailyKos engage their members through voluminous online talk. Both represent new avenues into the broader public sphere and important modifications to the organizational layer of American politics. Both, to a limited extent, also engage people offline, using the Internet to facilitate the type of face-to-face engagement that has declined since the interest group explosion of the 1970s. A third type of organization focuses on just this type of online-to-offline participation, however. Echoing the Democratic Club movement of the 1960s, several netroots political associations have sought to provide "online tools for offline action." It is to that third model that we now turn.

"Online Tools for Offline Action"
Neo-Federated Political Associations

"The major difference between Philly for Change and all the other groups is that we have a local volunteer base. The other organizations don't have that."
—Jen Murphy, Philly for Change chair

The Howard Dean presidential campaign was a watershed moment for the Internet and American politics. Throughout 2003, the former Vermont governor's insurgent "Internet candidacy" attracted nationwide attention, fueled by an outpouring of volunteer support at local Meetups around the country and record-setting online fundraising. As the Dean phenomenon crashed in the cornfields of Iowa—a reminder that, as Clay Shirky put it, "support isn't votes, fervor isn't votes, effort isn't votes, money isn't votes"—one thing remained clear to campaign professionals: online enthusiasm was no longer limited within the borders of cyberspace. Internet supporters, properly channeled, could be converted into valuable resources such as campaign volunteers, media coverage, and financial support.

After the candidate suspended his campaign, Dean announced that the Dean for America campaign organization would relaunch as a political association, Democracy for America (maintaining the acronym DFA). The unusual structure of the campaign operation—placing authority in the hands of a distributed volunteer apparatus—yielded two particularly valuable resources: a nationwide list of 3.5 million supporters and a host of ongoing “Meetups,” with dedicated and passionate volunteer leadership already in the habit of meeting around the country. The new organization would be headquartered in Burlington, Vermont, mobilizing its national supporter list through MoveOn-style action alerts. The local Meetups would be treated as DFA groups, empowered to set their own local priorities with support from the national organization. In the aftermath of the 2004 election, Dean would be named Chairman of the Democratic National
Committee. He announced a “Fifty State Strategy” for revitalizing the Democratic Party Organization at the state and local level. DFA and its groups acted as a key constituency in moving his priorities forward and bringing new blood into the party apparatus.5

Democracy for America represents a third unique model of Internet-mediated political association. Internet-mediated issue generalists like MoveOn primarily seek an organization-to-member relationship, relying primarily on e-mail communication. Online communities-of-interest like DailyKos primarily offer a venue for member-to-member, online relationships. Organizations like DFA, which I term “neo-federated organizations,” also provide a venue for member-to-member relationships, but it is primarily through offline engagement. Local DFA groups provide new infrastructure for self-identifying progressives to gather, discuss issues, and enact campaign strategies. In so doing, they utilize the lowered transaction costs of the new media environment to replicate many of the features common to the membership federations of old. Under the moniker of “Online Tools for Offline Action,” DFA seeks to revitalize democratic participation within local communities, rather than through online communities.

To better understand this new organizational form, I engaged in eight months of participant observation with the local DFA group, Philly for Change (PFC). From June 2006 through February 2007, I attended meetings and events, interviewed the leadership, and generally sought to develop a clear picture of the operating practices of a locally grounded yet Internet-mediated organization. It bears noting that, through coincidence rather than conscious design, Philly for Change is one of the most active groups in DFA’s system. Many cities lack a local DFA group, and still others saw brief activity that later disbanded. I thus consider PFC and DFA to be a “proof of existence” of sorts. The first section of this chapter provides a thick description of the local organization. The latter sections then turn to existing limitations on the model, as well as changing features of the still-evolving new media environment.

I argue that DFA should be viewed as a “proto-organizational” example of the neo-federated model. Proto-organizations, in the context of technology, emerge at a premature point in the diffusion curve, developing key institutional features before the supporting technology is ripe.6 Such organizations serve as a guiding example for a later wave of organizational entrepreneurs, who introduce key modifications in software code or social circumstance to further effect. In particular, DFA faced two limitations at the time of its formation. First, in 2003 the Internet was still primarily accessible through desktop and laptop computing devices, providing a categorical distinction between the “online” and “offline” worlds. This distinction has since been blurred by the rise of the Mobile Web. Internet access through hip pocket devices like the iPhone has spurred a burgeoning market for location-enabled web applications, in turn expanding the opportunities for location-based political associations. Second, the size of DFA was limited to the initial

Dean Meetups—any cities that did not already have an active Meetup in February 2004 had no natural path to creating a DFA group. Compare this to the Obama for America campaign, which transitioned into Organizing for America (OFA) after the candidate won the presidency. The chapter ends with a discussion of OFA, itself an exceptional case in many ways.

Philly for Change: “Let’s Take Over the Democratic Party”

Philly for Change meets once a month at the Tritone, a dimly lit bar in downtown Philadelphia. An average meeting draws between 20 and 40 Philadelphia progressives, most of them between their mid 30s and early 60s. Two volunteers sit at a table by the door, handing out meeting agendas and nametags and pointing newcomers to the sign-in sheet. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m., but that includes around 20 minutes for people to shuffle in, order dinner and drinks, and mingle with friends. Once begun, the steering committee chair serves as emcee, introducing guest speakers, asking committee leaders to provide updates on ongoing activities, highlighting past successes, and urging the crowd to stay focused and minimize side conversations. The meeting always ends with a “take action” portion, which usually involves separating the members into small neighborhood groups where they can make plans for petition gathering or other local activities over the course of the following month. To a veteran of civic associations, the whole experience is strikingly ordinary. The operation of this in-person meeting is identical to those of civic associations of years past and present. “These are the mighty Deaniacs?” one is left to wonder. Weren’t they supposed to be younger, more well-versed, armed to the teeth with technological wizardry?

Indeed, what makes Philly for Change unique is not the introduction of novel technical marvels, but the extent to which they have converted face-to-face community engagement into political power. PFC is a testament to the value of community presence that professional advocacy groups of the direct-mail era have never been able to replicate. Jen Murphy, who served as Chair of PFC from 2005–2007, describes the organization’s particular niche in Philadelphia politics as being unrelated to the Internet or the influence of Dean himself. “The major difference between Philly for Change and all the other groups is that we have a local volunteer base. The other organizations don’t have that.” When dark-horse candidate Michael Nutter was elected Philadelphia’s newest mayor in 2007—without the support of Philadelphia’s powerful Democratic machine—many observers were quick to credit Philly for Change with providing the smart, savvy “boots on the ground” that proved a difference-maker. In a cover story article of the Philadelphia City Paper, Doron Taussig wrote, “It has been evident for some time now that something is happening in Philadelphia. Melodramatically, you could say it’s
a movement; more conservatively, it’s the birth of a new constituency. The participants call themselves ‘progressives’ or, sometimes, ‘reformers.’ Suffice it to say that they’re a new group of players in city politics, and that they’re not pleased with the way things have been going.”

Philly for Change member Tony Payton, Jr. has been elected to the State House, and former chair Anne Dicker ran a high-profile but unsuccessful primary challenge against disgraced but powerful Democrat Vincent Fumo. Other group members, such as Hannah Miller, have “infiltrated” the ward system of the local Democratic Party. The leaders self-describe as ‘party operatives’ and believe fervently in Howard Dean’s 50-State Strategy. They canvass neighborhoods, organize petition drives, and develop sustained campaigns around issues of both local and national importance. They also create spinoff organizations, such as Ray Murphy’s Philly Against Santorum, which mobilized Democrats in the 2006 Senate election. Their endorsement in local races is coveted by political candidates, resulting in election-season general membership meetings crowded to the hilt with powerbrokers. The organization’s membership is strongly reminiscent of the Democratic Clubs described by James Q. Wilson in his 1962 classic, *The Amateur Democrat*: “cosmopolitan, intellectually oriented amateurs,” where “amateur” refers not to skill level or sophistication, but to “one who finds politics intrinsically interesting because it expresses a conception of the public interest,” as juxtaposed against the set of professionals who are “preoccupied with the outcome of politics in terms of winning or losing.”

If a vibrant local volunteer base is so valuable, one is left to wonder why the membership federations and Democratic Clubs ever faded in the first place. The answer, as Skocpol notes, relates to its relative costs in the broadcast era: “new technologies and sources of funding created fresh opportunities and incentives for civic organizers. Suddenly, mobilizing fellow citizens into dues-paying, interactive associations that met regularly no longer made sense for ambitious elites, who could instead run professionally managed organizations able to gain immediate access to government and the national media.” As we stopped being a “nation of joiners,” for whatever reason, it became significantly cheaper to raise funds and hire a staff of professional lobbyists than it was to build and maintain a large volunteer federation. The last few volunteer federations, including Rotary and the Sierra Club, have watched with concern for years as their volunteer base turns from saltand-pepper to grey-haired, with no new generation filtering in behind them. The day-to-day operations of PFC are not consumed with cutting-edge technology. But through the addition of a few basic structures, the costs of local association-building are mitigated to the point where groups like PFC again become surprisingly viable for a new wave of ambitious local elites. As Anne Dicker, the longtime chair of the group, put it, “The technology isn’t all that visible in what we do. Mostly, it lowers the barriers to entry for getting into this sort of work. You don’t need as much political experience to get started as you used to.”

The technology behind Philly for Change starts with Meetup.com. Meetup had its moment in the limelight during the 2004 election, as part of the wave of interest in the Dean phenomenon. The logic of the site is simple enough, allowing interest-based groups to self-organize through a centralized web portal. It was chiefly developed to help hobbyists gather locally. Comic book collectors in Des Moines could find each other through the website and schedule a monthly get-together where they could debate Spider-man versus Batman to their hearts’ content. The site establishes the time and location, publicizes it to other local Meetup.com visitors, sends out automated meeting RSVPs and reminders, and even solicits post-meeting feedback on how the meeting went. Howard Dean’s campaign manager, Joe Trippi, famously placed a link to Meetup.com on the front page of the Dean website, driving the flood of onlooking deanforamerica.com visitors to a platform (Meetup) where they could self-organize. This, in turn, generated the large and enthusiastic crowds that created the sense of inevitability around his candidacy before a single vote had been cast. As Clay Shirky noted in his campaign retrospective, the media easily mistook this heightened volunteer activity for broad-based support: “Prior to Meetup, getting 300 people to turn out would have meant a huge and latent population of Dean supporters, but because Meetup makes it easier to gather the faithful, it confused us into thinking that we were seeing an increase in Dean support, rather than a decrease in the hassle of organizing groups.”

Sociologist Seb Paquet terms this the rise of “ridiculously easy group formation.”

Philly for Change is best understood as a sort of sedimentary infrastructure left over after a heightened moment of citizen participation in politics. Anne Dicker headed the group during the Dean campaign and recalls the transition process from campaign operation to political association. “Our motto back then was ‘you have a good idea, go do it!’ When the campaign ended, we all gathered and started thinking about what to do next. There were committeeperson elections coming up, so we decided what we should do is take over the Democratic Party of Philadelphia.”

Central to this story is the local decision authority vested among the volunteers. Traditional political campaigns are tightly managed by senior staff, seeking to coordinate a wider-reaching campaign “assemblage” that includes staffers, volunteers, part-timers, and allies. As Rasmus Kleis Nielsen points out, at the end of the election, the staff leave town and the assemblage of volunteers, part-time staffers, and allied organizations disperse, leaving little if any residual structure in place. Indeed, this is one source of Skocpol’s normative concern with the transformation of the organizational layer of American politics: cross-class membership federations provided a “laboratory of Democracy,” building social ties and imparting foundational democratic skills to members. Modern campaigns, like modern interest groups, fail to provide such skills, instead focusing volunteers on simple tasks with little organizational responsibility. The Dean campaign, by contrast, placed a great deal of authority in the hands of its volunteer Meetups (arguably too much!). The 2004
primary generated a volunteer base and acclimated supporters to regularly meeting with one another and planning collective actions on a stable schedule. Unlike previous presidential primary campaigns, which have traditionally ended with the flourish of a speech declaring that the campaign ends but what it represents will live on, the "bottom up" structure of the Dean campaign operated like a wave, leaving behind a sedimentary infrastructure for future associational activity.

In fact, most of the Internet-mediated issue generalists share these sedimentary characteristics. MoveOn was initially built through the wave of citizen interest in the Clinton impeachment and substantially grew its member list through the anti-war protests. The PCCC’s member base and organizational reputation are rooted in the health care reform bill. Color of Change—a MoveOn spinoff—was formed around the response to Hurricane Katrina. The finding holds less true for online communities-of-interest like DailyKos because the ebb and flow of readership leaves less "sediment" behind. DailyKos’s readership surpasses 1 million unique visits per day during an election season, but falls back to 600,000–800,000 when there is less breaking political news.9 While the Internet-mediated issue generalists harvest new e-mail addresses, thus swelling the "member rolls" during these periods of heightened interest, online communities-of-interest rely on continual visits, comments, and diaries—a "pull" medium rather than a "push" medium, in the parlance of social media professionals.9

Today, PFC continues to use Meetup and an in-house spinoff called DFA-Link to generate meeting reminders and manage their volunteer lists. This is the type of "back-end coordination" celebrated by Matthew Hindman in his 2005 piece, "The Real Lessons of the Howard Dean Campaign": "In the business world, the Internet’s real successes have not been in retail, but at the backend: thousands of businesses have quietly used the Internet to streamline organizational logistics. Dean’s example suggests that the Web may alter the infrastructure of politics in a similar fashion."10 This "quiet use" is what separates PFC today from traditional civic associations—it allows PFC to organize locally "on the cheap." PFC fundraising consists of passing a hat around at meetings—they have debated asking for a small annual dues payment, but to date membership remains free. Their primary organizational expenses include a quarterly newsletter that they like to mail out to their membership and some small volunteer reimbursement expenses.11 PFC chair David Sternberg explains, "Many of our members live in the city, so the biggest expense in our budget is renting cars through Philly Car Share if we want to spend the weekend canvassing."12 Like MoveOn, PFC has no office or paid staff (DFA nationally employs a handful of staff, mostly at their Vermont headquarters), and thus it is able to operate effectively on this shoestring budget. The Southeast Pennsylvania Group of the Sierra Club, by contrast, has an office in Manayunk, PA, multiple field staffers hired to organize volunteers around the organization’s "Cool Cities" campaign, an ink-and-pulp newsletter that goes out to its several thousand member list, and a five-figure annual operating budget. The lowered costs of local association-building allow PFC to build their local volunteer base at greatly reduced overhead costs.

For all of Sierra’s heightened expenses, their endorsement is less coveted in local politics, and their profile in the city is much lower. The reason is that PFC serves as a network forum for a host of progressive Philadelphia interests (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of network forums). In their first meeting of 2007, the room is filled with presenters from allied local organizations. Each presenter is there to provide an overview of their campaign priority, pitching it to the assembled volunteers in the hopes of attracting a valued coalition partner. It is a similar scene to the electoral endorsement meeting. All members who have attended at least two meetings in the past year are invited to vote on PFC’s local endorsements (with no membership dues, participation serves as the dividing line between members and non-members). Local political officials and operatives fill the room, shaking hands and handing out material, in a scene reminiscent of longstanding local politics. By contrast, few Philadelphia progressives encountered at PFC meetings or through Philadelphia Drinking Liberally (another roots neo-federated group, detailed in Chapter 5) are aware that the national Sierra Club even includes a local volunteer presence. The organization has a multi-decade history in Philadelphia politics, but only devoted environmentalists and the public officials they target are aware of it. Sierra Club endorsements are conducted through candidate surveys and interviews with a designated local political committee. Though they are clearly valued by candidates for office, the Sierra Club endorsement process creates substantially less candidate interaction than the PFC process. PFC, as a local "issue generalist" works on elections, library funding, transit issues, health care, city recycling, and a host of national issues. Doing so attracts a larger population of volunteers and increases their prominence in the news and in local political circles.

For observers in the Skocpolian tradition, groups like Philly for Change appear to be helping to repair some of the damage wrought by a previous period of generational displacement among American political associations. A grand intellectual tradition, running through the works of Alexis de Tocqueville, John Dewey, Benjamin Barber, Jurgen Habermas, and Skocpol, among many others, posits that these well-functioning political associations play a critical role in a healthy democracy, serving as "laboratories of democracy" or "active publics."2 From this perspective, the public sphere was weakened when organizational membership transitioned from participation to check-writing, "from membership to management." Discussions of the Internet and American politics have primarily focused on novel tools and tactics—e-petitions, Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube.24 By contrast, technology remains in the backdrop for Philly for Change, serving primarily as an enabling condition. PFC relies on a set of "mundane mobilization tools."25 Automated e-mail meeting reminders have replaced phone trees, drastically reducing the volunteer hours necessary for event organizing. The group requires
Online Tools for Offline Action: The Strengths and Weakness of DFA

The tone and tenor of a Philly for Change meeting is strongly reminiscent of the federated political associations that populated the organizational layer of the American public sphere of a bygone era. Technology is mitigated to the background, enabling local participation by simplifying the tasks of local volunteer engagement. But the analogy to Skocpol’s cross-class membership federations becomes less clear when we turn attention from the local affiliate to the national organization. DFA is a hybrid of sorts, with several offerings clearly designed to provide “online tools for offline action,” but also operating at the national level like its Internet-mediated issue generalist peers, MoveOn and PCCC. The distribution of DFA local groups is uneven, their ties to the national organization relatively loose. Traditional features of a federated civic association, such as an annual national convention where local delegates can affect national policy, are notably absent. DFA is federation-like, but also MoveOn-like. If this is the best example of a “neo-federated” political association, then we must conclude that the federated model is itself quite limited at this juncture.

DFA’s e-mail profile from the Membership Communications Project (MCP) highlights the MoveOn-like character of the national organization. DFA sent out 82 e-mails in the first six months of 2010. Fifty-one of those messages were action alerts concerning national issues, with health care, the Democratic primary elections, the Gulf oil spill, and the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell repeal being the top issue topics. In 20 messages, DFA directly partnered with the PCCC, cosponsoring calls to action around health care and the Bill Halter Arkansas primary campaign in particular. Figure 4.1 provides a breakdown of their action requests. In comparison to MoveOn, DFA made a higher percentage of “pass-through” fundraising requests, likely due to their more active primary endorsement efforts that stem from the local group system. As with MoveOn, e-petitions make up a relatively small portion of DFA’s tactical repertoire (17.6% of action requests).

There are two ways to interpret DFA’s MCP profile. One is that the organization and its local groups maintain independent e-mail platforms. Philly for Change, for instance, is accessible through navigation of www.democracyforamerica.com but is primarily hosted through a separate domain, www.phillyforchange.com. The member lists are kept separately—not all Philadelphia-area DFA supporters receive PFC alerts, and vice versa, and while MoveOn uses its national list to plan local events, DFA may leave local events to local groups, focusing the national list on national events.

A second interpretation is that Philly for Change is an exceptional case, even within DFA’s group system. The dummy account for the MCP was geographically linked to a zip code in Providence, Rhode Island. Unlike Philadelphia, where PFC is a major presence among local Democratic political organizations, there is no DFA group in Rhode Island. Philadelphia is one of the locales where the community of Dean volunteers in 2003 possessed the right mix of size and enthusiasm to answer the “what’s next” question and eventually convert themselves into an established local entity. Social network theorists refer to this as a “clustering effect”—the
density of Dean volunteers (and potentially other key resources) surpassed a critical threshold necessary to support ongoing organizational activity. Providence experienced no such local group formation, and DFA's selection of "online tools for offline action" is of limited utility in promoting the launch of new groups after the Dean wave had receded.

The heart of this toolset is DFA-Link, an online platform supporting local volunteer engagement available on DFA's website. DFA-Link lets users connect with a local DFA group or launch their own DFA-based affinity group. It includes blog functionality, event-posting features, automated meeting reminders, and standard social networking features that link users to one another. DFA-Link is particularly useful for the organization's endorsement process. Local, state, and national candidates are invited to answer an online questionnaire, submitting themselves to an advisory vote of the membership on organization endorsement decisions. Any DFA-Link member can then recommend endorsement of the candidate. This is meant to enable a virtuous positive feedback loop, with a natural incentive built in for candidates' supporters to join the organization and try to influence the vote. Chris Warshaw, the former Field Director of DFA, who was responsible for designing this element of the system, explains that DFA intends for these miniature "takeovers" to happen, noting that "anyone actively involved in promoting a city council candidate is someone we want on our membership rolls." Particularly in comparison to the Sierra Club, whose endorsement process is outlined in a 133-page manual, the DFA-Link system is exemplary in lowering the costs associated with complex volunteer tasks.

DFA-Link's potential for enabling offline action is not fulfilled by its track record. In a 2007 interview, Warshaw estimated that about two-thirds of the national member list and 80%-90% of the active members are Dean alumni. The Dean campaign in 2004, like the Obama campaign in 2008, provided a wave of heightened volunteer engagement. Political volunteers flood into these presidential campaigns for the summer and fall and then disperse back to their daily routines after the election. Outside of those formative moments, there is little reason for a local progressive to stumble upon DFA-Link.

The challenge for DFA-Link, as with many other organization-based social-networking sites, can be described as a lack of "stickiness." Sticky sites are ones that users visit frequently, for extended periods of time. We can operationalize stickiness as [average visits/day x average duration/visit]. Sites like Facebook and YouTube are overwhelmingly sticky, with devoted users spending hours per day on those sites. On sites that include user-generated content, stickiness produces the network effects that allow for a power-law, "rich get richer" phenomenon — the more time users spend on the site, the more content is produced, leading that site to be increasingly valuable in comparison to sites of a similar nature. In any given hour, large quantities of new content are added to Facebook and YouTube. Dozens of posts are added to DailyKos every hour as well. DFA-Link attracts little new activity, meaning that a visitor has little reason to visit again the following day.

Indeed, one former PFC chair described the site as "inflexible," expressing a preference for the simplicity of e-mail. Of an estimated distribution list of over 4,500 PFC members, only 645 have signed up for accounts on DFA-Link, and the vast majority of those accounts are inactive. On a day-to-day basis, there is simply little reason for a PFC member to visit the site, and the same is even more the case for a DFA member in Providence or another city that lacks a standing local organization. Their progressive neighbors are online, but they are congregating elsewhere. Neither DFA-Link nor Meetup.com show signs of regular group activity beyond a core of a dozen or so groups, and the lack of activity on Philly for Change's own DFA-Link page is a clear indicator that online membership, as displayed through these portals, is a poor indicator of actual in-person group activity.

DFA's national efforts are structurally similar to an Internet-mediated issue generalist like MoveOn or PCCC. As early examples of neo-federated organizing go, DFA has been field-defining, while still being quite limited. The problem is that location-enabled search runs into a real problem with the anti-geographic nature of the World Wide Web circa 2003. DailyKos serves as the gathering place for an online community of interest, freed of the limitations imposed by geography. DFA, by comparison, attempts to provide a gathering place for that same community-of-interest offline, but faces some tricky constraints. What search term should an amateur Philadelphia or Providence progressive enter in order to stumble upon DemocracyForAmerica.com? Online hub sites, when divided into local entities, lose some of their transaction cost-lowering qualities. And lacking a robust nationwide system of local groups, DFA has not developed the second-order infrastructure necessary for national–local identity building. The organization has no annual convention. The small national staff offers web-based, phone-based, and in-person trainings to its local activists, and otherwise stays in touch with key local volunteer leaders. But it has not created institutions to bring together these volunteers as a national community. DFA's relationship with its groups resembles more of a confederation than a federation — the entities are loosely tied, with few formal expectations of one another.

As neo-federated organizational forms go, DFA remains only a partial example. Recent advances in how citizens access the Internet, however — in particular the rise of the Mobile Web — provide reason for us to expect the neo-federated organizational form to become increasingly salient to American politics. Indeed, as location-enabled search and utilities improve at a breakneck pace, DFA begins to look more like a "proto-" example of the new type of organization.
Proto-Organizations and the Software Ripeness: Theorizing the Drudge Report

The Internet is in a continual state of development. Barry Wellman has suggested that "an Internet year is like a dog year, changing approximately seven times faster than normal human time." The medium's rapid developmental pace, with computing capacity doubling approximately once every two years, leads to a condition of ongoing disruptive innovation. New market opportunities emerge quickly, as increases in bandwidth, storage capacity, and cheap processing power render new classes of activity viable. As a guiding example, just imagine trying to launch YouTube on the dial-up connections of the mid-1990s. If DFA-Link has proven "inflexible" to its target audience and been relatively underutilized, one possibility is that the tool was similarly developed too soon. Just as YouTube required the permissive condition of high bandwidth Internet connectivity, online support for offline organizing arguably requires the permissive condition of a widely diffused Mobile Web. If that is the case, then Democracy for America falls into a category that we can best understand as "proto-organizations."

Joe Trippi, former Dean Campaign Manager and famed techno-optimist, offers the useful metaphor of "snow plowing" in his campaign retrospective, The Revolution Will Not Be Televised:

"What [sites like Amazon, eBay, and Expedia] were doing was plowing snow, clearing the roads for Internet users to feel safe and comfortable enough to spend money, make reservations, and interact on the web in a million ways. ... [In the 2000 election] McCain managed to pull a decent number of people, about 40,000, into his campaign via the Internet, but it was the [Apple] Newton of online political campaigns. The technology simply wasn't quite mature enough yet; enough snow hadn't been plowed."

Trippi's point is twofold. First, there is "a fine but excruciating line between being the first and being the first to succeed." The rapid development of computational equipment meant that the first PDA—the Apple Newton, in 1987—could be an abysmal failure, while a decade later the Palm Pilot proved to be a tremendous success. It is a matter of the underlying technologies ripening. Just as importantly, however, is the social learning process that occurs online. Sites like Amazon and eBay, driven by a strictly economic imperative, acclimated Americans-as-consumers to online credit card purchases. Only after that acclimation process had occurred could the Dean campaign convince large numbers of Americans-as-citizens to donate to a political campaign. "Snow plowing" refers both to the "ripening" of an underlying technology and to the social learning process driven by economic- or entertainment-driven applications of the new medium.

One result of this "snow plowing" phenomenon is that large Internet-mediated organizations and popular websites can sometimes develop as a precursor to a new wave of supportive software. For example, the DailyKos community could not have been created in 2000 because Scoop's community blogging software package hadn't been created yet. Interest in online political discussion existed but was relegated to clunkier Usenet message boards. Conservatives in the 1990s gathered on one such message board, FreeRepublic.com, and that site remains active today with vibrant discussion among a devoted core of conservative activists.

We can term this type of structure the "proto-organizational" form. I define proto-organizations as a special class of Internet-mediated group, technically identifiable only in retrospect. They have two defining characteristics. First, they benefit from first-mover advantage, representing an initial major attempt at allowing Internet users to participate in some novel activity online. Second, as a result of this first-mover status, they rely upon a bare-bones software platform that lacks many supportive features that later become accepted as essential functions. Proto-organizations demonstrate an existing demand or market opportunity, which a later wave of entrepreneurs seek to leverage new software code or emerging trends in online participation to improve upon. The Drudge Report provides perhaps the classic example of the proto-organizational form.

Matt Drudge (serendipitously, his real name) launched the site in 1994, sending out a broadcast e-mail soliciting subscribers for a website that would feature "a cross section of things that the editor Matt Drudge is focusing on in ... Already read by key players, this tip sheet will be sure to peak [sic] your interest." The site featured a list of headlines, occasionally with brief editorial commentary, each with hyperlinks to a news story found somewhere on the web (see Figure 4.2—screenshot of DrudgeReport.com). Drudge's fame as a cutting-edge newshound was cemented in 1998, when he broke the news of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in a "world exclusive" after the major news organizations had failed to release the story. His site has had enduring power, reaching roughly 2 million unique visitors per month, which gives it a larger readership than many newspapers. With a reputation for regularly breaking news of the next day's headlines, journalist Chris Cillizza (author of the Washington Post's blog, The Fix) describes the Drudge Report as "the single most influential source for how the presidential campaign [of 2008] is covered in the country."

Is the Drudge Report a blog? Not exactly. Drudge's habit of posting hyperlinks with limited commentary is emulated by a few elite bloggers, particularly popularly early adopters such as Duncan "Atrios" Black and Glenn "Instapundit" Reynolds (see Figure 4.3, screenshot of Instapundit.com). Blogs traditionally appear in reverse-chronological order and are archived over time, whereas the Drudge Report is organized as a three-column spread of news items and includes no archives. Blogs typically include a blogroll of like-minded authors, and most of
them include (at minimum) the capacity for reader comments. Drudge has neither of these. In the typology of blogspace presented in Chapter 3, the Drudge Report would appear in the farthest corner of quadrant I (independent blogs) since it includes no community-enhancing features and draws an audience entirely on the basis of the author’s individual reputation. But labeling it as a blog is problematic. David Perlmutter, a journalism professor at the University of Kansas and author of Blog Wars, instead labels the Drudge Report as a “proto-blog,” noting, “To this day, Drudge is Drudge: one man, no interaction, no community. The combination of independent media, hyperlinked posting, and voluntary association that bypassed and critiqued regular media, however, was developing at the same time, and we would soon all know its name: blog.”

Notice, then, how the particular chain of events unfolds. Drudge launched his website in 1994. It burst into the public consciousness in 1998. It wasn’t until 1999, when Pyra Labs created the commercial software platform Blogger.com, that blogging became an identifiable activity even among early Internet adopters. Compared with the latest blogging software platforms, the Drudge Report is the very essence of “clunky” or “inflexible” software. Blogging as a form of criticism, expression, and organization would not take off until additional software elements were added (first by Pyra Labs and later by Scoop, the platform that enabled DailyKos’s diary architecture). But thanks to the substantial reservoir of authority that he developed by virtue of his first-mover advantage, Matt Drudge has virtually no incentive to update his site to newer software. Drudge does not need to engage a community of participants to build an audience because he has already established himself as a known commodity. In 1998, we would not have known to call the Drudge Report a “proto-blog” because the activity of blogging had yet to mature. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the site fills a similar niche to that of political and media blogs, while lacking many of the features later incorporated as core features of blogging software.

So what of Democracy for America, then? For local supporters in Philadelphia, PA, the organization has the feel of a traditional federated political association. For local supporters in Providence, RI, it feels more like MoveOn or PCCC. It includes a federation of strong local groups, but that federation is unevenly spread across the country, and no second “Dean wave” is going to provide a mass influx of new “member-sediment,” so to speak. Philly for Change may be an exception—a proof of existence and nothing more—or it may be an indicator that DFA appeared before enough “snow had been plowed.” At issue is the texture of the generation shift among American political associations. Will the Internet facilitate extended face-to-face engagement amongst local populations of like-minded partisans, or will it be concentrated in online tactics and brief episodes of online activity? Where will the next wave of online innovation lead us?

It is dangerous to speculate on such matters (the Internet routinely makes fools of those who boldly predict its future), but there is increasingly strong evidence for treating DFA as a proto-organizational example of a robust neo-federated model. The reason is that we are seeing a dramatic shift in the types of devices citizens use to access the Internet. In 2004, the boundary between “online” and “offline” was firm. Internet access was mitigated through desktop and laptop portals. To attend an in-person meeting, citizens had to log off, leaving the online world for a separate offline world. Early examples of “cyberactivism” were
self-contained among “netizens,” engaging in online political acts directed at online sources of authority. The bright-line distinction between online and offline has been rendered fuzzy, however. Devices like the iPhone and other smartphones allow the Internet to be present wherever citizens can find a cell phone signal. Global Positioning System (GPS) sensors are built into these devices, leading to mass aggregation of geo-locational data and driving a new wave of economic, social, and entertainment services based upon supporting consumers in their neighborhood. Rating services like Yelp.com and foursquare.com are “plowing snow,” acclimating citizens to the merger of online services into previously offline activities. In so doing, they potentially remove a few barriers that have frustrated local political associations for decades.

Meeting Notes: Information Abundance Stops at the Internet’s Edge

The final half-hour of a Philly for Change meeting usually consists of breaking into small groups—neighborhood teams—to plan volunteer activities for the coming month. In the June 2007 meeting, I sit at a small table with three other West Philadelphians, but my mind is preoccupied. Earlier that day, I’d witnessed my first iPhone commercial, boasting, “This is not a watered-down version of the Internet. Or the mobile version of the Internet. Or the kinda-sorta-looks-like-the-Internet-Internet. It’s just the Internet. On your phone.” It’s brilliant marketing, and our table, in this dimly lit bar, feels palpably offline by contrast. My neighbors and I settle on a plan to set up a table at the Clark Park farmer’s market, educating other residents about local recycling issues and gathering petition signatures. The meeting ends with neighborhood teams reporting their plans to one another, receiving encouraging applause while a group leader jots down notes on a yellow legal pad. Those notes could form a useful benchmark, indicating the plans we’d set, reminding us of our stated goals, and helping the organization to identify “star” volunteers. But they won’t. Tracking that sort of data is about as hard in 2007 as it was in 1967. The condition of information abundance that is so central to a variety of Internet-mediated organizations is not present in this bar. Data on a legal pad cannot be Googled, as it were.

Herein lies the limit of “backend coordination” tools, circa 2007. At the national level, Democracy for America is able to track many forms of member interest and engagement. Through its national e-mail list, the organization can track open rates and action rates. It can gather passive democratic input, just as MoveOn does. It can engage in A/B testing to hone its message and test out the popularity of national campaign topics. But the activity in a Philly for Change meeting remains opaque to the national organization. It doesn’t know whether my neighborhood team set up that table or collected those signatures. It can’t tell how the meetings are going or what interpersonal controversies are on the rise. Likewise, the DFA-Link tools aren’t present with us in the meeting. To make use of it, PFC members would have to take the extra step of entering meeting notes and reminders after the fact. It is easier to just e-mail each other. Sociologist Seb Paquet has argued that the Internet enables “ridiculously easy group formation” through the lowering of transaction costs. That may well be true for online groups, but for local volunteer associations, with technology relegated to the background, many of those historic transaction costs remain unchanged—that is, unless the Mobile Web integrates online utilities into these offline circumstances.

In a 2008 interview, I spoke with Natalie Foster, former Deputy Field Network Director for MoveOn, about the potential of online–offline tracking systems. “That’s the Holy Grail,” she replied excitedly. “We always said in MoveOn that what we needed more than anything else was a way to record feedback on which house parties and meetings went well and which ones didn’t.” Technically, MoveOn does offer such a feedback mechanism in the form of automated post-event e-mails that are sent to participants asking that they rate and review their experience. But the response rate to such post-event questionnaires is preciously low in comparison to other types of online feedback. Online activity like webpage visits and e-mail clicks can be passively tracked. Report-backs from offline events, by contrast, require additional, active effort on the part of the members. As a result, Internet-mediated organizations know vastly more about their members’ online activity than their offline activity, and the organizations can do far less to support and cultivate that offline activity. MoveOn and DFA would like to invest training and organizing resources in those members who engage in the best local work—particularly in cities like Providence that have no existing local group. But the limitations presented by offline data collection heavily curtail their efforts.

The Mobile Difference

The Mobile Web extends the reach and modifies the application of these tools. The iPhone has already led to an extensive (and some say threatening) new field of online experimentation. With over 300,000 applications available through Apple’s iTunes “app store,” various economic, social, entertainment, and civic organizations are building customized applications to take advantage of geo-local tools. Organizing for America (OFA), the sedimentary offspring of the Obama for America presidential campaign (discussed below), has been at the forefront of developing these apps to support offline engagement. The Obama '08 app allows supporters to look up issue information, find local events, sign up for local groups, and use a distributed phone-banking tool. By routing supporters through the application, OFA is able to passively capture more data on the activities of their
active volunteers. As Mobile Web-enabled phones gain market share, meeting augmentation and evaluation tools become a next obvious step. Rather than asking members after a meeting to fill out an online questionnaire or enter meeting notes into a backend system, those features can be built into an application that augments the in-person meeting itself. The same type of rating practices that routinely occur on sites like DailyKos—giving “kudos” to comments or recommending diary contributions—can be applied to the PFC activities that, to date, have remained strictly offline.

Sites like Yelp.com are already engaging in this sort of “snow plowing.” Yelp was launched in 2004 as a sort of “Zagat ratings by the masses, for the masses,” combining elements of Wikipedia, community blogs, social networks, and the Yellow Pages, all with a helping of Google Maps on the side. The site has over 53 million unique visitors per month and features over 20 million reviews.44 Visitors to the site can browse through user-generated reviews of restaurants, shopping, nightlife, beauty and spas, or more than 15 other categories. Registered users can write their own reviews and give 1- through 5-star ratings of any location they visit. They can also rate each other’s reviews, giving them credit for being “useful,” “funny,” or “cool,” or flagging them as inappropriate content. Registered users are also invited to fill out profile information and network with each other. The most active reviewers on the site are invited to be members of the “Elite,” a superuser-designation that includes invitations to local “thank-you” mixers.

Though its launch predates the iPhone’s market entry, Yelp’s explosive growth occurred alongside the rise of Mobile Web access. As reviews become accessible and writeable on the go, Yelp becomes an exponentially more valuable tool—restaurants can be searched without sitting down with a desktop or laptop computer, or scathing reviews about poor service can be written during a tedious long wait. Yelp’s iPhone application lets users access this repository of local wisdom at all times, encouraging higher participation rates and the accumulation of more assessments. While long-established sites like YellowPages.com and CitySearch.com attempt to provide top-down directories of available services, Yelp invites a growing participatory community to do the legwork behind local searches. Location awareness increases the utility of Yelp’s services, in turn broadening the size and scope of the service’s applicability. Yelp surpassed CitySearch as the leading local business review site in April 2009, overtaking first-mover advantage through a wave of user-generated content.49

Yelp is not itself a civic association, but the event- and user-rating practices it ingrains have valuable applications for DFA, MoveOn, and similar groups. As Americans-as-consumers become accustomed to using the Mobile Web to rate offline organizations and events, the learning curve required for Americans-as-citizens to take equivalent actions in the public sphere is sharply reduced. The data abundance of the Internet becomes increasingly integrated with previously offline political activities. MoveOn and DFA have not developed their own “apps” at the time of this writing, but conference panels at Netroots Nation and other nertopcs conferences demonstrate an increased appetite for mobile applications.

Zack Exley, former MoveOn staffer, Kerry for President Internet Coordinator, and New Organizing Institute President, offers a powerful commentary on the challenge that has traditionally faced local political associations: the “Tyranny of the Annoying”:

“The Tyranny of the Annoying stems from the fact that, except in times of extreme crisis, it is just not worth it for mature, serious people to put up with all the indignities that go along with taking and maintaining leadership of any political entity. This principle guarantees that every Elks Club, Union Local, DAR Chapter, or Democratic town committee will tend toward being controlled by annoying people—they are the ones with egos desperate to be fed by winning petty little power plays and plenty of time on their hands.”40

Exley’s hope is that the Internet can help to mitigate the “Tyranny of the Annoying”—that the same sort of tools that reward positive contributions on Wikipedia, eBay, and online communities like Slashdot or DailyKos can be turned to local political associations, simplifying leadership tasks and rewarding “mature, serious people” for their contributions. A central limitation for neo-federated organizational models has been that online data abundance stops at the Internet’s edge. You can A/B test only those topics for which you have data. The valuable contributions made by local volunteers in face-to-face meetings go unrecorded. “Online tools for offline action” remains a limited field of activity. The spread of the Mobile Web opens up new avenues for neo-federated organizational experimentation. Through novel applications, designed for iPhone and Android-based mobile devices, organizations are tinkering with what location-enabled, ever-present Internet connections can add to traditionally offline arenas of social engagement. Among nertopcs professionals, there is a near-consensus that mobile applications will be the “next big thing.” If they provide a novel solution to the “Tyranny of the Annoying” problem, the neo-federated organizational model will become increasingly relevant.

I should pause here to note an important caveat in the spread of the Mobile Web. Among Internet scholars, there is a longstanding research program concerning the “digital divide.”44 Initially focused on the Internet diffusion gap between wealthy and poor countries, digital divide studies have also noted the gap between rich and poor citizens, as well as the skills divide between younger, urban, wealthier, and better-educated individuals and socioeconomic disadvantage segments of society. Simply put, any benefits from the Internet disproportionately accrue to the already well-off, exacerbating existing inequalities. These concerns are equally applicable to the Mobile Web and application-based
utilities. Though the Pew Internet and American Life project found in 2010 that 40% of American adults access the Internet from their cell phone, an increase from 32% in 2009, there is a difference between the rich application-based ecology of the iPhone and Android phones and the limited Internet offerings provided by cheaper cellular phones.

Oddly enough, the digital divide in Mobile Web access is unlikely to limit the utility of the iPhone for political associations like DFA. The reason is that the volunteer base of such organizations has long been demographically skewed toward the very segments of the population who are most likely to afford new technology. Put another way, the segment of the American public who can afford to spend their time volunteering with a political group tends to overlap with the segment that can afford an iPhone. This is a legitimate cause for concern among practitioners, particularly those who have hopes for a diversified public sphere. It is also a longstanding feature of American political life—one that new communications technology will not independently resolve.

Organizing for America—Governance Organizing and the Dilemma of Control

The savvy reader may have spent much of this chapter pondering additional cases. If Democracy for America is a proto-example of the neo-federated ideal type, what group comes next? Living Liberally, covered in Chapter 5, has a wider neo-federated network but limits its groups to social events rather than sustained collective action. The Obama for America campaign, which transitioned into Organizing for America (OFA) after his election and merged with the Democratic National Committee (DNC), is a more intriguing candidate. Indeed, OFA bears several strong similarities to DFA. The name itself is an homage of sorts—both organizations chose to adopt new names that preserved the acronym of their campaign apparatus. As Daniel Kreiss has demonstrated, the Obama campaign’s New Media Team was heavily populated by Dean campaign alumni, and the Obama website and campaign tools were designed by Blue State Digital, a consultancy founded by Dean alumni (see Chapter 5). Howard Dean served as Chair of the Democratic National Committee from 2004–2008 and presided over the controversial “50-State Strategy” that DFA activists supported en masse. Moreover, both organizations are the sedimentary offshoots of a presidential campaign mobilization, making them distinct from groups like MoveOn and PCCC that build their lists through social movement- or issue-based sedimentary waves. Given the longstanding tradition of electoral field mobilization—what Rasmus Kleis Nielsen refers to as “personalized political communication”—one might expect that the sedimentary infrastructure left behind by electoral campaigns would be particularly amenable to local volunteer association-building. The Obama campaign volunteers were used to knocking on doors together, whereas PCCC’s volunteers had mostly clicked, donated, e-mailed, or made phone calls.

OFA was first unveiled on January 17, 2009, after a stakeholder meeting in Chicago sorted through potential parameters for the group. At that time, I highlighted three key differences between OFA and DFA—differences that still hold true today and that lead me to conclude that OFA should be considered as its own, exceptional organization form. First, OFA is substantially larger than DFA; indeed it is larger than any other political association in America. With a member list of over 13 million supporters, the Obama for America campaign has been referred to as the largest campaign mobilization in American history. Beyond the size of OFA’s e-mail list, the campaign also boasted a sophisticated field structure, including hundreds of thousands of volunteers and thousands of staff. If we postulate that groups like PCCC and MoveOn were more efficient in their mobilization efforts, we must question the scale of the OFA organization.

A second difference involves the bully pulpit and agenda setting. One of the major goals of American political associations involves attempts to affect the political agenda. Never before has there been a political association directly and explicitly tied to a presidential administration. The Obama administration has a range of tools for setting the government’s agenda, including blue ribbon commissions, press conferences, and the annual State of the Union address. At the national level, the direct agenda-setting capacity of the president’s bully pulpit deeply impacts the strategic choices and operating systems his allied organization puts in place. OFA listens to its membership and coalition partners to determine its issue priorities, then attempts to raise the profile of those priorities in the media and through interactions with elected officials. OFA’s issue priorities stem from the Oval Office itself. While groups like MoveOn and DFA have been labeled “hybrid organizations” that combine party-like mobilization repertoires with interest group and social movement repertoires, OFA is in fact the governing party.

The third distinction follows from the second. Whereas DFA empowers its local groups to set their own issue priorities and "take over the Democratic Party,” OFA already is the Democratic Party, placing it squarely within two orthogonal traditions: presidential party building and American political associations. A substantial dilemma of control emerges as a result. After the 2008 election, OFA had active volunteer operations in every major American city. These volunteer operations were distinct from the locally elected, longstanding Democratic Party leadership. If the organization invited those volunteers to set their own agenda, it would effectively have created a rival to every local Democratic Party apparatus within the party organization. The inevitable outcome in hundreds of municipalities would have been a fractious period of party infighting, as established (and sometimes elected) local party operatives battled with "senior” OFA volunteer...
leaders. Recognizing this threat—which also doubtless would have proved an irresistible draw for journalists—the OFA design team curtailed all local decision authority.65

The lack of local decision authority renders OFA categorically distinct from the neo-federated model. DFA groups like Philly for Change make endorsements in primaries and empower their volunteers to select local issues as campaign priorities. Members can influence the organization’s issue priorities and gain greater voice and authority through ongoing participation. Local OFA groups cannot make endorsements or select local priorities. Doing so would create an intra-party conflict because OFA is embedded within the DNC. Ari Melber, in a report titled “Year One of Organizing for America: The Permanent Field Campaign in a Digital Age,” detailed the resulting contributions of the organization. OFA has continued to engage in heightened levels of political mobilization. Around health care reform alone, the organization reports that over 1.5 million volunteers took some action in 2009, including submission of 238,000 letters-to-the-editor of local papers, organizing of 11,906 local events, and a single day of action featuring 315,000 calls to Congress.66 These numbers may appear small in comparison to the group’s previous electoral mobilization, but they are quite large in comparison to other issue mobilization groups.

Melber coins a new term, “governance organizing,” to describe the unique niche filled by this hybrid of a political organization and a formal party apparatus. I would endorse this term and add that we must consider OFA in its own unique category. An equivalent organization could conceivably be built by other successful presidential campaigns, or possibly by a governor at the state level, but the broader associational universe cannot (and in fact should not) adopt the organizational routines and mobilization strategies employed by the Obama team. OFA stands in a category of its own, apart from the netroots associational universe.

The limitations of governance organizing are apparent in two clear cases stemming from the Membership Communications Project dataset. First is the health care reform mobilization. Whereas groups like PCCC, MoveOn, DailyKos, and DFA actively called for strengthening the health care legislation as it moved through Congress, OFA remained mute on the details of the bill. There was no space for OFA volunteers to call for a public option or to pressure centrist Democrats to oppose restrictive abortion language. OFA’s mobilization focused on “passing health reform now” rather than attempting to influence the contours of that legislation as it progressed.67 Over the course of a lengthy policy battle, OFA was limited to a single, simple message, while other netroots advocacy groups stayed abreast of the latest news and engaged in a greater range of mobilization tactics.

Likewise, in the aftermath of the health care bill’s passage, much of the progressive activist community was focused on supporting Lt. Governor Bill Halter’s primary challenge to Senator Blanche Lincoln. Lincoln had been a vocal opponent of the public option within the Democratic caucus, and poor poll numbers indicated that she was virtually certain to lose her re-election bid against her Republican opponent. While PCCC, MoveOn, DFA, DailyKos, and several unions all devoted national attention and resources to mobilizing activist support for Halter, the local OFA volunteers had no voice in OFA’s endorsement decision process. The DNC unsurprisingly supported the Democratic incumbent, and OFA quietly sought volunteers to support her primary re-election. It is possible that local OFA volunteers would have supported Lincoln anyway. But such a scenario is doubtful, given that MoveOn’s, DFA’s, and PCCC’s member rolls are filled with Obama supporters, and the Halter campaign proved highly popular with these communities. But the larger point is that federated political associations act as “laboratories of Democracy” specifically because they create a venue for citizens to deliberate with one another, make decisions, and then enact those choices. The dilemma of control means that, despite OFA’s tremendous size, the organization is severely handicapped in providing such a venue for its active local volunteers. OFA/DNC can mobilize mass supporter activity to “help enact the president’s agenda.” It cannot engage its members in discussion of local civic or political issues, though. And it cannot hand local members a democratic voice in deciding the president’s agenda.

Conclusion

The neo-federated model is a work-in-progress amongst Internet-mediated political associations. In a limited set of circumstances, the Internet has usefully served to lower the costs of face-to-face engagement, invigorating local political associations like Philly for Change. From a normative perspective, this is the model that inspires the most optimism. Theorists dating back to Benjamin Barber have looked to the Internet with hopes that it could enable “strong democracy,” with heightened participation in local and national affairs.68 More recently, Skocpol has highlighted that the decline of cross-class membership federations represented a substantive loss for the American public sphere, as historic venues for citizen participation, social movement mobilization, and democratic skill-building were replaced by issue experts and professional lobbyists. My own normative preferences admittedly run in this direction as well. Many socially significant political matters are settled at the local level. If the next wave of Internet-driven innovation yields an increase in local citizen engagement, it would strike me as an unqualified social good. Local communities could use more and stronger social ties among their engaged citizenry.

Democracy for America serves as the leading example within the progressive netroots. It boasts “online tools for offline action” and leverages the lowered costs of online communication to support local affiliates like Philly for Change that are deeply reminiscent of political associations of old. But DFA is a limited
example of the neo-federated model; its national activity is more in line with a MoveOn-style issue generalist. Relying on the sedimentary infrastructure built through the Dean campaign, the organization has a dozen or so strong local affiliates but few obvious opportunities for spreading that system to new cities and states.

The Internet, however, is a medium in continual development. DFA was developed years before the Mobile Web, and there is early “snow plowing” evidence that the applications and social practices supported by mobile, GPS-enabled computing devices can support major innovations in the arena of location-based activity. The wall that separated “cyberspace” from the “real world” has become a porous boundary. Internet access has come unchained from desktop and laptop devices and become an ever-present, augmenting feature of public life. The digital divide-related implications of this change are concerning but have limited impact on the potential for new political associations.

DFA, like Free Republic and the Drudge Report, seems more like a proto-organizational example of the neo-federated model. It combines first-mover advantage with a software platform that, in 2004, was far from ripe. Into this breach, the Mobile Web doubtless will have some impact, but it is too early to state definitively what that impact will be. The technology does not necessitate the growth of place-based netroots groups. It does, however, create a more permissive context, expanding the variety of data that can be passively gathered and rendering a digital presence in previously “offline” activities. As the Mobile Web continues to diffuse, researchers and organizers alike would be well advised to keep an eye on how the technological affordances of the Mobile Web are deployed by political organizations.

5

**Netroots as Networks—Building Progressive Infrastructure**

“...To respond to the challenges of elite entrenchment, countermobilizers must develop...an ‘alternative governing coalition.’ An alternative governing coalition is composed of intellectual, network, and political entrepreneurs, and the patrons that support them.”

—Steven Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement*

The organizational layer of American politics extends beyond membership associations. Along with the netroots generation of political organizations discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, a rich tapestry of non-membership advocacy organizations (NMAOs) has emerged in the past decade. These NMAOs were founded in the midst of progressive counter-mobilization; the electoral and policy losses of the 2000, 2002, and 2004 elections prompted calls for new ideas, new strategies, and new organizational arrangements within the American Left. Reacting to a perceived *infrastructure deficit* in comparison to conservative media, policy, and electoral efforts, the progressive donor community engaged in a concerted effort to build new supporting institutions. New think tanks, training organizations, data vendors, and backchannel communications networks were all forged in this time period. These infrastructural endeavors drew upon the new media environment and the changing needs of Internet-mediated advocacy organizations. The netroots’ institutional capacities are shaped both by online technological affordances and historical circumstance. This chapter extends our scope of analysis beyond membership-based organizations, adding various types of *netroots infrastructure organization* into the picture.

This chapter serves three purposes: first, it provides a historical backdrop to the emergence of the political “netroots” in the first decade of the 21st century. The new political associations among the American Left developed not only in response to the changing communications environment, but also in response to perceived