

Katrina Bloggers and the Development of Collective Civic Action: The Web as a Virtual Mobilizing Structure

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David G. Ortiz¹ and Stephen F. Ostertag¹

Abstract

Scholarship on collective civic action helps link collective-level contentious actions and individual-level civic engagement. Using longitudinal data from a group of New Orleans residents who started blogging in the wake of hurricane Katrina, we highlight the digitally mediated social processes linking individual civic engagement with collective civic actions. Through a developmental approach, we analyze the progression from individual blogging to the creation of social networks, the formation of a community of “Katrina bloggers,” and their engagement on a range of offline collective civic actions. We argue that the Web serves as a “virtual” mobilizing structure, enabling individuals with shared concerns to organize across time and space, without the need of copresence or preexisting formal ties, networks, or organizations. Our analysis provides insights into the development of virtual communities and social movements formed around collective identities and processes of collective efficacy that highlight the dynamics of contention in civil society.

Keywords

collective civic action, social movements, blogging, civic engagement, community, collective identity, collective efficacy, civil society

Scholars studying social movements and civic engagement have spent the past several decades examining the relationship between collective action and civil society. However, these two literatures tend to examine different aspects of civil society (McAdam et al. 2005; Walker 2008), hindering our ability to see the linkages among them, appreciate changes in citizenship styles (Schudson 2006), and understand the social processes and resources that transform individual into activist (Walker 2008). Sampson et al. (2005) have devised the term *collective civic actions* in an effort to transcend the artificial distinction between social movement and civic engagement literatures. Emphasizing the linkages among a variety of behaviors focused on civil society,¹ collective civic actions are “public events that bring two or more people together to realize a common purpose or specific claim” (p. 675) and that range from mundane civic engagement to direct action protests.

¹Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, USA

Corresponding Author:

David G. Ortiz, Tulane University, 220 Newcomb Hall, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA.
Email: dortiz@tulane.edu

Yet, research on collective civic actions—as well as that on social movements and civic engagement—has not sufficiently theorized the role of digital communication technologies,² and tends to emphasize the role of preexisting networks, social ties, and physical organizations in mobilizing action (McAdam et al. 2005). Digital communication technologies do not require copresence in physical time and space for effective communication and organizing (Earl and Kimport 2011; Howard 2010; Walgrave et al. 2011). Hence, such technologies might enable new means of interacting and organizing (Boase et al. 2006), revealing their mobilizing capacities and ability to foster a variety of collective civic actions (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2010). This introduces insightful ways of understanding the development of collective identities (Sampson et al. 2005), processes of collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997), and dynamics of contention in civil society (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

We build upon this scholarship with a case study of a New Orleans' blogosphere that emerged after hurricane Katrina in August of 2005. We use a *developmental approach* to analyze the digitally mediated social processes that link individual civic engagement to group-level collective civic action. We examine the creation of a loose digital network of individuals with shared concerns, and how they grew into a community of “Katrina bloggers”³ that formed a social movement⁴ and engaged in collective civic actions toward the recovery and rebuilding of the city after the hurricane. These collective civic actions did not develop by relying solely on previously formed social ties, networks, or institutions (e.g., existing nonprofits or social movement organizations [SMOs]) but instead emerged from a loose network of geographically scattered individuals who used the Web to find others with whom to discuss their frustrations and experiences of hurricane Katrina and its lingering effects. We argue that absent preexisting organizations and social networks that traditionally serve to facilitate collective action, the Web served as a “virtual” mobilizing structure (McAdam 1982) that enabled the development of social ties, networks, community, and a shared identity that was activated for a variety of collective civic actions ranging from classic protests to blended social actions and even the creation of a formal online civic (i.e., news) organization.

In this paper, we contribute to the existing social movement, civic engagement, and digital media scholarship by highlighting the ways in which the Web (and blogging in particular) can serve as a “virtual” mobilizing structure. It allows participants to establish networks, share grievances, build collective identity, and create the community required to organize and mobilize for collective civic action. Furthermore, by focusing on the development of a specific case longitudinally, we establish how a “Katrina bloggers” movement emerged—without the need for preexisting organizations for mobilization—out of loosely tied, ad hoc networks of bloggers with little or no experience in social movement or political organizing, and whose ties and relationships were not characterized by institutionalized leadership positions or physically bounded by proximity. Digital media also allowed for the formation of a flexible and decentralized mobilizing structure that enabled participants to opt in and out of certain actions and areas of interest while moving back and forth between individual civic engagement and fully organized collective civic action. Combined, these factors highlight the digitally mediated social processes that underlie the development and dynamics of contentious and noncontentious actions (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) and suggest different means of involvement and mobilization than early scholarship on civic participation and social movements recognized.

Social Movements, Civic Engagement, and Collective Civic Action

A vast amount of social movement's literature focuses on analyses of large, often violent collective actions by those largely outside of status quo social, economic, and/or political systems while downplaying more routine and mundane acts of civic participation.⁵ Recognizing this

shortcoming has led to a renewed interest toward the study of smaller, nonviolent, and more institutionalized types of collective action events (McAdam et al. 2005; Sampson et al. 2005) and an increased focus on the mechanisms and processes (McAdam et al. 2001; Sampson 2000, 2012) that can aid in explaining the emergence, development, and outcome of collective actions.

On the other end of the spectrum, scholars generally conceptualize civic engagement as the active membership and involvement in a community or collectivity, such as a neighborhood or city (Larsen et al. 2004), usually focusing on a community's civil (e.g., legal), political (e.g., voting, committees, offices), and social (e.g., education, transportation, health) systems (Marshall 1998). Civic engagement tends to be noncontentious and mundane, often involves participants who are largely situated within status quo social arrangements and emphasizes participation in existing organizations, associations, and institutions (e.g., Skocpol 2003, 2004; Paxton 1999; Putnam 2000; Rotolo 1999; Wuthnow 1998).

Civic engagement scholarship has recently started shifting its emphasis from the individual to the collective and from formal organizations to looser associations and collective actions (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2009; Fischer 1982; Lopez et al. 2006; Walgrave et al. 2011). This has led to greater attention toward collective efficacy (Larsen et al. 2004; Sampson 2012; Sampson et al. 1997), or the ability of a collectivity to identify shared concerns and interests and work together to effect change.

Seeing how the recent changes in these literatures are leading toward a convergence, a group of social movement and civic engagement scholars has sought to capture a broader understanding of contention that embodies the linkages between the study of apolitical, noncontentious civic engagement and more political, contentious collective actions (Baggetta 2009; Kamete 2009; Lonkila 2011; Sampson 2012). To this end, Sampson et al. (2005) devised the concept of "collective civic action." Here, collective action is understood as existing on a continuum, with more mundane, less contentious civic actions extending in one direction and more disruptive, contentious protests extending in the opposite direction.

As a concept, collective civic action enables the researcher to focus on a broader range of collective activity, and better understand the relationship between contentious and civic engagement activities, including their *development* through time and across space. Furthermore, collective civic action also allows the researcher to consider hybrid events that can combine civic participation with social movement claims-making (Sampson 2012). These *blended social actions* are a form of collective action that "blurs traditional boundaries by combining common types of civic participation, such as festivals or neighborhood association meetings, with a stated claim and an organized public event that seeks change" (Sampson et al. 2005:680). In other words, these are mixed events in which, for example, actions and protests are launched from a community meeting, or where a group's collective actions not initially organized to address the institutions of civil society turn into forums to address them.

Yet, research on collective civic actions is still developing and could benefit from a better understanding of the changes that digital communication technologies can have in the formation and development of such actions. Sampson et al. (2005) examined fluctuations in collective-level events over time, but their newspaper-based data did not allow them to question the role of digital communication technologies in collective civic actions. Furthermore, they tend to emphasize the role of preexisting institutions and organizations—especially those based on neighborhoods—on emergent and sustained collective action (Sampson 2005:679). Yet, some collective civic actions might be "relatively autonomous" (Alexander 2006) and emerge largely independent of these preexisting structures. The loosely tied networks that digital communications help enable (Bennett, Breunig, and Givens 2008; Boase et al. 2006) might offer some insight into different forms of collective civic actions. We believe our data on blogging in post-hurricane Katrina New Orleans provides a unique window of opportunity to record the social processes that turn isolated individuals into collective civic agents. Rarely do scholars capture the nuanced development of

social networks and communities. Yet, the wake of hurricane Katrina provides an opportunity to witness these developments and analyze their significance for social movement and civic engagement scholarships.

Collective Civic Action and Digital Communication

The growing accessibility and use of digital communication technologies (e.g., the internet) and their relationship with collective action provides insightful theoretical opportunities to explore and build upon the aforementioned changes in social movement and civic engagement scholarships. Indeed, there is a growing amount of research examining the relationship between digital communication technologies (primarily, the Internet and Web) and civil society (Boulianne 2009).⁶ Most of this work examines the role of the Web in amplifying (Boulianne 2009; Downing 1989; Gurak 1997), detracting (Bakkar and de Vreese 2011; McCollough 1991), or transferring (Barber 1998; Bimber 1998; Boulianne 2009) collective and individual forms of civic engagement and contentious actions. Some of this research focuses specifically on blogs (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2010). Yet, much of it examines national-level blogs, such as *The Huffington Post*, and uses quantitative network analyses to chart the interconnection among them (Shaw and Benkler 2012). Further, most of these studies focus on civic engagement and dismiss a wider range of collective civic actions. Data from bloggers themselves, the ties, networks, communities and social movements they create, and their engagement in collective civic actions is largely absent in this literature. The wake of hurricane Katrina and the subsequent growth in local bloggers provide an opportunity to address these gaps in current scholarship by revealing how a group of people used blogs to find each other, create social ties and networks, develop community, and take part in collective civic actions as a social movement focused on the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina.

In this research, we focus on the collective civic actions that bloggers created and/or took part in and examine the social processes that led to these developments and turned individual bloggers into collective civic agents. In this sense, we move beyond questions on the effects of digital media on civic participation and contention. Instead, we examine collective civic actions to highlight the role of blogging—and the Web—as a virtual mobilizing structure that fostered the creation of new social ties and networks, community-building efforts, identity formation processes, and other resources needed for effective mobilizations. In so doing, we see how both general and specific social processes of networking and organizing emerged and took shape through digital media. These processes are general in the sense that we record the development of networks, community formation, and shared identities that emerge through ongoing communication and are activated for collective civic actions by a movement of Katrina bloggers. They are specific to digital media use in the sense that bloggers did not need to rely on a physically bound community and the previously established social ties it provides to find information about the flood, communicate shared frustrations and concerns, and form a digital network. Nor were they part of a formal organizational structure with institutionalized leaders dictating mobilization strategies or engaged in community building and outreach.

We believe that post-hurricane Katrina, New Orleans provides a useful social laboratory for this research. In the 28 months after the flood, 148 new blogs were created in and around New Orleans,⁷ a sizable increase in blogging from trends recorded before the storm and since 2008. Further, many of these blogs have names that either directly (e.g., *Thanks, Katrina*) or indirectly (e.g., *Tin Can Trailer Trash*—referring to the Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers) reference hurricane Katrina. In this paper, we explore the variety of collective civic actions carried out by these bloggers in the months and years following the flood, and we highlight how these actions were enabled by the digitally mediated social processes afforded through blogging.

Communication Technologies and Affordances

Collective and civic actions have always been enabled and created through various communication media, as communication media fundamentally inform social relations and interactions (Thompson 1995). Each media technology revolution has opened new avenues for citizens to use when engaging in collective and civic actions. For example, Tarrow (1998) draws attention to the importance of printed communications and transportation systems (i.e., roads) in the rise of modern social movements. Among other uses, the printing press allowed for faster and wider distribution of pamphlets while roads allowed for faster communication between towns and easier access to deliver messages to different communities. Together, these technologies formed part of a structure that enabled the creation and organization of large groupings of individuals that could more easily mobilize to carry out organized protests.⁸

Digital communication technologies can also enable new capacities for engagement in collective and civic actions. With digital media, the costs of mobilizing are lower than with other forms of media, and there is no need for physical copresence to communicate, inform, and organize (Bennett et al. 2008; Earl and Schussman 2003; Schussman and Earl 2004). As Earl and Kimport (2011:7) note with the Web in particular, it provides “inexpensive opportunities for organizers and participants that could not have come to fruition as quickly, easily, or cheaply without the Web.” Drawing on a framework of soft determinism (Howard 2010) in which communication technologies are conceptualized as resources that people can use in a variety of creative ways, affordances recognize that each technology lends itself to certain uses and can open different opportunities for engagement in civic and contentious actions. As such, affordances are “the type of action or a characteristic of actions that a technology enables through its design” (Earl and Kimport 2011:10).

Through its capacity to integrate text, audio, and [tele]visual content into a single message; its low cost; the ability to transcend hurdles posed by time, space, and place limitations; and the ability to enable one-to-many interactions with many-to-one feedback, the Web can afford social interactions, relations, and forms of collective action and activism that are less common from or even completely different than (Bennett et al. 2008; Boase and Wellman 2006; Earl and Kimport 2011; Rheingold 2000) classic collective actions. Indeed, recent work on e-mobilization has noted that the Web affords new relationships and organizing capacities (Earl and Kimport 2011; Walgrave et al. 2011), and fosters the creation of loosely tied networks where participants can opt in and out, while they oscillate across areas of interest (Bennett et al. 2008; Bennett and Segerberg 2011; della Porta 2005; Kavada 2010). Further, digital media can foster the participation of people who have little or no experience in social movement or political organizing (Howard and Hussain 2011), and leadership among these loosely tied networks of like-minded individuals can be spread quite widely (Walgrave et al. 2011). Howard and Hussain (2011:37) point out that in most of the uprisings of the Arab Spring, there was no clear group leadership; instead, “there were prominent nodes in the digital networks, people whose contributions held sway and mobilized turnout.” Also, because of the nature of the Web as a communication technology (i.e., laterally distributed, possibly anonymous, mostly open and flexible), the discussion, planning, and organization of collective civic action is more likely to resemble “a many-sided conversation among more or less equal individuals” (p. 48) than a specific message issued by the leadership to the rest of the individuals involved in the group. Combined, these suggest different processes of involvement than earlier scholarship on civic participation and social movements recognized and highlight forms of participation that might differ from the face-to-face mobilizations organized by churches, neighborhood associations, and other more geographically dependent planning units (Boase et al. 2006).

All these characteristics speak to the Web’s capacity as a “virtual” mobilizing structure—one that can sometimes have very different characteristics than classic mobilizing structures.⁹ In

other words, the Web can act as a platform for interacting, sharing, and organizing for collective civic actions that can preclude the need for and provide the functions of previously established social movement or civic engagement organizations (Castells 2003, 2009; Schussman and Earl 2004).

In this paper, we contribute to the existing scholarship on the intersections of social movements, civil society, and digital communication by explaining how online communities formed and then moved offline into informal groups and formal organizations that engage in collective civic actions. We highlight the social processes that link individual civic participation to group-level collective civic action by analyzing the creation of a loose digital network of individuals with shared concerns and how it turned into a community of “Katrina bloggers.” In this process, we argue that the Web served as a “virtual” mobilizing structure that was crucial for the formation of a community with shared goals and its engagement in collective civic actions. This “virtual” mobilizing structure was based on ad hoc networks and new social ties that the bloggers in our sample created as they sought information after hurricane Katrina. The networks were generally loosely tied, highly flexible, and had a largely decentralized structure.

Our approach allows us to demonstrate how this network has been (and can be) activated for a broad range of collective civic actions (protests, blended social actions, and civic engagement), most of which did not rely on previously established organizations or physical mobilizing structures. Further, our analysis brings to light the fact that individuals within these groups move quite freely—often in the same time frame—across various forms of civic engagement and protest. In our view, this cements the value of using the concept of collective civic action, since it might help us to better understand the connections between individual civic engagement and collective action.

The upheaval, disruption, and lingering effects of hurricane Katrina for residents of New Orleans and the larger Gulf Coast were no doubt vital precursors for those in our sample to start blogging and organizing. While this makes our data unique to digital media use in times of crises and disasters, we believe that such context is not a necessary condition for the processes and formations we discuss in the following pages. Rather, we believe that we highlight phenomena that could arise through digital media use in times of extended and amplified collective need (Boase et al. 2006) associated with shared frustrations and collective trauma (Ortiz and Ostertag 2014). We believe post-hurricane Katrina, New Orleans provided that context of extended and heightened need and concern, and as such, our analysis uncovers new developments of more generic social processes of networking and highlights different ways of understanding the development of virtual communities formed around collective identities (Sampson et al. 2005), processes of collective efficacy (Sampson 2012; Sampson et al. 1997), and dynamics of contention in civil society (Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl 2005; Earl and Kimport 2011; McAdam et al. 2001).¹⁰

Data and Method

Our discussion in this paper is grounded in an ongoing project started in the summer of 2010 on blogging, social movements, collective action, and civil society in post-hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Our data include interviews and content analysis of blog posts, Web pages, and literature published by local bloggers, as well as ethnographic fieldwork gathered while attending and participating in a number of local blogger-related events and speaking engagements.

The data for this paper are largely based on semistructured interviews with 27 self-identified bloggers. As a secondary form of data, we also included content analysis of blog posts and Web pages of the civic organizations, and blended social actions organized by our bloggers, as well as field notes from our observations and participation in various blogger events throughout the city. Combined, these data help us uncover the gradual development of this Katrina blogosphere.

Table 1. Demographic Data on Blogger Sample.

Demographic Characteristics	
Gender	
Male	13
Female	14
Race/ethnicity	
White	21
African American	4
Middle Eastern	1
Other	1
Age	
29 and under	2
30–39	8
40–49	9
50 and over	8
Education	
High school or less	2
College	11
Graduate school	14
Household income	
\$40,000 or less	6
\$40,001–\$80,000	4
\$80,001–\$120,000	6
\$120,001 and above	2
Declined to answer	9
<i>N</i>	27

They highlight the role of the Web as a virtual mobilizing structure for the establishment of networks and the creation of a community around the Katrina blogger identity, which ultimately resulted in the engagement of a diverse set of collective civic actions.

We collected our interview data at two points in time. Our first 17 interviews were conducted between September and November of 2010. A second wave of interviews was conducted between July and November of 2012 (10 participants). We recruited most of our interviewees at the *Rising Tide* annual conferences. This is a yearly conference organized by and for social media users (most of whom are bloggers) living in or writing about New Orleans after the flood. We attended *Rising Tide* for three consecutive years (i.e., 2010–2012) and used the conference as a base from which to advertise the project and recruit interview participants. Following ethnographic interviewing protocol (Flick 2006), we then contacted all those who expressed interest in our project to schedule an interview. Our shortest interview lasted 1:15 hours, while our longest one took 3:00 hours to complete. After completing the interview, participants were asked whether they knew of other self-identified bloggers who would like to take part in this research. We recruited some of our first and second wave of interviews from these suggestions as well.

Our interviewee sample reflects similar demographics to those found in national research of Internet use and adoption (Pew Research Center 2011). It is composed of mostly white, middle-class, middle-aged, and well-educated participants, some with graduate degrees (see Table 1 for a summary of our sample demographics). Such demographics speak to a number of privileges that allow for greater access to technological and socioeconomic capital, and individuals with similar characteristics tend to be more inclined to engage in collective civic actions (Putnam 2006).

In contrast to our sample, the city's average population in the four years after the storm was approximately 60 percent African American and 30 percent white, 67 percent of residents had less than a college degree, and the average household income was \$59,952, with 52 percent of households making less than \$40,000 and 24 percent making between \$40,000 and \$74,999 per year (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center 2012). It is interesting, however, that despite these demographics and national trends, many New Orleanians are not unfamiliar with civic engagement. In fact, a survey of 7,000 New Orleans residents after Katrina found that while New Orleanians score below the national average in most measures of civic engagement, they were substantially more likely to participate in existing formal, neighborhood-based organizations such as churches, schools, and neighborhood associations (Weil 2011).¹¹

While our bloggers share some of the demographics of civically minded Americans, they did not engage in civic actions as a collective in the same way that most other New Orleanians did (i.e., through neighborhood associations, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, and other organizations) after Katrina. In fact, based on Weil's (2011) findings, since they were not geographically bound through neighborhoods or any other previously established ties or associations, it's likely that many in our sample would not have engaged in collective civic actions together. Indeed, blogging afforded them the opportunity to find each other, foment new social ties, and create networks based on shared grievances of the flood, the rebuilding, and the recovery process of the city after hurricane Katrina. Those in our sample were able to use their access and sophistication with the Web to develop a new community. This community was not so much bounded by physical location, as is the case for most mobilizations in New Orleans, but instead it was built around a shared identity rooted in their blogging and their experiences with the flood and its aftermath. This identity of Katrina bloggers led them to engage in a variety of collective civic actions as a loosely tied social movement focused on the cultural and social recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina.

We recorded the interviews with our bloggers, transcribed them, and analyzed them using NVivo. We took detailed notes immediately after each interview, highlighting important issues and identifying trends in order to distinguish overall themes. These notes served as reminders on how to interpret respondents' rich and dynamic narratives as we coded the transcriptions once they had been converted into print. We used interview guides to identify a number of issues or topics we wanted to address, and respondents were allowed the freedom to elaborate in their responses. Most of our questions were open-ended, and we did not openly question our respondents on their opinions of blogging and the Web as platforms for collective civic action and mobilization. Instead, we discussed a range of issues and as our respondents elaborated many expressed themselves in ways that we later, through open, substantive, and selective coding, understood and conceptualized (Wolcott 1994) as network creation, community building, identity formation, and collective civic actions.

Among others, we asked questions such as: Why and when did you begin blogging? How often do you blog? What do you blog about? What other blogs do you read? How did you find those blogs? Do you comment on other blogs? Do you receive comments on your blog? Did you know of others who started blogging after Katrina? This methodology helped us avoid leading questions and other types of bias that might occur during the interview process due to the researchers imposing their own influences on the interviewees. It was during the coding of these questions, where we noted clear indicators of the development of a post-Katrina blogosphere, the networks fostered by these bloggers, the creation of a virtual and physical community, and their collective civic actions toward the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. These practices also allowed us to code transcribed interviews accurately and with depth, adding to the validity and reliability of our data (Becker 1996; Bogdan and Biklen 1982:156–62).

We triangulated our data by including field notes from our observations and participation in various blogger events throughout the city (including the three *Rising Tide* conferences) and content analysis of all blog posts ($N = 7,268$) from 13 Katrina bloggers between August 1, 2005, and December 31, 2007. Our sample was chosen randomly from the pool of 27 bloggers we interviewed, plus 11 others that the bloggers in our sample identified as important and prolific writers after the flood. We decided to complement our interview data with blog content because it allowed us to cross-reference and verify the validity and reliability of our interview data.

Because our research is designed to assess the emergence of collectivities *over time*, it is also historical. We begin with a clearly established community of bloggers who organized and attended the annual *Rising Tide* conference. Using interviews, we worked back in time and attempted to understand how this community came into existence. We believe the timing of data collection (between five and seven years after the flood) is long enough to see some settling down of the initial confusion experienced as people both left the city and then returned months and years later but short enough so that the experiences are still fairly fresh in people's minds, and they can recall them rather accurately. Our goal is not to make generalizable claims by our data alone. Instead, we aim to contribute to our collective understanding of the processes of and linkages among collective civic action, digital communication, and civil society.

Setting the Context: Disaster and Communication

On August 29, 2005, hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the larger Gulf Coast region, flooding roughly 80 percent of the city and destroying much of its infrastructure. In addition to the physical damage, the storm displaced over a million residents in the Gulf Coast region, and New Orleans lost over half of its population (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center 2011).

Trialing conditions like these might foster collective engagement among residents (Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006) and the community and collective efficacy needed for mobilization and collective civic action (Sampson et al. 2005). This sense of collective efficacy is born from people first realizing shared concerns and then recognizing their capacity to act together toward resolving those shared problems. But in order to develop such a sense of collective efficacy, there has to be some semblance of community. In the case of New Orleans, blogging became one of the few avenues by which residents could share their frustrations, develop a loose network of like-minded individuals with shared concerns, and foment a sense of community and shared social identity. As such, blogging served as a "virtual" mobilizing structure that afforded a group of geographically scattered individuals the possibility to develop a community based on a collective identity organized around their blogging (i.e., an identity of Katrina bloggers) and the collective efficacy necessary for engaging in collective civic actions.

In the wake of the hurricane, many New Orleans residents went online for news and information about the city that they felt was more accurate and reliable than what they were seeing in the national outlets.¹² Here, they found the small number of preexisting bloggers who were using their blogs to disseminate information about the flood, the city, and their concerns about the disaster and the reconstruction process. Some of these bloggers remained in the city and provided firsthand accounts of what they saw and heard. Others left but were posting information that they received from friends and/or family who stayed. A number of residents decided to create their own blog, serving as the early members of a Katrina blogosphere. Over the following months, the number of newly created blogs in New Orleans grew rapidly and more than tripled between the end of 2005 and 2007 (see Figure 1). Many used their blogs not only to disseminate important information to city residents but also to engage what they saw as the inaccuracies and degrading content in the national news and the troubling aspects of the national and local recovery efforts (Ostertag and Ortiz 2013).

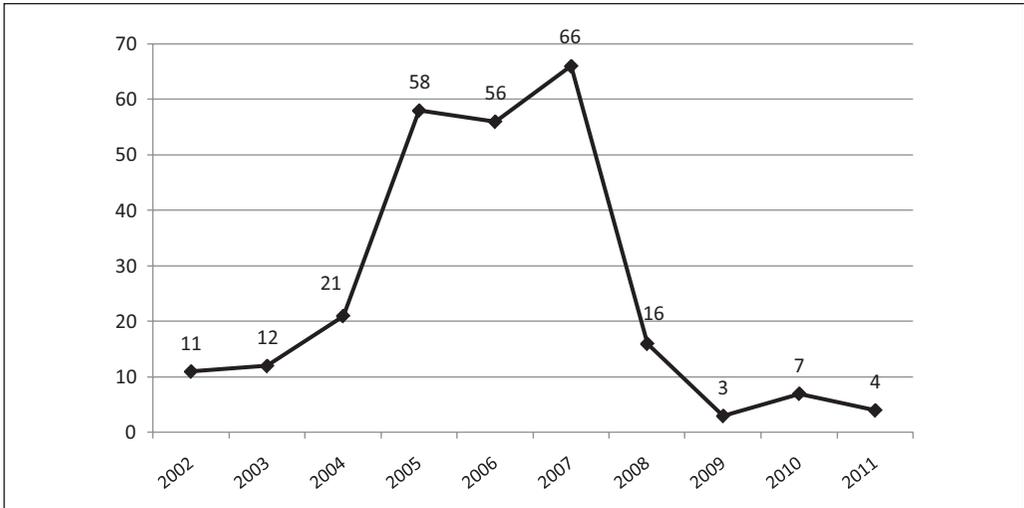


Figure 1. Number of new blogs about New Orleans by year.

While the initial drive to blog was commonly fueled by the need to seek and provide others with information, vent frustrations, express traumatic experiences, and to share concerns about their city, its role in finding likeminded others, creating social ties, and helping build a community emerged as latent by-products. Bloggers and blog readers found each other, were found by others, and promoted their blogs in a way that allowed for the creation of a loose-knit network of concerned individuals that grew into a collective community of Katrina bloggers. They were able to create this network by using the tools that the Internet made available to them, including Internet searches (often Google searches), exploring people's blogrolls, exploring the links bloggers inserted into their blog posts (hyperlinks), e-mailing each other directly, and through insights provided from readers commenting on blog posts (many of whom were bloggers themselves). We now discuss the processes by which this network developed and turned into a community of Katrina bloggers that was activated for a variety of collective civic actions.

From the Individual to the Collective: Creating Community

Communities are collections of people held together through time, ongoing communication, and common social attributes, practices, and goals. They "provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity" (Quan-Haase and Wellman 2004: 115) that foments a sense of solidarity and belonging (Shklovski et al. 2010). While communities used to be defined by geographical location, digital media has erased the need for physical copresence as a precondition for community development since communities are "based on what we do with others, rather than where we live with others" (Haythornthwaite 2002:159; cf. Lev-On 2010:1222). Yet, interaction is a necessary element for a sense of community and "we-ness" to develop. Blogging, and the types of ongoing interactions it enables through its design, provides a suitable format for ongoing interaction and the development of community.

Finding Each Other and Creating Social Ties

Pre-Katrina bloggers were fundamental to the early development of the Katrina blogosphere, and the social ties and networks that would foster a community of Katrina bloggers. *Your Right Hand Thief*, *Library Chronicles*, *Gulf Sails*, *Maitri's VatulBlog*, and *Cliff's Crib* were all blogs that

started before the storm.¹³ Many of the bloggers in our sample cited these blogs as the first blogs they discovered and from where they learned of others. Our interviewees also stated that in the weeks following the flood, these blogs served as important focal points (Lev-On 2010) not only for them but also for a number of evacuated residents.¹⁴ These early bloggers provided a virtual place for others to visit, consume, learn, interact, and expand their online network (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Shklovski et al. 2010). As such, they served as nodes in the establishment of new social ties and emerging social networks.

The process of finding these early blogs and other Katrina bloggers was varied but purposeful. Many of the bloggers in our sample reported that they found each other through Web search engines or became aware of other blogs because they received comments on their own blogs. They recalled that once they found at least one blog, they browsed its blogroll, individual posts, or the hyperlinks to find other bloggers or blog readers. *Oyster of Your Right Hand Thief* mentions how he came to find some of these blogs through search engines, hyperlinking, and using the blog's blogrolls.

Maybe I typed New Orleans blogs or something like that . . . [and], after kind of being temporarily engrossed in one of them, there was enough links to go to another one . . . They would link to each other . . . It was something like that: search engine, I found one and they linked to another two . . ., and I liked the other two enough that I wanted to go see what they wrote the next day.

In his answer, *Oyster* not only notes how he purposely sought to seek others to establish ties but he also implies that most of these bloggers had already started establishing social ties via their hyperlinks and blogrolls. *Maitri of Maitri's VatulBlog* also recounts how she began establishing these social ties with others by receiving comments on her blog.

We just kind of found each [other] . . . Comments just started popping up on the blog going "hey I'm so and so, thanks for the information. Check out my blog" and we started exchanging information that way . . .

In *Maitri's* case, she did not initially try to make contact with others. Instead, other bloggers "found" her and prompted her to read their blogs, which fomented their ties. In other cases, some bloggers *actively* sought to cultivate such ties. Here, *HuckUpChuck* talks about how one influential blogger, *Ashley Morris*, helped create this loose network by e-mailing other bloggers directly.

He [Ashley Morris] made contact with just about every blogger . . . he really went out of his way to try and cultivate a more personal relation with the blogging community. He wrote me an email out of the blue saying "hey, I read your blog, I live right here . . . come by anytime . . ." And so he would do that to everybody . . . He was kind of like a part of this post-Katrina blogging community that really used the blog to comment, pound and keep and hold accountable local officials and national officials and try and organize the local blogging community in a very activist kind of way.

Ashley Morris did not start blogging until shortly after the storm, but he was an avid blog reader and commenter. He, along with many of the other early writers, was fundamental for what would first grow into loose online social ties and networks, then friendships, a sense of community and shared identity, and eventually offline get-togethers, and more civically minded, contentious and noncontentious organizing.

Creating a Virtual Community

As bloggers and blog readers began using their newly established social ties to interact with each other on a regular basis, they learned the norms of blogging (e.g., proper citing and inserting

hyperlinks to content), commented on blog posts, created a LISTSERV, and e-mailed each other directly. A network of bloggers and blog readers gradually developed. Through their continued interaction, they established more enduring ties and networks that stimulated a sense of virtual community. Below, *Dangerblond* discusses how this network developed and how she was incorporated into it. In her statement, she mentions some of the defining elements of community: support, sociability, and ongoing communication.

[W]e all met each other from reading each other's blogs, and when I first started blogging, people like *Oyster* and *Ashley Morris* and *Library Chronicles* and . . . *Adrastos*, they had been doing it for a long time, and *b.rox*. And they were very welcoming to me and they always commented on my things that I wrote. And you know, I commented on their blogs.

Although they had not met each other face-to-face, their continued interactions started to slowly evolve into a semblance of a virtual community: one that provided space to communicate, share concerns about the recovery process and other important problems of their city, and rely on each other for support. *LipRap's Lament* discusses how the networks and ties that developed within this Katrina blogosphere were starting to grow into something stronger, resembling a virtual community.

It's just that all these people were brought together because we care about New Orleans, we've become pretty good friends for the most part, and ah, I think it's the chance for all of the reality of the issues really helping bring people together. And . . . ah, it just makes things a lot easier to take, when things get really, really rough. You need that community, you just do.

As *Liprap* notes, after some time of continued interaction, the bloggers in our sample came to realize that they had established some enduring ties online. Despite the fact that they had not yet met in person, they formed a virtual community—that is, they had become a group with lasting ties and ongoing communication, that provided each other with support and information, and that shared similar goals (caring about New Orleans and its recovery) and a sense of belonging.

While people were reading each other's blogs, commenting, and e-mailing each other, this sense of virtual community grew, and one blogger even created a NOLAbloggers' e-mail LISTSERV.¹⁵ *NOLASlate* states that “the LISTSERV used to be a very busy place—constantly. I mean you'd get online in the morning and there'd be 10 or 15 e-mails on the *NOLAblogger* list, and all the subsequent responses.” Initially, through Yahoo and then later Google, the *NOLAblogger* LISTSERV included most Katrina bloggers and blog readers. It fostered continued interaction among participants and helped them distribute information and recognize shared grievances. In so doing, the LISTSERV helped further nurture a virtual community and shared identity among participants as they came to see themselves as “Katrina bloggers.”

Taking the Next Step: From Virtual to Physical Community

While communicating online served a number of important purposes, some wanted to take their virtual relationships to “the next level.” Here, *Maitri* not only mentions several of the defining characteristics of community—support, solidarity, ties through time, and a sense of belonging—but also notes how that sense of virtual community elicited her desire to meet other bloggers in person.

[W]e had some people who almost carried each other in those months after, you know. So, um, we wanted to see each other in real life, and go “who are you? You're like one of my best friends now. I need to meet you. I need to talk to you.”

As time went on and regular online communication continued, this network moved offline and the ties of some of its members strengthened. Some met in person at the first Mardi Gras that followed the flood (February 2006), as it served as a useful public gathering that allowed bloggers to meet each other in a safe, casual manner. *Oyster* notes how

[A] lot of this blogging community hadn't really met each other in person . . . After Katrina it seemed like there was definitely some more, much more momentum to say "hey, let's meet up in person. Where are you going this Mardi Gras? . . . maybe I'll see you." The urge to connect in person seemed much greater and that eventually turned into things like these Geek Dinners and parties for bloggers or people on the bloggers' [LISTSERV], readers, and so forth.

The Geek Dinners to which *Oyster* refers were informal, potluck get-togethers, usually held at a blogger's house.¹⁶ They provided an opportunity for bloggers and blog readers to meet in person in a relaxing atmosphere. The first Geek Dinner was held on July 14, 2006, several months after the first meeting of a few bloggers at Mardi Gras. Here, *Adrastos* notes the role of Geek Dinners in the face-to-face meeting of each other and in establishing offline relationships, "we had a series of things called "Geek Dinners," which were dedicated to the people who are not only bloggers but also read and just wanted to come and meet us and have a good time."

Geek Dinners provided an informal gathering space where bloggers, blog readers, and others could meet each other, and finally communicate face-to-face, network, and develop stronger ties that helped cement their sense of community and identity as Katrina bloggers. Further, *People Get Ready* remarks in a blog entry dated roughly one year after the flood how he saw a fully concretized community of Katrina bloggers and stresses the sense of collective efficacy that the group had developed.

Most of the people reading this entry will appreciate what I'm about to say. The New Orleans blog movement has become an incredible network of information dissemination, storytelling, and mutual support, and I would argue that the New Orleans movement has emerged as a stronger expression of community than in almost any other forum of "extra-personal" (i.e., non-interpersonal) communication anywhere else in the world. (*People Get Ready*, July 16, 2006, blog post, <http://peoplegetready.wordpress.com/2006/07/16/>)

As *People Get Ready* states, less than a year after the storm, these bloggers not only thought of themselves as a community but also as an action-oriented collective, a movement. This sense of collective efficacy developed over time and through the interactions afforded by blogging. Katrina bloggers would later realize their collective efficacy via a number of different collective civic actions geared toward the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. In the following section, we take a look at some of the collective civic actions that Katrina bloggers fostered and participated in.

Katrina Bloggers Activate: Collective Efficacy and Collective Civic Action

Katrina bloggers were motivated to act due to the collective trauma (Erikson 1976) they experienced in the aftermath of the flood. They went online to express their shared grievances about the flood itself and the recovery and rebuilding of the city. There, they discussed, organized, and planned a host of collective civic actions that revolved around two key issues: the national media representations that many in our sample saw as a threat to their collective identity as New Orleanians (Ostertag and Ortiz 2013), and to put pressure on governmental authorities whose inadequate responses to the hurricane's aftermath (fraught with corruption, lack of planning, and ill-advised policies) were hindering the recovery of the city. Katrina bloggers realized their

collective efficacy and activated the networks and community bonds they established to engage in three different forms of collective civic actions: (1) protest organizations and participation, (2) blended social actions, and (3) collective work toward the creation of new civic organizations.¹⁷

Regarding the first form, bloggers communicate and organize each other through their blogging to either largely organize or play an important role in protest events. We examine one example of an event in which bloggers were an important part of the organization and participation, but that would have occurred regardless of their involvement, and another event mostly organized and solely carried out by Katrina bloggers.

Regarding the second form, we examine an event that would fall into the category of what Sampson et al. (2005) refer to as blended social action, the creation of a social media conference established to discuss the recovery of the city. This conference, *Rising Tide*, served as a hybrid event that included traditional civic engagement and collective action claims-making. Katrina bloggers first organized this conference in August 2006, roughly one year after the flood and to coincide with its anniversary. They have continued to organize this conference every year since and to a larger and larger audience.

Finally, regarding the third form, bloggers work together, as bloggers, to create new civic organizations that would not have existed without the networks, capital, and community established through their blogging. Here, we discuss the emergence of an online news organization created in early 2009 called *The Lens* that was created by a Katrina blogger and designed to “educate, engage and empower” citizens to advocate for a more transparent and accountable city government (*The Lens* 2012).

Bloggers and Protests: The March against Crime and Protesting Eddie Jordan

As people returned to New Orleans in the following months and years after the flood, they encountered a city that was in wide disarray and in many ways anomic. Blogger *NoItsJustMe* describes this collective atmosphere.

I mean . . . I felt like I was witnessing and a part of like a mass . . . not psychosis, but just like the depression, the anger, the fatigue and the hopelessness was just sort of, like “ahh,” you could just kind of feel it . . . but . . . like collectively, you know, at times you’d be hopeless and at times you’d be angry and at times, you know, it’d be frustration, maybe a little hope but usually group insomnia, that sort of thing.

This sentiment reached its climax with two high-profile murders in rapid succession (in late December 2006 and early January 2007) that sparked a massive march and demonstration at city hall with estimates of upward of 5,000 participants. While bloggers were not solely responsible for organizing the march, they were an important part of it since they used their blogging to help organize and participate in it. Here, *Oyster* recalls the event and the role of bloggers in it.

That was certainly not set up by the blogosphere but . . . some of the people who spoke at the event were bloggers . . . It was documented by blogs, the bloggers turned out in force and recorded the event and commented on the event and pushed it before and tried to keep it going afterwards . . . I point to that as something that bloggers definitely energized . . . There’s a few others where you could say we had a hand in.

Blogger *Last Magnolia* agrees with *Oyster*,

So . . . that core [Katrina] bloggers group, the *Rising Tide* group, they all were going to get together and march . . . and there were marches from different places . . . but um, yeah . . . I mean, everybody

blogged about it, about you know, “go to the crime march.” I’m not sure if that really made it that successful cause there was other publicity about it from the *Silence is Violence* people.

Oyster and *Last Magnolia* both highlight the leveraged affordances that their blogging offered to this protest. In a city-wide protest that was organized quickly, bloggers used their online networks to promptly and widely disseminate information, organize, and participate “in force” at this protest event. For example, of the seven speakers at the main event in front of city hall, two were Katrina bloggers (*b.rox* and *Squandered Heritage*).

Moreover, Katrina bloggers took action to create and sustain momentum before and after the event. For example, *b.rox*—who was a close friend of one of the victims—had a series of daily posts starting on the day of the murder of his friend (January 4), leading up to the march (January 11), and continuing until a couple days after (January 13). *B.rox* continued to sporadically mention the march in his blog posts throughout the rest of January. In one of his posts, he calls for all New Orleanians to get involved in the march and in rebuilding the city:

Yesterday morning a friend of mine was murdered . . . How to respond? . . . I believe that [she] would have wanted us to keep fighting for justice and a better city. If you are reading this in New Orleans, and you’re not actively involved in working for the future of this city, I challenge you to get involved, now . . . A march on City Hall is already being planned. (*b.rox*, January 5, 2007, blog post, <http://b.rox.com/2007/01/05/>)

In that post, *b.rox* also gives the time and place for the march and the contact information of the organizers. On a later post, he gave a “first-look” of the entire speech he would later give at the march. The speech serves both as an indictment of the government and as a call to community action,

Leaders, you need to do something that many of us think you can’t do. You need to be honest. You need to admit that what you’re doing isn’t working, and plan a return to true community policing . . . We know that law enforcement alone can’t solve these problems. We need long-term solutions too. It will take all of us. It will take community involvement. Well, look around. The community IS involved. And we will stay involved. To our political class: You’re on notice. We will be watching. (*b.rox*; January 11, 2007 blog post, <http://b.rox.com/2007/01/11/>)

Finally, two days after the march, in a January 13, 2007, blog post, he acknowledges the role of Katrina bloggers in his speech by stating “[t]he words of my speech came not from me but from the community, from my neighbors, and in particular from the local blogosphere.” As *b.rox* noted, the role of other bloggers in making the march a successful event was quite significant. For example, *LipRap* posts about the importance of the march for the recovery of the city, the role of Katrina bloggers in disseminating information about the march, and the need to follow-up after it happens.

Indeed, this fellow [Katrina] blogger [*Adrastos*] . . . details a planned march on City Hall in these parts, and then he skillfully dissects the pros and cons of this strategy of the citizens taking the city back from these damned killers. Overall, he is for the march, as am I. And there does need to be a massive follow-through on the part of the march’s participants. This all may seem like yet another thing to deal with on top of all the other recovery efforts, but dealing with the scope and the scale of this violence is VITALLY important to recovery. (*LipRap’s Lament*, January 8, 2007, blogpost, http://liprapslament-theline.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html)

GBitch has a similar post on January 8, 2007, where she states “[I]ots of folks have details but go to *Adrastos*’ post and check out the comments section on the fears, hopes and some of the

demands/ideas from the organizers and the meeting Sunday.” (<http://gbitchspot.com/gbitchspot/?p=231>)

Several Katrina bloggers also kept disseminating information about the event days after it happened. For example, on a post written the night after the march (January 11, 2007, <http://wetbankguide.blogspot.com/2007/01/>), *Wet Bank Guide* reproduces parts of the speeches at the event. The day after the march (January 12, 2007, <http://gbitchspot.com/gbitchspot/?p=234>), *GBitch* includes pictures of the event and links to video and audio of the full speeches, and that same day, *LipRap* posts a link to *b.rox*'s speech and writes “[t]ake a look at one of the reasons why I still live here: this guy and his speech. Go ahead, read it. I’ll wait.” (http://liprapslament-theline.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html) Indeed, all of these posts offer hyperlinks to other blogs and to information about the march.

While this protest would have taken place regardless of bloggers’ involvement, they were nonetheless vital contributors, organizers, and participants in the event. Moreover, their role in the dissemination, organization, and follow-up of the march was done greatly through their blogs and the digital networks they established over the previous months without the need for any of them to be co-present in time and space.

While not on the same scale as the March against Crime, Katrina bloggers organized and carried out a protest against then city District Attorney Eddie Jordan, whom they (and many others in the city) saw as corrupt and incompetent. Here, however, Katrina bloggers were solely responsible for this protest carried out on July 15, 2007. Without their organizing and participation, this event would not have taken place. *Last Magnolia* explains,

We did protest Eddie Jordan in front of the Cabildo and that was like Katrina bloggers only . . . there was a couple dozen [bloggers] and [we] went down there and the idea was we would protest with signs because I think *Good Morning America* was at the Cabildo for something. I went down before work . . . he did eventually resign, but it was a few months after that.

Katrina bloggers were the sole organizers and participants in this protest. Their continued disappointment with the D.A.’s performance comes to a breaking point when Eddie Jordan drops the charges on a murder case of five teenagers due to “losing” the only witness. The witness was subsequently found by New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) in a matter of hours, but the D.A. had failed to request the police’s help and had decided to dismiss the case before the witness was found.

Maitri of Maitri’s VatulBlog posts the story in her blog (on July 11, 2007, <http://vatul.net/blog/index.php/1386>) along with a list of names and contact information of all pertinent authorities and members of the press. She asks that everyone contact their city officials about this and ends her plea with “Eddie Jordan has got to go!” That same day, *NOLA-Dishu* posts in his blog a reproduction of the letter he sent to “everyone on Maitri’s list” asking for the resignation of Eddie Jordan (<http://noladishu.blogspot.com/2007/07/disaster-that-is-das-office.html>).

The next day (on July 12, 2007, <http://thechicory.com/blog/?p=187>), *Varg of The Chicory* responds by posting “Who all has joined the chorus demanding Jordan’s resignation?” and includes a list of links to *Squandered Heritage*, *Maitri*, *Suspect Device*, and several other bloggers that had stated in their blogs that Eddie Jordan should resign. And *NOLA-Dishu*, on a blog post titled *The United Blogger Front*, makes the call to all other bloggers to pressure city council for the resignation of Eddie Jordan.

I propose a united blogger front. Regardless of our politics, conservative, liberal, moderate, Republican, Democrat, Independent, black, white, brown, etc. we pressure Nagin and the City Council to publicly call for Jordan’s resignation. We especially focus on the City Council. They are still eligible for reelection. (*NOLA-Dishu*, July 12, 2007, blog post, <http://noladishu.blogspot.com/2007/07/proposal-for-united-front-of-all-nola.html>)

This would eventually lead to the organization of the protest dubbed “Storm the Cabildo.” A few days before the protest, a call to participate in it started making the rounds through the Katrina blogosphere. *Maitri's VatulBlog*, *b.rox*, *Squandered Heritage*, and several other Katrina bloggers reproduced the call to protest seen as follows:

New Orleans citizens, fed up with the resurgence of violent crime in their city, will stage a protest in front of the Cabildo on Jackson Square on Monday, July 16 at 6 a.m. to demand the resignation of District Attorney Eddie Jordan . . . We hope that you'll participate in this peaceful demonstration. Those interested should be in front of the Cabildo at 5:30 a.m. on Monday (to catch the live broadcast of Good Morning America). We ask that you bring signs and wear something white. (*Ashley Morris*, July 15, 2007, blog post, http://ashleymorris.typepad.com/ashley_morris_the_blog/2007/07/storm-the-cabil.html)

After the protest, Katrina bloggers used their blogs to continue discussing the event, much as they did with the March against Crime. For example, *Varg* posted on July 16, 2007, his recount of the protest. (<http://thechicory.com/blog/?p=192>) *Maitri* (who could not attend the protest) also posted on the same day a statement that reads “a few dozen people stood outside the Cabildo in the rain this morning, bearing signs that said ‘Jordan Resign Now,’ ‘Eddie Out!’ and others.” Her post provides links to all the media coverage that the protest garnered (including national and local news outlets such as FOX8, WWLTV, and ABCNews; <http://vatul.net/blog/index.php/1392>). Most of the bloggers kept using their blogs to pressure for Eddie Jordan's resignation until October, when the D.A. finally resigned.

Again, this is an example of how Katrina bloggers used their leveraged affordances to realize their collective efficacy through direct protest. Bloggers decided to organize and engage this collective civic action because it both resonated with broader collective sentiments in the city, and because they saw it as an opportunity to openly manifest their disapproval of Eddie Jordan. This was a clear display of collective efficacy manifested in their capacity for action in order to realize a common goal. While Katrina bloggers were, of course, not solely responsible for the District Attorney's resignation, they collectively organized and voiced their disapproval of his administration, and their participation was largely enabled through their blogging and the networks and associations that emerged from it. Having examined a couple of cases of protests that Katrina bloggers were involved in, we turn our attention to their organization and participation in a blended social action.

Bloggers and the Rising Tide Conference: Blended Social Action

Rising Tide is an annual conference organized mostly by Katrina bloggers and blog readers. The first conference started in August of 2006, one year after the flood, and it continues to this day. We categorize *Rising Tide* as a blended social action since it is an event that provides a mixture of collective civic engagement with collective action claims-making. This can be readily recognized by reading its mission, as it is an annual gathering for all who wish to

learn more and do more to assist New Orleans' recovery. It's **for everyone who loves New Orleans and is working to bring a better future to all its residents**. Leveraging the power of **bloggers and new media**, the conference is a launch pad for **organization and action**. Our day-long program of speakers and presentations is tailored to inform, entertain, enrage and inspire. We come together to **dispel myths, promote facts, highlight progress and regress, discuss recovery ideas, and promote sound policies at all levels**. We aim to be a “real life” demonstration of **internet activism** as we continue to recover from a massive failure of government on all levels.¹⁸

The mission of *Rising Tide* is indeed quite telling of how our group of Katrina bloggers envisions this conference as a blended event: a call for civic engagement and activism at the same

time. The organizers frame the conference as an act of civic engagement by appealing to all who care about the city to participate in a discussion of how to move forward. They recognize the leveraged affordances that their blogging offers for organizing such an event and its potential for activism. The conference also serves as a space in which to manifest the collective efficacy of the community and launch activism.

From its inception, *Rising Tide* was conceived as a blended event. In his July 5, 2006, post, *Oyster* seeks to organize the growing Katrina bloggers' community. He writes,

Katrina Bloggers Activate! Form of . . . a convention in New Orleans! Think of it: bloggers from all over could get together, and talk about the Katrina aftermath, and blog, and argue, and party, and share information, and podcast, and effect political change, and meet each other in person, and have a "work day" in a flooded neighborhood, and actually *do something*, and have panels and guest speakers and t-shirts and stickers . . . (<http://righthandthief.blogspot.com/2006/07/rising-tide-conference.html>)¹⁹

Absent physical copresence and previously established organizations like a nonprofit or SMO, *Oyster* used his blog as a platform to create, communicate, and plan this blended event out of a loose network of individuals who had established ties and created a community based around the identity of Katrina bloggers. Their blogs, the Web, and the network of Katrina bloggers served as an alternative mobilizing structure that enabled them to communicate, organize, and bring to fruition this blended social action.

Dangerblond, who, along with *Oyster* and several other bloggers, is a key organizer of the *Rising Tide* conference, describes the first conference and how Katrina bloggers have tried to make it grow since then, "we were really happy with the first one and we had about 60 people . . . we'll have [panels on] like the schools, once we had sports . . . Umm, politics we always have." Likewise, *Cliff of Cliff's Crib* notes the changing status of panelists:

As the years pass, they've been getting more prominent guests. The first two years it was like basically all bloggers for the most part, you know, as times been going on, you know, the chief was there [referring to city's police superintendent], they've been getting other people to take part in it.

Liprap's Lament agrees, "Yeah, and we've been slowly building it over the past five years. The first year was really just, you know, getting all these people together that we'd only found out about through the internet." Recent panelists include a number of local journalists including those writing for the *Times-Picayune* (the main newspaper serving the New Orleans metropolitan area) and *The Gambit* (the local alternative weekly), a number of representatives from local neighborhood associations and community organizations, and professors from local universities.

Rising Tide V was held on a rainy Saturday in late August and attracted approximately 215 people, in addition to the 22 invited panelists. The panels lasted about an hour and a half each and covered a range of topics, including public safety, environmental sustainability and the gulf coast, politics, and the popular HBO program *Treme*. There was also a presentation by Tim of *Tim's Nameless Blog*, an engineer who has experience working with the Army Corp of Engineers on the New Orleans' levee system.²⁰ Further, organizers also now include "how to" workshops, designed to teach the untrained how to use social media for activism and civic engagement purposes. *Rising Tide VI* and *VII* were held in August 2011 and September 2012, respectively. They attracted similar attendance numbers, included panelists on topics like the BP oil disaster, education reform and charter schools, and organized workshops on using WordPress for blogging and on intellectual property rights.

Next, we discuss a civic organization that one Katrina blogger created from scratch by drawing on the networks and capital she generated from blogging. This organization is intimately

rooted in post-Katrina blogging and would likely not exist without the fundamental work and organizing of bloggers.

Bloggers Create New Civic Organizations: The Lens

Blogging also served as a fundamental precursor to the creation of new civic organizations that would likely not exist if it were not for the networks, community, and affordances provided by the Katrina blogosphere. One of the more formal organizations to emerge out of our Katrina bloggers group is *The Lens*.

The Lens is an online-only news organization that runs an active Web site. We draw attention to it for two reasons. First, in its simple existence, it is an example of collective civic action, as it publishes daily reports on happenings at city hall and among other institutions throughout the city (e.g., criminal justice, education). Second, *The Lens* also creates blended social actions through its Salon series. These are community forums focused on particular topics (e.g., education, criminal justice, housing and blight) in which members of the city government, nonprofit community organizations, and community leaders discuss recent developments, answer questions, and talk about future plans and goals. These Salons serve to foment collective sentiment, cultivate collective efficacy, and launch further actions toward addressing important issues and concerns in need of attention.

Mary Breaux of the Katrina blog *Squandered Heritage* started *The Lens* in January 2009. In the wake of the flood, *Squandered Heritage* was one of a number of influential blogs that was investigating and writing about issues related to the rebuilding efforts. *Squandered Heritage* focused mostly on housing and the city's architecture, as many homes were either destroyed in the flood or slated to be razed. She would photograph them and post the photos on her blog. Mary eventually gained access to the city's list of homes slated for demolition. Concerned with neighborhood blight and repopulating the city after the flood, she invited other Katrina bloggers and her blog readers to take pictures of homes from the list and to post them on *Squandered Heritage*. In doing so, she helped create a subgroup of Katrina bloggers organized around the shared concern of neighborhood blight. As she explains,

[S]o what we had done in this little small online working group, people hadn't met each other, we just sort of tied ourselves together, we started documenting these properties. I'd write about them, and illustrate the sort of insanity . . . and we would have different prism points that we were interested in.

As *Squandered Heritage's* reputation and notoriety were growing, another reporter (Maija) who had recently moved to New Orleans sought her out. Like Mary, Maija was also concerned with land-use issues and had learned about Mary from her *Squandered Heritage* blog. They decided to collaborate and apply for a grant from the Open Society Institute to fund an online news organization, and *The Lens* was born.²¹

The Lens as civic organization. *The Lens* currently has 11 employees and a budget that is slightly north of one million dollars. Together, they produce long-form, investigative journalism on a number of issues, including government and politics, environment, schools, land use, and criminal justice. They also produce daily reports on council meetings and other events happening at city hall. Their mission is intimately rooted in civic engagement,

The Lens is the New Orleans area's first nonprofit, nonpartisan public-interest newsroom, dedicated to unique in-depth reporting projects, as well as exclusive daily stories. Our mission is to educate, engage and empower readers with information and analysis necessary for them to advocate for a more transparent and just governance that is accountable to the public.

In addition to a number of other issues, *The Lens* was recently awarded a grant from the Knight Foundation to fund a number of journalists to report on the board meetings of the city's newly created charter school system.²² According to its Web pages,

The Lens has assembled a dedicated group of reporters to provide regular coverage of the 42 charter school boards that oversee 73 public schools in Orleans Parish. *The Lens* publishes agendas and supporting materials for board meetings as they are made available. Then, our reporters follow up with coverage of the meetings, posting the documents that were distributed. Our goal is to provide readers with a one-stop resource for meaningful and specific information about charter school governance in New Orleans.

The Lens would likely not exist if it were not for Mary and the networks and reputations she developed as a Katrina blogger with *Squandered Heritage*. *The Lens* reports on events happening in city hall, the sheriff's department, the city's education system, and other areas of civil society. As a news organization, it constitutes civic engagement by its very nature; indeed, this is partly evident in the fact that its Web site has gained the attention of policy-makers at city hall, as well as the heads of important community organizations throughout the city.²³

The Lens organizes blended social actions. *The Lens* has hosted a number of Salons since it was first created in early 2009. Held every quarter year, these are community meetings that *The Lens* organizes and hosts at various centers throughout the city. Reporters from *The Lens* moderate the events, asking each panelist a series of questions before opening up the discussion to audience members. We might think of these Salons as examples of blended social actions as they are designed to both discuss important issues facing city residents and serve as a potential catalyst for planning and collective civic action.

For example, New Orleans is currently one of the most violent cities in the United States. It also incarcerates a higher rate of its population than any city in the world, and almost all of those incarcerated are African American. Many residents hold strong opinions on issues related to violent crime, incarceration, and race. In March of 2012, *The Lens* hosted a Salon session on the city's juvenile criminal justice system. Panelists included members from local organizations (e.g., Safe Streets/Strong Communities, BreakOUT! and the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana), as well as representatives from the Vera Institute of Justice and the Orleans Public Defenders Office. Other topics have included the city's education system, neighborhood blight, and rebuilding.

Further, and indicative of its ability to mobilize, *The Lens*' reporting is partially responsible for pressuring the city to host open community meetings to discuss the sheriff's plans to build a new 4,000 plus bed jail. Reporting from *The Lens* on the lack of public awareness and feedback on these plans pressured the city to abide by its own regulations that required it host a number of community meetings to discuss such issues. These meetings were well attended and pressure from a number of residents eventually led the sheriff to scale back the size of the jail to around 1,300 beds.

Created by a Katrina blogger, *The Lens* serves an interesting, multi-dynamic example of collective civic actions. With both the Salons and its reporting, we might see *The Lens* as a civic organization that cultivates blended social actions. The mission of this organization is rooted deeply in ideas of civic engagement and citizenship. This, coupled with its significant mobilizing capacities and the various forms of collective civic action that it performs and cultivates, suggests that online news organizations such as *The Lens* occupy various spaces on the continuum of collective civic actions.

In sum, Katrina bloggers activated the digital networks they fostered over the months and years following the flood to take part in a variety of collective civic actions geared toward the

city's recovery and rebuilding work, including protests, blended social actions, and creating new civic organizations. Much of their contentious and noncontentious collective civic actions revolved around issues of just, rational, and transparent governance among authority figures at city hall and the collective traumas resulting from their actions (Ortiz and Ostertag 2014). They sought to fight for "justice and a better city," and they warned the city's political class that they were "on notice" and that the citizens would "be watching" them (*b.rox*). They pointed out the corruption and "insanity" of the city's recovery and rebuilding work (*Squandered Heritage*) and worked toward a more "transparent and just governance that [would be] accountable to the public" (*The Lens*). In some of the examples we discuss, their collective efforts were directed at the city's violent crime problem, as senses of security and safety were "VITALLY important to the recovery" of the city (*Liprap's Lament*), and residents were angered by city leaders' inability to "admit that what [they're] doing isn't working" (*b.rox*) and adequately or competently deal with it.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship in social movements (McAdam et al. 2005) and civic engagement (Sampson et al. 2005) has argued that we might transcend the artificial distinctions between these literatures by expanding on the types of behaviors that we see as valuable to civil society (Schudson 2006) and theorizing them as existing on a continuum of collective civic actions (Sampson et al. 2005) ranging from individual to collective and noncontentious to contentious. Doing so allows us to recognize the variety of people's involvement in civic and contentious actions, how that involvement might shift over time, and the fact that they might take part in multiple collective civic actions within the same time frame.

In this paper, we argued that digital communication technologies facilitate dynamic varieties of engagement that span a wide array of collective civic actions. We suggest that as "virtual" mobilizing structures, digital communication technologies facilitate the creation of new social ties, the development of digital networks, the formation of online and offline communities with shared identities, and the collective efficacy that is so crucial for organizing and mobilization of shared grievances. To support our argument, we use longitudinal qualitative data from a project examining the relationship between local blogging and collective civic action. We highlight the processes involved in the formation of a bloggers' movement that emerged in New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina. With a developmental framework, we show how a community of "Katrina bloggers" emerged out of individual-level, digitally mediated social processes and was then activated for a number of contentious and noncontentious collective civic actions. These ranged from involvement in protests to the creation of blended social actions and civic organizations. In the process, we show how affordances associated with the Web, and blogging in particular, were fundamental to creating new social ties and loosely-knit ad hoc networks, organizing, and mobilizing without the need of preexisting structures, SMOs, institutionalized leadership positions, or copresence in physical time and space.

This paper also responds to recent calls in social movement and civil society scholarship to better understand the underlying social processes that manifest themselves in collective civic actions and events (McAdam et al. 2001; Sampson 2012). We do this by highlighting the movement from individual blogger to a collective of bloggers organized around a shared identity of "Katrina bloggers" and their movement from online interactions to offline collective civic actions. We emphasize the role of blogs in affording and structuring the social interactions and relations that foster the development of networks, collective identities, and collective efficacy. Hence, we gain a better understanding of the social processes that underlie the dynamics of contention (McAdam et al. 2001) and how they are digitally mediated. Further, our analysis brings to light the fact that individuals within these groups move quite freely—often in the same time frame—across various forms of civic engagement and protest. We suggest that this is because

digital media allows for the formation of a flexible and decentralized mobilizing structure that enables participants to opt in and out of certain actions and areas of interest while moving back and forth between individual civic engagement and fully organized collective civic action.

While the hurricane and its lingering effects appear to be a necessary precursor for those in our sample to begin blogging, we believe such a disaster need not be the only precipitating factor. Rather, we believe that conditions of sustained and amplified need associated with shared frustrations and collective trauma serve as sufficient background factors that underlie the digitally mediated social processes we identified in this paper. As such, we see an affinity between our findings and those of scholars who studied other digitally mediated mobilizations, such as Iran's digital revolution in 2009 (Howard 2010) and the ongoing Arab Spring (Howard and Hussain 2013).

Authors' Note

Both authors contributed equally to this article.

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Notes

1. Here, we ascribe to a broad definition of civil society (see Elshstain 1999) that includes a variety of social concerns and institutions (education, health care, news, criminal justice, religion, neighborhood associations, etc.) that tend to exist in the communal spaces that lie between the family, state, and market.
2. We use the terms *digital communication technologies*, *digital media*, *digital communication*, and *the Web* interchangeably throughout this paper. While weighty arguments can be made to differentiate these as distinct theoretical concepts, most scholars still use these terms indistinctly. In this paper, we chose to not make such distinctions in an effort to illustrate the role that the Web and digital communications in general can have as "virtual" mobilizing structures for collective civic actions.
3. Most of those in our sample identify themselves as "Katrina bloggers." Throughout this paper, we use this term to reflect the collective identity of this community.
4. In this paper, we rely on Tarrow's (1998:4) definition of a social movement as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities." That is, a group with common purposes and solidarity that poses collective challenges to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes and that does so through sustained interactions with those elites, opponents, and authorities.
5. This is not to say that social movement scholarship does not cover noncontentious events, or that it is solely based on the analysis of events themselves. On the contrary, we acknowledge that event-based research is only a part—albeit an important one—of this scholarship.

6. Due to the way in which the respective fields of study have developed (as noted above), most of this research focuses on how Internet use affects civic engagement, and/or contentious and noncontentious collective action, separately.
7. This count reflects the numbers of blogs written by individual, independent writers whose blogs were centered around political and public affairs topics (i.e., excluding those based on sports, hobbies, personal, or family issues).
8. We realize this is an oversimplification of Tarrow's argument, but use it to illustrate the interrelationship between technologies and active, creative users of such technologies.
9. There is a considerable debate in the literature about the nature of the differences between online collective action efforts and offline collective action efforts. For a good summary of this discussion, see Earl and Kimport (2011).
10. We recognize that our analysis suggests a temporal order of the development of collective civic actions out of individual-level blogging. These are the developments we witnessed in our study, though we do not necessarily claim all developments of digitally mediated communities follow similar paths.
11. For example, after Katrina, those who were most likely to engage civically were members of Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs (SAPCs). These are the neighborhood-based community organizations that would historically help members defray health care costs, funeral expenses, and financial hardships. Members of SAPCs are generally less educated, lower income, African American individuals, which is a very different group than our sample of bloggers (Weil 2011). As such, we believe that those in our sample and those who do not fit our sample characteristics realized their civic engagement in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina by tapping into their own (and dissimilar) sources of social capital. Those in our sample used their access to and know-how of the Web to mobilize, while other New Orleanians drew on the social ties they created through their shared history, culture, and geography to mobilize.
12. Katrina bloggers were very vocal about their perception of the mainstream media's biased coverage of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. They repeatedly mention this—both in their interviews and in their blogs—as an important factor that made them go online to find other sources of information and led them to become bloggers. We discuss this at length elsewhere (Ostertag and Ortiz 2013). Furthermore, a 2008 Kaiser Family Foundation report found that 45 percent of the Orleans Parish residents sampled rated the national news coverage of New Orleans' recovery from Katrina as either “not so good” or downright “poor” (Kaiser Family Foundation 2008). For additional research examining the mainstream media's coverage of hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, see Shah 2009 and Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006.
13. Often these blogs started only a few months before the storm.
14. All of our interviewees stated that they relied on blogs, LISTSERVs, and online discussion boards for reliable information after hurricane Katrina. They were not the only ones to do so, as many other residents engaged in the same practices. For more detailed information on this well-documented issue, see Heussner 2008, Klinenberg 2007, and Perrone 2005.
15. While communication over the LISTSERV has slowed down over the years it continues to this day.
16. As the name implies, “Geek” refers to an additional identity that many Katrina bloggers shared. It refers to their computer skills. While not all bloggers would consider themselves computer geeks, as some had recently learned how to blog, others are much more computer savvy. *Dangerblond* illustrates this, “there's a lot of ‘geekitude’ to it [blogging] and before they came out with things like WordPress [an easy to use blog format] and these blogging websites, you had to figure it out, you had to do html you know, and I would have never done it [started blogging] if it hadn't been so easy.”
17. We also found a number of individual bloggers whose blogging led them to individual civic actions or fostered their involvement in already existing organizations (such as a local biking organization working on making the city's streets more biker friendly). However, because we are interested in collective forms of civic action, we do not discuss these here.
18. All bold print in original.
19. All italics in original.
20. In his presentation, Tim (speaking as a concerned citizen) argued that New Orleans residents should solicit the federal government to categorize the levee system as federal dams. He claimed that doing so would place the levees under a stronger system of oversight.
21. For a more detailed description on the growth of *The Lens*, see Ostertag and Tuchman 2012.

22. The city used the massive disruption caused by hurricane Katrina to dismantle and revamp much of its public school system. As a result, there are now 42 charter school boards that oversee 73 public schools, the most of any city in the United States.
23. This is based on interviews with the editor and reporters of *The Lens*.

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Author Biographies

David G. Ortiz is assistant professor of Sociology and affiliated faculty of the Stone Center for Latin American studies at Tulane University. His interests include: social movements, collective violence, state repression, time-diffusion of social processes, research methods, and Latin America. His current research agenda focuses on gap-time conditional risk set models for collective action and repression, digital media and activism, short and long term effects of disasters on social movements, and the effects of International Financial Institutions on contention in Latin America.

Stephen F. Ostertag is a cultural/media sociologist at Tulane University. His interests are in digital media, collective behavior, news-making/consumption, and civil society. His present research is a largely qualitative, multi-method study examining the growth of a post-hurricane Katrina blogosphere in New Orleans, focusing on how in the weeks, months and years after the systemic levee failure, people used blogs to communicate, establish relationships, and organize to influence rebuilding efforts and the city's civil and political institutions. He is also using this research to develop a theory for a cultural sociology of journalism and a framework to build a future media sociology.