

The Public Imperative:
Civic Engagement, News Media, and Digital Politics in the Tea Party Movement

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Abstract

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This dissertation explored a dimension of American political culture that is likely to be relevant to individuals and social movements seeking political change. I proposed that we share a familiar, yet mostly implicit, social construct that is deeply rooted in historical narratives and national identity. This construct suggests that, when facing some kind of oppression, people may feel compelled to come together, to voice their opinions, and to try to change the status quo. I called this “the public imperative” and described its three core elements: 1) meeting up, 2) speaking out, and 3) pushing back. To see if this functioned in practice, I conducted a series of qualitative in-depth interviews with members of the Tea Party movement, meeting at events in several Western states and Washington, D.C., and talking with members across five distinct regions of the country. My findings suggested that the public imperative was a powerful motivator in transforming isolated, frustrated individuals into a national movement. Through interviews and a detailed web analysis, I also examined how news media and digital platforms related to members’ public imperative expectations. This study has implications for how individuals and organizations might develop more meaningful and effective forms of civic engagement in the United States and elsewhere.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated three times...

To my parents, whom I love beyond measure, and to whom I owe everything;

To my teachers and my students;

And to the public.

Chapter One

National Mythology in Political Discourse and Civic Engagement

Introduction

A nation exists, at its deepest roots, not only in the land, laws, and wealth of a people, but in the collective imagination. A nation is a collaborative construction that reflects and reifies the beliefs of people within and beyond its borders; it is an entity that is conceived, maintained, and changed in countless actions and reactions of individuals connected through it (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995; Carey, 1989). At the center of modern democratic systems, three broad domains of social actors vie for influence over the flow of public meaning and political power: political officials, who claim to lead and represent the public; news media, which claim to speak for the public; and the public itself, which remains a notoriously slippery concept. Politicians and news media maintain a substantial social influence, transforming people's lives through legislation and shaping the narratives that become history. And yet, the trump card in American politics belongs to neither of them: in the political imagination, both answer to the public. As imaginary as "the public" may be, it is nonetheless fundamental to the ebb and flow of American politics, and its influence suffuses political discourse. Consider, as just one example, a phrase familiar to virtually every American student and citizen: "We the people." These words come at the opening of the Preamble to the United States Constitution, situated there by the document's authors to establish the public as the sovereign of the new nation.

Politicians are attuned to this idea of a powerful public, especially at crucial and contested moments. In early 2008, for example, Illinois Senator Barack Obama was navigating a precipitous stage of his presidential campaign: opponents had leveled charges of anti-

Americanism and race-baiting over controversial remarks by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the pastor at Obama's Chicago church. It was a political crucible. At the Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Obama began the speech many thought would make or break his campaign with the most powerful appeal to unity available in American politics. His opening words directly invoked the Preamble: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union..." The speech became a pivotal moment for the campaign and an effective answer to critics (Kantor, 2008; Tapper & Venkataraman, 2009). Throughout the campaign, Obama built themes that tapped into citizens' shared destiny through the campaign's primary slogan, "Yes we can," and another potent echo of the Preamble, "We are the ones we've been waiting for." In his victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park, on November 4, 2008, Obama returned to these themes, capping his historic campaign and asserting that "in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people" (ABCNews.com, 2008). Obama's campaign symbolized and embodied an extraordinary moment in American political rhetoric, one that would soon be answered by a conservative movement with a different vision.

Rumblings of that response began early in 2009, when activists and organizations began staging "Tea Party taxpayer revolts" across the country. Drawing heavily on revolutionary symbolism, participants quickly cultivated an identity staunchly opposed to President Obama and "liberals," one rooted in conservative views of citizen-patriotism and "real Americans" (Detweiler, 2009; Montopoli, 2009). The Tea Party movement helped shape a historic election in November 2010, in which the Republican Party reclaimed the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. When the newly elected members convened, incoming Speaker of the House John Boehner opened the 112th Congress with a symbolic nod to the Tea Party, having members conduct a (mostly) complete reading of the Constitution (Steinhauser, 2011). Boehner himself

started the proceedings with the same words Obama had invoked in Philadelphia: “We the people.” Again, the phrase marked a transformational political moment and a triumphant claim to public power, as it would repeatedly during this period. Shortly after the election, Minnesota Republican Rep. Michele Bachmann—founder of the new Tea Party Caucus in Congress and then on the cusp of her own presidential campaign—issued a stand-alone rebuttal to President Obama’s first State of the Union speech, which she closed by saying, “We the people will never give up on this great nation.” In summer 2011, as the GOP presidential primary took shape, former Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin traveled to historical sites and primary states in a bus emblazoned with a graphic representation of the Constitution boldly featuring the words “We the people.” In all of these cases, and countless others, political leaders across the ideological spectrum claimed authority and authenticity by invoking the foundational idea of American politics: a visible, vocal, and engaged public.

In this dissertation, I propose that this embodiment of public identity plays a key role in American political culture. When people come together for a political purpose, “the public” can become a powerful symbolic influence, both for participating individuals and for social institutions. In this way, public identity offers a genuine manifestation of the power of citizens. The critical questions, therefore, concern how and why individuals step into political public spaces and what they encounter when they do so. I will argue that these questions can be answered through an understanding of three central premises that legitimize civic action by enacting American public identity: *meeting up*, *speaking out*, and *pushing back*. Naming and examining these premises can provide insights about certain mechanisms of democracy that are frequently taken for granted. This dissertation will examine the dynamics and implications of this phenomenon through an analysis of the Tea Party, an emerging conservative social movement

that has exerted significant influence on American culture and politics. In the remainder of this chapter, I will address American public identity, its roots in political mythology, and its three central premises, which I collectively call the *public imperative*. In the next chapter, I will describe the methodological approaches I used to conduct this research. Three chapters of data analysis will then examine: how the public imperative appeared in individual-level Tea Party discourse; how members engaged with mainstream media and new media platforms; and, finally, how three key Tea Party websites functioned at the peak of the 2012 presidential election.

American Public Identity: Myth and Motivation

The public has been a vivid and consequential idea in the political imagination for the better part of 400 years, so much so that Carey (1997) calls “the public” the “God term” of liberal society—that is, the concept without which democracy has no meaning. From the roots of Western democratic systems premised on popular sovereignty to modern questions of digital civics, debates emerge continually over what mechanisms of governance actually constitute the “rule of the people”: who speaks, who votes, who judges, who administers this power (Held, 2006; Peters, 1995). Still, like “freedom” and “democracy,” “the public” can be many things to many people. It confounds measurement and defies location, even as it pervades political discourse and social relationships. Scholars who engage the issue confront a proliferation of conceptual dimensions, e.g. the public as a political actor, as a social space, as an audience, as a public sphere, and so on (Coleman & Ross, 2010). Moreover, different models of “the public” offer substantively different questions and imply divergent courses of action (Cayton, 2008). I suggest beginning from the perspective of political discourse, where

“the public” may be seen as an imagined political collective that is invoked and experienced by individuals as a core element of civic engagement. This view emphasizes dimensions that are relevant to communication, as well as the term’s potential for motivating people in processes related to political power.

The imagined public that this dissertation addresses is a widely shared social construct that is deeply rooted in national mythology and implicitly linked to Americans’ sense of themselves. Myths shape the political present by drawing on historic narratives (Nimmo & Combs, 1980) and reinforce a sense of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983, 2006) that is constantly reiterated, not only through physical markers such as flags, coins, and public buildings, but also through discursive constructs: e.g. the language of “we” and “us”; messages of cultural superiority and national exceptionalism; and perhaps most importantly, the national origin myths (Billig, 1995). In the reiteration of these ideas, individuals may find a place for themselves and connect on a deep, personal level, which allows them to tie an historic legacy to their immediate experience (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This is a crucial process because in reaching back to the origins of the nation, we necessarily encounter the origins of a distinctive idea of the public. Indeed, to understand American public identity as a concept, we need to understand the influences shaping it at the nation’s founding.

The American Revolution was a moment of extraordinary creativity, in which bold, pragmatic action and carefully crafted ideas gave rise to new democratic institutions and identities. It was an era in which citizens discovered a new kind of political voice, and with it, a new kind of political power. Historian Gordon Wood (2011), for example, suggests that the intense rhetorical atmosphere of the period was indicative of a deep social transformation driven by passionate and vociferous actors: “The American Revolution... marked a decisive change in

the way political activity was carried on in America and gave new legitimacy to the involvement of common people in politics.” Social patterns of course privileged and set apart wealthy, white landowners (Schudson, 2001; Starr, 2004), but a number of cultural impulses were opening doors for a broader concept of the public. In the 17th century, the English Parliament had amplified existing cultural ideas about “the people” as the base of political legitimacy, incrementally claiming for itself “the people’s inherent power to begin, change, and end governments” (Morgan, 1988, p. 59). Following the Revolutionary War, the Founders elevated this concept of popular sovereignty to the apex of the newly imagined community. In so doing, they granted profound and unprecedented authority—legal, moral, and discursive—to the idea of “the public.” Thus, America was ordained under the auspices of the unalienable and universal rights of “we the people,” and the national origin story was set. The truth of the concept may be endlessly debatable, but the basic premise stands as the founding myth of American public identity.

This identity comes to the fore at key moments throughout American history. President Lincoln (1863) sanctified the fields of Gettysburg and reaffirmed the national purpose, declaring that, “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” After the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt (1941) asserted the people’s stake in the coming war, asserting, “No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.” Reverend King (1963) addressed the assembled masses on the National Mall, saying, “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.” This is the lineage of American public identity that contemporary politicians and activists invoke when they raise the banner of “we the people.” Indelibly intertwined with the national story, such

statements function as claims to a higher authority. New issues and conflicts emerge, but the pattern recurs. Opposition to the Vietnam War in the 1960s and abortion in the 1980s were deep cultural conflicts that took shape first in the streets and then on the evening news. In 2003, protests against the Iraq War spanned the globe. In 2006, millions in America marched in protest of anti-immigration laws. And in 2009, members of the nascent Tea Party movement railed against what they saw as the heavy hand of a corrupt government. At each of these moments, “the public” came to life through three central activities of large groups of citizens: meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. These ideas are the foundation of American public identity, echoing from the Revolution to the present day. Collectively, they are what I call *the public imperative*.

The Public Imperative: Meeting Up, Speaking Out, and Pushing Back

Democratic culture functions as a system of shared beliefs. Central to those beliefs is a process of cultural exchange, what Balkin (2004) calls the “liberty of expression,” in which people share ideas in the service of a better world. Because of well established historical and cultural contexts, citizens in advanced democracies typically are free to assemble and act as a public through simple practices that are so common as to seem unremarkable: a community meeting about traffic patterns; a block party to introduce a City Council candidate; a group sponsoring bicycle rides to promote safety. In each of these cases it is the collective that offers individuals a more authoritative voice, one that promises some kind of influence in the social system. Such simple events reflect a powerful idea that also drives transformational social movements: namely, the broad-based assumption that people who organize can be heard and being heard creates the potential for change. This is what I call the *public imperative* in its

essential form. In short, American citizens possess a deep-seated sense of their right—and, in certain circumstances, their responsibility—to *meet up*, *speak out*, and *push back* against political power.¹ Below, I consider each of these premises in historical and scholarly contexts, and then offer some expectations for how they might manifest in political discourse.

Meeting up: Convening

The cornerstone of the public imperative is an unimpeachable belief among citizens that they are free to connect with others to form groups or networks. Without some kind of aggregation, there can be no “public” to conceive. In the American colonies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, social interaction in coffeehouses, pubs, and clubs emerged as part of a broader trend of social and political progressivism that was drawing people together to discuss, influence, and improve civic life (Stephens, 1988). Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) wrote of the American impulse toward collective forms of government, suggesting that it substantively defined their character. Similarly, Deneen (2005) points to Emerson’s “democratic faith” as a discourse that translated individualism into a shared sense of community, an almost religious personal experience that bound each to another as inheritors of a divine legacy. This associational impulse runs deep in the American experience, and scholars have identified its power on both social and personal levels. Dewey (1927) rooted his view of the public in this interconnectedness: “Nothing has been discovered which acts in entire isolation. ... There is no sense in asking how individuals come to be associated. They exist and operate in association” (p. 22). Moreover, public association offers a crucial self-awareness to its participants: coming

¹ It is important to note that these ideas are not limited to American citizens. Indeed, many democratic social movements have drawn upon these very themes, both within and beyond U.S. borders. For the purposes of this dissertation, in which I intend to establish a foundational framework for subsequent research in this and other contexts, the scope of this proposition applies to American politics and may include both citizens and non-citizen groups.

together is a process of seeing and being seen, in which individuals come to understand themselves by understanding their place in the group (Gamson, 1992; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

The collective is a concept that guides political action and informs individual experiences.

To examine this directly, is important to ask and understand what this type of network looks like in practice. We convene purposefully in countless forms, and social gatherings are integral to political expression in American culture at many levels. Entertainment can take on an activist tone when music events raise money for local charities or a film series shows documentaries about social issues. Rituals like graduations and memorial services can become symbolic calls to do more and to serve a cause. Many people attend fundraisers for local schools, or community meetings to debate quality-of-life issues. In digital spaces, people form and join groups online that make them part of broad or highly specialized communities. Citizens may descend on a politician's public forum, or organize their own protests ranging from a smattering of people on the steps of City Hall to a river of marchers flooding the streets of the nation's capitol. At each of these levels, there is personal and political power in the act of coming together as a group, of seeing and being seen, in and as a public. This first element of the public imperative, therefore, establishes the foundation on which subsequent elements build. It does not, in itself, guarantee citizens a voice or the political change they seek, but it creates a medium in which they can declare a common identity and demonstrate their strength as a representation of a public.

Speaking out: Declaring

Once people have convened, the public imperative implies their right to declare the goals and values that motivate them. This is a powerful privilege, as evidenced by the efforts of elites and media figures to build and maintain systems that allow their own voices to be heard. As

pervasive as elite and institutional systems may be, the public also has a speaking role in traditional politics. Under public pressure from a newly vocal citizenry, freedom of expression was enshrined alongside freedom of assembly and of the press in the First Amendment: “By legitimating the idea that ordinary people could govern themselves, the Revolution dignified their right to speak up—literally, without self-consciously bending and averting their eyes while addressing people of higher status” (Starr, 2004, p. 64). Like meeting up, speaking out becomes crucially important to both individual and collective senses of the self. Balkin (2004) suggested: “Freedom of speech is part of an interactive cycle of social exchange, social participation, and self-formation. We speak and listen, we send out and we take in. As we do this, we change, we grow, we become something other than we were before, and we make something new out of what existed before” (p. 33). In practice, speaking out can become a profound moment of self-discovery and self-definition.

Speaking to a group is a distinctive event in social life, often an intense experience of presentation and representation, in which individuals expound or embody broader ideas. This process is enacted every day in America. Civic organizations recognize important members of their community; politicians interact with constituents in Town Halls or at other proceedings; social movements mobilize members in demonstrations. In such contexts, where people gather to embody the public, certain individuals may speak for the group, asserting their own views as representative, sometimes with the boisterous backing of the assembly. In a modern context, such messages may be delivered to the assembled crowd, but often they are tailored to news media that might capture and further amplify them. Whereas news organizations are expressly designed to broadcast individual, elite views to mass audiences, the public must be deliberately constructed in media in order to validate the spoken messages of regular citizens. This may take

place through such means as “man-on-the-street” interviews, polling data, or speakers addressing a rally. For this reason, the power of political speech, the urgent need to be heard, and the representative value of particular messages are likely to be seen by activists as a central to public identity. Outcomes for public voices are neither completely predictable nor guaranteed, but the combination of meeting up and speaking out creates a public structure within which individuals can become visible and vocal. At that point, the broad contours of American mythology suggest that real change is possible.

Pushing back: Demanding

Public speech carries a potential for social transformation. This is due largely to the representative power of an embodied public and the focused communication of a collective voice. The ability to be visible and vocal is moot, however, if there is no way for the public’s message to have an impact. Again, the story of the nation’s founding is at the root of this cultural understanding, with the Revolution serving as a mythic template for subsequent generations. At many different levels of colonial society, ordinary people used their emerging voices to bark at leaders, to rail against public policy, and to argue for a fairer, more inclusive nation (Starr, 2004). These acts of speaking out explicitly led to outcomes that were otherwise impossible, and an imprint of this period of vociferous civic action has endured. Skeptics have rightly warned against democratic utopianism, but there is nonetheless a fundamental and persistent argument in American political culture for the restorative power of the public. For example, Lippmann (1922) famously despaired of regular citizens’ ability to overcome their own limits and the prejudices of news media, yet Dewey maintained faith in the possibility of a broader movement, a “democratic convergence” that could still bring about social change through “purposive human action”

(Deneen, 2005, p. 182). Critical perspectives such as Lippmann's remain valuable, even while keeping an open mind about the power of political ideals and expectations.

The public imperative culminates in seeking to influence leaders and change the political system. There are many levels at which voices in the street evolve into specific actions intended to change politicians' behavior and reshape legal realities or social conditions. It is not uncommon to see citizens "take on City Hall," often with a reasonable expectation of making a difference. A political leader's vote may shift after constituents' messages jam voicemail boxes, and their emails crash computer systems. Protest movements can evolve into legislative drives, and organizers may find that establishment figures are suddenly willing to take their calls. Even as skeptics question the quality of online discourse (see, for example, Sunstein, 2002), activists continue to show how collective power flows in digital spaces, with organizations attracting resources from global audiences and decisions being vetted through networks rather than traditional authorities (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 1996). Through such means, citizens expect to find real leverage. As above, there are no guarantees that they will be effective, nor that the consequences of their actions will play out in predictable ways. Nonetheless, this expectation of actual change is an integral part of the public imperative. Thus, when citizens do take on such roles, we might expect them to express a deep-seated faith, grounded in historic precedent, that a public stirred to action can and will effect the changes it seeks.

Concepts so deeply rooted in history and political culture ought to be identifiable in actual discourse. It is useful to note Schudson's (2001) observation that political practices embody cultural ideas—that is, they symbolize and materialize culture in ritual, symbols, and other manifest expressions. His associated caution is equally important: such ideas are notoriously difficult to perceive accurately, especially across time and across different cultural

frames of reference. Such notions as “liberty,” “freedom,” and of course “the public,” are bound to evolve, so to understand them in shifting contexts is a challenge. Scholars can address this by grounding inquiry as much as possible in empirical accounts. Part of this charge is striving to both listen carefully to the subjects one encounters (Gamson, 1992) and to separate out the media-driven “spectacle” of the public (Peters, 1995). With this in mind, I turn to this dissertation’s object of study, the Tea Party movement of 2009-12, which offers an active and vivid opportunity to explore these ideas.

The Tea Party and the Public Imperative

There are few political phenomena better suited to an exploratory study of the public imperative than the Tea Party movement of 2009-12. Alongside the Obama campaign of 2007-08, the Tea Party is arguably one of America’s most high-profile political movements in decades. In the short period between Barack Obama’s inauguration and the midterm elections of November 2010, it was the Tea Party that represented the cutting edge of popular politics and conservative opposition to the new president’s agenda. Not only was the Tea Party a prominent topic in political news following its inception, but also it exerted electoral power both through contesting conservative primaries and mobilizing support for politicians who were willing to echo its themes. Between 2010 and 2012, media and politicians framed much of the presidential campaign season in the language and issues the Tea Party had advanced. The movement lent itself effectively to this study for three primary reasons: first, as described at the outset of this chapter, its scope and influence have been substantial; also, as noted below, its immediacy makes it uniquely valuable to study; finally, its emergence during a period of technological

transformation raises useful questions about how people may be using new tools to enact historical patterns of communication.

Understanding the ideas that fueled this particular movement may help explain generally how a social movement can become influential in political discourse. It is rare to have an opportunity to examine a political phenomenon as it takes shape, and the immediacy of unfolding events generates an excitement among participants that offers unusual insight into the dynamics of political identity formation. Such accessibility of a national movement in its developing stages lets researchers observe the mechanics of political culture more closely than is possible in most campaigns, administrations, or lobbying efforts. The context of a present experience can help capture ideas and attitudes that might fade or change with time. It is also worth noting that this political movement arose at a complex moment in political and media history. For example, the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first African-American president represented a form of cultural progress that many never expected to see in their lifetimes, raising important questions about the social power of minorities in an era of rapidly shifting demographics. Moreover, the country was mired in a severe economic crisis that increased tensions across many social fault lines, including race, class, and ideology. In terms of news media, patterns of corporate conglomeration, radical downsizing, and the waning influence of print all contributed to fundamental shifts in the influence of traditional journalism. At the same time, digital technologies were redefining what was possible in terms of independent and interactive publishing. Together, these factors make the Tea Party a rich object of study, and one that invites questions at multiple levels.

This dissertation explores whether and how the public imperative was present in the political discourse of the Tea Party movement, and how these elements of American public

identity spurred other personal and collective insights. It examines how individuals described the mediation of their political experiences in both traditional and new media environments. After a discussion of methods in Chapter Two, three subsequent data chapters build on the public imperative conceptualization to examine basic assumptions and to develop insights for further research. The first two data chapters are based on commentary from self-identified Tea Party members who were active in building the movement and advancing its broadly shared, but loosely organized, political goals, between about 2009 and 2011. Over a period of roughly ten months beginning in summer of 2010, a research colleague and I conducted 35 in-depth interviews, in person and via telephone, across 15 states representing five distinct regions of the country. These interviews, ranging between 20 minutes and two hours, invited subjects to respond to open-ended questions about their experiences in their Tea Party organizations, the Tea Party as a national organization, and their thoughts on both traditional and new media platforms. In Chapter Three, I draw on these interviews to examine how the public imperative premises appeared within the discourse of these Tea Party members, and further ask how they experienced the process of political engagement. In Chapter Four, I use the same interviews to examine Tea Party members' perceptions of traditional news media, as well as their alternative strategies, digital and otherwise. In Chapter Five, I conduct a web analysis to examine three prominent Tea Party websites developed by distinct organizations: an independent national group that directly supported activities of local Tea Party groups; an independent group operating at the regional level; and a Washington, D.C.-based group focused on news aggregation and fundraising. The broad objective was to see whether and how these organizations use language and interactive tools to foster public imperative practices. Below, after a brief outline of the movement's development, I will describe a series of research questions that will guide these data chapters.

Origins of the Tea Party

The Tea Party is not a demographically diverse movement but it does span a range of organizational types and, most importantly for members, it offers a central thematic structure in which a variety of conservative issues and interests can be accommodated. Early members claimed dissatisfaction with the later years of George W. Bush's presidency, in particular economic policies such as the Troubled Assets Relief Plan (TARP) that Bush signed to stabilize the banking industry after the advent of the subprime mortgage crisis. The 2008 campaign was frustrating for many conservatives who felt that Republican Party candidate John McCain was too much an establishment figure and too rooted in the political culture of Washington, D.C. (Montopoli, 2008). At the same time, Barack Obama's presidential campaign garnered attention for gathering large public crowds that were attracted by the candidate's populist rhetoric and inspirational speaking style (CBS.com, 2008). Obama's online campaign operation was particularly effective in connecting and managing supporters and, through viral videos and local networking, helped attract many first-time participants in a political campaign (Talbot, 2009). As the campaign wound down, conservative anxiety increased, and some voters saw the election as a turning point with dire consequences (Gorski & Zoll, 2008). Within days of Obama's inauguration, frustrated conservatives began launching their first public responses.

The events commonly recognized as the "first Tea Party protests" occurred in January and February of 2009, several of which targeted President Obama's support of the economic stimulus bill. The Tea Party metaphor emerged in conservative online networks and, as individuals began organizing themselves into small local protests, the name took hold. At the same time, national political organizations and conservative media figures recognized an opportunity to support the nascent opposition movement. On February 19, 2009, CNBC financial

news reporter Rick Santelli launched an on-air diatribe against government support for the banking industry's failed mortgage assets (Barone, 2009; Rosenthal, 2009). A number of commentators and activists have subsequently referred to this as the "Santelli rant" and have credited it with turning a flickering movement into a media phenomenon. From that point, the Tea Party spread rapidly, both through independent groups adopting the brand name, and also through the support of established conservative organizations.

Throughout the Tea Party's development, the conservative political group FreedomWorks, then directed by former Republican House Leader Dick Armey, promoted and supported Tea Party events, and the organization continues as a link to the D.C. establishment (Gardner, 2010a). Another group, Americans For Prosperity, funded by conservative industrialists David and Charles Koch, began coordinating with new local protest groups. In 2009, Fox News sponsored and heavily promoted "Tax Day rallies" at several locations around the country, featuring network anchors hosting televised events, rallying large crowds, and conducting interviews with prominent conservative political figures (Media Matters, 2009). Around this time, a number of national organizations began to form, such as Tea Party Patriots, Tea Party Nation, and Tea Party Express, each with a distinct focus and relation to establishment interests and the grassroots (Khim, 2010). Over the next year and a half, the Tea Party played a central role in American politics, from staging openly hostile opposition to the Affordable Care Act at Democratic Congress members' Town Hall events (Urbina, 2009), to the ousting of conservative candidates in Republican Party primaries (Whitesides, 2010; Zeleny, 2010), to the election of dozens of Tea Party-backed candidates in the 2010 midterm elections (Srikrishnan, Pliner, Schlesinger, Goldstein & Khan, 2010). Taken together, it was a remarkable track record for a new social movement in a short period of time.

Criticism of the movement began to mount as its influence spread. Opponents leveled accusations of racism, ignorance, and “Astroturf”—that is, fake grassroots—against Tea Partiers (Good, 2009), but the movement continued to score political victories. The movement successfully captured news media attention, flexed its muscle in numerous elections, and reshaped the way leading conservatives spoke in American politics (Gardner, 2010b). Throughout this period tensions emerged between the Tea Party and local and national news media. Media representations of the movement were sometimes critical and often included images and descriptions of angry protesters or provocative protest signs. This type of coverage frustrated many Tea Party members and may have increased the movement’s interest in developing an online presence. Broadly, this experience was not unique to the Tea Party during this period, but their story did seem to fit a popular political narrative in American culture: a group of citizens, aggrieved by their political condition, who gathered together, raised their voices, and in so doing transformed the political landscape. In the case of the Tea Party movement, the story—like so many political stories—was partly myth and partly true, and both elements were amplified in mainstream news coverage and the movement’s own narratives. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of these events, I developed a set of research questions that asked how individuals within the movement experienced the public imperative, how they subsequently interacted with traditional and new media, and how key websites served members during a crucial political moment, the 2012 presidential election.

Research Questions

The story of the Tea Party movement is complex, and it played out within contexts of heightened political partisanship and a news industry in transition. Many organizations have claimed to represent the Tea Party; many political and cultural leaders have tailored their strategies to appeal to Tea Party voters; and many news commentators have tried to define the movement and its meaning. Most of this national attention was predicated on a visible and vocal network of local Tea Party groups. This active presence reflected an engaged public that could be addressed and invoked by elites and organizers who wished to demonstrate their influence; it also created a source of messages, images, and momentum that elites and news organizations referenced in broader political discourse. With this in mind, I was interested in examining the contours of Tea Party discourse at the grassroots level, asking in particular how individual political experiences shaped citizen perceptions of political life and its possibilities. In this dissertation, I attempted to do this through the analysis of 35 in-depth interviews, which are described in detail in the methodological overview in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I explore how Tea Party members lived out the principles of the public imperative, asking how they met up, spoke out, and pushed back—all in the context of larger national mythologies about what such activity means. In Chapter Four, I examine Tea Party members' views of local and national news media, especially news coverage of the movement and the ways such coverage advanced or hindered their political goals in the context of the public imperative. In Chapter Five, I shift the focus to a comparative analysis of three specific Tea Party websites, each representing a distinct approach within the movement, to ask whether and how ideas about civic engagement and the public imperative were reflected in the production of new media content. The following research questions guided these three data chapters.

Data Chapter 1: Individual experiences

In this dissertation, I suggest that the public imperative is a deep-seated but largely implicit social construct that helps individuals imagine and pursue forms of civic engagement, specifically through its three core premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. As described above, these derive from the importance that individuals place on the nation and national myths (Anderson, 1983, 2006; Billig, 1995), especially a Revolutionary narrative in which citizens came together in a time of crisis, spoke out with passion and intensity, and ultimately achieved a profound political and social transformation (Carey, 1989; Starr, 2004; Wood, 2011). This was premised on the fact that national identity offers individuals a deep, personal link to a resonant historic legacy (Anderson, 1983, 2006; Billig, 1995; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Moreover, the American origin story crucially foregrounds public groups that directed real political power against entrenched elites (Morgan, 1988; Wood, 2011) and secured public communication as a fundamental requirement of freedom (Balkin, 2004; Starr, 2004). Therefore, I expect that public imperative principles are central in American public identity, which situates “the people” atop the political hierarchy and provides a model with which individuals can enact their socially constructed sovereign status. A useful first way to determine whether such principles are salient is to speak with a range of political participants and invite them to describe their motivations and experiences. As such, the first stage of this research asks whether and to what extent the basic contours of the public imperative were present in the discourse of the Tea Party, specifically at the level of individual members’ experiences, and how these elements inform their actions. The research question that guided this chapter asked:

RQ1: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members invoke or echo the three public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back? If so, how do they talk about these experiences?

Data Chapter 2: Media critiques and attitudes

Whatever the motivations and meanings that individuals bring to their pursuit of civic engagement, in a modern context they most often operate within a mediated public space controlled by news producers and media companies. This raises important questions about the dynamics of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back as they function within the domain of traditional news media. In American political culture, there is an enduring expectation that news media have a responsibility to inform, and in some senses represent, the public at large. This is a notion that is operative to varying degrees for both citizens (Stephens, 1988; Meiklejohn, 1948, 1960) and journalists (Deuze, 2005; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes & Wilhoit, 2007). At the same time, it is well established that news media representations of protests and protesters often systematically delegitimize citizen political action, typically through thematic coverage that portrays them as deviant and dangerous (Dardis, 2007; Gitlin, 1980) or bothersome, ineffective, and unpatriotic (Di Cicco, 2010). In short, news coverage is crucial for political communication, yet it often presents social movements and protests in a negative light.

These dynamics create a paradox of political representation in news media: on one hand, the press is supposed to report fairly and help the public keep its civic leaders honest; on the other hand, protesters are likely to be cast as nuisances, troublemakers, or worse. Thus, in a political system that nominally answers to “the people,” individuals’ ability to pursue the most visible, vocal, and demanding forms of civic engagement—that is, their ability to engage in public imperative activities—can be undermined by news media. If the primary institutions charged with facilitating public communication are inhibiting forms of expression that ordinary citizens see as a birthright, they may be contravening important values of public identity. Such interpretations are unlikely to appear in news media narratives, so it is useful to inquire directly

how individuals perceived this paradox. Therefore, the research question that guided this chapter asked:

RQ2: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members talk about traditional news media and digital media, either generally or in relation to the Tea Party? If so, how do they describe these types of media in the context of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back?

Data Chapter 3: Online channels

This tension between deeply held expectations of public power and the critical representations of protesters and social movements is especially consequential at this moment in media history. Just as news media are increasingly corporate, conglomerated, and distanced from regular citizens' lives (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2004), the advent of digital technology has fundamentally changed what it means to represent oneself in the public sphere (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2000; Deuze, 2007). Because of their densely interactive and co-constructed nature, new media sites can reveal important dynamics about the flow of political power in society (Bennett & Toft, 2009; Foot & Schneider, 2006). Digital media offer a promising platform for the expression of public imperative values: open networks, free expression, and organized activism are all hallmarks of digital politics. There is often a gap, however, between what is possible and what is achieved. Digital media may offer an effective system for disseminating messages and engaging users with interactive content, but such activities do not in themselves represent fully realized forms of civic engagement. It remains to be seen to what extent such sites can fulfill their democratic potential.

It is likewise important to evaluate such sites not merely in the context of their manifest content, but also in the context of what kind of relationships they make possible: relationships between individuals or groups; relationships between types of members, such as volunteers and professionals; and relationships between different levels of the movement, from local groups to

national organizations. The third stage of this research offers a comparative analysis of three examples of Tea Party websites to explore whether and how public imperative premises were reflected in their messaging and interactive content. These sites represent a range of types: the first was the site for a national organization that supports and coordinates advice and information for local groups across the country; the second was the site for a local Tea Party group in Arizona that sponsors regular meetings, classes, and public events for a regional membership; the third was a nationally oriented news aggregator based in Washington, D.C. and specifically targeted at the Tea Party movement. This analysis will look within and across these sites to ask whether and how these organizations developed new media content that reflects a public imperative perspective, both thematically and in terms of key features of websites. The research question that guided this chapter therefore asked:

RQ3: Do specific websites of leading Tea Party groups employ messages, features, and links that reflect the public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back on political power? If so, how do these elements facilitate these activities and how do they limit them?

Together, these research questions were designed to cast light on individual experiences of civic engagement, to capture first-hand views and critiques of traditional media from that perspective, and to apply a critical lens to emerging alternatives for political communication online. Such questions can be effectively explored through careful application of the methods of in-depth interviewing and web analysis. The next chapter addresses these methods in detail and describes the multi-method approach that was employed across the data chapters.

Chapter Two

Research Design

This dissertation is an exploration of the public imperative as a conceptual approach to describing and explaining certain key motivations of civic engagement in American political culture. My objectives were to develop an empirical understanding of how members of the Tea Party movement talked about their experiences of civic engagement, including observations of both traditional and new media, and to consider these insights in the context of three new media websites representing different organizational strategies of the movement. Specifically, these inquiries were structured around the three public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. Qualitative analysis of political discourse offers an effective means by which to look for influential themes that may resonate in political culture generally. Evidence of the public imperative premises in the political discourse of the Tea Party movement would set the stage for deeper examination of how they manifest, how they interact, and how they might be narrowed or expanded to better capture attitudes toward civic engagement (Ragin, 1994). In this chapter I describe the two main methodologies—in-depth interviews and web analysis—that constituted this study.

The public imperative is premised on citizens' understandings and expectations of civic engagement. This perspective suggests that individual-level communication is the most appropriate starting point for inquiry. In the proposed framework, the political power of motivated citizens can be an engine of social change, and the ignition point of the process lies with citizens themselves. Thus, I would expect to see narratives that conform closely to public imperative themes appearing prominently in activists' descriptions of their experiences and the movement generally. Public imperative discourse is also likely to appear in news media coverage

of protest and the speeches of political leaders, both of which are usually tuned to public interests. However, a case could be made that politicians in their rhetoric and news media in their coverage respond to the underlying mechanisms that motivate individuals, especially in high-profile cases like that of the Tea Party movement. As such, individual expressions of political ideas can provide rich and direct sources of data for this study. A particularly effective way to obtain insight into individuals' views is through in-depth interviews designed to solicit open-ended personal commentary (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006). The primary methodology of this study, therefore, was an in-depth interview process. These interviews comprise the data of both Chapter Three and Chapter Four. Chapter Three examines individuals' attitudes about civic engagement generally and the presence of public imperative premises specifically. Chapter Four addresses how the public imperative premises were related to perceptions of traditional news coverage, alternative strategies, and uses of new media.

In Chapter Five I employed a second method, web analysis. Digital media have dramatically expanded the capacity for individuals to connect, to publish their opinions, and to influence political leadership (Chadwick & Howard, 2009; Tedesco, 2004; Turner, 2006). These digital spaces are much more than mere soapboxes: they create the opportunity for new kinds of political interactivity, in which participants can have a greater role in shaping the content and direction of civic engagement (Benkler, 2006; Bimber, 2003; Bimber, Stohl & Flanagin, 2009; Marshall, 2009). Such spaces have been important to oppositional social movements and political organizations seeking to extend their reach and influence, including both the ideological left (e.g. anti-globalization groups) and the right (e.g. nationalist conservative parties) (Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005; Lievrouw, 2011; Trenz, 2009). In this context, the Tea Party movement is something of a paradox: on one hand, its orientation is one of anti-government protest and the

rhetoric of rebellion; on the other hand, it advocates from a position of cultural dominance, wherein members are typically wealthy, well-educated, Caucasian retirees arguing for established conservative principles (Bernstein, 2010; Parker & Barreto, 2013; Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010). As such, the Tea Party represents a nuanced social phenomenon evolving in a complex political arena. This points to the need for a flexible and adaptive approach in mapping its communication strategies. Chapter Five offers a multimodal web analysis of three important Tea Party sites, in the context of interview data from the preceding chapters, which examines both their discursive and structural content, specifically the thematic content, interactive features, and out-links they use to build their movement.

This combination of methods connects in-depth individual-level data and manifest web content in an emerging political sphere. By examining data derived from interviews in relation to actual political communications from within the movement—and particularly online content designed in part to circumvent mainstream media—it was possible to ask whether the public imperative was reflected in this domain of Tea Party discourse. It would be unsurprising to find general congruency between the public goals of a popular political movement and the personal views of its members. The objective of this study, however, was to evaluate to what extent the core premises of the public imperative were present and how they informed individual and organizational approaches to civic engagement. Broadly, this inquiry develops an empirical foundation for further research into the dynamics of the public imperative, including more nuanced understandings of it as a phenomenon, its presence in other media platforms, and eventually, its relation to political contexts outside the United States.

In-Depth Interviewing

Qualitative interviewing is a form of social inquiry that offers researchers a distinctive and illuminating way to understand individuals' attitudes and opinions. The interview process itself is a fundamental form of communication, what Seidman (2006) calls the "prototypical human experience (of) two people talking" (p. 8). Employed across a range of disciplines, it offers a high capacity for observing and interpreting a given cultural context. It can be particularly effective in exploring political communication where powerful individual experiences manifest as social phenomena: subjects' views can be analyzed for insights that are not immediately evident in aggregate representations such as polling data or media coverage.

The distinctive quality of in-depth interviewing is its emphasis on the lived experiences of subjects, i.e. the substance of individuals' lives and the meanings that they make of the events, ideas, and feelings they encounter (Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 2006). This type of knowledge is highly detailed and subjective, but the method allows for credible analysis above the level of the individual. In the process of developing an interview instrument, refining it, and carefully engaging with the resulting data, it is possible to describe a valid picture of the subjects' culture, including phenomena that are not perceived directly by subjects themselves (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Broader dynamics can and do influence individuals' sense of themselves, but social dynamics are dialectical: individuals deliberately seek to influence their world as well (Dahlgren, 1988). By revealing patterns within a discursive political arena, interviewing can foreground these motivating experiences, help describe complex processes and practices, and establish an empirical framework for developing variables and hypotheses that can be tested using other methods (Weiss, 1994). As such, interviewing is particularly well suited to an exploration of whether and how the public imperative functions in political culture.

General principles and process

In-depth interviewing is distinct from other social science methods in several ways, but three stand out: its interactive and iterative nature; the role of the interviewer; and the goal of the process. Within a particular interview, subjects respond dynamically to questions posed by the interviewer, who may then respond in kind; this mutuality shapes the flow of the interaction, generating a co-constructed data artifact, the transcript. These data, in turn, may guide revisions and refinements of the interview instrument, the subject pool, or even research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In this, the body of individuals being studied has greater influence—and more potential impact—on the study design than in other methods (Weiss, 1994). Moreover, the position of the interviewer as a thematic guide, and the impact of the choices she or he makes within an interview, are substantial (Berg, 2004). The most effective interviewer successfully adopts a posture of curiosity and engagement, but nonetheless allows the subject to lead the discussion and thus to share in control of the experience. The interviewer should take a critical position, actively considering not only what is and is not said, but also the social and cultural influences at work on one's self (Kvale, 1996). The goal in this process is a particularly nuanced type of descriptive data, in which subjects may report internal ideas and attitudes that can be considered on face value and also interpreted in the context of the study. The primary objective is not mere measurement, but rather a sophisticated understanding that may incorporate physical or verbal cues, situational dynamics, and broader contexts. This also includes identifying internal contradictions within a group's narratives, or even within an individual's expressions, which may point to important tensions within a cultural context. All of these elements influenced my decision to rely primarily on in-depth interviewing for this study.

As complex as these elements are, the interview process itself follows a relatively straightforward path. To effectively design and execute an interview study, researchers take a number of basic steps while keeping certain subtleties in mind. As in other social science methods, the process develops in familiar stages, from conceptualization, to pilot testing, to refinement, to analysis. At each stage, decisions impact the data that can be gathered. The subject pool should be accessible and appropriate to the study, including a range of characteristics that are theoretically relevant; the interview instrument should be rooted in both theory and observations of the context; and the process itself should establish a comfortable space for subjects (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interview instruments can be designed in a variety of ways depending on the situation, whether starting broadly and narrowing the focus, asking questions of equal import throughout, or starting narrowly and moving toward increasingly wider contexts (Stewart & Cash, 2008). In a “semi-structured” interview, the same set of questions is presented to each subject, but interviewers interact with subjects in distinct ways using follow-up questions to probe responses and invite further observation and commentary (Berg, 2004; Burns, 2000). In the early rounds of interviewing, the objective is to gather general understandings and sketch broad themes; in subsequent iterations of the instrument, researchers can refine the questions and test particular expectations. Throughout the process, researchers should conduct interviews in a responsible manner, maintaining professional and ethical standards for privacy and transparency, and accommodating subjects as much as possible.

An interview study should be designed to capture sufficient variation in subjects’ responses, without excessive redundancy. Ensuring a substantive and representative data set must be carefully balanced with limited time, access, and resources. Two central concerns are sufficiency and saturation (Seidman, 2006): first, does the study include enough participants to

capture important criteria such as organizational dynamics, demographics, and regionality?

Second, are there enough participants to fully map the primary themes relevant to the study? The question of data saturation is particularly important for establishing content validity: it is the point beyond which “no new themes, findings, concepts or problems” emerge (Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles & Grimshaw, 2009, p. 1230). Specific guidelines for achieving saturation are elusive, but some scholars have suggested that 30 or so interviews are appropriate for a grounded theory study, while others have found that more than 90 percent of primary themes may be established after as few as 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).² Expressions of these themes become the material that scholars analyze and interpret.

There are a number of approaches that researchers might take to the analysis of transcript data. For example, they may condense or categorize subjects’ statements, identify structural similarities in narratives, or interpret responses in the context of other forms of data; such techniques may be used individually or in combination (Kvale, 1996). Interpretation of data can be conducted in a variety of ways, but three broad levels are particularly useful for establishing the direction of the analysis. These can be described as three types of understanding: first, evaluating subjects’ self-understanding allows researchers to describe how subjects see and think about themselves and their own experiences; second, a common-sense understanding situates subjects’ experiences within a wider frame of reference that would be recognizable to an average audience; third, theoretical understanding constitutes the application of the theoretical frame to the data in order to test a study’s key propositions. At each of these levels, the themes that

² In fact, some research has shown that even as few as six interviews can be useful, particularly in circumstances where the subject pool is relatively homogenous, data quality is good, and the domain of inquiry is focused (that is, where subjects are in general agreement about the relevant questions and can competently address the cultural context) (Guest et al., 2006).

emerge may reflect the theoretical foundation researchers have established at the outset, or new themes may emerge that stretch researchers' thinking.

The case for validity rests on a number of qualitative criteria. Kvale (1996) describes three dimensions worth considering. One is the argument for "craftsmanship" as validity: is the design appropriate and fair, does it accommodate subjects' ranges of experiences and give them an opportunity to express themselves, and does it account for alternative explanations? Another useful lens is "pragmatic validity," which asks whether the conclusions drawn by the overall process can be directly observed in the actions that take place within that cultural context; that is, does the description match the evidence? A third valuable measure of validity, sometimes called "agreement validity," constitutes an assessment of the study and its conclusions by members of three key groups: the subjects themselves (do they feel fairly represented?), the general public (are the conclusions coherent and reasonable?), and the theoretical community (does the study demonstrate the phenomena that it claims to?). Considered together, these types of measures constitute a co-constructed, integrated assessment of validity, which emerges, like the interviews themselves, within an ethos of creativity, collaboration, and transparency.

Interviewing Tea Party members: Study design

Interview data for this study were collected in conjunction with a research colleague in two phases over a period of 12 months between July 2010 and July 2011. I intended to capture two important periods in the evolution of the Tea Party, specifically the months leading up to, and then following, the 2010 Congressional midterm elections. All technical elements of the study, including the study design, the subject pool, the interview instrument and its revisions, were approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Review Board (see Appendix for interview instrument). Specific steps I pursued in developing and executing this study

included: designing the questions; selecting subjects; developing a consistent contextual approach for the interview process; conducting interviews, both in person and via telephone; and finally, analyzing the data and preparing to present conclusions. Each of these is addressed briefly below.

In designing this semi-structured interview instrument, I developed thematic clusters of questions that I wished to address, along with associated probes that allowed me to explore certain topics in greater depth. The first version was based on theoretical interests and observations of news media coverage of the Tea Party, and was used in two early rounds of interviews. A second version was modified slightly based on those early interviews and employed in subsequent rounds of in-person interviews. A third iteration was modified slightly for the telephone interviews, primarily to accommodate the results of the 2010 Congressional midterm elections and, in the case of some follow-up interviews, to refer back to earlier conversations. In cases where I had sufficient time with a subject, generally 30 minutes or more, I used the long-form version of the instrument, which included approximately 25 questions in five primary categories, and approximately 25 prompts distributed in clusters linked to certain questions, plus a small battery of demographic questions. In some cases, I did not ask questions that subjects had already answered on their own; in other cases, I was not able to ask every question due to time constraints. Generally, in cases where I knew there was less time to conduct the interview, I used a short-form version that focused on one primary question and one prompt in each main category.

Both versions of the instrument addressed the same general categories. These categories included: the *process* by which members got involved in the Tea Party (asking a range of questions, e.g. “How did you first hear about the Tea Party?”); the *types of participation* they

pursued (e.g. “Since you got involved, what are some ways you have participated in the Tea Party?”); the perceived *effectiveness* of the movement (e.g. “Fifty years from now, what do you think people will say about the Tea Party?”)³; and the movement’s *relationship with news media* (e.g. “Do you think the Tea Party can get its message out in the media?”). In some cases, as I revised the instrument, I added specific probes about issues, terms, or people that recurred frequently, such as the phrase “education” or conservative media figure Glenn Beck, who was then hosting a program on Fox News Channel. In other cases, I modified questions that were too theoretical, such as those probing about historical context. In a few cases, I eliminated questions, often because the information was emerging elsewhere in the interview process. The final iteration of the interview instrument appears in the Appendix, edited slightly for clarity.

In selecting the sample, I sought to balance the pool of subjects across a number of key dimensions. Because the demographics of the movement were generally homogenous, and because many groups featured only one or two primary contacts for spokespersons, there were some inherent limitations on the range of subjects in the study. However, within the context of the Tea Party, I was able to develop a sample that represented a strong range across a number of key criteria. I intentionally contacted active participants in the movement, those who would likely be able to articulate and reflect the values and agendas of their respective organizations. Typically, I began with contact information available on groups’ websites located through a simple Google search, and then sent emails or telephoned; in some cases, I employed “snowball

³ It is worth noting that there is not usually a direct correlation between the thematic clusters of theoretical interest and the specific wording of a given question. For example, if one is interested in asking about the broad impact and success of the movement, the best way to elicit discussion of that might be to ask about historical context. Even though a question has a particular form, it may be thematically targeted at an adjacent topic. Such modifications are typically based on experience in the field and understanding how individuals are responding to questions at different levels of abstraction.

sampling” to contact other members recommended by interview subjects. Most of the people I spoke with were organizers or leaders at some level, whose activities and commitment significantly influenced the public face of their group and even the Tea Party movement in their area. I also spoke with rank-and-file members, primarily via contacts at rallies and events, to gain insight into their views as participants. Wherever possible, I sought out members whose demographic profiles ran counter to that portrayed in news media. Despite these efforts, the vast majority of subjects fell into the category of white, well-educated people in their mid-fifties or older, many of whom were retired. In both the face-to-face and telephone interviews, I sought to establish as wide a geographic range as possible. Ultimately, I conducted interviews with 35 individuals, in 15 states, representing five key regions of the country (described below). Across the sample, a majority was male (57%, $n=20$). Most were older than 55 years of age, and all appeared to be Caucasian. While these sample demographics do not necessarily reflect the range of voices we sought to capture, they do reflect the demographic features of the movement with a fair degree of accuracy (see Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010, and New York Times/CBS News Poll, 2010). Most of our subjects (74%, $n=27$) held semi-official leadership roles in their local groups; however, these subjects often disavowed specific titles or generalized their role (e.g. “I’m the guy who talks to the media”).

Because I sought a range of subjects with a diversity of experiences across different regional areas, I balanced my approach between in-person interviews and telephone interviews. I conducted in-person interviews at the subject’s convenience, typically at a restaurant or café, which allowed for the greatest level of depth and interactivity. In some cases, in-person interviews were conducted at rallies or other events,⁴ which allowed for the immediacy of the

⁴ Other events included Constitution classes, candidate-vetting meetings, picnics, and so on.

experience to inform subjects' responses. In accordance with Human Subjects Review Board guidelines, all subjects were made aware of the researchers' status and affiliation with the University of Washington, as well as the intention to use transcripts in publications and presentations to academic and general audiences. Similarly, all subjects were aware they would be rendered anonymous in transcripts and were told they were welcome to skip any question they wished, and to end the interview at any time.⁵ Telephone interviews were conducted via speakerphone with both researchers present. All interviews but one were recorded with a digital audio recorder, and with the verbal acknowledgment of the subjects. In-person interviews at events were typically the shortest, lasting from 10 to 20 minutes; in-person interviews that were arranged for separate locations lasted longer, roughly 30 to 60 minutes. Telephone interviews generally lasted between 20 to 40 minutes. In each of these scenarios, I made a point to cover as many key themes as possible, digging deeper as time allowed. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed with the help of a research assistant, and principal investigators carefully reviewed and corrected all transcriptions. Interview notes were also transcribed and included in the data set to augment the interpretive potential of the interviews themselves and to clarify meanings where audio was unclear.

I conducted interviews in two main phases. The initial phase lasted from July 2010 to September 2010 and focused on face-to-face interviews and attending rallies and events. This established a range of themes in conversations that were particularly rich and vivid, across a diverse geographical range. Interviews and events in this phase took place during two extended driving trips across Western states: the first included cities in Northern California and Oregon; the second included cities in Idaho, Utah, Arizona, and Nevada. We later conducted additional

⁵ In virtually all cases, interviews were conducted with one researcher primarily asking questions and the other taking notes; these roles were interchanged frequently.

interviews in Washington State. These trips were planned to allow a process of iterative thematic development and to align with specific public events. For example, the first trip comprised three events in two states, timed to coincide with 4th of July celebrations occurring that weekend. The second trip comprised several interviews and events across four states, timed to coincide with the Right Online convention in Las Vegas, Nevada.⁶ This first phase of the study also included a research trip to Washington, D.C., on the weekend of Glenn Beck's "Restoring Honor Rally" on the National Mall, during which a number of Tea Party rallies occurred, including one event hosted by Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann (which immediately followed the Beck event, also on the National Mall) and another organized by Tea Party Patriots (the following day, in a park near the U.S. Capitol Building). Fourteen of the 15 face-to-face interviews were conducted during this stage.

The second main phase of interviews lasted from January 2011 to July 2011. In this period interviews were conducted primarily via telephone, to extend the learning from the first phase to other regions, to deepen coverage of certain states, and reconnect with specific individuals after the 2010 Congressional midterm elections. Using the revised interview instrument, I conducted interviews with Tea Party members in the South (Arkansas, Florida, Texas), the Midwest (Missouri, Michigan), the Northeast (New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts), and Mid-Atlantic region (Kentucky). I also conducted additional interviews or follow-up interviews via telephone with members in Washington, California, Idaho, and

⁶ Right Online is an annual conference sponsored by the conservative group Americans for Prosperity. It features a general, but not exclusive, focus on technology and new media. It offers a range of workshops, panels, training sessions, and speeches by high-profile figures in the conservative movement, such as Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann and Fox News political analyst Andrew Napolitano. Although this was not specifically a Tea Party event, many Tea Party activists spoke and attended, the movement was a prominent topic of interest, and several panels related to the Tea Party themes and political organizing. According to the conference website, roughly 1,100 people attended the 2010 convention in Las Vegas (<http://rightonline.com>).

Arizona. I conducted 20 telephone interviews to augment the 15 face-to-face interviews, in order to gain a broad representation of regionality and a sufficient number to reach data saturation (Francis et al., 2009; Guest et al., 2006). Ultimately, the 35 interviews generated dozens of hours of recorded audio, and hundreds of pages of transcripts and associated notes.⁷

Analysis of the transcripts, like the development of the instrument, was iterative and took place in two main stages. First, to extract patterns of meaning from the texts, I read closely across all transcripts to identify themes emerging in specific language and abstract ideas. Using a web-based qualitative coding tool, Dedoose, I identified and coded excerpts throughout the transcripts to develop a broad sense of the thematic interlinking taking place within the data. In qualitative coding, researchers immerse themselves in the data, looking for passages that invoke themes theorized in advance, as well as themes that emerge from the analysis. In Chapter Three, for example, I noted where individual phrases were echoed across the data set, especially clusters of terms that reflected one of the specific public imperative premises. In that particular case, to capture instances of “speaking out,” I coded a range of closely related terms encompassing such concepts as “being heard” or “having a voice,” as well as stories that centered on verbal expression in public or in the media. I also noted where more general narratives and ideas emerged at multiple points, e.g. notions of civic engagement, discourse on rights and responsibilities, and various expressions of historical context. In addition to listening for concepts that echoed the theoretical framework of this study, I also remained open to other emergent themes and coded a number that were useful in characterizing the data as a whole.

Throughout the process, I followed the qualitative coding practice of maintaining notes to help

⁷ To check agreement validity, I contacted six interview subjects with their transcribed quotes and my contextual analysis, inviting them to comment in any way they wished. Five responded, none with any substantive comments or critiques. Four remained active in the movement; and once again, they were generous with their time, for which I remain grateful.

clarify and sharpen my understanding of the conceptual landscape. These were generated and organized along with the codes themselves within Dedoose, allowing me to build a detailed, integrated set of documentation that reflected significant amounts of both raw data and impressions.

Once this broad set of codes and memos was established, I began the process of distilling and condensing codes to determine which were dominant and most relevant. This involved grouping some codes together, eliminating others, and revising definitions to more accurately reflect subjects' meanings. I also sought to identify patterns that appeared informally, in regionality, for example, and in pre- and post-midterm election responses. Finally, I looked carefully for alternative themes, explanations, and influences that might generate the types of discourse that I propose derive from the public imperative. After developing this second set of codes, I recoded the entire set of transcripts, making only minor revisions where necessary. This resulted in a patterned analysis of the data that functioned both from a theoretical and a pragmatic perspective to categorize and illuminate central themes across the entire range of interviews. My interpretation of these themes, supported with extensive quotations, constitutes the material of Chapters Three and Four.

Chapter overviews

In Chapter Three, I analyzed interview data to understand Tea Party members' attitudes and ideas about civic engagement and their experiences in the movement. The presumption for this analysis was that there was likely to be both manifest and latent content that related to the public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. Following the guidelines of the method, questions were intentionally left general: in virtually every interview,

we began by asking subjects about their involvement and their experiences, without directing them immediately toward public imperative premises. The first research question asked:

RQ1: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members invoke or echo the three public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back? If so, how do they talk about these experiences?

The first part of this research question allowed me to look at direct invocations of the public imperative premises and also at indirect or referential mentions. The second part of this research question invited an important interpretive dimension of qualitative interviewing. Recall Kvale's (1996) three levels of analysis: first, how do subjects see and think about their own experiences; second, what is the common sense understanding of the broader situation; third, how do the data reflect on a study's theoretical propositions?

At the first level of analysis, I reported what subjects said in response to our basic questions and probes (e.g. "Tell me about the first time you went to a Tea Party event"), both in the context of the public imperative and with regard to other prominent themes that emerged. At the second level, I sought to situate what subjects said in the context of the Tea Party story in general. This meant interpreting specific responses in relation to other events and information (e.g. how did responses about "speaking out" relate to debates within the movement about media censorship?). At the third level, I attempted to synthesize what people said in light of the broader goals of the movement in the context of the historical and conceptual framework of the public imperative. At this level, I analyzed data to ascertain whether there was evidence of the historical resonance and national identity themes that I suggest underpin the public imperative. Together, these levels provide a picture of whether and how the public imperative operates in political discourse to motivate civic engagement. In addition, this laid the groundwork for questions about

how the key premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back relate to traditional journalism and new media.

Chapter Four extended these ideas about civic engagement by exploring subjects' impressions of traditional news media, alternative strategies to those media, and digital tools the movement used to organize and communicate. The expectation here was that Tea Party members would express attitudes regarding the relationship between the public imperative impulse and the dynamics of contemporary media. The analysis in Chapter Four attempted to situate the public imperative in the context of the shift from the traditional, top-down, one-to-many model of broadcast communication, to the emerging, networked, interactive model made possible by digital technologies such as the World Wide Web, Twitter, Facebook, and other user-friendly publishing platforms. The research question guiding this chapter asked:

RQ2: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members talk about traditional news media and digital media, either generally or in relation to the Tea Party? If so, how do they describe these types of media in the context of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back?

This question raised the issue of news media generally, leaving open a range of possible responses. In a few cases, subjects approved and appreciated traditional news coverage of the Tea Party, and expressed a collaborative relationship with local media figures. In other cases, they vehemently rejected narratives appearing in traditional news coverage and described the media in antagonistic terms. The open-ended framework of the interviews allowed me to capture a broad range of roles, issues, and problems perceived by subjects in the context of news media.

Chapter Four was structured intentionally to help raise issues about digital media that could inform the web analysis in Chapter Five. Questions of news media in a modern context are very likely to incorporate discussion of the internet, both in terms of traditional news organizations delivering their content online, and also the dynamics of independent

communication platforms such as blogs, list-servs, chat rooms, websites, and so on. Both of these types of references were present in the data and both were prompted by general questions in the interview instrument (e.g. “Do you think the Tea Party can get its message out in the media?” and “Do you have specific websites that you use?”). As in Chapter Three, data in Chapter Four were analyzed at three levels: in manifest content, in the context of broader social and political dynamics, and with regard to how they reflected or refuted specific theoretical premises. In this case, it was important to understand how subjects saw both traditional media and digital media serving or hindering the public imperative. The themes and attitudes that emerged in Chapter Four were particularly important for two reasons. First, they situated the theoretical notion of the public imperative in a real-world context of actual news coverage and actual online activity; this grounds the concept and helps us understand the contours of an abstract social construct as it manifests in a contemporary setting. Second, by opening the door to a discussion of digital spaces, this chapter provided data that could be connected with the content of Tea Party websites in Chapter Five. Ultimately, it was useful to link the analysis of such sites to the responses of Tea Party members, so as to more fully track the public imperative from a theoretical sketch to real communicative action.

Web Analysis

The internet has become a foundational medium for the development and dissemination of political culture. Many scholars embrace its expansive promise for rewriting global and social realities, while rightly noting that rapid technological evolution makes it difficult to discern vulnerabilities and limitations that emerge (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 1996; Castells, 2012; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Earl & Kimport, 2011). To effectively study this complex space, it is

necessary to develop analytical approaches that are creative, flexible, and responsive to the parameters of the inquiry. Within a complex digital media ecosystem, website analysis can provide an empirically grounded picture of whether internet spaces are fostering or inhibiting civic engagement in a given context. It is useful first to see the political web as a forum in which individuals and organizations are able to create rich political content. That content is an expressive reaction to the issues most salient to its producers, shaped by what is possible and impossible in the interplay of technology and human ideas: it is a co-construction between creators, users, and the interactive platforms where they meet (Boczkowski, 1999; Foot, Warnick & Schneider, 2006; Foot & Schneider, 2002). Analyzing these multi-dimensional elements can reveal important patterns in the ways that the web is utilized to extend civic engagement online.

It is now common when analyzing websites to use mixed-method approaches that can offer a nuanced perspective of digital content and its contextual significance. No single combination of methods is ideal for every case, but many scholars note the value of incorporating data both from individuals and from the digital spaces in which they are active, so that the analysis can address the complex communication systems they generate together (Baym, 2006; Flanagin, Stohl & Bimber, 2006; Murthy, 2008). A strictly technical analysis might miss concepts that are personally important to producers or users of a site; likewise, an analysis that relies solely on personally gathered data might overlook significant impacts or constraints of the digital medium (Howard, 2002). Below, I describe how I analyzed dimensions of three key Tea Party websites, guided by data gathered in the interview phase of this study. As such, my analysis of these websites pertains directly to the concepts that dozens of individual Tea Party members raised as priorities and concerns in multiple locations around the United States.

The website analysis in Chapter Five is fundamentally a communication approach, and it is intended to apply concepts from individual-level data to online content created by political organizations. Data in Chapters Three and Four explore the attitudes and opinions of Tea Party members, first regarding the nature and significance of their civic engagement practices, and second in relation to traditional and new media. The final data chapter asks whether and how those attitudes and opinions are reflected in three key nodes of the Tea Party “ecosystem” online. Groups that convene under the Tea Party banner are all-but-certainly going to be politically conservative, but there is a wide range of organizational types and agendas that can function within this discursive field. To focus the study, I am using the data generated in the interviews, along with specific elements of web-based communication, to examine three prominent types of Tea Party websites. As such, the Research Question that guided the third data chapter was:

RQ3: Do specific websites of leading Tea Party groups employ messages, features, and links that reflect the public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back on political power? If so, how do these elements facilitate these activities and how do they limit them?

This Research Question raises three key methodological issues. Below, after briefly describing the data collection process, I address the elements of political websites that I analyzed for this study. Next, I address how I conceptually and operationally defined the elements that emerged in interviews with Tea Party members. Finally, I address the process of selecting which sites offered an illustrative but manageable view of the Tea Party landscape.

Data collection

The online presence of the Tea Party in some ways is highly variable, particularly in the range of organizations that may self-identify as a “Tea Party group.” In other ways, the movement exhibits a remarkable coherence of messaging and issue agendas, such that different types of groups, and groups in different locations, may at times all be addressing a particular

topic or controversy. For this study, I could have looked at a single prominent site, but that would have limited comparison across group types. Similarly, I might have looked at a large number of sites, but this would have sacrificed the ability to dig deeper into the content of each site and, subsequently, into the strategies and choices of the sites' producers. I ultimately chose to focus on three organizations of distinct types, so as to provide some comparative power while also allowing a relatively detailed examination over a period of time. The sites, described in detail below, were: 1) Tea Party Patriots (<http://www.teapartypatriots.org>; launched 2009), a national-level site dedicated to facilitating grassroots organization; 2) Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, an independent regional site that acted as a hub for dozens of local conservative groups (<http://phoenixteaparty.ning.com>; launched 2009); and 3) Tea Party News Network (<http://www.tpnn.com>; launched 2012), modeled loosely on web-based news sites and staffed by media professionals with connections to established conservative groups. Each site was active and relevant in terms of content, and each clearly claimed the Tea Party mantle.

It was important to select an appropriate time frame, both in terms of broader political contexts (i.e. offline events) and in terms of duration. The 2012 presidential election offered an opportunity to examine these sites at a critical moment of intensive activity and attention. Site producers were presumably attempting to generate the maximum amount of media attention, user traffic, and volunteer and voter mobilization. This period also represented a culmination of the Tea Party's efforts since its inception shortly after the 2008 presidential election and its electoral successes of the 2010 midterm elections. For scholars of civic engagement communication, it was a propitious moment: it was arguably the most high-stakes, high-profile period in the movement's history to date, taking place on the country's biggest political stage. I chose to collect data over a continuous three-week period beginning on October 28, 2012, and concluding

on November 17. This offered a long enough time frame to observe changes in strategy leading up to the election and also the reactions on the sites to the outcome.

During the period of data collection, I reviewed each site daily, including the home pages and all primary sub-pages located one click away from the home page. This included pages in the primary navigation bar, which encompassed frequently updated content sections of the site, and also standard static pages, such as the “About Us” and “Contact” pages. For every page that included new content compared to the previous day, I captured a Portable Document Format (PDF) file of the entire page using Adobe Acrobat Pro, a software program that generates a complete image of a web page. This particular program allowed me to capture not only full web pages (often amounting to a substantial number of PDF “pages”) but also the active links available on each page. In addition to capturing PDFs, I took “Daily Notes” for each site and each page, recording whether new content appeared, any relevant links that were present, and my own observations about patterns and connections in the structural and textual material. Furthermore, when there was theoretically relevant content that did not fit into an easily defined category, I captured what I called “Daily Extras.” Over the course of the three-week period, these included other web pages, extensive photo sets that could not be captured in a PDF, and various links, images, and files that I deemed worth collecting. This process generated 287 PDFs of webpages, 60 files of notes, and 122 various digital “Daily Extras” as follows:

SITE	PDFS	DAILY NOTES	DAILY EXTRAS	TOTALS
Tea Party Patriots	167	23	52	242
Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots	97	21	70	188
Tea Party News Network	23	16	0	39
TOTALS	287	60	122	469

Taken together, this method allowed for a detailed, structured analysis of these key sites at a crucial moment in the Tea Party's history.

Elements of the analysis: Themes, features, and links

A principal goal of an effective web analysis is to balance several, sometimes competing concerns. The proposed framework of the public imperative encompasses three core ideas: individuals' experiences of connecting as a political network (meeting up); their experiences of giving voice to their ideas (speaking out); and the ways they seek to influence leaders to change the status quo (pushing back). This analysis used individuals' insights and attitudes as a baseline for evaluating movement websites. It also addressed the ways that members responded to traditional media coverage of the movement. Collective action is, at its core, an exercise in communication (Flanagin et al., 2006), so this was a central concern for this study. Equally important, Lievrouw (2011) described "mediated mobilization" as being "fundamentally interventionist... help(ing) movements intervene in the workings of social and political institutions, changing norms and values and reconfiguring the distribution of power and resources" (p. 175). This was, of course, a primary online focus for the Tea Party. As such, the functions of communication and action are top of mind in an exploration of the public imperative online.

Essentially, I set out to understand how these websites structured their communication with, and for, Tea Party members who may have wished to act on their public imperative impulses, both in general and in relation to traditional media. It was necessary to capture a range of activity for analysis, to account for core functions commonly associated with political websites, and also to leave room to interpret unanticipated findings. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) identified three components that are especially useful in new media analysis: first,

individuals' communication practices; second, artifacts they use to share meanings; and third, arrangements or organizational forms built around those meanings. Drawing on this model in the context of the public imperative and the Tea Party, three categories of analysis emerged. These were: 1) the *thematic content* of the messages that individuals and groups produced; 2) the *features* that producers employed in the construction of websites; and 3) the *links* that sites used to connect with other organizations and create wider networks. These are roughly analogous to Lievrouw and Livingstone's categories (communication practices, artifacts for sharing meaning, and broader arrangements), while accommodating a focused examination of Tea Party groups' online political activity. The themes, features, and links employed by prominent Tea Party websites were primary elements in pursuing their goals, and I was able to evaluate these elements in terms of the affordances and constraints they produced in relation to the public imperative.

Thematic content

The most direct communicative content at a political website is likely to be the messages that users encounter. Texts function within political culture to define values, to confer or withhold legitimacy, and to challenge established ideas (Edgerly, Toft & Veden, 2011). These concepts are fundamental to social movements: they give meaning to the identity that such sites offer potential members, which shapes individual groups, which in turn helps constitute the broader movement (Baab, 2008; Young & Foot, 2006). At the level of networks, narratives can become "structuring and constraining mechanisms" that can influence political relationships and expressions of power (Bennett, Foot & Xenos, 2011). For this analysis, I hoped to capture a range of ideas that could provide insight into these narrative-building practices, and in particular to see if any of these resonated with the views of Tea Party members I spoke to. Considering the distinctions between sites, and the variety of possible communication tools within them, close

textual readings were likely too fine for a parsimonious analysis. As the interview data suggested, however, individuals often talk about their experiences in ways that can be categorized thematically, which offered a point of contact with these sites.

Examining content at the level of themes offered a loose enough structure to interpret a wide range of content, but also provided enough coherence to compare ideas and attitudes that emerged in the interviews. Following Edgerly, Toft & Veden (2011), in this analysis, I considered “themes” to be related ideas, linked by recurring keywords and narrative structures. I addressed two types of thematic content, textual and visual. Here, textual content referred to articles and posts by top-level contributors, headline content, and navigation/linking text. Visual content referred to prominent photos (or photo sets, considered as a unit) and graphics, as well as the main topics of any videos; it did not include a detailed visual communication analysis of each element. The primary guidelines for the thematic content analysis were the two broad categories that emerged in the interviews, namely the public imperative and media attitudes, along with their associated sub-categories. These are described with specific conceptual and operational definitions below, which drew on interview data and other emergent understandings of the movement. In reviewing all web pages and videos collected, I recorded both where thematic content reflected or supported members’ views, and where it obscured or seemed to work against those views. This comparative analysis provided a snapshot of how the identity-building themes of each site related to the personal experiences described by individual members.

Features

The features that producers choose to incorporate into a website define the functionality of a site and significantly influence what types of engagement are possible there. As with thematic content, different types of user activity have the potential to shape the broader meanings

of the sites, the groups they represent, and the movement itself. Moving beyond traditional debates over whether the internet inherently benefits or damages democracy, Howard (2003) observed that interactive features of political websites can be extraordinarily powerful in their capacity to produce political culture, but that the tools themselves are: “not agents, but structures. They do not cause, but they do pattern, social outcomes” (p. 217). This important distinction raises the question of whether and how features at specific sites may influence sites’ value and efficacy for users. If site producers promote certain values, but then do not design the site to enact those values, they potentially limit that site’s scope and credibility. In the context of the public imperative, communication is a central concern. Balkin (2004) argued that the capacity for democratic engagement online is embodied in “free speech values—interactivity, mass participation, and the ability to modify and transform culture—[and that it] must be protected through technological design” (p. 5), as well as other, more traditional means. These values resonate closely with the tenets of the public imperative and further highlight the importance of website features in online civic engagement.

To analyze features, I examined home pages and all primary sub-pages one click away from the home page. I defined the term “features” to include dynamic content elements (e.g. columns, blogs, and photo galleries), interactive content elements (e.g. comments sections and polls), and specifically political online tools (e.g. a “Find Your Representative” database and petitions). I noted but did not specifically analyze the most common website features such as search boxes and software logos. I reviewed all archived PDFs, noting which features were present and their location. During the data collection period, I tested all major features I saw to confirm that, at least at some point, they were functional. Where features were added or removed during data collection, I noted that as well. For the analysis, I evaluated the collective feature set

at each site in the context of the two main categories of interview data, the public imperative and media attitudes. This allowed me to see the extent to which site producers offered features that supported members' public imperative priorities and media concerns.

Links

Linking is essential to the internet. The choices that social movement website producers make regarding how and where to link can directly and indirectly shape the way sites evolve, thus potentially shaping the movement itself. Benkler (2006) described the crucial shift in the public agenda that takes place with the transition from a “trust us” culture of traditional, one-way media, to the “see for yourself” culture of a densely hyperlinked community: “Access to underlying documents and statements, and to the direct expression of the opinion of others, becomes a central part of the medium” (p. 232–233). As the Tea Party developed, individuals and small groups across the country began organizing themselves into local, regional, and national networks. Many people first discovered their local Tea Party through hubs like Tea Party Patriots; this helped build momentum and credibility for the movement in its early stages. Moreover, linking is a deceptively simple practice that can provide an infrastructure for complex and meaningful communities to take shape. These communities are likely to vary significantly, but the essential act of creating a link to another point on the internet allows individuals and groups to construct a social context for themselves; whatever motivation and nuances may shape the process, linking is community-building (Adamic, 2008). It is also true that much criticism of online political culture is directed at the exclusivity of overly homogenous networks, and that linking practices can foster dangerous patterns of epistemic closure (Hindman, 2008). This variability, or lack thereof, raised questions about how Tea Party site producers were linking to other online resources and how this might or might not reflect priorities of individual members.

In analyzing Tea Party linking practices, I chose to examine only links from the three key websites to other online resources. I did so because I was primarily interested in how site producers sought to construct their online communities with the resources available to them. A broader analysis of Tea Party sites, one tracking both “out-links” and “in-links,” would show certain types of network relationships that would be valuable in other contexts. To maintain congruence, again, my objective here was to examine these particular sites in the context of the interview data. To conduct this analysis, I clicked on every available outlink (that is, every link from one of the main sites in the study to another online location) that was created by site producers. Examining these links together revealed certain basic patterns I could evaluate in the context of members’ individual priorities.

Conceptual and Operational Definitions

To analyze the themes, features, and links of the three Tea Party sites, I first created conceptual and operational definitions for the key concepts that emerged in the interview process. These definitions drew directly on the patterns of priorities and concerns that individual members across the country cited in our conversations. I then focused the concepts so that they could be applied to the types of website content I was examining. In this section I first will describe definitions developed from Chapter Three, regarding the public imperative and its three key premises: meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. Then I will describe definitions developed from data in Chapter Four, addressing media attitudes, specifically: media critiques, alternatives, and media in the context of the public imperative.

The Public Imperative: Conceptual and operational definitions

The public imperative principles of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back on political power were highly salient and distinctive for the Tea Party members I interviewed. For

each of the principles, there were two primary dimensions that substantively defined the concept. In terms of meeting up, members first spoke about connecting as individuals and forming groups; second, they spoke about bringing these groups together in larger networks, locally and regionally. In terms of speaking out, members first did so symbolically, often expressed as “finding one’s voice“ and “being heard“; second, they spoke out strategically, both by deliberating on the direction a group would take and by creating opportunities to speak publicly with politicians. Finally, in terms of pushing back, Tea Party members did so first as rebels, through a pugnacious response to political opponents (including those in the Republican Party); second, they pushed back in the name of an American restoration, positioning themselves as defenders of an idealized polity. These ideas constituted the core conceptual and operational definitions with which I analyzed these sites.

The Public Imperative: Conceptual definition

In this study, the public imperative was constituted in three key principles. Meeting up encompassed the emotional experience of connecting with compatriots, as well as the processes of forming and maintaining Tea Party groups at local, regional, and national levels, including such organizational activities as managing logistics, setting group agendas, promoting attendance, and so on. Speaking out encompassed symbolic expressions of vocality, both internally and externally as groups, as well as public deliberation and opportunities to interact with politicians. Pushing back encompassed organized political action to influence politicians and policy-making, as well as broader symbolic work to reclaim, re-unite, or otherwise restore the nation.

The Public Imperative: Operational definitions

1) Meeting up: Content that addressed the personal experiences and organizational processes of individually making contact with other Tea Party members, forming Tea Party groups, and developing relationships among groups.

1a) Meeting up themes: Thematic content that referenced individuals' personal experiences of connection through civic engagement or online community, e.g. "It was so good to see everyone at the rally!" Also, organizational planning of live events and online actions, e.g. "We will be meeting at the Howard Johnson's conference room," or, "Join us for our weekly web conference!"

1b) Meeting up features: Content elements that facilitated individual and group communication and networking, e.g. email accounts, individual and group pages, calendars, and so on.

1c) Meeting up links: Links to other websites or online resources that reinforced individual connections within the movement, e.g. personal websites, or that extended a group's network, e.g. cross-promotion of events, other Tea Party groups, or other collaborative political organizations.

2) Speaking out: Content that addressed symbolic expressions of speaking and being heard, as well as deliberative processes within groups and organized public interactions with politicians.

2a) Speaking out themes: Thematic content that celebrated vocality, e.g. "Have your voices heard!", or that encouraged or effected deliberative decision-making, e.g. "If you have agenda items you want to present at the meeting, submit them to me." Or, content regarding public or group events with politicians intended to allow a level of personal interaction, e.g. candidate forums, meet-and-greets, Town Hall meetings, and so on. Note: these are distinct from both rallies (coded under meeting up) and more direct political action (coded under pushing back).

2b) Speaking out features: Content elements that facilitated expression or deliberation either within the movement or with politicians, e.g. chat rooms, blogs and comments, instant messaging, web conferencing, and so on.

2c) Speaking out links: Links to other websites or online resources that reinforced an ethic of expression, or that facilitated deliberation within the movement or with politicians, e.g. chats, public speaking classes, candidate comment forms, and so on.

3) Pushing back: Content that addressed or facilitated organized political action intended to influence policy-makers, or that addressed symbolic work to reclaim, re-unite, or otherwise restore the nation.

3a) Pushing back themes: Thematic content that expressed symbolic or actual efforts to pressure politicians and compel them to change or protect certain policies, e.g. “They are on notice and if they don’t do the right thing we will get rid of them,” or “We are going to stand outside the Senator’s office until he answers us.” Or, content that expressed symbolic expressions of reclaiming, restoring, or reuniting America in an idealized, unified state, e.g. “We are going to bring this country back to the values it was founded on.”

3b) Pushing back features: Content elements that facilitated political action to influence policy-makers, e.g. civic action tools, training guides, and so on; or content that symbolically expressed a commitment to reclaim, restore, or reunite the nation, e.g. “the Patriots’ Wall.”

3c) Pushing back links: Links to other websites or online resources that facilitated political action to influence policy-makers, e.g. vote-tracking sites, scorecards, training resources, and so on; or links that symbolically reinforced the ethic of reclaiming, reuniting, or otherwise restoring the nation, e.g. “Take America Back Petition!”

Media Attitudes: Conceptual and operational definitions

Tea Party members I spoke with were vocal and emphatic in their opinions about media. In some cases, they offered trenchant critiques; in other cases, they discussed various ways they sought alternatives to traditional media. Taking a step back, there were also several ways that members spoke about media in the context of their public imperative goals, although they did not use that specific term. They did, however, talk about meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back in terms of both traditional and digital media. In terms of critiques, members generally spoke about ways traditional media worked against the movement. In response, several members pursued various alternatives to traditional media coverage. Finally, in the specific context of media, many Tea Party members spoke to one or more of the three public imperative premises.

Media Attitudes: Conceptual definition

In this study, media attitudes were clustered around three key areas. Media critiques addressed the specific issues of misrepresentation of the movement by media outlets, bias inherent in media outlets (particularly traditional outlets such as newspapers and television), and perceived attempts to undermine the movement directly. Alternatives to these problems with traditional media included the use of multiple sourcing, conducting original research, and turning to digital media. Finally, the definition of media attitudes encompassed the intersection of media and the public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back.

Media Attitudes: Operational definitions

4) Media critiques: Content that addressed misconceptions or errors in representation of the movement by media outlets, inherent biases of the media, and attempts to undermine the movement.

4a) Media critiques themes: Thematic content that addressed misrepresentation of the movement by news media, e.g. “Once again, the news channels are portraying us as angry crackpots.” Also, thematic content that addressed bias in the media, especially liberal bias, but any type, e.g. “Clearly the liberal media are at it again!” Finally, thematic content addressing specific attempts by media to deliberately undermine the movement, e.g. “We are not racists, but the media will call us that.”

4b) Media critiques features: Content elements that tracked or exposed specific problems of misrepresentation, bias, and undermining by media. Examples might include a poll or specific area to report such problems.

4c) Media critiques links: Links to other websites that supported these specific critiques or offered further evidence of them. (Note: Links to sites to combat these would be labeled under Media alternatives.)

5) Media alternatives: Content that encouraged or facilitated multiple sourcing of news consumption, conducting independent research, and the use of digital media on their own merits or in response to problems with traditional media.

5a) Media alternatives themes: Thematic content that encouraged or recommended members to pursue alternative strategies, e.g. “It’s always best to flip around and get a story from all sides,” or “Don’t let the media fool you, go read the Founding Fathers for yourself!” Also, thematic content that specifically endorsed or encouraged use of digital platforms.

5b) Media alternatives features: Content elements that encouraged or supported members wishing to access additional media sources, e.g. a local cable-channel finder for Fox News or CNN. Also features that encouraged or supported original research, e.g. on-site debt calculators. Finally, features that specifically facilitated the use of digital media, e.g. on-site web conferencing tools. (NOTE: Elements were coded as “media alternatives” rather than a generic public imperative category when they were presented specifically in the context of being an “alternative” resource.)

5c) Media alternatives links: Links to other sites that endorsed or facilitated the alternatives of multiple sourcing, e.g. links to liberal news sites, independent research, e.g. links to conservative online history programs, or learning to use digital media, e.g. links to free blogging software.

6) Media and the public imperative: Content that directly linked media with the three key premises of the public imperative.

6A) Media and public imperative themes: Thematic content in which members linked media outlets to their experiences of meeting up with other Tea Party members, attempting to speak out through the media to the public, and the ways they worked both with and against media in pushing back.

6B) Media and public imperative features: Content elements that directly related to news media and the key premises of the public imperative, e.g. a tool that generates an email to a network CEO, or a database that identifies local reporters by zip code.

6C) Media and public imperative links: Links to other sites that supported public imperative premises specifically in the context of media, e.g. media training resources, examples of successful media engagement, or attempts to push back directly on media figures.

Selecting sites for analysis

The Tea Party’s influence in politics to date has encompassed two primary points of leverage. On one hand, there has been the experience of the movement on the ground, wherein activists seek to raise concerns and pressure politicians through grassroots action. On the other hand, the movement has also been a powerful idea that Tea Party spokespeople wield in national

news media and the conservative politics. These two dimensions are naturally intertwined and there has been an inherent tension between them. Members at the grassroots level have spoken of changing the country, but also reject the idea of national leadership. “Tea Party leaders,” typically self-appointed, depend on the presence of the grassroots for their authority, but can scarcely speak for all groups. Both of these dimensions are essential to the Tea Party movement and they delineate a complex and important dynamic. To capture how this manifested online, I selected the websites of three organizations that, together, offered an illustrative view of the Tea Party.

The three websites I analyzed belonged to the Tea Party Patriots, the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, and the Tea Party News Network, and each offered a robust object of analysis. Each, in its own way, has contributed substantively to the movement. Each offered expansive or limited ways for individuals to learn about political issues and events, to interact with other Tea Party members, and to support the movement. Taken together, these sites represented key nodes in the movement’s digital presence. I chose to analyze these websites after the interview stage of the study for two reasons. First, the interviews provided valuable conceptual frames with which to examine the sites: in addition to the theoretical propositions presented in Chapter One, I was able to consider specific, empirical evidence about how members were conceiving themselves and their movement. Second, there was a chronological consideration, in that the movement has continually moved through a process of discovery and reaction. These websites reflected the movement in a secondary stage of development, at a time when the expertise gained in the 2010 midterm election victories was being focused on the 2012 presidential election. It is a moment when the movement’s strategic communication was likely to be more polished and intentional than its earliest days, and was likely to reflect greater strategic management by site producers.

Tea Party Patriots

The first organization I analyzed was Tea Party Patriots, which played an essential role in the development of the movement. Tea Party Patriots represented a crucial intersection of the grassroots and national messaging dimensions. It was an organization with national reach, founded by early activists and volunteers, which offered extensive support to local Tea Party groups seeking to become part of the movement. Beginning in 2009, Tea Party Patriots provided a structure through which many thousands of individuals became Tea Party members. It also developed an influential voice in national politics through support from conservative backers and establishment organizations. Co-founders Mark Meckler and Jenny Beth Martin were frequently cited as “Tea Party leaders,” and although Meckler had since left the organization, Martin remained active and highly visible throughout the period of this study. Neither Meckler nor Martin were established political insiders when they founded Tea Party Patriots, but the organization helped launch many hundreds of Tea Party groups. In the first years of the movement, Tea Party Patriots was probably the most active and extensive national Tea Party organization, establishing its role by hosting local Tea Party websites, offering training materials and guidance, organizing free teleconferences for members, and helping guide the development of core communication themes that many local groups adopted as their own. Though not a requirement, the “Tea Party Patriots” name was adopted by many of the local groups that used the national website to start organizing. Tea Party Patriots described its mission as influencing national debate through the cultivation of local groups. The national organization’s slogan, which appeared prominently on their website, was “100% Grassroots, 100% of the Time.” It was also true, however, that Tea Party Patriots coordinated with well-funded conservative groups in

Washington, D.C. In addition, Meckler and Martin frequently appeared on conservative news programs speaking on the Tea Party's behalf.

The Tea Party Patriots website (<http://www.teapartypatriots.org/>) also was important in the movement's growth. The site became the de facto starting point for a great portion of the movement: it was consistently a top Google search result for the term "tea party." Tea Party Patriots was originally developed on the Ning social networking platform, which became popular with many groups in the movement. The central site allowed users to easily create sites for local or regional Tea Party groups that included basic web features: a news feed, social networking tools, a space for blogs and chat, and so on. The main Tea Party Patriots site offered these same features as well, modeling ways that groups could incorporate user-generated content and news content. The main site underwent a major design revision in late 2011, but it largely retained its core functionality, including hosting sites for state and local groups. With the revision, the organization left the Ning platform, streamlined its appearance, and raised the profile of its training and fundraising functions. Though its approach was distinct from the local groups it supports, there is little question that Tea Party Patriots was foundational to the Tea Party's online presence.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots was a local group that in many ways exemplified the movement's grassroots ideals. The group was active in state politics, frequently mobilizing members to participate in rallies and to pressure representatives to support conservative issues such as Arizona Senate Bill 1070, which called for stringent new state regulations targeted toward undocumented immigrants. Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots was at the center of a large network of similar groups in the region and it offered a wide range of activities for

members and the public, including candidate vetting events, constitution classes, training sessions, and social events. The co-founder of the group has since gone on to win an election as an Arizona State Representative.

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots website (<http://phoenixteaparty.ning.com/>) became active in 2009 and offered a wide range of material for analysis. It included an active news feed, blog posts by members, links out to different types of content, and more than 5,000 photos and 300 videos of political events sponsored by the group. During my analysis it was hosted on the Ning.com social networking platform. Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots was a strong example of an active, grassroots Tea Party organization that arose independently and continued to sustain an active agenda at the local and state level, while also reiterating values that resonated with the national movement.

Tea Party News Network

The third website I analyzed was the Tea Party News Network (<http://www.tpnn.com/>). This site represented a different approach to the Tea Party movement than the previous two. Launched in 2012, shortly before the presidential election, this site positioned itself, as the name suggests, as an alternative news source that reflected Tea Party values. Tea Party News Network was founded by conservative activist and marketing specialist Todd Cefaratti, who in 2009 created TheTeaParty.net, a site that raised money for conservatives and sponsored Republican presidential candidate debates. In a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), Cefaratti (2012) described himself as having been “just a citizen” in 2009, when he was motivated to take political action, in the name of “We the People,” against President Obama’s Affordable Care Act legislation. The Tea Party News Network featured regular articles posted by a group of established conservative media personalities. Headlines and stories featured such

pointed partisan content as, “Democrat Lawmaker Promotes Bestiality,” and “Obama to Americans: High Taxes for Thee, but NOT for Me.” In that sense, the site functioned more like a partisan political blog, but many of the visual and textual cues were obviously meant at least to evoke, if not to directly trade on, the authority of a more traditional news service.

I included this site for analysis to capture another important dimension of the Tea Party movement: organizations, often with connections to the conservative establishment in Washington, D.C., that take up the Tea Party name, but that may not obviously support grassroots groups’ agendas. There is no question that the Tea Party has attracted keen interest from establishment conservatives in American politics, and the interactions between the two approaches has not always been amicable. Although it offered little interactive content, the Tea Party News Network may have been speaking directly to members’ anxieties about traditional media, as well as members’ desires to seek out alternative sources of information. By including the Tea Party News Network alongside Tea Party Patriots and Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, I sought to capture a broader, if still selective, view of this complex movement and its various approaches to the online civic engagement.

Summary

In this section, I described: the objectives and challenges of website analysis, details about data collection, and the elements (themes, features, and links) and process of this analysis; conceptual and operational definitions I employed; and, finally, the sites selected for analysis. By carefully reviewing hundreds of PDF documents, pages of notes, and additional digital artifacts, I synthesized material to address my Research Question. In doing so, I identified key similarities across sites, noting particularly their primary thematic content, their most prominent features, and their general linking strategies. I also carefully evaluated the differences between sites to

determine how they constructed distinctive approaches to civic engagement and news media.

Overall, this web analysis provided a detailed, multi-dimensional picture of these key nodes in the Tea Party's online presence. In Chapter Five, I describe and interpret these findings in detail.

Chapter Three

The Public Imperative in Individual Tea Party Discourse

The dramatic success of the Tea Party movement in its early stages was fueled by the grassroots energy of conservative citizens, many of them taking action for the first time. On April 15, 2009, the day of the first major national Tea Party protest, the public imperative's core characteristics of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back were evident in first-person accounts from around the country. When Tea Party groups marched through Rochester, New York, for example, blogger "Rochester_Veteran" (2009) posted about the thrill of coming together as a patriotic public:

I had great exchanges with so many people and everybody was so upbeat and positive and united in the opinion that "We The People" need to regain the reins of government from the crash course that we're being driven to! [...] As we were going through our preparations, we heard repeated roars from the rally across the river. I saw a sea of people forming up, flags waving and signs being held up and at that moment, I knew this was turning into something big!

That same day, a local news reporter in Austin, Texas, covered a boisterous, energetic Tea Party rally near the state capitol building. The reporter interviewed Charlotte Cranberg, who spoke emphatically of the national pride and implicit power that comes from gaining a public voice (Hoff, 2009): "This is making us feel good about America. That we can have a voice, and we're gonna have a voice. This is the beginning, I think, of a great movement." In San Diego, California, rally organizer Dawn Wildman spoke to a national newspaper reporter and put local lawmakers on notice that the Tea Party would be watching them closely and expecting results (Dorell, 2009): "We're seeing how you vote. You're not paying attention to your constituency. We put you there, and we can take you out." These types of sentiments appeared time and again in statements by Tea Party members as they charted a path from the anxious, isolated space they

inhabited in late 2008 to a new reality of clear purpose, active networks, and increasing political capital.

This chapter explores how the concepts of the public imperative recurred repeatedly among the individuals with whom I spoke, often with profound resonance, as they went through a process of political awakening. Tapping into the historical legacy of the American Revolution and the power of political narrative, these new Tea Party members frequently structured their experience in terms of banding together, publicly declaring their authority, and attempting to transform their political circumstances. Mapping these patterns illuminates a crucial type of civic expectation that motivates citizens to enter into public life and provides context for understanding inherent tensions between social movements, traditional journalism, and new media practices. To guide this exploratory investigation of the public imperative, I developed the following research question:

RQ1: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members invoke or echo the three public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back? If so, how do they talk about these experiences?

To answer this question, I conducted a series of qualitative in-depth interviews with 35 active Tea Party members between July 2010 and June 2011. The resulting transcripts were rich in detail. They allowed me both to examine whether the proposed public imperative premises were present and to explore how they manifested and interacted. Interviewees described their experiences and motivations in their own words, emphasizing what was most important to them personally and situating themselves in both an emerging political movement and a deeply rooted national mythology. In this way, the transcripts laid bare themes that were highly salient for some of the individuals guiding and shaping the Tea Party during this period.

In describing the impulses that first brought them to the public square and the motivations that continue to drive them, members frequently cited the premises of the public imperative. Each of the core components was not only present but vividly so, often informing interviewees' first-hand experiences in rich and complex ways. With only broad questions and limited prompting in the interviews, many people passionately described the joy of connecting with like-minded people, the authoritative experience of speaking out in public spaces, and the intensity of their efforts to pressure their representatives and change the country. Each of these premises was present in every region of the country in which I conducted interviews, from Utah to Florida, Arkansas to Massachusetts, Washington State to Washington, D.C. Moreover, each was present to some degree in virtually every interview, whether I was speaking with local or national organizers, longtime political professionals, or first-time participants. In some cases, these were direct invocations of the public imperative, but often the premises emerged in thematic clusters that appeared repeatedly across the data. Together, these clusters tell a distinct public imperative story, one in which political newcomers instinctively tap into a process of political engagement that gives them a clear path forward and a potent emotional reward. Beyond the rhetoric and controversy, this was how the Tea Party became what it was.

Meeting Up: Connecting As Individuals and In Groups

Social movements are constituted in relationships, and when Tea Party members described how they first became involved, they consistently spoke about the fundamental importance of connecting with others like them. This is the public imperative premise of *meeting up*, and it manifested on two primary levels. The first was *meeting up as individuals*, as they developed interpersonal connections and experiences at rallies and meetings. The second was

meeting up in groups, as they built organizational relationships at local, state, and, in some cases, national levels. Running through all these interactions were the potent personal meanings that meeting up engendered for members of the Tea Party. Certain patterns appeared repeatedly in the way individuals told their personal stories. I will briefly summarize these and then show how they emerged in members' own words. All excerpts are based on carefully developed transcripts; words and phrases appear as they were spoken, with consistent punctuation to indicate pauses, repetitions, minor substitutions for clarity, and minor additions for clarity.

Meeting up as individuals

The process of social action took shape as people began meeting up as individuals. When asked how they first became involved with the Tea Party, virtually every member I spoke with told a story of acute frustration, isolation, and anxiety, grounded in their perceptions of specific government policies and the decaying state of the nation in general. Motivated by this, they felt compelled to take action to meet with others who shared their values. They often described this indirectly as a kind of leap of faith. Once they did meet up with others at rallies and meetings, almost all members described a thrill at discovering groups of like-minded people. Throughout these interviews, this impulse to meet up was more than simply a pragmatic, rational activity. For many it was also a profoundly transformational, even quasi-religious experience of connection and community.

The individuals I spoke with reported being intensely motivated by feelings of political frustration, isolation, and anxiety in late 2008 and early 2009. The government's response to the 2008 economic crisis and the policies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama left many deeply frustrated. A sense of isolation magnified the oppressive, offensive political climate that they were experiencing. Many reported deep concern, sometimes bordering on panic, about the fate of

the nation. In virtually every case, it was their eventual connection with a like-minded group that ameliorated this concern and opened a door to a new personal political reality.

Wayne, a Tea Party organizer who headed an active group in Arizona, was typical in his strong sense of frustration. Like many others, he characterized his political work as the only viable solution to his concerns:

By the beginning of 2009, I just couldn't take it anymore. I mean, I was screaming at the TV and was like, you know, this can't keep going the way it's going. The direction is totally wrong. So I basically, you know, it was easy for me to understand, you know, that we had to get out there and try to do something about it.

In some cases, the anxiety people experienced was almost existential in nature. Andrew, a Tea Party organizer who worked in the financial industry in New York City, was emphatic about the emotional toll of political events:

People thought I was nuts. I mean, I wasn't going out with girls. I felt like Charlton Heston in "Soylent Green," if you know the story. You know? I'm like, "Do you know what's happening?" And people were looking at me like, "What?" I'm like, "The ship is sinking. This isn't the way to go." So I was in total despair. [...] So then I heard about this Tea Party event in (New York). And I tell (fellow Tea Party organizers), because they really did save me, because I was... total despair.

Bob, an organizer for a large Tea Party group in Idaho, echoed many members when he described an urgent need that the new movement seemed able to fill:

It was the theory and the thought behind the Tea Party that was interesting to me, that somebody was willing to stand up and say, stop this insanity with the (government) spending at the time. There, at the time there was also, the TARP program had just gotten kicked off by Bush and the entitlement programs by the Obama administration, and I just saw us going in [...] the wrong direction and felt that somebody had to stand up and speak out, since there was nobody else in (this) area.

In each of these cases, as in many others, individuals felt alone in their sense that the country was on a desperately wrong track. As painful as this isolation was, it generated a powerful impulse to meet up with others, and the Tea Party provided an attractive and effective vehicle for doing so.

Meeting with others in a political context was an unfamiliar prospect for many in this movement, particularly for conservatives who tended to not be steeped in a tradition of public protest. Several of the interviewees first reached out not knowing what they might find. With little sense of what to expect, they took a political leap of faith to cross the gap from isolation to connection. Ellen, a retiree in Arizona who subsequently joined several conservative political groups, was compelled to venture out on her own:

It's not necessarily the Tea Party or even the Republican Party that inspired me to get out. It's what I saw occurring in front of my face that inspired me to get up and get out and try to do something. Like I said, the first thing I ever went to I went all by myself. And, you know, I said I can't stay in the house anymore. I have to get up and go out and show my face and stand with other likeminded people. So that's what I did.

Bob, in Idaho, also started alone. He had no particular agenda when he began participating, and first took action only after a chance meeting with local protesters:

Interviewer: How did you first hear about the Tea Party and what made you want to get involved?

Bob: Great story. I'm driving down (a main street) Saturday morning. I see these young guys. They look like college guys, but they're probably a little bit older than that. And they're standing out there with signs saying, political science something, like stop socialism, or stop the spending, or don't steal our youth's money, and I stop to ask them who they were. They said that they were the new (local Tea Party group) and, I said, "Well, when are you guys going to do it again?" They said next weekend, and I said "I'll be here," and that's my starting with the (group). So I went home and made a sign and next Saturday morning I stood in the middle of the road with them, protesting the direction our government's going.

Sarah, one of the earliest Tea Party organizers who became influential in a major national Tea Party organization, also spoke of an impulse to take action and her personal leap of faith:

I don't know, I was just doing it you know? Like when something needs to get done, you just do it. You don't just, like, sit around. You just get it done, you know? I mean... I think, you know, it's probably a good outlet since I was so frustrated and feeling so stifled. I can't really remember now specifically but I could probably say that I felt a little bit better that I was doing something rather than just sitting around and taking it for what it was. But it was more, it was more just trying to think, "Oh my gosh, I hope there's more people there than just me."

Similarly, Bonnie, a Tea Party organizer in Arizona, described the progression from frustration and isolation to successfully bringing people together:

You know, so we were all keenly watching what was going on, very concerned. And then as the Tea Parties began to come together we all started getting involved. [...] Well, I wanted to get a message out that I personally had because I was concerned about socialism. So, I looked for the Tea Party on the Fourth of July to speak my concerns and there wasn't one here in (my city). There was one in (another city). But here we are the fifth largest city and there was no Tea Party scheduled on the Fourth of July, where there was other Tea Parties around the nation, and we were lacking. So, we couldn't find anyone to do it, so myself and Rick [...] just said, "Let's just do it." So, that was step one in getting involved, and because we had stepped forward to do it, many people asked to keep going, and so here we are a year later. Many more people have joined, and several chapters. So, it's been a blessing.

For all of these people, as for many Tea Party members, the process of discovering their political potential—and the answer to the visceral frustration, isolation, and anxiety they were experiencing—began when they reached out to meet up with people they did not yet know.

When they took this leap, the people with whom I spoke were often thrilled and energized by encountering others. Meeting up affirmed their political views and provided them with social contacts that focused and fueled their participation. Both through rallies and through nascent Tea Party groups, individuals discovered a new way of situating themselves in the world: not only were they not alone, but they felt an emerging sense of purpose. Dorothy was a Tea Party activist working with Wayne in Arizona. She attended rallies sponsored by a Washington, D.C. Tea Party group before joining a local group and then becoming an organizer with Wayne.

The experience of connecting with like-minded people activated powerful feelings of community for her:

So when I attended the Tea Party Express group, I felt energized. I felt like I was not alone. And I think a lot of us were starting to feel that we were alone out there, that nobody else felt the way we did, that everyone was into handouts and welfare, and nobody seemed to want to work anymore. Well, having attended one of those events I realized the opposite was true.

Dorris, a Tea Party activist and author in California, was also tentative at first, and then delighted by the emotional charge of meeting up with other who shared her view. She described the inspirational moment that she and her husband experienced when they attended their first rally:

I found out about the big Tax Day April 15th of 2009 and that there would be a rally in (a California city). And my husband and I decided that we would make the three-hour drive there. We made some signs on our kitchen table the night before, and really weren't sure what to expect. My husband said at the time... he was a Vietnam War veteran, who returned to protests and people in the streets with signs, and never thought in his life he would be one. So he really was a little bit nervous and not sure what to expect. And we got to the (rally) and there were 5,000 other patriots there and I immediately knew that something really big was happening in American politics and I wanted to be a part of it.

Dorris also noted two important aspects of meeting up that the movement offered. On one hand, people were able to come together to protest government policies; on the other hand, as she noted, rallies could also take on the tenor of a patriotic community gathering:

It was just... ah, terribly exciting and exhilarating. People were so friendly, although pissed off about the economics of the country, and the huge debt, and the piling on with the stimulus bill and TARP, and just the general ignoring of what the people want by our representatives. There was deep anger and frustration in the crowd, yet the atmosphere was more like a block party where everyone was very friendly. There were people, young families with kids in strollers, people brought their dogs, they laid out on the perimeter, they laid out blankets and were sitting. I mean, it was like a Fourth of July picnic in many ways.

Not all meeting up took place at rallies. At the same time that people were gathering in town squares, local groups were forming around the country to organize further events and start

building the movement. Many members reported the rapid growth of their local groups. Angela, an organizer in Kentucky, had started a small group in late 2009, shortly before the second major national Tea Party protest was approaching on September 12:

I just put it out online again, on our local, online newspaper site, said you know, we're going to have a [protest] viewing party, you know. People that couldn't go, come over to the restaurant that we're at now. And we had a big crowd come and that became the nucleus [of the group], and we have not looked back since. I don't think we've ever missed another meeting. We meet every Monday night since then except for some major holidays. So that was kind of what... it was just a fever, I mean, there's just so much energy [...]. And, [we] just had a lot of energy from the grassroots and, you know, once people start coming, there's no turning back. You didn't have to go out and really beat the doors, you just announced it and people came out of the woodwork, they're just so frustrated with the whole thing.

Cameron, a highly successful organizer in Arkansas, also started with a very small group that eventually became a multi-state network that attracted attention from national political organizations. His group started when, at the behest of his wife, he went to hear a presentation about the Tea Party at a local restaurant:

I called a friend, he showed up, and there was about eight of us, and we heard the story, and I turned to the group and I said, "Well you can count me in. I don't know about the rest of you, but this sounds like a pretty good deal." And so with that, we met two weeks later in one of the, the people in attendance, their home, and eighteen people showed up. And then the next meeting, two weeks later, there was thirty-some odd. And it just kept growing, and that's where we find ourselves today, and it's been an exciting ride.

This momentum helped create an expansive and credible grassroots presence that attracted both media attention and support from the political establishment. This in turn exposed the movement to more potential members and the cycle continued.

Many of the Tea Party members with whom I spoke described the emotional impact of these first meetings as being transformational and even profound. This depth of feeling was

triggered not simply by the opportunity to attend a rally or a meeting, but by the meaningful personal connections that the movement made possible. Martha, a retiree in Arizona, had never participated in politics beyond voting, but spoke about the movement bringing people together in a national community:

And I would say, “What can one person do?” Well, one person can join with two, can join with three, can join with the Tea Party, and it is a national movement. It’s a phenomenal movement. And so we support each other, and we encourage each other.

For Dorothy, the connection with others gave her not only an active role in politics but a profound sense of purpose. This language permeated her descriptions of her Tea Party experience:

Our meetings are really one of the highlights for me, because it brings hope. I think that’s really the bottom line. It’s exciting, we feel like we will be... we feel like we are making a difference and that we continue to make a difference. [...]

All I know is the first meeting I attended was... it was extremely hopeful, because I started to sense a purpose that I, that I could be involved with, where I could make a difference, or die trying. And I mean that seriously because I’m not a kid anymore. [...]

I hope that what I’m telling you you’re not hearing for the first time. And if you’re not, then there’s hope. I just... I can’t do it alone. Wayne can’t do it alone, and we won’t live forever anyway. So, I would like to be able to bring back the basis that our country was founded on before we lose it and before everybody forgets.

On several occasions, people described their sense of excitement and purpose at meeting up with others as bordering on religious experience. Andrew, the banker in New York City who was active in a Manhattan-based Tea Party group, spoke with enthusiasm about one of the early rallies put together by a fellow organizer:

It was a big event. And it was amazing. We were, we were... I was there and I felt almost like an evangelical... not an evangelical, I’m a Catholic... but you know I felt like an evangelical, you know, like just

enlightened. And I felt finally happy because I felt like there were people around me that understood how I felt. It was a lot of frustration. And a lot... I can definitely say it was a predominant move. It was hopelessness. Despair. Frustration. And a lot of people... it was kind of like you band together. You know, like, "We're here. Together." And, you know, you can turn this angst into action.

Mack, a Tea Party organizer in Michigan, also invoked spiritual language in describing his connecting with others:

That's how this movement is growing. It's kind of like spreading the gospel. I don't want to use this as a big comparison because there's nothing really in my opinion like sharing the gospel. That's the greatest joy that a person could ever hope to have the ability to do. In a lot of ways I see God working in this Tea Party the same way I see the church working. It's one-on-one. It's with your neighbors, your family, your friends. It's communicating what is really the truth....

This is how potent the public imperative can be. Individuals who felt lost and alone, acting on an intense urge to connect, jumped into the world of politics, often with no experience and no particular plan. This impulse was met with excitement, energy and purpose. These steps—from deep frustration and isolation, to the thrill of connecting with like-minded compatriots, to building a movement—were built on the promise and the reward of simply meeting up with others who shared their values. In the next section, I will show how these individual connections quickly grew into other kinds of powerful relationships.

Meeting up in groups

As these interpersonal connections grew, people almost immediately began *meeting up in groups*. Local groups started to grow rapidly and then began to form statewide and regional networks. These, in turn, attracted the attention and assistance of national organizations that helped perpetuate the cycle. A pervasive and potent ethic of meeting up dominated this period, across a range of organizations. This complex, multi-level process generated a national movement capable of dominating national news and political agendas. The implications of their

actions were unclear at the time, but the starting point for so many of these people—and thus, to a significant degree, the movement itself—was an instinctive, emotionally charged, and deeply rewarding experience of meeting up.

The core function of meeting up was present and critical throughout the Tea Party movement, from an individual heading to her first political protest alone, to some of the most well-connected, well-funded conservative advocacy groups in the nation. Members of the movement were eager to extend this ethic of meeting up beyond local and personal contexts. After discovering one another at rallies and establishing local groups, organizers started contacting and partnering with nearby Tea Party groups. Many eventually formed statewide coalitions and began working with emerging national organizations such as Tea Party Patriots or well-established conservative forces such as Americans for Prosperity.

Cameron, for example, had significant success bringing groups together across the state of Arkansas:

The other thing that we've got cooking right now is last November I shot a note out to all the Tea Parties with some key leaders in the state of Arkansas that are leading conservative efforts here in Tea Parties. And we've got together, six of us did, and we collectively said, "You know, it might be a good idea to try and get all the Tea Parties together in the state, at least to sit around the table and listen to one another, where we've been successful, where we've had failures, where there's opportunities to learn from one another." And that's become reality. We launched at the capital last week. We had our own press conference and we launched the Friends of the Tea Party.

Interviewer: Oh?

Cameron: Yeah, it was pretty cool, and we had representatives from most every Tea Party in the state, and we had a number of representatives and senators that stepped down, a number of the executive officers, or constitutional officers of the state dropped by, and engaged in a meet and greet. [...] We have thirty-some-odd Tea Parties in the state that are actively engaged and we're anticipating that in two years we can at least line up another twenty, if not thirty, more. We'd like to have one in every

county, because we think that at that point we can have a very, very significant influence throughout the state.

In Cameron's case, meeting up as individuals opened a door to established political networks and elected officials. Often, once people moved beyond their initial hesitation, there was a strong expectation that meeting up would translate into greater political clout. In many cases, they were right. Rex, an organizer in Texas, helped build a Tea Party network that leveraged their meeting up into direct legislative contacts:

Interviewer: Does your organization work with other groups?

Rex: Yeah, we work with other Tea Parties. We're associated with a number of Tea Parties in the state of Texas. And I personally am on the state advisory for the Tea Party Caucus of the Texas legislature. The second largest caucus in the Texas legislature is the Tea Party Caucus, and we have a [...] state-wide advisory board that are made up of Tea Party coordinators, and I'm on that, so I'm working with those other [...] Tea Party coordinators from around the state of Texas.

Coordination among groups was common for the Tea Party members I interviewed. When groups wanted to work together, they were often able to successfully meet up and collaborate, even when there were differences and points of disagreement. In some cases, they were reaching across state borders, as with Wayne's group in Arizona:

Right now we're working with (a Tea Party group in Texas). They have a real good program about getting the vote out. They've seen results in (two Texas cities) of increasing voter turnout, by as much as, she even said last night as much as 1000 percent, just by going out and working the precincts and finding people who want to be involved, and the whole route. So you know, we're all trying to work together in this, because it's all brand-new.

Meeting up in groups sometimes even extended beyond the boundaries of the Tea Party itself, offering a high-profile platform for collaboration among several conservative political organizations. Bob in Idaho spoke about a coalition in his area that was coming together as a "conservative family":

One of the things we have done that may be a little bit unique is not just with the Tea Parties but with the other conservative groups in the area, specifically Project 9/12. [...] And here we have a group called the Idaho Freedom Foundation. That's where I'll be going this afternoon for the no-tax rally. We've come together more as a conservative family and we're trying to work a little bit more closely together. So instead of saying, (our Tea Party group) is going to have a float in the 4th of July parade, or something like that, just to use an example, we'll probably get together with 9/12, Idaho Freedom Foundation, Idahoans for Liberty, and obviously the other Tea Parties in the area, and do it all together. And I know this sounds sort of hokey, [but] I don't care if they're members of (our group) as much as I care if they're conservative voters.

The Tea Party organizers and participants I spoke with proudly emphasized the shared values of the movement and were eager to meet up with other groups. In some cases, groups did specifically distance themselves from one another for various reasons having to do with policies (e.g. endorsing candidates) or their general mission (e.g. "education" versus public action), and generally speaking, members celebrated the movement's lack of coordinated leadership. Overall, though, groups were ready to come together for a greater purpose. Malcolm, a coordinator and teacher for an Arizona Tea Party group, characterized this coherence this way:

There's a number of different Tea Party groups within Arizona and yet, we all, in one way or another, work together towards mutual ends. Though not every group agrees on what the tax should be, and so on and so forth, the message is basically the same thing.

This strong collaborative ethic throughout the Tea Party movement—despite the diversity and complexity of these groups—reflected the importance of meeting up. Just as individuals felt a sense of community and increased influence when they came together, so, too, did these newly formed groups.

Early in 2009, representatives of established conservative groups and new Tea Party organizers had a conversation about how to bring local groups together to stage a national protest. This local-national link was another key way that the ethic of meeting up helped the

movement grow. Many local groups eventually connected with national-level organizations, in order to build their own membership (as with Tea Party Patriots, among others), or to stage bigger rallies and protests (as with Tea Party Express and Americans for Prosperity, among others). Roy, an organizer in California, received material support from a variety of national organizations, which helped him attract more local interest:

(One national group), they're a support group for kind of the conservative movement. When the elections were going on in November, I got an email from (them) that said, "Are you in any need of campaign signs for your candidate that's running for Congress?" And they shipped me out 25 signs to put, you know, lawn signs. And they just now sent me another pamphlet that I'm going to be handing out [...]. They shipped me out 100 of them. And they're, you know, they're well done and I'm going to hand them out to the people. [...] So, there's [also] other smaller groups that come together [...]. Liberty Action, there's Smart Girl Politics, there's different groups. Different names, but all pretty much the same goal in mind.

It was clear from this case and others like it that the impulse to meet up at the grassroots level was often fostered by national organizations. The Tea Party's national credibility, however, was largely based on the initiative and enthusiasm of local groups. For example, Sarah organized one of the first local protests in 2009 to gain national visibility and later began working for a national group. She described the importance of national and local groups meeting up so that local activists could bring more people together at the grassroots level:

I mean, (the national organization) exists to give help to local organizations. So we definitely have a huge relationship with the local groups. I mean we really, if there's ever any sort of conflict, like if the group ever feels that the national umbrella organization is coming in too harsh or something like that, we're always like, "Feedback, feedback, feedback." I mean, we work it out with people. We'll fly there and have meetings with people face-to-face and just say, "What can we do for you?" We'll help them if they want to do a statewide conference with all the local groups, we'll try to help them get money to put it on. Basically everything that we do, we want to provide them with resources and tools so they can grow their groups, you know, strengthen their networks across the state and just help them with visibility or just like whatever tools they need to be strong. So yeah, we have a really good relationship with them.

Many conservative organizations at the national level were undoubtedly motivated to help cultivate the Tea Party movement for strategic reasons: an all-but-unprecedented populist uprising on the right meant new opportunities to increase fundraising, media attention, and political leverage. At the same time, the national-level organizers I spoke with sincerely valued the personal experiences of new individual members. Their primary goal was to bring people together, so they could in turn bring more people into the movement.

Jack, a former state-level director for a national conservative political organization, spoke almost reverently about an early Tea Party event that his organization sponsored:

When we held really the first Tea Party event in Wisconsin 8,000 people showed up. Over the course of that event the number of people that I ran into that said, "I attended that event, it's the first time I did it and I said to myself, I'm going back to my community to do the same thing." (One attendee), a grandmother from Sheboygan, never been involved (in politics), went back to Sheboygan and started her own group. (Another attendee) from Wausau, Wisconsin. (Another attendee) from Rhinelander. (Another attendee) from Racine. The same story. These are people that have never been involved that said, "You know what? I didn't know there were that many people in Wisconsin that shared my beliefs." It was a group, they got the energy and they went back to their own communities and did it on their own. Fascinating, fascinating.

This is where the national and individual levels intersect most directly, in the impulse to bring people together. Though it may satisfy different objectives, organizers at all levels of the Tea Party seemed to quickly discover how the powerful emotional dimension of meeting up was foundational to the growth of the movement.

In a movement composed largely of political newcomers, individuals who initially felt isolated and anxious managed nonetheless to build an effective, well-integrated network that could reach across city, state and organizational boundaries, and eventually even into the halls of the U.S. Congress. Without this robust and pervasive sense of the fundamental value of meeting up, it is easy to imagine the movement dissipating in its early stages. Instead, personal

connections thrived both at rallies and in local groups across the country, driving the expansion of new networks and garnering national-level support. On this successful platform of meeting up, the Tea Party was able to fulfill the next critical dimension of the public imperative: speaking out.

Speaking Out: Being Heard Symbolically and Strategically

Social movements in American politics typically rise and fall on their mastery of democratic expression, and the Tea Party achieved extraordinary success through its use of visible, vocal civic action. In their own words, the people I interviewed embraced the public imperative premise of *speaking out*, broadly and spontaneously. This urge to speak out followed closely on members' powerful impulse to meet up with like-minded citizens, and was likewise rooted in the anxious atmosphere of conservative politics in late 2008 and early 2009. As with meeting up, Tea Party members' speaking out functioned on two distinct levels. The first was members' *speaking out symbolically*, primarily by tapping into certain narratives that resonated with American history. The second was members' *speaking out strategically*, which they did initially through public rallies and then, with increasing directness, to politicians themselves. After clarifying these levels briefly, I will show how they emerged in Tea Party members' descriptions of their experiences in the movement.

Speaking out symbolically

In the same way that meeting up with fellow conservatives helped situate Tea Party members in a community, speaking out symbolically gave them a prescribed role within American political culture. Specifically, many of the subjects I interviewed directly or indirectly invoked an American tradition of "finding one's voice" as a citizen, which they did by answering

perceived injustices through public protests and by talking back to their political leaders. Members throughout the movement also cultivated an ethic of speaking, listening, and dialogue that was symbolically powerful for them and their groups. For virtually all of the interviewees, their first acts of speaking out were preceded by a period of wariness or hesitation. As they recounted their stories, however, they looked back on those early expressions as a natural and obvious response to their frustrations. It was as if, having finally spoken out, they authentically and personally understood it as a fundamental dimension of their American citizenship. In this way, the movement's rallies and protests were extraordinarily effective at activating a sense of political power and responsibility among its members. The symbolic dimension of speaking out was thus a key to the emergence and success of the Tea Party.

In the interviews I conducted, speaking out signified much more than a simple act of speech. It was also an opportunity to step into the role of an active citizen and fulfill a potent American ideal. One of the key frustrations that many Tea Party members reported was an acute sense of “not being heard,” certainly by politicians but also by society in general. Having finally met up with like-minded compatriots, the public imperative offered them a next step. In recounting their personal stories, members time and again said they were “finding our voice,” which in turn unleashed an even more robust way to be heard. By speaking out—in public, amongst themselves, and to politicians—Tea Party members were at last able interact with the political system that so frustrated them.

Tea Party members often framed their acts of speaking out in the language and myths of American history. Sarah, an early and influential Tea Party activist, staged a rally in early in 2009 that was subsequently credited with helping launch the movement. That event might never have happened but for her sense of having no voice in the political system. When her

Congressional representative's office answered a complaint she had made with a form-letter offering "thanks for her support," it triggered a powerful public imperative response that is worth quoting at length:

I do not support you, no! So (I started because of) that, and it was sort of just a realization that as American children I think that we're taught very much about our special history, that in America you have a voice and you're different from other countries. We're really a country, you know, made by the people, and decisions are made by the people. Yeah, we elect representatives and we have a republican form of government, but it's still based on what the people want, and you know, you're always going to have a voice and all this stuff.

And I just woke up one day and I thought, "I do not have a voice at all. They don't give a damn about what I think." And that feeling is like... well, you know, having grown up with this ideal, this really idealistic view of what politics and government was, and then to feel totally outside the process, completely, was really jarring and very upsetting and frustrating.

And so I just thought, "Well, okay, I have two choices. I can either just accept it the way it is and just keep going on with my life the way I have been, or I can do something and try to change it." And the only thing I could think of to do, since I wasn't being listened to by the people who were supposed to be listening, was to try to take it to the public square and see if we could get somebody to listen there. So that's how I decided to have the first protest.

This was a watershed moment in the emergence of the Tea Party, and one that was echoed in various ways throughout the interviews.

Members often linked speaking out with phrases or concepts that invoked key American values. For example, Lettie, a Tea Party organizer in a small town in Oregon, said that after the passage of President Obama's health reform legislation in 2009, "We got the feeling that 'we the people' are being ignored. They're just not listening to us [...]. We felt like we had to get people together and find our voice." Daniella, attending a rally in Oregon with her husband and daughter, spoke about the Tea Party movement in similar terms, saying, "That's where it's coming from, the grassroots of us people." Daniella also drew an important distinction between

traditional politics and the revolutionary impulse of the Tea Party: voting is important, she said, but, “It’s not going to matter until our voice is heard.” Similarly, Wayne in Arizona, like Sarah and many others, located the origins of the movement in a failure of political representation and the need to express the authority of “the people”:

The original concept of a Representative was to go to Washington, pick up ideas and thoughts, and blah blah blah. Bring them back to the voters, present them, let the voters, you know, present what they felt about it, whether they approved or disapproved, then they would go back to Washington to vote. Well, we got left out. They do what they want to do. They think they know best. And we know best. The people know best.

Stephanie in Utah directly linked the concepts of citizenship and speaking out several times, saying, “We (the Tea Party) want to encourage citizens to stand up, and no matter what you feel about an issue, stand up and have your voice heard about (it).” For Stephanie and others there was an obvious and emphatic link between speaking out, American identity, and conservative values:

(Americans) have, at their core, conservative values. And they work hard, and they pay attention to their family, and they worry about their family. And because of that, they have been silent in this country. And we are silent no more. And that’s what we realize, is that we represent the majority of citizens and we needed to rise up and be silent no more and have our voices heard. And that’s what we’re doing.

Bob in Idaho exhibited a similar defiant certainty that was also widespread in the movement. When reporters asked him why he got involved, he said, “...the answer was quite simply because I either sit down and shut up or stand up and speak up, and that’s where I am. And that’s where I think many of our members are.” For Bob, speaking up in the face of failed political representation was both an American privilege and a crucial next step:

One of my frustrations is that the conservatives in Congress are not speaking up or at least they’re not heard. [...] My frustration with our Republicans, our existing representatives, is that they got lockjaw. One of our Tea Party sayings is “silence is consent.” We have stickers to that

statement. And, if somebody's going to do something and you're going to be quiet about it, then, you know, it's your deal. It's... we live in America. If you were in, you know, Afghanistan or Iraq or somewhere like that, where you couldn't speak up, or China, then that's one thing. But we can speak up here.

In a movement so rich in American symbolism, this link between speaking out and a narrative of upstart citizens was resonant. It offered a model and an inspiration for many early activists who would drive the movement's growth and increasing influence.

For some organizers, their first public rallies were ad hoc affairs, but they created an exciting atmosphere in which to speak out. This helped establish a model that proved crucial for the Tea Party in its early days. Andrew in New York City talked about his fellow organizer's first foray into public protest, which jumped from a personal Facebook page to a well-known park in lower Manhattan:

Andrew: He just goes out with a bullhorn and all of a sudden it caught like wildfire.

Interviewer: A bullhorn?

Andrew: Right in (the park), by himself. He says, "I can't take this. I'm going to go out." And he went out with a bullhorn, everybody on his Facebook, friends... This was before anything in the Tea Party. [...] So he just did his thing, all his friends, and they started coming.

In this case, as in many others, the impulse to speak out was so strong that people with no political experience were jumping in. When Bonnie in Arizona took action, she scheduled an event, invited everyone she could think of, and set up a microphone. For her, the act of speaking out was immediate and obvious. At the time, it seemed to her to be the only thing she knew to do, but it became the core of her message to that first crowd:

But when Rick and I did the Fourth of July [protest], we had how many days? All of maybe five days to organize it at the most? And because we were like, "Something's got to happen." So we just got a PA system and a microphone, a couple speakers on the stand. And we didn't have fancy

speakers, we didn't have big-name speakers. We had a group of people and they said... you know, when I asked them, they said... "How many of you here have said in the past somebody should do something? Raise your hand." And they all raised their hand. "How many of you have gotten to the point now that 'I should do something'?" And they all raised their hand. "Well, today starts that first day to take it out of your comfort zone. Take that step forward. Take this microphone, and tell people how you feel. You know, just let your voice be heard, that's step one."

Speaking out, for Bonnie and others, was crucial in the early days of the movement because it was instinctive and achievable. It would prove even more important as people discovered the personal resonance and symbolic power it represented. Bonnie continued her description of that first rally by noting the contagious, transformative excitement of speaking out about one's concerns:

I was mad. And I was emphatic. And people started to go, "Yeah! Give me the microphone!" You know? And then they started taking the microphone and they started talking. And next thing you know we couldn't... we had to go to our... we went like on a little march [...] you know, little flags and a little parade deal. We had to go, and we couldn't get people off the microphone, they were so needing to say what they had to say. Even though they were scared at first, they took that little step, and I realized people need to say what they have to say. So we added that to our (regular meeting agenda). Time to sound off, you know? Time to say, "This is how I'm feeling. This is what I'm concerned about. This is my ideas." We got most of our great ideas from that element. That's how we've grown and, and people wanted to be heard. It keeps them coming back.

This instinctive reaction to speak out began to shape members' thinking and their group strategies. As it did so, it brought people together and allowed them to argue for social change. Eleanor, an organizer in Florida who also worked with the state Republican Party, described how speaking out made the Tea Party so effective at unifying disparate individuals:

I knew that getting directly involved in the local political scene again would be to the citizen's advantage. However, we needed another catalyst to bring like-minded citizens together to work for this goal of turning back to the principles of limited government and free markets. So the Tea Party is the perfect conduit for it. As a voice and as a catalyst and as a simple

way for like-minded individuals, people with the same political outlook, to band together.

A “voice and a catalyst” is a succinct description of how speaking out functioned for Tea Party members. First, it provided a powerful symbolic voice that let individuals feel they were part of a rich American political tradition as they took to the public square. Then, as it evolved, it also allowed them to push for change, by strategically directing their voices both inward, toward movement-building, and outward, toward politicians who were suddenly compelled to listen.

Speaking out strategically

As important as the symbolic level was, speaking out also had an essential pragmatic level that can be characterized as speaking out strategically. The process of “finding one’s voice” was not limited to brief public protests: it also informed the Tea Party’s growth in other, more direct ways. Throughout 2009, for example, activists used their newly reclaimed citizens’ voices to organize the movement itself in both local and national groups, thus creating even more opportunities to meet up and speak out. Finally freed from the isolation of silence, many members began directing their voices toward politicians, using a range of channels and strategies. This type of activity, and the results it garnered, helped engender an attitude that surfaced in many of these interviews, i.e., an aggressive ethic of political accountability. In speaking out, members pointedly gave politicians notice that they would be watching their actions, expecting certain results, and punishing or rewarding them at the next election. In both its symbolic and strategic dimensions, speaking out was a critical step for Tea Party members on their path from being frustrated individuals to an influential voice in national politics.

For the Tea Party members I interviewed, speaking out quickly became not just a symbolic act, but an important way to agitate for political change. For many, the exhilaration they experienced at rallies and protests translated into a multi-faceted instinct to interact with

compatriots and opponents alike. To a significant degree, the movement itself was grounded in the extensive and frequent discussions that groups held at both local and national levels. These discussions were often predicated on regular members, not just “leaders,” having a voice in how their groups would go forward. This openness translated into various kinds of interactions with political figures, from hosting election forums where members could vet candidates in person, to speaking directly to their representatives. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that speaking out generated an inner sense of authority for the members and the movement at large. When the Tea Party spoke, they expected candidates to listen.

Sarah, who moved from an individual activist to working at a national Tea Party organization, said that speaking out was an internal value for the movement from very early days. Her national group’s “three core principles” were echoed throughout the Tea Party, among hundreds of local groups, in every type of communication they employed. When asked how these principles were initially developed, Sarah emphasized the importance of speaking out within the movement:

Interviewer: Where did those (principles) come from?

Sarah: They came from the early days of (our organization). I mean, it was this huge process to get a mission statement and a vision and the three core principles. I mean, it was like hundreds and hundreds of people, probably thousands of people voting online, and talking on these conference calls that would go for like four hours, and just hashing it out. [...] We repeat (the core values) all the time, in every video we do, in every event that we do at Tea Party Patriots, because it’s been so hard to get the press to understand that we don’t cover certain issues like abortion and gay marriage. You know, we’re constantly being bombarded with emails or commentary that we do somehow cover those things, so it’s really just been an effort to define the movement [...].

When asked to clarify how this process took shape, Sarah reiterated the importance of a broad ethic of speaking out:

Interviewer: Whose idea was it to set that agenda that you just described?

Sarah: It was everybody. You know, the whole conversation was everybody. You know, somebody saying, “Hey, I think we should, you know, un-mute themselves. I think we need a vision statement, mission statement.” [...] It just happened because people were talking about it and we were all voting on it and discussing it and hashing it out.

There was also sense among many subjects that speaking directly with others was inherently more authentic than other types of communication. In interviews, members frequently highlighted their groups’ internal processes for speaking out, which often centered on creating opportunities for speaking with political officials and candidates. Cameron in Arkansas, for example, lauded the even-handed discourse of the cable channel C-SPAN as being “real,” and spoke about his group’s plans to foster that kind of dialogue:

There are times where I hear C-SPAN articulate the message on both sides very effectively, and I like the fact that they provide that open forum for conversation to take place, so, you know, it’s uncut, it’s raw, it’s real. And I think that’s good. And that’s what we intend to do at all of our meetings. We have weekly meetings and we have general monthly meetings and stuff, and we give people an opportunity to be real. We’re moving to what we’re going to call “People’s Town Hall” and we’re inviting the elected officials to what we call “The Round” and we’ll have them in the center and we take all the chairs and everybody’s sitting in a big circle around them, like they used to do.

As groups became more established through their weekly meetings, many began to reach out to political leaders in this way. These types of meetings are not unusual in politics, but they were often completely new for Tea Party members who until then had felt isolated from their representatives. Janel in Massachusetts was a single mother and a blogger when she became a Tea Party organizer. As her group’s profile increased, she was actively working to foster direct interaction with Republican politicians, including presidential primary candidates. In July 2011, she was coordinating with several campaigns to arrange visits:

We just had (a leading presidential primary candidate) here as a speaker at our rally in April and we are working on bringing a few... well as many presidential candidates as possible to Massachusetts, to these public forums, just open events, really, because we decided that people just need to hear directly from them. We did the same thing with (a state politician). We invited him to an event, where people came, had breakfast and heard him and, you know, got to ask questions, so that's nice. And we did a lot of that in our meetings last year with legislative and congressional candidates.

Similarly, Wayne and Dorothy in Arizona, both of whom had distanced themselves from politics before joining the Tea Party, established a rigorous schedule of public interaction with their group for candidates, some of whom they hosted repeatedly:

Wayne: Every Tuesday night we have different candidates. Some are candidates who've been here, you know, five, six, seven times. (Arizona Senate Candidate), this is actually his second time here. [...]

Dorothy: We've had all the candidates from (our congressional district), I think, with maybe one exception. We've had people running for various judge positions. We've had (an Arizona Corporation Commission) commissioner. Anyone who would like to come up and talk, Wayne has made that available.

Speaking out to politicians was not limited to campaign events. Stephanie in Utah found opportunities to be heard when legislators invited public commentary, which was another key way Tea Party members expressed the authority of "the people":

I testified on the behalf of HB67, which was our healthcare nullification bill. But all of these ways to get citizens to get involved, interact, to go up there and recognize our state capitol... that is the people's house. We should be up there. And if there are bills we feel strongly about, either way, we're supportive of them, or we don't want them to get passed, we should be up there and have our voices heard.

Speaking out to politicians could also be even more direct, when politicians were amenable. Tea Party groups and leaders might have a "dialogue" through public discourse, or they might have contacts within an administration. Eleanor in Florida referred to the influence

that the Tea Party had exerted on that state's conservative governor, Rick Scott, who was elected in 2010:

We have constant dialogue with Governor Scott [...]. The Tea Party isn't the only political-value-type entity that he reaches out to, but he... we have a voice, and things are changing, and our voice now is, "Here's a solution, do this, think about this."

The combination of these varying approaches toward speaking out worked to the Tea Party's advantage. Grant, a political consultant in Arizona, managed a major national campaign in that state in 2010 and interacted with a broad range of political organizations. Speaking after the election, his assessment was that the Tea Party had learned to speak out better than other, more established groups:

It seems that the [2010] election cycle was driven primarily by who has the biggest voice, who's shouting the loudest, who wants more change than anything else. That was the Tea Party movement [...].

Speaking out strategically was therefore a key element of the Tea Party's success in its formative years, and a crucial principle for linking individual experiences to direct civic action.

The way that Tea Party members spoke out also allowed them to express their particular style of combativeness. For many, speaking to politicians often featured an aggressive ethic of accountability. The urgency of their newfound voices matched their original levels of frustration, and speaking out helped level the playing field between "the people" and their representatives. Wayne in Arizona was one of many who highlighted the need to keep politicians responsive to constituents' opinions:

If the congressman or senator is not doing a very good job, hey, we need to go tell them, you know? We also need congressmen or senators that are going to come back and go to their district and say, "Okay, I'm back, now what's going on?" And don't be afraid of town-hall type meetings, which, most of them now, they run from, so, they're afraid of them.

Angela in Kentucky was even more emphatic and broader in scope. In her view, the Tea Party was using its voice to keep the Republican Party as a whole focused on the movement's goals and an uncompromising conservatism:

As long as the Republican Party continues to be a centrist kind of a thing, it's going to lose the support of all of these people who have always voted Republican in the past, because they weren't paying attention. Now we're saying to the Republican Party, "Hey, we are paying attention and we're now getting it. We understand that this government is too big and it's outgrown its constitutional bounds, and now that we're paying attention, we're not going to support you forever, Party, as long as you keep acting this way."

Many members I interviewed used this direct, authoritative tone, and they seemed to be keenly aware that with a collective voice, speaking out became much more powerful. Bob in Idaho noted the back-and-forth dialogue that the movement could now demand of politicians:

The Tea Party, as a movement, we're saying, "Whoa, stop, Mr. Politician, regardless of your party. This is the way we feel, and this is where we want to go with it, whether it's successful or not." [...] (In Idaho) we get to know these guys, and what was appealing to us—for the people who were leaning conservative—was, we want them to look at us and say, "Yes or no, Mr./Mrs. Tea Party, we will or will not do that," and hold them to it. So when that issue does come up in the future, we could say, "Hey, Jack, this is what you said, and this is what you're doing. It's not good enough." You know? We want a commitment from them if they're going to get our support.

Eleanor in Florida saw the movement perhaps as broadly as possible, giving a voice to a wide swath of frustrated Americans:

I think we've had the most impact for a lot of citizens, many, many citizens that are not vocal, that do feel like their lives are overwhelmed by government intrusion. And they're very concerned that it's going to escalate to a point where there's going to be no return. We have become, again, a voice for those concerned, whether they're taxpayers or not. [...] And I do think most Americans, whether you're subsidized by the government or not, do have a feel for intrusive government, and they don't like it. They don't want it, and Tea Party has been a way for them to stand up and say, "We don't... this is not what we bargained for."

In these ways, speaking out represented an important stage in the development of the Tea Party. The symbolic power of “finding our voice” as citizens translated into an ethic of direct and often demanding communication with politicians. No longer feeling “unheard,” they reached a point where their collective voice brought them to a new level of influence and potential.

From this new vantage, however, Tea Party members found that speaking out needed to be followed by more: the power implicit in speaking to politicians was now available to them as it had never been before. Protests and rallies with speakers were critical in the early phases of organizing, but members wanted to move toward an even greater impact. Sarah in Washington, whose 2009 rally in Seattle was so essential in launching the movement, came to see meeting up and speaking out as stepping stones to other kinds of action:

I think rallies are so good for making—especially if you feel like you haven’t been heard—that it’s a really good way to get that off your chest and make you feel like you’re being heard. But you know that the real work comes after the rallies. And every group that I talk to, they’re all pushing initiatives, they’re all doing something to make a difference, recruiting candidates to run, stuff like that.

Meeting up created a foundation for these symbolic and strategic forms of speaking out. In turn, the process of speaking out led Tea Party members toward even more direct forms of civic engagement and a greater role in the political battles at hand. They achieved this by embracing the third component of the public imperative: pushing back.

Pushing Back: Rebellion and Restoration

The goal of social movements is change, and the path toward that goal will shape both individual experiences and broader outcomes. The Tea Party movement drew members from among anxious, disconnected individuals and brought them together in groups that could speak out to the public and to politicians. This was insufficient, however, to fully satisfy either their

immediate political frustrations or an historical sense of duty to the nation as they imagined it. The members I interviewed told me that after the early successes of the movement, they recognized a need to develop political influence and organizing expertise. They pursued these in way that reflected the movement's distinctive style of *pushing back*. This third element of the public imperative goes beyond public protest and emerges as pressure to induce political change. As with meeting up and speaking out, two dimensions appeared in the data, in this case representing two important types of American political identities. In one, the Tea Party members I spoke with directly and irreverently defied political leaders and organizations by *pushing back as rebels*. In the other, members adopted a more circumspect, historically inflected position by *pushing back to restore the nation*. Each of these was a potent strategic and rhetorical approach within political communication, and each offered its own strengths for advancing the movement's agenda.

Pushing back as rebels

The rebellious nature of the movement is signified directly in its identification with perhaps the most symbolic act of defiance in the run up to the Revolutionary War, the Boston Tea Party. While modern Tea Party groups do not bear a significant measure of historical congruence, there is an important link in the emotionally charged narrative of frustrated colonists being pushed to bold action, thus sparking a fundamental social transformation. Members invoked these types of stories both to describe their initial shock and urgency, and to orient their subsequent civic action. For example, many used metaphors of "waking up" to the economic and social degradation of the country, or the notion of the public as the "sleeping giant." The initial success of protests in 2009 gave way to a realization that this strategy was limited. In 2010, seeking to make a greater impact, Tea Party members began to put the Republican Party on

notice that a new watchdog had arrived. Members I spoke with said the Republican Party needed to answer the demands of the grassroots or risk being taken over. This threat was potent enough in the abstract to guide and inspire many individuals and groups. It subsequently became quite specific when longtime Republican politicians started losing primary elections at the hands of newly roused conservative activists. In these ways, the Tea Party members I interviewed saw themselves fulfilling an American ritual by reclaiming the legitimate authority of the people from feckless and corrupt leaders. As they did so, they enthusiastically took on the job of pushing back as rebels.

In describing why they joined the Tea Party, several members reported an important internal experience of shock or “waking up.” Pushed to a personal breaking point by political frustration, the urge to take action started these individuals down a public imperative path. The need to push back animated those first stages of meeting up and speaking out, and left an indelible impression on the people I spoke with. Roy in California characterized this as a movement-wide feeling:

I would think that everybody that’s involved in the Tea Party movement would raise their hands and say, “We fell asleep at the wheel. We voted down party lines,” you know. “We weren’t paying attention.” And all of a sudden, you know, with the bailouts it became bright as day that we were asleep at the wheel, we’re mortgaging our grandchildren’s future for all the stimulus, and all the dots kind of came together and we said, “Whoa, we’re done, this is... we’re done, we’re done. We’re making a change and we’re making it right now.”

For many, feeling the capacity to push back was thrilling. Their first taste of effective civic action was immediately rewarding in practical terms, and also activated powerful identity-building narratives of national mythology. Bonnie in Arizona was energized by her battle over one of Arizona’s controversial immigration laws, Senate Bill 1070:

We don't take the claim for 1070 passing or whatever, but we do say we were instrumental in the implementation of this vote. Which is... what's the right word? Unprecedented?... that a group of citizens has ever been able to make that much... a collective group of citizens. I don't know, maybe they have. But at least in this direction, a conservative group of people. Usually, it's the liberals doing it, you know. But now, this... you know, they call it the sleeping giant, you know, or the silent majority, isn't silent anymore. Right? And what happens when the silent majority becomes loud? 1070 gets passed. Things like that.

Members urgently wanted to effect change, but many of them reported feeling limited after attending several public events. In my data, several members reported a period of questioning as they stretched the boundaries of simply speaking out. Janel in Massachusetts noted the importance of being proactive rather than reactive:

It's not enough to stand up and, when you hear something's happening, and say, "OK, we don't want that." There's got to be, you know, "OK, this is what we do want, let's... How do we get there? How do we get that implemented, who... Does it mean electing new people or does it mean just working with who's in office right now to get there? How do we... what's the means to an end?" And it's not protesting because, you know, by the time we're out in the streets most people have already made up their minds.

As members came to grips with the limitations of their public efforts to speak out, they instinctively began looking for the next step, and they began actively seeking ways to push back on political leaders. Meeting up had given them a much-needed sense of community, and speaking out had given them a voice. The arc of American history promised them something more, and many members spontaneously brought this issue to light. Rick, Bonnie's fellow organizer in Arizona, was keenly aware of the need to move to the next level:

I think what separates us from just a protest or something from the past, is that in, traditionally in a protest, they would go out, hold their signs, yell maybe, damage things, just rowdy people making a statement. Instead, we're sitting there, we're organizing behind the scenes, trying to, trying to figure out what is the most effective way that we can use our members to make the most amount of impact as possible. As opposed to making just noise, what can we do behind the scenes to actually create a difference?

As the midterm election year of 2010 began, efforts to make an impact were largely directed at the Republican Party. From early on, the relationship between the Tea Party and the Republican Party was tense and complex. In pragmatic terms, the movement's first, best target was the conservative establishment with which they shared a basic political orientation. According to Eleanor, the member in Florida who acted as a link between local Tea Party groups and the local Republican Party, the Tea Party's very existence was a sign of potential trouble for the Republicans:

We became involved largely, too, because of the disenchantment of our community with the Republican Party and the way that politics had been going, moving forward in the Republican Party primarily on a national level, but also in our state of Florida. So the Tea Party is a large part in response to the disenchantment of the politics of the Republican Party, and that's what happened here as well.

In many cases, the Tea Party set establishment figures on edge, and not without reason. When asked about his coordination with the local Republican Party in Michigan, Mack explained it in simple terms:

Mack: Do they listen to me? Several do. Some feel as though I'm a threat. I'm not a threatening type person. You know, they look at us as a threat in a lot of ways.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Mack: Because we can, you know, make a big difference in the direction of the Republican Party.

The Tea Party was partly rooted in frustration with Bush-era economic policies, and state lawmakers who had supported those policies began to draw activists' ire. Tensions between the Tea Party and the Republican Party were often predicated on Republican representatives falling short of Tea Party members' conservative ideals. As members moved beyond simply speaking

out, Tea Party rhetoric moved toward demands with a more existential tone. Angela, a Tea Party organizer in Kentucky, explained these dynamics this way:

I don't know that the Republican Party has decided which way it's going to go, but the Tea Party has drawn that line and said, "Look, this is, this is where we need you to be. This is where all these rank and file members of the Republican Party and a few Democrats believe you should be. You should be at smaller government and less taxes and just you know, just a less invasive, oppressive form of government. This is what we want. We don't want some of these social policies and laws and things that have been passing. We want a smaller EPA, we want the FDA out of our face, we want somebody who will stand up and say, 'Enough is enough, this government has become too much of a socialistic government.'" And we want Republicans saying that, and actually passing the laws. It's kind of like... I think it's a challenge to the Republican Party: "Here's how you survive, here's how our country survives." And that's if we back up and move back the way the constitution said we were supposed to be. But secondly, this is how you [Republicans] survive as a party is by stepping back and going more to the right and not to the center where it had been going.

This was a rhetorical move into a realm of ultimatums. Indeed, the subtext of much Tea Party messaging during this period centered on whether there would even be a need for the Republican Party in the future or if it would become simply a vehicle for the movement itself. For many members, the Republican Party had clearly failed the Tea Party's conservative ideals, as Angela suggested:

If we had our druthers, we would take over the Republican Party and (make) it live up to its published national platform, which does talk about smaller government and lower taxes and, you know, really make it live up to that, and also have a pro-life platform. And I think that if you had a survey of Tea Party members, that's what they would want.

This kind of rebellious pushing back was unusual in conservative politics, and critics of the Tea Party might have initially considered it idle talk. Before long, however, the Tea Party demonstrated that when it chose to push back, at least some conservative politicians would feel it first-hand.

Modern Tea Party rebels did not throw tea, but they did manage to eject several sitting Republicans from office, and to upend consensus candidates in others. In many cases, establishment figures saw these as audacious and counterproductive acts. In the context of the public imperative, however, Tea Party members' enthusiasm made sense. Stephanie in Idaho explained the potent citizen-driven narratives that justified and even required her to take action:

It's our job to grill these people, you know? Don't just take them at their word, you know? They've said this before, you know, you need to question them and question them and question them until they start crying. I mean literally. I'm just saying, don't just take these people for their word. That's what politicians do, they tell you what you want to hear. We shouldn't just accept that. We shouldn't just accept the rhetoric. Prove to me that this is how you're going to be. Because how many times have we done it? You elect somebody and then you think they're going to be one thing and then as soon as they get back in D.C. they do something totally opposite. It's our job to hold them accountable.... [...] And it's our job to watch every vote they cast and to continue it. Vet them, and then after they're elected, watch every vote they cast and hold them accountable. And if you know a vote's coming up, be proactive before they vote. Call them up and say, "This is how I want you to vote." And if they vote the way you don't want them to vote, put the pressure on them to recognize that this is how you, you know, that you will not be reelected if you continue down this path. That's our job as citizens.

In 2010, a wave of Tea Party actions took establishment conservatives in state politics by surprise throughout the country. Tea Party groups leveraged a few key contests into national media attention by eliminating longstanding figures they deemed insufficiently conservative. Bob in Idaho described the movement's tough tone, which suddenly carried real weight after Tea Party-affiliated Raul Labrador won upset victories (Kraushaar, 2010) in both the primary and general elections:

The Republicans have a lot more to be concerned about in this state (Idaho) than the Democrats, because, you know, they're in office, they're in power. And if they don't live up to their campaign promises, we've been very pointed with them, and said, "You know what? You either do what you said you were going to do"—which is, you know, for a politician it's like choking them—"Or we're going to work to get you out of here

next year.” So, they know that we can probably have a serious impact on it.

One of the most visible 2010 Tea Party victories happened in Utah, where Bob Bennett, an 18-year veteran of the U.S. Senate whose conservative credentials had not previously been in question, failed to escape the primary (Barabak, 2010). Stephanie, who at the time had only recently become active in politics, was an enthusiastic participant in that process:

We wanted anybody but Bob Bennett to be elected, and that was the mantra. Because as we looked at his record, he was responsible for brokering TARP back in October of 2008 under George Bush. You know, he is culpable for all of these things that have happened. He sits on the appropriation committee, so he’s responsible for all this unbearable spending. [...] We just feel like he’s been here in power 18 years and he has not represented the people well. And he’s a Republican, and we said, “You know what, he has got to go.” [...] 80,000 people came out to their caucus meetings that night. [...] A lot of them had never even been to their caucus meeting, so literally we had that much of an effect by what we did and implemented. And certainly the feeling was, we don’t want Bob Bennett. I told everyone point blank at the meeting I would not be voting for Bob Bennett, and I was elected [as a delegate]. Same with the other individuals at the caucus meeting. Those elected to be delegates, we were all saying, “Absolutely not, we will not elect Bob Bennett.” [...] And I’ll be honest with you, when Bob Bennett got ousted in the second round, it was like winning the Super Bowl for me.

In another high-profile 2010 primary, Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum, the establishment front-runner for the open governor’s seat, lost to little-known Tea Party favorite Rick Scott, a wealthy business owner (Bousquet, Klas & Caputo, 2010). Eleanor explained the dynamic in Florida from the Tea Party perspective:

Bill McCollum is a progressive politician, okay? That’s what he stands for. He’s a Republican and he’s progressive. He lost. And the reason he lost was because of his progressive political features, not because he was a Republican or a Democrat. Rick Scott won because of his values that are Tea Party values of limited government and fiscal responsibility. Period. That’s one dramatic example of how Tea Party politics affected a really quite, a powerful position actually, because everyone just assumed at the beginning of the primary, when they both declared, that Rick Scott didn’t have a chance. And that was just standard thought. That was the

institutionalized thought. Oops! Here came the Tea Party and said, “We’re not having anything to do with Bob McCollum, he’s out.” And sure enough, he was out. And it was really quite exciting because not only was it the proper political decision to make, the right man won, (but Scott) is doing exactly what he said he was going to do.

These victories and others were surprising and controversial to establishment conservatives. To Tea Party members, however, when dozens of new Tea Party-friendly candidates entered Congress in January 2011, it was a vivid reward for their pushing back as rebels. Members’ belief in their own power and legitimacy had resonated with a deep national identity story, contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy that may have motivated other groups and helped tip electoral scales around the country. The public imperative dimension of their story gave them a supreme confidence that permeated much of their discourse. The “power of the people” allowed them to push back successfully and by actively deploying the power of the sovereign public, Tea Party members reclaimed some of the lost power that had caused them so much anxiety. Dorris, the author and activist in California, sounded like many Tea Party members when she disparaged the mainstream political parties and staked a claim of American authenticity for the movement:

The Democrat party [...] has been entirely co-opted and taken over by the radical, progressive, socialist Left. [...] The Republican party and the establishment has lost their way in all these many years in just wanting to get along with the Democrats [...]. And it is the Tea Party movement, a conservative grassroots American movement, that is trying to educate our representatives that, no, they do not run things. No, they do not tell us what to do. We tell them what to do. We are reasserting our power, the true power of the people.

The public imperative had helped generate an atmosphere in which the rebels were reclaiming what they saw as rightfully theirs from a corrupt government. Pushing back was not only conceivable, it was an obligation. Stephanie in Utah made it her mission to share her knowledge and fulfill the duties of a citizen:

(Our) goal is to get people back to understanding what their rights are, understanding their role as a citizen. They are responsible. Because I feel like our government... The way a republic is set up is that the people have the power, and we allow... we hand over some of our power to our elected representatives. So if they're no longer representing us, we need to take that power back.

Andrew in New York echoed this sentiment and spoke hopefully of the prospect that the Tea Party wave of 2010 would inspire a wider citizen movement:

I would love to see America get back to what it is where, the people, the true people are running the country, and they care, and they take the time. They care, and they see who their leaders are, and they understand that they are the boss and the politicians report up to them, not vice versa.

These attitudes were sincere and deeply held convictions, rooted in powerful national narratives and tested in the electoral arena. Pushing back as rebels was a fundamental feature of the Tea Party during this period. As the movement matured, the individuals I spoke with also intuitively felt a need to cultivate a broader, more inclusive vision.

Pushing back as restoration

Though much of the Tea Party's early history was taken up with boisterous protests and conservative primary battles, members also hoped to advance their political standing by embracing unifying political values. Having once felt frustrated and isolated themselves, they were eager to encourage civic engagement, to share information, and to restore national values they saw as lost. This rhetoric of "restoration" manifested as a deeper form of pushing back. As the Tea Party shifted away from its contentious, protest-driven image, it projected what members saw as broad, inclusive values of participation, education, and unity. Their conservative agenda was in no way diminished, but the process of coming to the public square had given them a sense of national scope and historical import. While this certainly was a feature of conservative political rhetoric in general, the process of pursuing a public imperative strategy had brought

members to a point where they could advance these themes by leveraging their large networks, national media coverage, and the attention of newly skittish conservative representatives.

The three key themes that seemed to constitute the Tea Party project of restoration were participation, education, and national unity. These three ideas appeared time and again as Tea Party members talked about returning America to an earlier state of grace. Tea Party members emphasized political participation in their own efforts, in many ways and across many groups. Several members I interviewed claimed a non-partisan interest in greater political participation, which was normatively encouraging. At the same time, as with many political movements, this often came in the service of advancing one's own core values, rather than genuinely encouraging participation for its own sake. Members also enthusiastically embraced education, which was a profoundly important part of many individuals' own political awakening. However, the information that groups disseminated was notably less neutral and open than it might have been. Finally, members also were genuinely committed to their cause of social unification through restoring Constitutional values, even if that objective was often complicated by members' strong antipathy toward other political viewpoints. This tension—between general democratic ideals, on one hand, and a strict partisan agenda on the other—limited the movement's capacity for actual inclusivity. Even though they did not find a path through the partisan divisions that animated their movement, the individuals I spoke with nevertheless embraced a deeply American instinct during this period. Despite great anxiety, and with great effort, they struggled to push back against what they saw as a danger to their country, and they did so hoping to unite their fellow citizens.

Among the people I spoke with, political participation was a broad and robust value that elided partisanship, at least on a surface level. Several Tea Party members claimed to be

unconcerned with someone's voter registration and were happy, even eager, to talk with Democrats and Independents, often while holding Republicans at arm's length. Though participation by people other than strong conservatives was very rare in the movement, members seemed sincere when expressing the sentiment that partisan identification did not matter. Bonnie, for example, was emphatic in her commitment to participation for people of all parties:

We want to see it continue to go towards the direction of encouraging citizens to get out and do their civic duty. Democrats, know who you're voting for and why. Republicans, same thing. Know who you're voting for and why. And that's what we're about, is to get people involved, and constituents to be active, and that is about it. That's all.

Indeed, Bonnie's view on constituency, below, is an exquisitely concise endorsement for citizens pushing back on their political leaders:

Our job is to get voters inspired to get out and vote, to encourage others to do their civic duty. The first thing I was preaching was: What is a constituent? Do you know what a constituent is, and do you know the power behind your constituency? You hold the most powerful position in all of politics, as a constituent. Go use it. And know what you are doing, know who you are talking to, know why you are saying it. Go use it.

The caveat behind this principle was that participation as a value was primarily conceived in service of the Tea Party's political goals. Bob in Idaho endorsed participation emphatically, going so far as to argue for broad, bi-partisan action, albeit with certain Tea Party themes:

One of my reasons for sitting down with you is the fact that I really do want to get young people aware of what's going on. I'm working with a group over at (a local university), for the director of the political science department, and the political science department, and their side, whatever you call them, clubs to try to get people involved. And again, I don't care if they're on the right or the left. I just want them to be involved, period. Because I'm doing this at 66 years old, not for me, you know. I've got four kids and four grandkids, and it's going to affect them a lot more than it's going to affect me. [...] I don't expect to get any personal gain from this other than getting the country back into, you know, the direction at least I feel it should be going to. I think that our government is doing an injustice to our youth right now. They are absolutely saddling them with the fiscal responsibility they will never be able to overcome, if we

continue going this direction.

It is worth noting that this dimension of the Tea Party's pushing back strategy is perfectly normal in politics. As with many voter registration campaigns and any candidate get-out-the-vote program, outreach is often nominally non-partisan but also targeted to like-minded citizens. Like other political movements, the Tea Party embraced political participation as a broad value, and then set out to build a specific type of membership. This is potentially one area where independent Tea Party groups have learned from established political advocacy organizations such as FreedomWorks and Americans For Prosperity. These large national organizations, which may be liberal or conservative (or ideological in other ways), are versed in encouraging participation as an American value, while carefully targeting certain voters. Jack, a former state director for one large national organization, was extremely influential in training dozens of Tea Party groups:

I was probably invited to speak at the majority of [Tea Party groups in his state] at one point or another, to tell them from my perspective what they could do to get involved. This thing is as simple as writing a letter to your editor, contacting your legislators to let them know how you feel. Because the vast majority of Americans don't realize the impact of contacting their elected officials. [...] That's one of the things that we drove home, time after time after time: they really can have an impact. And it's as simple as picking up the phone and calling your legislator and telling them how you feel on an issue

Jack's comment is a clear example of how groups can embrace political participation, a clear American value, while advancing their own partisan goals. This is a valid, bi-partisan approach to electoral politics, and one the Tea Party embraced wholeheartedly. Tea Party groups varied widely in their goals and objectives, but they frequently emphasized traditional political participation. Malcolm, a coordinator and "Constitution class" leader in Arizona, noted his group's levels of participation:

(Several group members) are precinct committee members within the Republican party. A number of them [...] put up signs, campaign signs. They went out, and went door-to-door, and got people to sign ballots, ballot initiatives. Went out and got the signatures to get names on the ballots, so on and so forth. A very involved group. I would say at least 90 percent of the people at one point or another attended some campaign function or participated in assisting the candidate, one or more candidates.

This traditional political work reinforced a value of civic participation and represented an evolution of the Tea Party's origins in protest. They were acting on a principle that echoed with their own recent personal experience and with the historically idealized nation they hoped to restore.

Another key strategy that groups pursued in pushing for a restored America was education. As with participation, this broad-based value would be hard to argue with from a normative standpoint. Again, however, the education that most members referred to focused on specific political values favorable to the Tea Party agenda. In talking about their efforts to restore the country, Wayne in Arizona valued education specifically as a means to foster greater participation:

Basically, what we're trying to do is we're trying to bring education... educating the public so they can make intelligent decisions about politics. We're trying to bring them back into traditional roles of voting, trying to get out the vote. [...] But we're trying to get people active in that, to get them out in their precincts, and be able to work their precinct, and talk to people. There's a lot of people out there who are upset. A lot of them don't know who to talk to.

This link between education and participation was central to the Tea Party's organization and goals. Both are high-minded and widely shared values that properly invite respect. At the same time, they are also means of partisan movement-building that have the benefit of avoiding any controversy from angry protesters.

Education, like participation, echoed through the movement as a crucial way to push back on a corrupt political system. It, too, was a way to advance Tea Party messaging while embracing a clear social good. As Barb in Oregon said, “We’re about education. We want people to learn. And once you learn, education is power.” Many Tea Party members echoed this sentiment. A pronounced shift from “protest” to “education” was taking place by 2010, in part, perhaps, to portray the Tea Party as a more inclusive movement. Gary in California noted this shift:

I definitely think (the Tea Party) started (as a protest movement). You know, people got out and rallied and that’s what we did. But, you know, we now are all about education. We’re all about enlightenment and sharing information and talking about things [...].

In almost all cases that I encountered, what constituted “education” within the movement was very much seen through a partisan lens. For many Tea Party members, reading conservatively framed information about the founders and the workings of government was a transformative experience. This conceptual work helped give them a sense of control over their own destiny, and an historically inflected sense that their efforts could help re-establish long-lost conservative values. This was typically the type of education that Tea Party groups sought to share. Cameron was one of many who espoused a commitment to education, and defined it in Tea Party terms:

We realized that this country was broke and broken, and one way we could really seriously contribute to it was to educate people. So, we took the approach of trying to grow membership as quickly as we possibly could, and bring them into a full understanding through education and communication what the Constitution is about, of what fiscal responsibility means, and how, if we don’t get things under control, the devastating effect it’s going to have on our country and our children.

Often, members framed their group's political organizing as education. Members sometimes highlighted a principle of open-mindedness, which helped situate these activities in a less polarizing frame. Dorothy in Arizona described her group's efforts and motivation:

Wayne has, in addition to bringing up candidates, he has sponsored two forums for our Tea Party group. One was for city council candidates where we did have Democrats and Republicans. And we invited all of the candidates to attend. And that was, I thought, you know, very interesting and helpful. And he also put together a forum for the [local] School District when they were planning an override and we had a huge attendance. So, he's been very, very big on trying to educate people on the issues and the people. And I think that's important because we all have a leaning one way or the other, but when you only listen to your side, I think you cheat yourself and I think you cheat your society. If you're really looking for the best people and the best issues, you really should entertain all ideas. Then you can sit back and make up your mind.

This is, in fact, important civic work, and communities are likely better for having the types of forums Dorothy mentions. At the same time, information from any partisan political organization is bound to be ideologically inflected to some degree. For Roy in California, sharing information was about spreading awareness of political corruption and revealing a truth that people would hunger for:

People are so uninformed in the world, or in the United States, so totally uninformed that they have no concept of what's going in the House and in the Senate and with their pocketbook and their taxes. Once you enlighten somebody, which is one little piece of information, it starts a fire, and they want to know more, and they want to know more.

Janel in Massachusetts viewed education and information through a direct public imperative lens, as a way to bring people together and push back:

I look at the role of the Tea Party as being that bridge between people who have information about something, whatever their niche issue is [...]. Within this limited government set of principles, you know, we can help instruct people on what is constructive and how they can affect policy.

Members frequently referenced this ethic of teaching and learning, particularly around illuminating corruption, vetting candidates, and providing information to voters. The individuals I spoke with had internalized this as a strong positive value, but made very little distinction between education and political communication. As such, the Tea Party put an idealized, theoretically universal principle of American culture into the service of an admittedly partisan agenda. They were not the first political movement to do so and they certainly will not be the last. They were, however, pushing back against social values they opposed using a broad American value—education—that is typically intended to unite citizens.

A third way that Tea Party discourse sought restore the nation was with direct calls for a unity or re-unification. For many individual Tea Party members, the crisis of social and economic corruption was so dire that it threatened the nation’s very existence. In calling to restore what they framed as “Constitutional values,” the Tea Party was pleading with fellow citizens to join them in rebuilding the nation’s rightful foundations. This was a deep and urgent form of pushing back, premised on the ultimate founding document. This helped explain some of the intensity that defined the movement and their very strong link to the founding myths. For Andrew, as for many Tea Party members, the country faced an explicitly existential crisis:

I believe, and a lot of the Tea Party people believe, that this is the decade, the seminal decade, the pivotal decade on whether this country is going to drop. We’re either going to lose everything and fall down. Or we are going to restore this country back to where it needs to be.

In Tea Party discourse, the failure of political representation and the corrupting influence of opposing ideologies had pushed the country to the brink, and a return to Constitutional values was the only chance to restore it. As Eleanor noted, it fell to the people to lead the way:

The Tea Party is that voice, saying neither political party is doing the job. So we have to exert our influence in such a way that we can change the nature of the sitting politicians and our current politics in this country.

You know, progressive politics has taken over just about every institutionalized level of our political system. And our goal is to stop that tide, and turn it around and go back to the Constitution. And that means exerting influence on many levels.

The Tea Party's call for citizens to speak out and push back was thought by members to be very general, but there was a crucial disjuncture. Their construction of "progressivism" and "liberals" as an existential enemy precluded any real call to unity. As powerful as the Constitution and other national symbols are, this bright line in Tea Party discourse meant they would necessarily be pushing back against many of their fellow citizens. Mack demonstrated the lengths that some members went in defining who may and may not be "American":

Interviewer: What do you think the Tea Party's role is going to be in the (2012) presidential election?

Mack: [...] We have got to restore this country. Barack Obama and progressive liberalism, their ideology needs to become anathema to the very foundation of the Constitution and proven so. We've got to turn this back, if we don't our country is gone. Should Barack Obama get four more years, America will not be America. It's already becoming something that I never thought I'd see in my lifetime. [...] Now we've got to restore this country to its roots. We've got to have a real common sense discussion with the American people. What do we want this nation to be? We don't need somebody to come in and fundamentally transform it into something that it's not. That's where the Tea Party is. We're saying let's stop. Restore. Renew. We can do that.

Tea Party members sincerely wanted to have a "discussion with the American people" and to "restore" the nation. In so many instances, the members I interviewed urged "the American people" to come together and embrace the truth, but it was the truth as they, the Tea Party, saw it. They yearned for a unified country, but one unified around their own core values. For Rex in California, restoring Constitutional values amounted to rewriting the meaning of "representation":

I don't believe any of the establishment politicians actually understand this grassroots movement that's going on in this country, and I think they're

going to learn more and more in... maybe not in the 2012 election, but through the year 2016, they're going to learn more and more that the people of this country want a different form of representation. And I really truly hope, and I think from talking to a lot of people, that we're actually going to get back to the original intent of our Founding Fathers and we're going to have representation for the people, representation for the states, and representation for the nation. And we don't have that right now.

While many members sought to pull the country together, they were also trying to pull apart other legitimate constituencies. It was clear that Tea Party members loved their country, just as their ideological opponents do. In their call for restoration, there was a dissonance, but there was also a level at which members were tapping into very familiar, very powerful myths. As Dorothy said:

We don't want to see what I see as the jewel of the world go away. There's no place like America. There's just no place like us, and it's worth fighting for. [...] I would like to be able to bring back the basis that our country was founded on before we lose it and before everybody forgets.

In this, Dorothy was invoking deep national mythologies and drawing on a shared national identity in order to fight for her country as she saw it. Her instincts to connect with others, to speak out, and to push back in the name of "the jewel of the world" suggest that, whatever else she may believe politically, she shared a meaningful connection with many other Americans in her innate sense of the public imperative.

In Summary

The evidence across these interviews pointed strongly to a patterned public imperative emerging within individual Tea Party discourse. From initial efforts to meet up as individuals and in groups, to speaking out strategically and symbolically, to pushing back both as rebels and to restore the nation, the Tea Party members here were emphatically pursuing a public imperative agenda. In doing so, they situated themselves in a long narrative of political struggle

in American history. Sarah in Washington, perhaps the most dedicated member I encountered, described her efforts as a fight for freedom:

Of course people on the other side will disagree with me when I say this, but I think that if you look at the Civil Rights Movement... I think the Civil Rights Movement was about bringing freedom to people that didn't actually have it. And I think we're not trying to say... we're not trying to get special treatment for rich people or special treatment for one group of people. What we're actually trying to say is, we want what we consider is liberty and freedom for everybody.

American democracy offers citizens a way to talk and think about civic engagement, and the public imperative is a powerful rhetorical structure within this discourse. Tea Party members effectively used this type of language to justify and validate their efforts, even as they shifted away from a controversial public image of angry protesters. Their attitudes and statements matter because they help illustrate a deeper relationship to their fellow citizens, a shared root of concepts and actions that allow them, like others before and after, to meet up, speak out, and push back, and thus take an active role in their own history.

Chapter Four

The Public Imperative in Traditional and Digital Media

Social movements pursue goals by trying to develop persuasive messages, reshape discourses, and capture the imagination of political leaders and the public. To do so, they must enter a complex media ecosystem that offers both compelling opportunities and fierce challenges. As individuals across the country began to assemble under the banner of the emerging Tea Party movement, they found themselves enmeshed in an often-confounding relationship with news media. Janel in Massachusetts was new to political organizing when she launched her Tea Party group in 2009, and she quickly learned that navigating among news organizations would be difficult but essential:

We know that a lot of the mainstream media is hostile to us and is hostile to our mission and is just caught up in the myth and the misconception that we're racist, that we're classist, you know, whatever they to want call it, you know, whatever definitions they want to apply to us. So we have to, you know, be willing to interact, because it is valuable to have your message out there in the mainstream media. But at the same time we have to be very well aware and useful of alternative media. Which, you know, brings the internet back into play, brings blogging back into play, and the use of websites.

Like many of her fellow Tea Party activists, Janel was seeking to influence a media system she perceived as simultaneously hostile and valuable. This required a dogged, often grudging relationship with traditional news media of television, newspapers, and radio. At the same time, groups were yearning to escape the confines of traditional news frames. Sarah, who as a first-time activist had helped spark the Tea Party movement, said her national-level organization expected to be “bypassing the media and going straight to the people.” Evidence for these dynamics was abundant in the data I analyzed for this chapter.

As part of their emerging media strategies, many Tea Party members enthusiastically turned to a range of digital media, including email, political blogs and websites, and social media

like Twitter and Facebook. Most were already familiar with these basic digital tools, and they wholeheartedly embraced the chance to connect, communicate, and organize online. Mack in Michigan ruminated on just how critical these new media were:

Without (the internet), I don't know. I don't know that we'd have any of the information that we're using. It'd be difficult to get that information to anybody. I'm not sure this movement would exist without the internet.

The interviews I conducted showed that traditional and digital media were deeply implicated in how Tea Party members pursued their public imperative goals of coming together, being heard, and influencing leaders. In the first part of this chapter, I address members' general attitudes toward traditional and digital media. In the second part of this chapter, I explore how traditional and digital media advanced and constrained the public imperative.

Tea Party Perceptions of Media

Social movements and media organizations have long been engaged in a complicated dance of mutual interest and suspicion. This relationship traces its roots to the nation's founding, when news media of the day sustained a boisterous political culture and helped shape an emerging sense of the public imperative. According to Starr (2004): "From the earliest phases of the Revolutionary conflict, the press had served as a means by which the colonists had debated their common interests, developed a national identity, and created capacities for cooperative action" (p. 70). Such impacts were not simply high-minded, of course. At the time, democratic ideals and economic interest were simultaneously shaping news processes and content (Baldasty, 1992). This dynamic persists today. On one hand, social movements and news media need each other. Movements seek participants and influence, which a sound media strategy can help to deliver; meanwhile, news media may see movements as both a valuable civic story and a way to

fill broadcast time or column inches (Molotch, 1979; Rucht 2004). On the other hand, the relationship is also contentious. Social movements are distrustful of news media that often portray them as marginal, bothersome, or even dangerous (Di Cicco 2010; Gitlin 1980), while news organizations are often disinclined to amplify critiques of the status quo (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2000). These tendencies manifest time and again across decades of social and technological change.

The power in this two-way dynamic has rarely, if ever, been equally distributed, but many social movements have sought to level the playing field. For much of the nation's history, news organizations have exercised significant control over which voices become public, whether through editorial choices or production formats. Social movements, however, have often developed alternative channels and discourses designed to circumvent traditional news gatekeeping (Coleman & Ross, 2010). The advent of digital media has only intensified this relationship. Today, an evolving array of platforms and tools augments and transforms the capacities of social movements, allowing them to reach wider audiences more easily and in more engaging ways (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Movements still confront top-down media constraints, but now they do so in the context of vast, interactive networks, where social power can flow "horizontally" between users, and new patterns of influence are emerging (Castells, 2012). Such networks change how social movements can communicate both internally and outwardly, and they also impact the practices of traditional media organizations and longstanding norms of political culture (Dahlgren, 2005). These alternative channels of public communication can be an important check on the norms of journalistic practice (Rucht, 2004), even if there is a tendency to exaggerate the power that media organizations exert (Schudson, 2001). This is the arena in which the Tea Party began to take shape. To explore how this dynamic unfolded in the context of the

Tea Party movement and the public imperative, I developed a second research question. The first part of this chapter addresses the first part of the question:

RQ2: *In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members talk about traditional news media and digital media, either generally or in relation to the Tea Party? If so, how do they describe these types of media in the context of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back?*

In the interviews, I introduced this topic with the same intentionally open-ended question: “Can the Tea Party get its message out in the media?” In response, subjects generally talked about two broad categories of media. First, they offered a detailed set of *critiques of “traditional” media*, which in this context referred primarily to cable news, broadcast television news, and local newspapers. These critiques helped spark a variety of *alternative media strategies*, including the consumption of multiple news sources, an ethic of “research,” and, most importantly, a pivot toward digital media.⁸ In general, these two categories—traditional and digital media—functioned as discrete units in members’ descriptions of the movement. Finally, I examined how media *related directly to the three public imperative premises*. Below, I briefly describe how these categories appeared in the data, and then I turn to examples.

Tea Party members had a complex relationship with traditional media, both before and after the launch of the movement. In general, there was a range of positive and negative views in play simultaneously. Through firebrand figures like Fox News’ Glenn Beck and CNBC’s Rick

⁸ It would be useful here to address my use of the terms “traditional,” “alternative,” and “digital,” in reference to media and media practices in this chapter. It is difficult if not impossible to adequately represent a complex set of media forms and practices with a single term. I used these terms not as categories aligned with particular scholarly discourses, but rather simply as reflections of what Tea Party members said and did. The method of qualitative interviewing that I employed leaves room for subjects to shape the data through their own discursive patterns. When I asked an intentionally open-ended question on “media,” subjects spoke about two things: frustrations with news coverage of the movement, and actions they were taking on their own to work around those frustrations. Therefore, these “traditional” and “alternative” categories are rooted primarily in the data presented here.

Santelli, traditional media helped motivate many people to seek out conservative activist groups. In doing so, these media helped promote awareness of the burgeoning Tea Party movement both directly, as with Fox's support of the first "Tax Day Tea Parties" in 2009, and through general news coverage at national and local levels. Nonetheless, members primarily saw traditional news organizations in oppositional terms: they felt news media regularly *misrepresented* the Tea Party, suffered from *liberal and commercial biases*, or directly *attempted to undermine* the movement. Together, these themes substantively captured how the Tea Party members I interviewed spoke about traditional media.

Because of their suspicions about traditional media, members often noted the value of certain alternative media practices, which they said offered better access to the "truth" behind deceptive media content. For example, many cited the importance of reading and watching *multiple media sources* across the partisan spectrum. Others embraced an *ethic of independent "research,"* seeking out explanations for political events that better fit their understanding of the world. But it was *their turn toward digital media* that most actively represented their alternative practices. In the interviews, members spoke about finding local Tea Party events online, creating websites for their newly formed groups, and using email and other online tools to coordinate actions and disseminate information. As the data below will show, these digital media were an important way to bring the movement together and to satisfy members' quest for information they could trust.

To complete this part of the study, I looked specifically at points of intersection in the data between media use and the three public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. Media are essential to political communication and both traditional and new media interacted in complex ways with members' sense of how civic engagement should

function. The Tea Party clearly benefited from, and clearly struggled with, different forms of media. In particular, traditional media were useful for facilitating the movement's early stages of meeting up, and then were much less effective at helping members speak out and push back. Digital media were also instrumental in bringing individuals and groups together, but these, too, were limited in the ways that they facilitated subsequent actions.

Critiques of Traditional Media

Among the Tea Party members I interviewed, the most prominent attitude toward media featured a set of critiques directed at traditional news. Generally, this applied both to national news, such as broadcast and cable television, and to local news outlets, typically newspapers. These critiques covered a range of reactions to news media in general and coverage of the movement specifically. They mentioned a number of frustrations that are common to many social movements, which was unsurprising. At the same time, they also revealed a pronounced feeling of personal offense, in some cases rising to a keenly felt sense of persecution. For example, Tea Party members frequently suggested that media routinely *misrepresented* the movement; that media were irrevocably *biased* due to ingrained liberal and commercial interests; and that media were actively trying to *undermine* the Tea Party and suppress its message. Groups and individuals had varied experiences dealing with the news media, of course, and thus their attitudes and approaches differed. The critiques described below were pervasive, however, and in several cases they helped push groups to develop alternative media strategies.

Perceived misrepresentations of the movement by news media

The activists I interviewed frequently suggested that news organizations misrepresented the movement. This manifested in a number of ways, from distorting members' basic messaging

to maligning the character and motivations of members themselves. Dorothy in Arizona said that news media were intentionally focusing on political rather than economic messages at one of the early national Tea Party protests in 2009:

If anything, if the mainstream media, as we've started to call it, if they showed that event at all, they would try to pick a sign that was very anti-Obama. Well, that's not what we're mostly about. We're mostly about, "we're taxed enough already," "government is too big."

This was a common refrain in the interviews, and members often said such media controversies distracted the public from their efforts. Bob in Idaho allowed that the national economic message had been somewhat successful, but he flagged another contentious issue for many groups. In his view, and in others', news media were conflating the national and local levels of the Tea Party, thus missing the most important dimension of the movement:

Interviewer: Do you think the media are getting the story of the Tea Party right?

Bob: Yeah, that is an excellent question, and the answer is I think they're getting it partly right. The problem is that the Tea Party that they're covering is the national Tea Party, The Tea Party Express. And in that regard, they're getting the protest part right as far as, yeah, they're against excessive spending or government intrusion, but they're not getting the local stories.

It was significant that, like Bob, many local-level Tea Party members did not recognize their own experience in the content of national media coverage. This took a personal turn, members suggested, when media misrepresented not only the movement's agenda, but also the character of its participants. Media narratives did often focus on the Tea Party's reputation for boisterous dissent and divisive language. For many members I spoke with, this was a bluntly false portrayal. Eleanor, an organizer with significant experience in her local Republican party in Florida, spoke about her own interactions with reporters:

After having some, you know, decent dialogue with the individual that's conducting the interview or whatever, and they say, "We didn't... that's not the impression we got of the Tea Party from the media. That's not the impression I

get.” So what impression did they get? Well, they got that we’re rabble-rousing, Bible-toting, gun-wielding ignoramuses. We’re none of the above, and, um, they’re always quite surprised.

Rick in Arizona echoed this sentiment when I asked how he talked about the Tea Party to people outside the movement:

I tell them that there’s a misconception that we’re just a bunch of rowdy people, and that sort of a thing. That they should come to a meeting and see what it’s all about. That we just... we do a lot of organizing, we do a lot of education. That it’s not just a bunch of people with signs, who are angry, as the media would like to portray us.

This type of misrepresentation of members’ character often insulted them deeply. For example, Sarah, an organizer for a national Tea Party group, reported a sense of shock and personal affront. She described an intense but not uncommon experience that many members had when seeing the movement portrayed in news media:

I think a lot of us actually were shocked that, you know, that we were being called racists and things like that. Because when you know what your motivations are, and then somebody else ascribes motivations to you, and you’re like, “No, that’s not at all what’s in my head!” Like, “How... how can you say that?”

Across the movement, this strong reaction was the result of critical media coverage that offended a deeply held sense of national identity that members were cultivating through their Tea Party work. Wayne in Arizona succinctly captured a sentiment that many others expressed, suggesting the media were overlooking the patriotic nature of their efforts:

But you know, the mainstream media has twisted it and said, “Oh, they’re all Republicans,” you know. “Tea Party are all GOP, blah blah blah.” Well, no, that’s not true. We’re Americans. We’re concerned about where our country’s going.

Wayne’s defiance was predicated on this key disconnect. In fact, much of the Tea Party’s broader relationship to news media stems from just this point: in the view of many members, news media falsely portrayed their efforts and fundamentally denied their patriotism.

Perceived liberal and commercial biases in news media

Many Tea Party members ascribed their perceived mistreatment to media's alleged deep liberal bias. People generally felt the movement would be unlikely to receive a fair hearing in a system that they perceived had grown increasingly liberal. Dorothy, who was in her mid-fifties, shared an opinion of many members that balance in the media had been lost:

I feel on a national level, I do believe that the media is highly liberal. I don't quite understand how they got that way, but it's been that way for a long, long time. And, I used to listen to CNN a lot before I became aware of FOX, and I can't stand to listen to it anymore now because it is so one-sided. I wish they could just report the news and then have a special time where they editorialize. But there is no more news reporting where you just simply get the facts.

Bob also perceived the media as being overly liberal, but in a somewhat ironic way. In his view, which was not uncommon in the Tea Party, mainstream media failed to represent conservative voices, although the conservative voices that were supposedly struggling to be heard were, in fact, among the most successful in modern media:

One of my frustrations is that the conservatives in Congress are not speaking up or at least they're not heard. I can't believe that somebody, if they're listening to the Limbaughs and the Hannitys and the Glenn Becks, you know... where are they on the national, you know, the ABCs, NBCs, CBSs, the CNNs even, you know, which is more of a liberal station? Where are these people? If you don't listen to Fox, you're getting one slant, and it's sort of like four against one or five against one, as far as the media is concerned.

Malcolm, who taught classes on the U.S. Constitution for various Tea Party groups, felt that the movement had some success in reaching conservative audiences, but that its scope was limited by media that had drifted from their original purpose:

Do I think they could get a wider spread if people would actually give them airtime or print space? Yeah. I think it would be nice if the media would do what it was called to do, which is keep a close eye on government in general and not take sides.

Such critiques of the media seemed to bolster an exaggerated sense of isolation and defensiveness among Tea Party members. The accuracy of such opinions may be open to question, but there was little doubt that the people I spoke with experienced them as true.

Another perceived bias was rooted in the commercial nature of the news media. There is ample scholarship that suggests commercial bias does play a role in shaping media content (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2004) even if the dynamics did not always manifest in the ways Tea Party members perceived them. Malcolm offered a fairly sophisticated critique of corporate media:

My problem with media is, is that I don't care whose message its trying to get out, whether it's the Tea Party or anybody else. The media has decided that they are the ones who are going to make the story, sell the story, because of money, because of ratings, rather than telling the story the way it was when I was growing up. [...] If you watch television, it doesn't matter who it is, they'll ask another commentator what the commentator's opinion is, rather than asking the experts who are not on the payroll of that particular news service. And that's where I think any group, Tea Parties included, are up against it is, is that if the paid staff of the particular news service is not in agreement with their point of view, that point of view is going to get shouted down.

Wayne took a more direct view of the same issue, but shared Malcolm's resigned tone and a sense that there was little to be done about traditional news media:

I mean, you can't blame the news, because they're only doing what sells. I mean they have to make money, too. So they do what sells. And, I don't know if there's a fix for it, to be honest with you, you know. [...] But you find some of the same stuff, though, in the Washington Post, and Politico. They slant everything too. Whatever sells for them. And hey, you know, they have to make a living too, so....

Some members offered fairly nuanced critiques of the media within this broader theme. I first spoke with Bob in Idaho in 2010 and he said that his group had been largely unable to attract mainstream media attention, although they were successful in connecting via talk radio. He specifically raised the issue of the journalistic tendency to focus on conflict, which in his

group's area had redirected media attention to counter protesters, whom he saw as distracting from the Tea Party message:

We're able to get our message out in the radio media, especially the talk show media. The key media people here which would be the national stations, ABC, NBC, CBS type of thing, they still choose to pretty much marginalize us and not really want to promote us. When we do have our gatherings, they are, you know, of course, a lot of their audience is based on confrontation and conflict, so if they're 12 people who are sitting on the side shouting, you know, something against us, those are the people that they focus on, you know, not the 1,888 people who are standing out on the steps supporting us. So, we do get it out, but not to the extent that we would like to.

When I spoke with Bob again in early 2011, after the successful midterm elections, he remained skeptical that the movement would be able to break through in a national media system so driven by financial motives. In fact, in his view, these liberal and commercial biases ran so deep they prevented even local news outlets from telling the Tea Party story:

Interviewer: Do you think the media coverage has changed at all since last summer?

Bob: You know, I would like to think so, but no. I think they're still a dyed-in-the-wool, you know, liberal, democrat type of thing. And they... the national media has villainized Tea Parties nationally to the point where even these people here [in Idaho]—which are really nice people, I've got nothing personally against them—but I think they are under that same banner, and they probably are not in a position to give us a lot of coverage. So, you know, they look for confrontation and conflict. That's the way they make their money. They don't want to see a bunch of sixty-year-old grandmothers and grandfathers standing on the State House steps. That doesn't do anything to get viewers.

Bob's choice of the word "villainize" was an indicator of the potent feelings of hostility that many Tea Party members felt coming from news media. In dealing with simple misrepresentations and bias, members were not pleased, but they were resigned to the situation. As their frustrations mounted, however, so did their negative perceptions of news media.

Perceived attempts to undermine the movement

In the most extreme examples from these interviews, Tea Party members perceived critical news coverage as evidence of outright hostility. They bristled at news stories that implied they were misinformed or deluded, and in particular at coverage that emphasized any racial or racist content of protests. An emphasis on derisive or controversial story elements is normal in the back-and-forth between news media and protest movements (Di Cicco, 2010; Gitlin, 1980). For many of the subjects I interviewed, however, this type of coverage was due to more than a broken media system. Rather, they perceived it as a strategic, ideological attack intended to weaken or destroy their movement. Dorothy believed that such media characterizations of the Tea Party were already discouraging potential new members:

There are people who believe as we do, who are afraid to identify themselves as Tea Party folks because of the way we've been maligned in the media and by the liberals.

Stephanie in Utah suggested this selective portrayal of protest elements was deliberately intended to emphasize deviant behavior:

(The media) ignore us. And if they do cover (a protest), like I said, they find the one crazy person who's probably, you know, not really even a part of it, that just wants to get dressed up and make us look like freaks. That's who they choose to cover.

Other members noted in similarly stark terms that media coverage seemed intentionally derogatory. On July 3, 2010, a group of self-identified Tea Party members, mostly strangers to one another, gathered around a picnic table in a small, wooded park on the Oregon Coast. At that meeting, Loren suggested that news media intentionally echoed phrases designed to show the Tea Party as violent radicals and invented stories because, in his words, "They want us to appear ignorant." At a July 4th rally the next day, a few miles north, Barb said that media demonized the Tea Party, continually replaying "one little sound bite" to create a false image in the public mind.

According to Barb, “Mainstream media has made us look like a bunch of uneducated fools.” For many members, this type of treatment was a visceral rejection of the excitement, hope, and patriotism that they experienced when they first came together as a group. Just as they were experiencing the thrill of finally joining together with other patriots, they were betrayed with portrayals of villainy or ignorance.

In the interviews I conducted, the media narratives that members felt most acutely and resisted most intensely were those that portrayed the Tea Party as racist. From fairly early in the Tea Party’s history, news media had accurately reported the presence of racist attitudes among some in the movement: analysis has shown that self-identifying Tea Party members were generally less tolerant of policies and attitudes about racial equality (Parker & Barreto, 2013), and racist imagery appeared both in public protests and online channels managed by Tea Party groups (Media Matters, 2009). Nevertheless, members vigorously resisted these characterizations, and saw in them a deliberate strategy to tarnish the movement. In Stephanie’s view, news media were trying to suffocate the Tea Party under such claims:

You know, as a whole, I think everybody [in the media] just wants to hope this thing [the Tea Party] will kind of go away, you know? If we just call everybody racist, maybe people won’t be so inclined to show up to these events.

Martha in Arizona argued aggressively against such portrayals, suggesting that the Tea Party was successfully policing itself with regard to any racist attitudes. For her and others, such reports were attacks that directly contradicted their own experience of the movement:

(The media) are now attacking the Tea Party as a distraction and calling us racists. And we know we’re not. And I haven’t seen the signs... you know, they showed signs about lynching Obama or whoever, and I have never seen that. And we self-censor anybody in our group that is out of line, then we ask them to leave. We said, “We don’t condone this, you’re out of line.” So you know, it’s just... I know from experience, and I’ve been to a lot of Tea Party rallies... there isn’t racism. You know, we’re going to a picnic! It is always very peaceful, very respectful.

Here, Martha captured one of the contradictions that the Tea Party faced in terms of its public image in news media. According to her account, her group had confronted racism in its ranks: they asked those participants to “leave” and employed an anti-racism policy. So there was simultaneously evidence for and, in Martha’s view, against the claims of racism. Yet such discourses about racism in the Tea Party persisted in media coverage, leading to continued frustration among many members.

The tension between a deeply sanctioned social attitude, racism, and the idealized community that Martha and others experienced, fueled an already robust antipathy toward news media. For Ed, a Tea Party organizer in rural Washington, news media were not only resorting to various kinds of “name-calling” against the movement, but they also unfairly obscured racist behavior on the left. As evidence, Ed cited protests against Wisconsin’s Republican governor Scott Walker, which developed after Walker proposed new, aggressively anti-union legislation in 2011:

You go to the mainstream media, ABC, CBS, NBC, they call us “tea baggers,” racists, and yeah, any number of different types of names. [...] You know, at a Tea Party rally, you never see any racist signs or any Hitler signs or any of that sort of stuff. What you always see, like what’s happening back in Wisconsin right now, is [liberal] people running around with signs saying that the governor’s Hitler and having a swastika and all that, even though (those claims are) garbage.

Political groups, like any group, can be susceptible to self-justification and defensive interpretations of events, and members of the Tea Party were no different in this regard. They keenly felt what they perceived as attacks both within general discourse about the movement, and from news media directly. For Ed and others, as for many conservatives, the media were actively seeking to suppress or even destroy the movement that had given them a renewed citizen identity. These perceptions likely reinforced longstanding conservative views about news media that described the world in highly partisan terms.

At their most extreme, these tensions between the Tea Party and news media fit a pattern of ideological conflict that runs deep in history and political culture. Dorris in California, author of a self-published Tea Party history, cast this conflict in these broader terms. In media reports about Jared Loughner, the gunman who attempted to assassinate Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and murdered several others in Tucson, Arizona, in 2011, Dorris saw a familiar dynamic:

This is just part and parcel. Whenever anything happens, (the news media) immediately want to blame the Right, to blame the Tea Party, to blame America and American values for any deficiencies in society rather than upon the person who did the actions. [...] (The Giffords shooting) is just an example on steroids of how the entire media focus is to prop up the socialist agenda of the Obama administration, because the people of the mainstream media actually believe this agenda as well. They are totally indoctrinated into the socialist, progressive mindset... they cling to these... these delusions of theirs, and paint any opposition to it as, as we are the ones that are out of whack. And that we are the ones that are dangerous. That is why there is such a wide rift right now.

Dorris' viewpoint was more strident than most, but her attitude echoed in the tone of many other members. For virtually everyone I spoke with, news media were either misrepresenting the movement or seeking to damage or destroy it, either because of deeply entrenched biases or outright ideological hostility. Members expressed a range of such views, as I have shown; in fact, in some cases, they even reported success with their media strategies despite these challenges. As I noted, traditional media were vital to the initial stages of the movement, helping give the Tea Party a national scope. Members' overall perceptions of news media, however, were strongly negative. To a significant degree, Tea Party activists felt that news media abused, attacked, and even tyrannized them. Rather than telling the "true" story, news media irresponsibly or maliciously betrayed their efforts to come together as citizens, have their voices heard, and change their world.

Alternative Approaches to Media

As vexing as it was for the Tea Party members to be misrepresented or attacked, the general attitude I encountered was one of resistance and circumvention. Members were convinced that traditional media would not treat them fairly, but rather than simply resign themselves, their response was to cultivate alternative ways to communicate with the public and within the movement. They instinctively sought different strategies that allowed them to work around the problems they perceived in traditional media. As these data showed, members had offered a range of media critiques, from basic frustration to full-blown ideological confrontation. Similarly, their alternative strategies fell into different types of activity. At a basic level, members emphasized the consumption of *multiple news sources* to better assess “both sides” of an issue. In a more critical mode, many members embraced an alternative *ethic of “research,”* through which they emphasized independent historical interpretations, media watchdog practices, and content from Fox News host Glenn Beck. Finally, at an even higher level of engagement, several Tea Party members described an active choice to work around traditional media through deliberate *pivot toward digital media* platforms like email, social media, and the web. There was no uniform online strategy that Tea Party groups followed, but as their comments showed, many members were directly responding to frustrations with traditional media by turning to these digital alternatives.

Following multiple sources of news

Many in the Tea Party presented themselves as wary news consumers who routinely sampled a range of sources. Typically, these included both conservative sources and sources that might generally be seen as neutral or liberal. In several instances, they encompassed both traditional and digital media. Those who spoke to this kind of news consumption did so without

prompting, and were eager to emphasize their goal of identifying “the truth” by diligently seeking out “both sides.” In demonstrating their “balanced” media consumption, several people touched on Fox News as the source they found most reliable. Wayne in Arizona captured this attitude most succinctly:

Fox is about... I mean, I flip through them all. I listen to them all. Like, okay, I'll hear the other side, I'll go over to CNN, listen to their side, and go back to FOX, listen to their side.

Barb in Oregon had a similar approach, saying that she got her news from “all sources,” specifically naming CNN. For her, though, Fox was true to its “fair and balanced” motto: “Fox usually will present both sides. I like Fox the most.” In these comments, Wayne and Barb left the reason for checking “both sides” implicit, but in our conversations, they were making a fairly clear claim for their own credibility as even-handed, savvy news consumers.

Dorothy directly identified the objective of this practice as an attempt to get at “the truth.” Like Barb, Dorothy also preferred a conservative news outlet, and suggested that the truth lay somewhere outside a single source:

The Wall Street Journal is not bad. I mean, in terms of trying to be a little more balanced. That's kind of my paper of choice. But what I find is, I like to read several sources on one issue, to try to get at the truth of it.

Because of the opposition that they confronted in traditional media, Tea Party members felt they had to invest extra work—reading multiple sources, including the “other side”—to accurately discover and understand the true meaning of events in politics and society. In a sophisticated media culture, many news consumers probably share this sensibility. The feeling that news media were not “reporting the whole story” would certainly be familiar for many political activists. Malcolm balanced a broad slate of sources, including those he considered partisan and neutral:

I read between five and seven news outlets a day online. I try to get a spectrum of understanding. I read both sides of the issue. I read what are considered liberal outlets. I read what are considered conservative outlets. I also have the tendency to read Reuters, because Reuters has a tendency to play the story and not the game, if you know what I mean.

Angela also read widely in news outlets but felt that traditional media were not going to allow the Tea Party's message to be heard. Moreover, she experienced such a profound sense of disconnection between competing media narratives that she felt (figuratively) that she was in an alternate reality:

I try to listen to a little of everything and I just... If you listen to... If you really follow news, like, if I'm reading Drudge online or the Blaze or *Wall Street Journal* even or a lot of these things, and then I listen to NPR news or NBC or ABC... It's like, you know, I'm living in two different dimensions. I believe they don't tell us things that I think are really important, and I can't believe how they cover what they do cover.

Many Tea Party members I spoke with echoed this sense of an alternate reality, the feeling that a hostile press was obscuring important truths. Like many Americans, perhaps, they seemed to feel that media content was fundamentally compromised. In order to find "the truth" and connect with the broader public, they sensed they would somehow have to go beyond traditional media.

An ethic of "research"

One key technique Tea Party members used to circumvent traditional media was embracing an ethic of "independent research," drawing on historical and contemporary sources. In various ways, members demonstrated hard-won knowledge to bolster the movement's credibility, both internally and also for outside audiences. For example, many situated the movement in richly historical terms that went well beyond the basic "Tea Party" trope. Dorris, who had researched and written her own Tea Party book, explicitly linked the modern Tea Party to several crucial moments in American history, describing the movement as a new Great Awakening on par with the Revolution and Abolition:

I think (the Tea Party) has deep roots in the American psyche and American history. The Great Awakening [that] it parallels, too, is the one that happened prior to the Revolutionary War from about 1730 into the 1760s. This was when you had Whitefield and his sermon, and it was identifying a new, almost an American theology of the worth and the value of the individual as a child of God. [...] Indeed, the Constitution in many ways is a beautiful anti-slavery document, [but] that strain [of slavery] was always present in America through the second Great Awakening in the 1840s [...] That was the beginning of the great abolitionist newspapers, the Underground Railroad, and you had the work of Frederick Douglass during this time. And this was all another Awakening before the Civil War. And the same parallels, I believe, are what are behind this third Great Awakening in American history.

Other Tea Party members also eagerly embraced the power of historical narrative as a way to understand and legitimize the movement. For some, this independent approach to historical documents allowed them to develop new, more personally coherent explanations of contemporary political culture. Rex, an organizer in California, had encountered the work of two popular but controversial conservative figures, the faith-based historians David Barton and W. Cleon Skousen. In his experience, this ethic of independent research was an exciting discovery that allowed him to reinterpret the meaning of American history and mythic figures:

David Barton has actual documents from the 1700s and 1800s. He's not one that just goes out and gets a book and reads it and says, "Oh, this is American history." He's one that actually has the founding documents in his hand and he can actually read what the people of that time wrote. So, and that's what I've tried to do with my studies. Rather than going out and buying a history book written about George Washington, I'm trying to go out and get books that were written about George Washington that actually reference documents that I can research and make sure the facts are true. [...] I went out and started doing my own research, and when I went out and did my own research, I found out that there was an actual document that supported everything that was being taught. So I tried to look for documentation that supported the other stuff and found that there was no documentation supporting the other stuff. So, that's where I am, and I'm growing and I'm learning.

Tea Party organizers cultivated this personal sense of growing and learning throughout the movement, incorporating resources from established conservative organizations into their

own education programs. In this spirit, Rex's group, for example, offered a video lecture series on from the National Center for Constitutional Studies.⁹ Having had such a positive experience exploring this ethic of research, Rex was eager to make that available to his members:

That's why (our group) is going to have history lessons in 30-minute formats, so people can actually learn the Constitution. They can actually learn about their Founding Fathers. They can go online 24 hours a day, seven days a week, they can pull up a lesson on what they want to learn, and do it. And if they want to do it in a group, if they want to do it as an individual, or if they want to do it as a seminar, that website's always there for people to pull it up and go through the lessons.

This research ethic extended beyond historical contexts to include contemporary information as well. Seeing themselves trapped between a corrupt political culture and a feckless media system, some Tea Party members developed an investigative instinct. The sense that something was amiss on a grand scale motivated members to actively circulate a wide range of information in the interests of uncovering, analyzing, and presenting "the truth" to a wider audience. Ellen in Arizona spoke about her habits of evaluating and propagating information in terms of a moral responsibility to their community:

I also send news and information out to a circle of people, and have been doing this well over a year. People come to me and say, "Gee, I heard this, is this true?" And I tell them "yes" or "no," this is true or it's not true, and I tell them where to go to look and research things on their own. And people do... our friends [and] families are acquainted with the work that we do, so I think they come to us for verification of some stories that they hear. Because we might be the only people who are plugged in enough, and do it, and take responsibility to do the research to understand whether something is or is not true, so we can give them a decent response.

This sense of research as a higher calling was pronounced for Ellen, as it was for others I spoke with. She and her friend Martha had come to the Sandra Day O'Connor Courthouse in downtown

⁹ NCCS is a conservative organization that publishes Skousen's better-known books and the seemingly ubiquitous "Pocket Constitution" pamphlets that were available at Tea Party events across the country in 2010.

Phoenix, Arizona, to counter-protest a pro-immigration rally. It was a sunny morning with temperatures already reaching into the 90s; clearly, they were on a mission. When I asked where they got information that they trusted, they described themselves as proud and active media watchdogs:

Ellen: I guess it starts at news that we get, or emails that we get from different organizations. And then we go on the web, or we look at newspapers, or newspapers even online, and try to understand where the stories come from, or research a person's name, or a topic, and understand where it comes from. [...] It's no secret anymore that part of the strategy is to keep so many balls in the air that people don't know which one to catch. So that's part of what we do also. We keep an eye on all those balls and watch how they bang against each other while they're in the air, before they fall, and while they're falling, so that we can understand how it will affect us and how it will affect people we know. So that's what we do. I mean, we're kind of journalists in our own way.

Martha: Yeah. Citizen Journalists.

The research ethic that individual members were embracing was also part of the broader conservative discourse, specifically coming from some of the most influential voices of the period. During the time I was conducting interviews, the instinct to get at deeper truths was embodied to a significant degree by Glenn Beck, who then had a prominent evening timeslot on Fox News, as well as an influential radio talk show. Beck's critics would be more likely to characterize him as a polemist unfettered by fact, but his style of impassioned commentary resonated strongly with conservatives who had grown suspicious of traditional media. In particular, Beck's supposedly research-driven conclusions aligned deftly with conservative anxieties about a hostile political culture, and seemed to provide his audience with a much-desired alternative to traditional media narratives. In this, Beck fulfilled his audience's need for social and political reassurance, situated within a discourse of research, truth, balance, and

fairness. Ed, for example, was persuaded by Beck's performance of credibility and his apparent willingness to admit mistakes:

Interviewer: Is there something unique about what Beck does?

Ed: Well, I think he really researches. Him and his staff, I think they really research what they're talking about. They don't shoot from the hip or anything like that. They get their information and they make sure it's correct. On the rare occasions when they do make an error, he'll stand up right in front of the audience and say, "Hey, I screwed that up."

Roy in California perceived Beck as an idealized neutral party whose work was rooted in fact, and whose conclusions were therefore reassuringly at odds with traditional news outlets:

Interviewer: What is it that Glenn Beck does that others in the media do not?

R: Uh...[laughter]. What he does, well, it's... How can I explain this? He produces facts. He researches to the nth degree all of the information that he's going to present to his audience. It's not spin, it's not an agenda, although you could call it an agenda. It's just the... how can I, how can I put it? It's not an agenda. It's like, if you listen to Fox, it's fair and balanced. He's the opposite view. He's the counterview to the mainstream media.

There was a hunger among the conservatives I spoke with for an alternative viewpoint, and they were adamant about building a scaffold of credibility for Beck's approach. Stephanie in Idaho, like hundreds of others around the country, founded a local group based on the principles Beck outlined in his "9/12 Project," which advanced the idea that on the day after September 11, 2001, America was a united country and could be again. Stephanie, like Ed and Roy, described Beck as a critical, questioning figure who urged people to think independently:

I like Glenn Beck. In fact, I was so excited. I got to meet him last Friday night. His revival was on Saturday and that was awesome. But we're not all Beck-bots. It's not like everything he says is whatever. I mean, I think he... I like what he does in the way that he kind of questions what's going on, and lets people do their research and draw their own conclusions on things. So, certainly I watch him on Fox. I wouldn't say that everything on Fox is perfect, but I certainly like him on Fox.

This theme of balanced critical inquiry was part of a larger Tea Party effort to develop a credible alternative narrative within a media system and a political culture that members perceived as hostile. The timing of Beck's approach spoke powerfully to many who were anxious about the 2008 election, including a number of people I interviewed who had recently become active in both Tea Party and 9/12 groups. For several of these Tea Party members, Beck's program aligned with their own practice of "alternative" research, which encompassed various types of conservative media and, increasingly, independent research conducted online. Ellen, for example, was hungry for alternative media narratives and actively pursued several sources that might provide them:

I think that what started me was the interminable run up to the election [...]. And the more I heard about Barack Obama, the more concerned I became. And again, you would not have heard any of that on mainstream media, but because I do watch Fox and I did listen to talk on the radio, I did hear things, and of course went and researched things on my own.

In Beck's case, it is worth noting that, as Stephanie, Bob, and others suggested, the Tea Party movement was highly resistant to the notion of leaders. Although Beck's critics linked him strongly to the Tea Party, no one I spoke with directly portrayed him as a leader of the Tea Party, nor even, for that matter, of the 9/12 groups he inspired. He was, however, a central motivating figure who helped foster among conservative audiences a strong impulse to circumvent, and thus refute, traditional media content that was critical of the movement. His ability to cultivate credibility through a discourse of research and facts helped make Beck an icon, and these values of independent research and truth-seeking resonated widely within the Tea Party. At many levels and in many ways, members were looking for a solution to their frustrations with traditional media.

Pivot toward digital media

In every region of the country, in states as diverse as New York and Arkansas, or Massachusetts and Arizona, the Tea Party was driven by a desire to discover and share truths that reached beyond the scope of traditional media narratives. The most active expression of this could be seen in the ways that individuals and groups turned to the internet as a site for organization, communication, and action. There was no single transitional moment where groups shifted their efforts from traditional to digital media; in fact, the internet was crucial to the movement from its earliest origins. Neither was there one digital strategy practiced by every group uniformly. Virtually every member I interviewed, however, was part of a group that used at least basic digital tools. For many of these groups, digital media represented a crucial alternative channel that would help them work around the barriers that traditional media threw in their path.

When members and groups made this pivot to digital media, they did so in different ways, but it was typically an act of engagement with a specific purpose. Like Ellen above, Ed was one of several people who told me he used the internet as a check on mainstream media:

Interviewer: Do you use the internet for your news?

Ed: I use the internet for news to an extent. If I see a news item on TV that isn't covered in the depth that I really want to pursue it, then I'll go to the internet.

Martha in Arizona amplified this sentiment. When I asked her about the Tea Party's ability to communicate via the media, she immediately cited roadblocks the movement faced and suggested that members would have to take action on their own to discern the truth. For her, the internet was part of a crucial alternative media structure that included Fox News and talk radio:

Interviewer: Do you think that that the Tea Party can get its message out in the media?

Martha: No. Um, I think it's a good sign that the Tea Party Caucus was just formed, because I think... well, I don't know, even the established media may not cover that, either. I don't think they want our message to get out to the American public. And as Ellen said, if you're not watching Fox, if you're not listening talk radio, or doing your own work on the internet, you're not getting the message. I, you know, I talk to some of my friends who are not plugged into the sources that I am, and they are clueless about what's going on.

Martha and Ellen were active in their local Tea Party group, along with other conservative political groups, and they both were strongly encouraging their personal networks to independently circumvent traditional media. Angela in Kentucky offered a similar conclusion from a somewhat broader perspective. As the leader of a growing Tea Party group, she spoke as a communications strategist who wanted to reach her audience increasingly through the use of digital tools:

Interviewer: Is the internet part of your communication strategy?

Angela: Yeah, well, of course the email. We do at least a weekly, sometimes bi-weekly email to our 400 members. And we also post our newsletter on our website. We're not utilizing it like we should but it's one of our goals [...]. One of the things that I want to do is try to do some [...] issue-orientated advertising between now and November. And I was thinking television, but then I was like, "I think that's passing. I really need to be thinking about what are those many outlets that we need to use outside traditional media." And, you know, we have a Facebook page but I think, [another group member] was trying to maybe do some advertising, like Google ads, or ads on Facebook, rather than just our Facebook page. We'll definitely use the internet in our campaign work this year.

When I spoke to Roy, he was eagerly pursuing digital media. For him, the value of getting around traditional media constraints was multiplied significantly by the vast networking opportunities that digital media provided:

One of the best, and greatest things that we've done in the last two years was use the social medias, Twitter and Facebook. I've probably... I'm maxed out on my Facebook friends and 98 percent of the people on my Facebook and Twitter accounts are political. And when you have a network of people all across the United States that share bits of information from their communities or their states, you get, you know, an overall grand picture of the political spectrum. Whereas, if you didn't have Twitter, you didn't have Facebook, all you had was your local

newspaper, you'd have a very, very limited perspective in what's going on in not only your community, but in the nation as a whole. Because [when] you pick up your newspaper, you're only going to see what the Associated Press or what your editor of your newspaper wants you to see. And Twitter and Facebook, you're seeing everything uncensored, unfiltered from all across the United States.

In Roy's view, as for others, this networking capacity of digital media aligned with and reinforced their ethic of independent research and discovering concealed truths. Rather than relying on one media channel, or a few, these social media platforms opened vast networks of information. The promise of such platforms was that members would be able to learn what was really happening, connect with one another and, in theory, organize take action in response. For Tea Party members, the scope of such a network and its independence from traditional media imbued it with an inherent integrity. It was not merely "what the Associated Press wanted you to see"; it was the assembled knowledge of "people all across the United States." For Roy and those who optimistically embraced these media, the citizenry was taking ownership of its own channels of communication

Naturally, this embrace of digital media came with caveats, and Tea Party members claimed to be on guard for unscrupulous or unreliable sources. Even Roy, immediately after the previous comment, added a well-rounded caution:

Now, that's not to say that you just can take everything that you see on Facebook or Twitter as gospel. You've got to have a sense of judgment in what you're reading, because there's a lot of stuff out there that, you know, to me, is tinfoil hats and everything else that, you know, that will come down the pipe. Anybody that has a platform will say anything that they want to say, so you have to have a little bit of sense in what you're reading and what you're seeing to have a good judgment of what you're getting out of it. But you know, that's... the Internet is probably the next best source of news information for us in our movement.

Dorothy was similarly committed to maintaining a skeptical eye, going so far as to incorporate a well-known internet rumor-debunking site into her regular media routine:

The internet is becoming a valuable source, although a dangerous one because it's very hard to decipher fact from fiction. I'm constantly checking things out on Snopes, or other sources because, you know, too much gets sent around that's not true.

Andrew in New York was similarly wary and brought to light an irony in the Tea Party discourse around credibility. On one hand, news media are dubious sources when reporting on the Tea Party itself; on the other, they are sometimes reliable enough to provide an important check on content gleaned from the internet:

Andrew: We're actually trying to work on (our internet strategy). We've been doing forums. We do our Facebook. I do the Facebook, read the webpage. I do a lot of stuff, just normal stuff. I don't want to do crazy blog stuff because you lose credibility.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Andrew: You know, I don't know. I'm just saying, like, you know how when they see, like, "John's Wacko Blog in the Basement"? We stay away from that. Everything's got to be cited by legitimate... you know, *Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg*, *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, CBO reports, GAO Reports. So I put that on the Facebook. We are trying to get that out. I want to build that out. It's one of the things we're working on.

Taken together, these data show that members of the Tea Party had a complex relationship with a rapidly changing media system, particularly in a moment when political fortunes seemed stacked against them. Overall, it was clear that media—both traditional news outlets and emerging digital platforms—played an essential role in the way Tea Party members thought about their capabilities as informed citizens, and their goals as a movement. To better understand how these media cultivated or constrained civic engagement, it is useful to look at how Tea Party groups strategized around traditional and digital media in the context of the public imperative. This perspective helps illuminate how media may be enabling or constraining citizens' fundamental impulses to meet up, speak out, and push back.

Media and the Public Imperative

In Chapter Three, it was clear that the public imperative provided a powerful organizing framework for members of the nascent Tea Party movement. In a state of anxiety and isolation, they came together, spoke out in the public square, and pressured leaders for change. In the first part of this chapter, data showed some of the complex relationships that members had with both traditional and digital media. In the remainder of this chapter, I look more closely at the intersection of media and the public imperative. To do this, I examine how Tea Party members perceived traditional media were silencing their voices, and how they turned to digital tools to start building their own networks for communication and action.

This point of inquiry is important for understanding the integral relationship between media and civic engagement on a broad scale. The channels that make public life possible also distort and constrain its shape. In the Revolutionary Era, print shops and postal policies were essential to the complex and rapidly changing political situation, but they were conceived and developed as commercial businesses, not solely to foster civic engagement. Similarly, contemporary media have both advanced the civic impulses of social movements and, for various reasons, hindered their ability to reach the public. Across different historical periods, media of the day can serve as channels for fundamental acts of civic expression, and the constraints they impose on citizens' actions can significantly influence events and consequences of political culture. The case of the Tea Party helps illustrate how a deeply rooted civic instinct is simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the technologies and practices that constitute the American political media system.

The public imperative provided a roadmap for much of the Tea Party's early development at the individual level. To review, the people I spoke with reported feeling anxious

and isolated in the period before they joined the Tea Party. Many took a leap of faith in coming out to their first event, but in short order they were *meeting up as individuals*, in restaurants, rented halls, and members' living rooms. As these meetings grew, members began to reach out and forge new connections, *meeting up as groups* to form networks at regional, state, and even national levels. Large public rallies were central to the movement at this point, where people began to *speak out symbolically* about their concerns and their plans. As groups increased in sophistication, they constructed events and activities in which they *spoke out strategically*, developing plans internally while publicly directing messages toward politicians. As their voices grew their patience diminished, and groups began to more seriously *push back as rebels*, taking the reins of their local political infrastructure and putting politicians on notice that they could be unseated at any time. As a culminating discourse, many of the Tea Party members I interviewed spoke to a higher patriotic calling, a profound desire to *push back and restore the country*, fighting corruption in the name of our shared national identity. These three broad categories—meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back—were vividly present in the stories that Tea Party members told about their experiences. To further explore this phenomenon, the second part of this chapter's Research Question is specific to the public imperative:

RQ2: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members talk about traditional news media and digital media, either generally or in relation to the Tea Party? *If so, how do they describe these types of media in the context of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back?*

This allows me to draw a more direct link between the public imperative behaviors of Tea Party members and the specific types of media that were being deployed in the movement. The individual experiences that drove the movement were immediate and personal, but the impact of the Tea Party would not have reached the levels it did without a densely mediated political culture in which to flourish. At each stage of

members' individual public imperative transformations, media shaped their progress. Sometimes media worked against the movement, as with derogatory or dismissive comments from cable news pundits. In other cases, media provided communication capacities that earlier social movements could only imagine, as with far-reaching online networks that could spring up in a few hours. These data show how news media played an important role in stoking feelings of anxiety and priming people to act. Conservative media personalities encouraged viewers to seek out the Tea Party and other groups, giving many people a nudge to step into the political arena for the first time. Once on their path, members found that both traditional and digital media would be integral to advancing a public imperative agenda.

Media and Meeting Up

In late 2008 and early 2009, conservatives were trying to find a way forward. After years of diminishing trust in media and political institutions, they saw their country mired in a punishing economic crisis. Already furious over the TARP and auto industry bailouts, many had deep misgivings about the coming Obama presidency. In this tense period, traditional and digital media both played key roles, albeit very different ones, in helping individuals move from a state of isolation and anxiety to the creation of an influential political movement. As accounts of small protests began to percolate into political blogs, talk radio, and local news reports, well-funded conservative groups like FreedomWorks and Americans For Prosperity quickly mobilized to take advantage of this groundswell. Soon, major figures in conservative media were exhorting audiences to join the rush to the public square, and the Tea Party was fully underway. According to Tea Party members I spoke with, *traditional media both facilitated and frustrated the process of coming together*. On one hand, news media were contributing to a building sense of isolation

and anxiety; then CNBC reporter Rick Santelli's "rant" ignited this tension, spurring people across the country to meet up in rapidly forming local Tea Party groups. On the other hand, once these groups had formed and wanted to bring more members into the movement, traditional media did little or nothing to foster further meeting up.

Digital media proved to be much more conducive to the types of meeting up activities that individuals and, later, groups wanted to achieve. Traditional media had offered powerful but ultimately indirect ways of bringing people together. By contrast, Tea Party members were more effusive about digital tools, largely because of the direct role that gave people to manage their own meeting up. Members described two principal ways that this occurred. First, digital media augmented traditional media information by giving individuals the ability to connect with local groups and promote their own protests and events. More significantly, digital media provided essential platforms for spreading news about the movement, allowing members to organize events, and keeping new groups connected. In all these ways, Tea Party members found that *digital media were extremely effective at making meeting up possible.*

Traditional media played a central, but indirect, role in bringing the Tea Party together. That is to say, in many of the stories members shared with me, the role of traditional media was never to actively facilitate meeting up; rather, traditional media motivated people by stoking their anxieties, and then stirring them with an angry rant. In New York, for example, Andrew's fears about the economic crisis were magnified by content from financial news sources:

I was getting so depressed. I was reading news story after news story. You know, I read *The [Wall Street] Journal*, I read Bloomberg, *Financial Times*, *The Economist*. And I was like, "Oh, my god." It was getting worse and worse. And I was drinking almost every night, because I was, like, "I know what is going to happen." Greece! What happened in Greece is going to happen here, if not worse.

Tea Party members from around the country similarly reported their frustrations building up through news media reporting. For many of them, a crucial transformation occurred when they finally reached a breaking point and realized that they needed to take action. As Cameron in Arkansas, a retired businessman, said:

I'm like a bunch of these other lazy old people, that... we were on the couch and we were shouting at the TV, and... you probably have had heard that from a thousand people or more. I'm serious, I had gotten to the point where it was like either I'm going to shut up or put up. [...] It was a reality to me that I needed to do something....

This exasperation, this yearning for action, was a hallmark of the Tea Party experience for many conservatives, and popular television commentators tapped into it. In February 2009, financial reporter Rick Santelli voiced the frustrations of many conservatives, blaming the housing crisis on delinquent home loan borrowers he called “losers.” Although he only made a passing reference to a Tea Party event—“We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I'm going to start organizing” (CNBC, 2009)—many credited the incident as the spark that set the movement ablaze (Walker, 2010). According to several members, the emotional power of Santelli’s rant motivated them to seek out a local Tea Party event. Ellen in Arizona linked the rant to her decision to attend her first rally:

I forget the fellow’s name, but the fellow had a meltdown on the television and said we ought to have a Tea Party and I thought that was a great idea. And then there was the Tax Day Rally [in Phoenix], so I went to that.

Many conservatives interpreted Santelli’s message as a direct call to action and responded enthusiastically. Wayne in Arizona suggested that the ethic of the rant was a guiding principle of the movement:

Interviewer: What had you heard about the Tea Party that made you want to (get involved)?

Wayne: It was kind of like the Rick Santelli thing, you know. “Get up off your ass and do something,” you know. That’s what he was trying to tell America to do that day that he did his little rant and rave, you know. “This can’t go on this way,” you know. “It’s out of control.” And, which we still believe, it’s out of control.

In these ways, traditional media were helping to build up—and then ignite—a massive amount of pent-up political energy. In so doing, they did play a role in the public imperative response that would follow, although it was ultimately a roundabout way to foster civic engagement. More importantly, in the midst of what they saw as a profoundly troubling political culture, individuals began to see a path forward, a way to stand up and engage. Bob captured in a few words the transition that many Tea Party members made from their couch to the town square:

I can sit around and grumble and complain, and you know, bitch to my neighbors and yell at the TV. But unless I stand up and do something, then I have no right. If I’m going to be here, if I’m going to be in Idaho, then I have to be the one to stand up and say, “Hey, I don’t like it. And because I don’t like it, I’m going to get involved and do something about it.” And it might not be right—we don’t do everything right—but at least we’re doing something.

It was in this spirit that many thousands of individuals went searching for a local Tea Party event. According to virtually everyone I spoke with, long years of growing frustration with media and politics had reached a critical turning point. Once they had decided to take action, their first move was to connect with others.

Though traditional media were important in the process of meeting up, members did not see media as allies in their cause. Apart from mentioning certain high-profile conservative media figures—primarily Santelli and, to a lesser degree, Glenn Beck—Tea Party members spoke

rarely, if ever, about traditional media as a way to bring people together.¹⁰ Tea Party members I interviewed rejected notions of local news as a defender of the public and, with a handful of exceptions, either disparaged traditional media as a hindrance to movement-building or ignored them altogether. In fact, Wayne in Arizona felt that partisanship of the local newspaper was hindering his groups' ability to connect with the public:

This town here's a college town. [...] Our newspaper is very, very liberal. I mean, we can take a good story to them or whatever, we can invite them to you know, put this event in the newspaper, you know. Let people know (a political candidate) is going to be here, "Come and hear him." No, they won't do it. So, they only want to criticize.

Wayne elaborated on this, noting that neglect from traditional media left many potential members stuck in a state of isolation:

There's a lot of people out there who are upset. A lot of them don't know who to talk to. A lot of them don't even know about (our Tea Party group), even though we advertise on the radio, it's in the newspaper, yada yada yada. They just don't know about us, so....

Traditional media had undoubtedly shaped Wayne's Tea Party experience, primarily by amplifying political and social problems, and then through Santelli's call to action. Beyond that, however, for him and for others, traditional media seemed more like distant entities that, if not openly hostile, were mostly uninterested in helping them accomplish their goals.

The story changed, however, when digital media were introduced into the narrative. For the Tea Party members I spoke with, digital media significantly improved meeting up in two

¹⁰ One of the few people who suggested that traditional media actually helped the movement said they did so only by accident. Jack, a former organizer for a national conservative organization, said misrepresentations of the Tea Party movement by news media actually made members more loyal: "I think the way the mainstream media characterized the Tea Party movement helped actually grow it. Because there were average citizens who had never participated in a political process before, showing up at these Tea Party events and then reading in the newspaper that they weren't for real. And I think it helped grow the movement."

ways. First, they changed the way that members made use of traditional media. Traditional media on their own were a source of frustration and dire news; when linked with digital media, specifically the internet, the two media types worked together very effectively to help members meet up. Individuals who heard about protests happening elsewhere in the country could quickly find a local group or, as many did, immediately start their own. Second, digital media proved to be an essential tool for bringing groups together and maintaining contact. In several cases, individuals learned about Tea Party events through alternative media channels like political blogs and then, as groups grew, they needed to be coordinated via email and social networking sites. These digital media affordances made them highly valuable to the Tea Party in this early stage as individuals moved from “screaming at the TV” to meeting up as groups of citizens.

In the narratives I heard, people often relied on digital and traditional media together to facilitate meeting up. Mack in Indiana was involved both in Tea Party and 9/12 groups. When I asked him how he first heard about the movement, his brief story exemplified this combined use of traditional and digital media:

There was a blurb on the radio and there was something in the newspaper that just caught my eye, but I was looking for it and I got online and looked. There was a group called the Michiana 9/12 Project, they're out of Elkhart, Indiana. And that was the first event that I went to.

Mack's story was echoed in the experiences of individuals across the country; often media were combined in different, sometimes complex ways. Matt in New Jersey described how television, the internet, and live events were linked in his experience of coming to the Tea Party:

I happened to be watching CNBC, February 19th, 2009, uh, when Rick Santelli gave his now-famous rant. [...] I then went to the New York City Tea Party and spoke at the New York City Hall Rally on February 25th. [...] I just knew from talking to the attendees, and doing my own internet research, that this [the Tea Party] was something. The time was right. It was just a feeling. [...] I went back after that rally and looked online and found a site that I think at the time was TaxDayTeaParty.com. And they

were looking for leaders or organizers and I signed up and, lo and behold, there were some other people that followed me to our first meeting, which was early in March of 2009.

In Matt's story, Santelli's rant inspired him to attend a rally, which shaped his internet activity, which in turn brought him to a new Tea Party group. In this case, like many others, traditional media were a jumping off point, digital media were a tool for connecting, and the reward was a real-life connection with like-minded compatriots.

At least one traditional media figure, Glenn Beck, explicitly encouraged the use of digital media to facilitate meeting up. For Stephanie, this became a key motivation for taking action:

When Glenn Beck kind of encouraged people to go and focus on this “we surround them” idea [...] he said, “Look through Meet Up¹¹ and find a group [that is] local.” And it's kind of like, “Hey, my mom and I are talking, and she's in D.C., and I'm in Utah,” and we said, “We're going to do this.” So I did. I went out and found a group that was just within ten miles of my house and went to that meeting in early March of 2009.

Many of the first Tea Party activists did not set out with sophisticated media strategies in mind. However, they eagerly embraced whatever media they could find in the interest of bringing people together. Sarah, for example, orchestrated an influential early rally that subsequently inspired waves of other Tea Party groups. Lacking the professional expertise of well-funded political consultants, her media strategy hinged on creativity and persistence:

I thought, well, there's conservative talk radio, I could call the radio hosts. [...] I think what really did it for me to get people there was I was on Kirby Wilbur's show. [...]. He let me talk and then he told me to call in the next morning, and I got to talk about it again, and then [conservative political blogger] Michelle Malkin posting (rally information) for me. So that's how I got 120 people there without knowing a single other conservative in Seattle at the time.

¹¹ “Meet Up” here refers to MeetUp.com, a social networking website that encourages members to form online interest groups in order to then meet up in person.

Sarah's ability to generate a crowd—and, thus, to create a seminal event that would help spark a nationwide movement—depended on little more than a political blog and a local talk radio show. When these narrow channels came together with the public imperative impulse of meeting up, however, they had the capacity to create something greater than the sum of its parts. Angela in Kentucky also relied on multiple types of media, linking the website of her local newspaper, to a major televised national event, which launched her local group:

I actually just kinda decided, all right, if you build it, they will come. And I just posted an announcement online [...] to say, "Hey, I'm going to be meeting on Monday nights at a certain restaurant." [...] It wasn't very, very well attended through the summer, but then on the big million-people-march on September the 12th [2009], I just put it out online again on our local, online newspaper site, [and] said, "You know, we're going to have a viewing party. People that couldn't go [to the national event], come over to the restaurant." And we had a big crowd come, and that became the nucleus, and we have not looked back since. I don't think we've ever missed another meeting.

Together, digital and traditional media effectively helped individuals and groups meet up. Members tended to focus much more on the actual meeting up that people were yearning for than on whether particular media were helping them do so; media were most beneficial when they were most transparent. This suggests that it was the public imperative experience, more than the execution of an elaborate media strategy, that animated this movement. For individuals at the local level, media were useful, but it was meeting up that mattered.

There were several types of digital media that members mentioned at various points, including Twitter, Facebook, political blogs, websites, email, and in one influential case, tele-conferencing. These tools were useful for organizers and participants looking to connect for the first time, and they continued to play a role in helping the movement grow. Sarah noted the importance of two key tools from which the Tea Party movement itself emerged, Twitter and tele-conferencing:

So, after Rick Santelli had his rant, I believe it was Michael Patrick Leahy and somebody else who had started TCOT, the Top Conservatives on Twitter. They started calling for nation-wide Tea Parties on Twitter and then said, “Hey, we should all get together on a phone conference.” So a whole bunch of us that were, you know, that followed TCOT and stuff, got on a telephone conference [...]. So, honestly, if any structure was there at the beginning, it was the free phone-conference companies. Without those, it probably never could have gotten off the ground.

Interviewer: And there was a role for Twitter in those early days?

Sarah: Oh, yeah, I’d say the free conferencing and Twitter. Twitter’s... maybe Twitter first because it was the TCOT that got people aware....

Sarah and others were using digital tools at the earliest moments of Tea Party activity.

Many members who attended or heard about these early protests were subsequently inspired themselves to start building networks and connecting with others. Janel in Massachusetts was one of a number of members I spoke to who cited Sarah’s original protest as a model for her own activism. Sarah had mentioned the importance of Michelle Malkin’s blog in bringing people to her first protest. In fact, Janel saw those specific posts, which extended the power of Sarah’s protest far beyond the Northwest:

I think that my first brush with (the Tea Party) was early in 2009 when the... and I believe it was Michelle Malkin’s blog, a website with the protests that were happening, or the protest that happened in Seattle. [...] And you know, I immediately thought to myself, as someone who lives in the Boston area, “Wow, I mean, if they’re going to start doing protests up in Seattle and around the country then we should definitely be having one in Boston as well.”

Some organizations began to develop national-level websites to facilitate Tea Party meeting up.

At these sites, individuals could easily register a group in a particular city or region and access basic communication functions such as email, chat, and blogging.¹² Sarah eventually took on a

¹² Even members who resisted national support recognized the importance of TeaPartyPatriots.org in building and maintaining groups. Garry in California was adamantly independent of any national group, but still relied on Tea Party Patriots as a way to attract

leadership role at a national organization and emphasized their website's core function as a resource for bringing groups together:

(Our organization) exists to give help to local organizations. [...] Basically everything that we do, we want to provide them with resources and tools so they can grow their groups, you know, strengthen their networks across the state and just help them with visibility. Whatever tools they need to be strong. [...] We have (many hundreds of) groups that voluntarily affiliate with us listed on the website, that other people can go and look and find a group near them.

As groups started coming together, they discovered the need to create a functional organization that could go beyond simply meeting up. Digital tools allowed them to create internal conversations, with an eye toward developing even greater influence. After the success of her first rallies, Janel improvised her way through the process of creating a group that would last. For her, digital media were essential to making the task possible:

It became pretty evident that we needed to put together, you know, some sort of official organization where decisions would be made. You know, do a website, get a Facebook page, things like that. Have some sort of system of contacting people versus, you know, just trying to keep addresses straight in your address book in the computer. So we started having meetings. We just, you know, sent out emails to everyone who had signed up with us over the course of the last eight months—and we didn't even have a name at that point—and said, you know, "We're looking at forming an organization," you know. "Here are a couple meeting times, come and voice your opinion."

Janel did not mince words when I asked her how important the internet had been in establishing her group. "Absolutely critical," she said. "Without it I don't think we would exist much." This was one of many examples where Tea Party members were using digital media on their own terms, with their own agendas, outside the constraints of traditional media. The combination of

members and remain connected: "I am on the website for TeaPartyPatriots.org because it helps people find us, but I don't participate in their town hall phone calls or anything else. [...] So while I'm aware of these groups, I do get their emails, and I am on their lists, we do not take direction from any of them."

both media types had been effective in creating connections; as the movement grew, digital media became independently important in cultivating a national movement of local organizations. These tools would be equally important as groups moved to the next public imperative goal, speaking out.

Media and Speaking Out

Tea Party members said they felt that traditional media were suppressing their voices, but interestingly, they did not make a pivot to digital media in the same way they did elsewhere: instead of using digital media to speak out directly, they used these tools to discuss, internally, what messages they would deliver to the public by other means. Chapter Three showed that, as individuals began meeting up and forming new Tea party groups, they began to focus on “having their voices heard.” Coming together in city parks, town hall steps, meeting rooms, and restaurants, members were powerfully compelled to speak out, both symbolically and strategically: that is, to raise their voices as citizens in the public square, and then to let political leaders hear from them directly. Given the importance members placed on speaking out, and given the hostility they perceived on the part of traditional media, it was not surprising that members felt *traditional media denied the Tea Party a voice*. As the data below will show, members suggested that traditional media either distorted their message or otherwise stifled their voices. Conservative media outlets provided some capacity to be heard, primarily at Fox News, but even this was limited.

As members had started relying more on digital media for meeting up, it seemed likely that they would turn to digital media as a way for their “voices to be heard.” This was not the case, at least not directly. Digital media did play an important role in speaking out, but with an interim step: members described digital tools not as a way to sway the public, but primarily as a

way to *foster strategic conversations* about the direction of the movement. In the context of speaking out, digital media were primarily a channel for internal planning and coordination. Rarely did members link digital media to the need to “have our voices heard” or similar concepts; the technical sophistication to use digital media as a public megaphone was either not present or not widely used in the movement. The online conversations they had proved highly consequential, however, to the point of substantively shaping the Tea Party’s national message.

Tea Party members I interviewed said, time and again, that their ability to speak out was severely curtailed by traditional media. In their view, it was only the conservative media, and primarily Fox News, that allowed the Tea Party message to be heard. The desire for civic expression was intense for many members, and when they could not achieve it, this was an affront to them not merely as individuals, but as citizens. Lettie, a group leader in California, for example, said she was first surprised that the national Tea Party rally in September 2009 got so little media coverage. Then the passage of President Obama’s health care legislation in early 2010 finally motivated her to take action and create a local Tea Party group. She recounted her story in distinct public imperative language:

We got the feeling that “we the people” are being ignored. They’re just not listening to us. [...] We felt like we had to get people together and find our voice.

Geoff, meeting with other concerned citizens in Oregon, also couched the Tea Party’s relationship to media in the rhetoric of the founding documents. For him, the movement’s public voice was achieved in spite of the media’s failure to share its message:

We’re practicing our First Amendment rights. We’re not getting our voice out through the news media, but we’re doing it directly.

A visceral sense of frustration was common among the Tea Party members I interviewed, and invoking historical contexts was not uncommon. This was partly due to these ideas being made

salient by the name of the movement itself: calling it the “Tea Party” specifically invokes related ideas. Comments like Lettie’s and Geoff’s were much more than window dressing, however: they seemed to genuinely experience these frustrations with traditional media in the context of an active citizen identity.

Other members I spoke to suggested that the Tea Party’s voice could be heard, but only within a narrow selection of ideologically friendly outlets, and even then only part of the time. Malcolm in Arizona raised this issue when I asked the general question of whether the movement could “get its message out in the media”:

I think they (Tea Party groups) find it very difficult to get their voice beyond the conservative media, whichever one outlet you want to talk about, whether you want to mention Fox or you want to mention the more conservative newspapers....

I asked Mack in Michigan the same question, and he characterized the problem in a similar way. For him, as for others, the issue was not that the Tea Party did not have a voice. Rather, it was that their voice was muted across most news outlets:

Interviewer: Do you think the Tea Party can get its message out in the media?

Mack: I don’t think it has a loud enough voice yet. I mean, it gets it out through its membership, but not the media. It’s kind of unfair that the only ones that do any kind of reporting on this is FOX News. And you’re not going to hear us on CBS, or NBC, or ABC, and even NPR is liberal-controlled.

The issue of news outlets as a garbled channel went straight to the identity of Tea Party members and their sense of the movement as a patriotic mission. For Rex, this distortion in traditional media obscured important truths, and even the coverage at Fox News was barely sufficient:

If you’re watching FOX News, you get about 25 percent of the Tea Party message. No, we don’t, we don’t get... There is not a clear message

coming through the media to the people what the true meaning and the true efforts of the Tea Party are.

This perception that traditional media were stifling speaking out aligns closely with other views that members expressed. In the sections above, members reported they felt traditional media were working against the movement generally, and inhibiting meeting up specifically. In the case of speaking out, digital media did play an important role, but not as a direct channel to the public. At this stage the nascent movement still needed to “find our voice,” as Lettie said, so the speaking out that took place was largely internal.¹³

In the context of speaking out, Tea Party views of digital media diverged from the patterns noted previously. To this point, frustrations with traditional media were closely related to a direct turn toward digital media: Janel said traditional media were becoming less relevant as she looked into online advertising; Roy suggested that social networks provided a wider, more trustworthy array of viewpoints than traditional news editors could. Similarly, when traditional media were unhelpful for meeting up, digital media made it much easier for people to connect with local organizations. In light of all this, Tea Party members might have made a direct leap, suggesting that digital media would help them “have their voices heard.” This type of language was not prevalent in the data. The value of speaking out as deliberation was clearly in evidence, however. For the Tea Party members I interviewed, digital media were valuable primarily for internal debates that guided group decisions. In the context of the public imperative values in

¹³ The vast majority of digital activity in the context of speaking out was directed at this type of internal deliberation and organization. There were a few instances where members were exploring digital media tools that had the potential to reach a broader audience: for example, web videos, self-publishing of books through Amazon.com, and a burgeoning independent web radio network at BlogTalkRadio.com. Although such efforts extended the Tea Party message online, in reality they were effectively contained within tightly bounded domains of conservative discourse. As such, they were not likely to achieve the public imperative goal of speaking out to the public.

Chapter Three, this aligns closely with the “strategic” form of speaking out, rather than the “symbolic” form: that is, digital media fostered a pragmatic, task-oriented, influence-building type of discussion, rather than a broad-based, highly public style of expression.

This deliberative, internal speaking out emerged across different digital platforms in the Tea Party movement. Early on, for example, Tea Party Patriots hosted online conversations that shaped messaging priorities that were eventually adopted by hundreds of local groups around the country. According to Sarah, the internet was where the movement’s mission statement and ubiquitous “three core values” were forged, and this happened expressly because of frustrations with traditional media:

Interviewer: Where did those [three core values] come from?

Sarah: They came from the early days of (our organization). I mean, it was this huge process to get a mission statement and a vision and the three core principles. I mean, it was like hundreds and hundreds of people, probably thousands of people voting online, and talking on these conference calls that would go for like four hours, and just hashing it out.

In this, we clearly see the movement turning to a strategic, digital form of speaking out, with the goal of establishing a broader public message. Grant in Arizona, a political consultant working for a major candidate in the 2010 Arizona Senate race, saw a significant amount of internal debate taking place in political blogs and other social media:

This was kind of the debate that they had to take on... and I saw it go back and forth in their comments on my blog; I saw it go back and forth, you know, through social media, other social media... but they had to weigh whether or not they wanted the ideal candidate versus a candidate who could win.

In this phase of interviewing I encountered no descriptions of the movement’s broader online strategy or investment in its digital infrastructure. Email was central for coordinating efforts and sharing information across groups. According to the Tea Party members I spoke with,

the digital tools that the movement relied on were basic and easily accessible. Bob in Idaho talked about his group's two main channels, a website and an email list:

[We have] two avenues that we use. The first and probably the most effective is, with all of our members we have, we use email blasts. So we send blasts on specific announcements, and again, what's going on. [...] The second one is basically using our website, where we have ongoing events and you know, what's happening in America. And along with that we have the newsletter that we send out on a monthly basis [...]. It's an email blast, but it's far more in depth, it's like eight to ten pages [...].

With these basic tools, Bob's group was tailoring information and organizing to different member needs. This was an appropriate and presumably effective strategy for many groups, which were primarily comprised of older, perhaps less tech-savvy members. Sarah noted that a simple digital platform like email acts as a foundation on which to build a communication strategy. Email was a basic tool that was accessible to virtually all members:

I mean, they at least all use email. At least. I haven't met anybody that doesn't. And so, really that's the basic that you need is email and from there it just becomes more and more.

Similarly, Angela used her email list to maintain a cohesive conversation among a disparate membership, sustaining a virtual Tea Party group using only this very basic digital tool:

I have a mailing list of 400. [...] But there's a lot of people on my mailing list, I know, that can't come on Monday nights. But they read the newsletter every week and they, you know, follow all the details and email me and ask a question so, I know it's a much bigger group than what I've seen on Monday nights.

The frustrations of traditional media were acute and explicit in terms of speaking out, but the Tea Party members I interviewed were not in a position to master exotic digital tools. Instead, they used basic tools to cultivate a powerful central message that flowed throughout the movements' actions and communications. They also held spirited debates in blogs and other social media, and shared information using simple, accessible tools like email. Eventually, the

Tea Party seemed to discover that, while the town square was a more potent venue for speaking out than the World Wide Web, they still needed digital media to plan their approach.

Media and Pushing Back

Tea Party members who were frustrated by news stories about the movement started pushing back on traditional media and eventually found ways to build better relationships and garner more even-handed coverage. At the same time, they were weaving digital media into their efforts to influence policies and politicians. In the Chapter Three, it was evident that individuals in the Tea Party were expressing a strong ethic of pushing back. This manifested as two distinct types of identity that informed members' narratives. On one hand, they were pushing back as rebels, fighting what they perceived to be a corrupt system and threatening to oust politicians who were sufficiently conservative. On the other hand, they were also pushing back to restore the nation, striving to bring citizens together again in the spirit of the Founding Fathers and a shared national identity. In talking about the media, they had a similar, if less intense, objective. Members said that by *working both with and against traditional media* they were able to garner coverage that was more objective. In this, they were successfully moving from being an "ignorant" and "racist" fringe to being a more normal group of American citizens.

Meanwhile, many members were happily embracing their rebel identity by seeking to *influence policies and politicians using digital media*. Groups were using digital tools to coordinate large-scale actions and to impact campaigns. Although no groups I encountered had sophisticated digital media strategies, members clearly enjoyed the disruptions they were able to create with basic tools. These results showed that members of the Tea Party were intentionally using media in different ways, from cultivating their public image to applying direct pressure. Members were learning the distinctions between traditional and digital media, in particular

where and how each type could be most effective. In this, they were also learning that different media constrained and supported different public imperative objectives.

Frustrations with traditional media ran deep, as comments have shown, and in some cases, members pushed back with a pugnacious attitude. In other cases, they pushed back more deftly, drawing reporters in and, by their own accounts, reaping the benefits of an amiable relationship. In both cases, members were engaged with a traditional media system that had once left them isolated and anxious, and now was dealing with them directly—perhaps not entirely on the movement’s terms, but at least in a more objective manner. Janel in Massachusetts had some negative experiences with local media and had calibrated her attitude accordingly:

So, you know, we have to play ball with them every once in a while [...]. I don’t care what (they) ask me, I have a message I’m trying to get across, and that’s the one I’m going to deliver. So, you know, they manipulate us, we manipulate them. It’s a reciprocal relationship.

At times, the antagonistic type of pushing back on media edged toward a mythic narrative. In New York, Andrew saw traditional media as a distortion of reality, and he portrayed the Tea Party as the heroic guide tasked with breaking the cycle of ignorance:

A lot of people have a false perception of reality. Did you ever see “The Matrix”? It is a false reality. It’s very similar to Plato’s allegory of the cave. [...] People have that [false reality]. I hear them make decisions because they listen to the media. The media gives this warped sense of... and I also think a lot of the media buys into it. I don’t think they sit in a room and they plot and plan, I think they believe it. And they perpetuate their beliefs. They believe it is true. They perpetuate it, and people see it and they think that it’s reality. So we have to shatter this false reality. Give them the red pill, if you will. Show them what is going on.

The exception to this view was Jack, the former state organizer for a national conservative group, who suggested the dismissive tone of traditional media had already been conquered. In his view, which was not widespread, the Tea Party had successfully established its credibility:

I think the transition from fall of 2009 into 2010 saw a transformation of the media who didn't understand that the Tea Party movement was for real, to today where they recognize it is indeed not only for real, but—as evidenced by some of the networks carrying Michele Bachmann, the Tea Party response (to the State of the Union)—that it's a force to be reckoned with. So the answer to the question is yes, I think the Tea Party movement can get its message out effectively in the media. It's been a dramatic sea change from 2009 to 2010.

Over time, Tea Party organizers became more experienced in dealing with traditional media, and this began to favorably influence how news outlets reported on the movement. For Sarah, pushing back on traditional media was primarily a matter of exposure, which helped reporters move beyond stereotypes:

Sarah: The mainstream media has been definitely covering us a lot more objectively. Just sort of reporting what's going on rather than opining about whether or not we're horrible, evil people. [...]

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Sarah: Maybe because their reporters have been meeting more people who are actually Tea Partiers. So maybe instead of painting a caricature, they've been doing interviews with them. [...] When [New York Times reporter and author] Kate Zernike interviewed me, she and I got along really well and I think she was, like, pleasantly surprised. [...] Eventually, you're going to start meeting people and see they're normal, and you're going to go, "Okay, I'm just going to report this."

State- and local-level organizations also pushed back by strategically cultivating media relationships. In Utah, Stephanie's group made a concerted effort by dedicating a key member to media outreach:

I am seeing some little subtle changes [in media coverage]. I mean, I've now appeared by quotes in several of the newspapers here and other members of our board have experienced the same thing. Do (the media) kind of twist it a certain way? Of course they do. They put in their own bias and twist it. But I am seeing maybe what could be a glimmer of hope that some things could happen well through the media. [...] We've kind of made (one board member's) focus a lot of the media stuff and outreach. So he's met with a lot of members of media, and [...] because of his efforts, there have been some things that have been a little more positive.

As with Sarah, Stephanie saw this active engagement with traditional media as an opportunity to mitigate negative caricatures of the movement:

I think we're trying to get (the media) more involved so they get more familiar. And I think through that they can see there is a lot more common ground and we've created a better, more open dialogue. [...] I do see some glimmers, and I think we're going to continue to try to work with the media, to help them understand that we're not just these Obama-hating people that feel like nothing bad happened until he got elected, and that's not the case.

This process of renegotiating the Tea Party's identity within traditional media discourses was always a struggle, regardless of whether it was friendly or adversarial. Pushing back eventually seemed to pay dividends, however, as groups felt they were increasingly able to influence how the movement appeared to the public.

If pushing back gently on traditional media led to a more refined Tea Party image, digital media were still for brawling. Many members had discovered early on that digital media facilitated quick and flexible political action. Using the same basic digital tools they used for meeting up, groups were successfully organizing members and applying pressure on specific issues and policies. Several groups were specifically using digital media as a key part of their campaign season strategies, expanding their reach and enhancing their capacities.

One of the ways the Tea Party used digital tools to push back was by activating members to attend events or take online action about specific issues. The movement's main asset at the grassroots level was a pool of activists eager to use their newfound voices to change the system. The digital media tools that let organizers reach them were simple, inexpensive, and effective. For Sarah's national-level organization, the ability to quickly target and manage their massive network of groups was essential:

You can disseminate information really quickly [online]. And you can

have a call to action in a second, to millions of people. [...] We don't have big bureaucratic institution we have to try to shift and change. It's very adaptable. [...] We might be working on one project and something more urgent will come up, and we can immediately send an email blast saying, "Hey everyone, we've got to shift to this for a little while," you know? And then we can shift back to whatever project we're working on.

This type of coordination was essential at local levels as well. Bob in Idaho illustrated how, even at smaller scales, there was a significant appetite for pushing back on politicians:

The emails normally will identify a specific action item. You know, come to the rally, come to the movie, vote against this, vote against that, vote for this. "Vote for this" is probably the most popular one right now because we're going through, if you want to make a note, it's called HR-117, Idaho HR-117, which is the nullification bill that just got passed by the House last night, here in Idaho. So we had a real push on that. I mean there must have been, I'm not using any exaggeration, 100 emails back and forth between all the groups, between people in and out of the different organizations, pressing them to press their representatives to vote for this thing. Yeah, it's effective.

By incorporating digital media into their communication strategies, members quickly discovered the power of pushing back directly. For example, Bonnie in Arizona led a group that had prioritized immigration legislation. She worked with one of her state senators to target a number of other representatives who were rumored to be voting the wrong way on an impending bill:

(The representative) said, "We have five legislators that have said they are going to vote no. And if all five vote no, it won't pass. 1070 won't pass." And he said, "Why don't you put their names and phone numbers up on your website and have your people call them?" So we did it! [...] That day that we put it up, (the state senator) called and said, "What are you doing? My phone is ringing off the hook! My secretary is going to tear her hair out. Of course I'm going to vote yes. Of course I'm voting yes on this." And I was, like, "Well great!" And she's like, "Can you please take my name off your website?" "Well, sure, as long as you vote yes!"

Other Tea Party groups were also embracing technology as a way to put pressure on politicians during elections.¹⁴ In New York, Andrew's group staged a candidate forum that was open to the public and accessible through the group's website:

I think we had 150 people in the auditorium. We had 16,000 views on our website. [...] (The forum) was very unusual. Normally, (candidates) do prepped lines or crap, and this and that, but [we had] none of that. We allow the audience to ask whatever they want. Facebook, Twitter, web. As long as it's, you know, not rude. [...] We broke it into two parts. It was the Congressional first, and then we had the Senatorial and the Gubernatorial. So we had (the candidates) there [on stage]. And then we had in the back of the stage, it was a "brain table," with two guys on the web and Twitter, and another guy writing cards and giving them to (the event host).

Many groups I spoke with were planning to expand their use of digital technology in campaigns and other arenas; whatever level they were at, they wanted to do more. One general priority for the Tea Party during this period was perceived election fraud. At the time of these interviews, Sarah's organization was in talks with True The Vote¹⁵, an election watchdog group that was planning to deploy new mobile systems designed for campaigning:

Interviewer: What's in the works for the next election cycle?

Sarah: One of the things, we'll be working with True the Vote to make sure people have the integrity in the elections down. It'll be using the technology again, like the mobile technology to help the get-out-the-vote efforts in people's neighborhoods and whatnot.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that, for some groups, digital media were simply a tool within a broader strategy of traditional campaign communications. For example, when I asked Garry what his group had done in the 2010 midterm elections, the emphasis was on face-to-face interaction. Email was almost an afterthought: "We phone-banked, not enough; we precinct walked, not enough. *We sent emails to local people in the community.* We wrote letters to editor. We had rallies. We went and stood out in the front of places where people congregated..." (italics added). This was not typical, but it does raise two useful points: first, it suggests that email was widely accepted as a commonplace tool in political culture, as routine as letters to the editor and phone-banking; second, it demonstrates the importance that many Tea Party groups placed on public action over virtual outreach.

¹⁵ Though True The Vote described itself as non-partisan, it emerged from a local-level Tea Party group in Texas, and had incited multiple controversies over whether it was preventing voter fraud or contributing to voter suppression (see Saul, 2012).

Even among members who disavowed any particular technological sophistication, the importance of digital media for pushing back was clear. While they were learning to subtly influence traditional media sources, groups were also using digital media to coordinate actions, pressure political figures, and influence campaigns. These efforts constituted a broad strategy of citizens attempting to assert their authority in a system they perceived as compromised, corrupt, and deaf to their concerns: in other words, they were acting on their public imperative to make a better world for themselves.

In Summary

This chapter first examined Tea Party members' general attitudes toward both traditional and digital media, and then explored how they saw these media impacting the public imperative goals of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. Data showed that these media were important in how members experienced their political environment and, more importantly, how they were able to construct an effective citizens' movement. Most members displayed an antipathy toward traditional media, which manifested in sharp critiques and a deliberate move toward alternative strategies, especially the use of digital media. These critiques and strategies were two sides of the same coin: as members perceived traditional media suppressing the movement's voice, they actively sought a new path toward legitimacy and influence online.

This became even clearer when applying a public imperative lens: members saw traditional media working against them on each key objective, while digital media allowed them to immediately achieve important goals at each stage. The process was a complex interaction of professional practices and communication technologies, but for individual members, the dominant factor was the set of potent expectations that arose through the public imperative. In

their narratives, traditional media tended to constrain a public imperative agenda, while digital media allowed them to move forward on a path toward their destiny as citizens. As powerful as traditional media may have been in spreading word of the movement, members felt their voices being stifled. As insular as digital media may have been in practice, members saw them as essential in their quest to push back and restore America. Ultimately, it was digital media that most clearly promised to fulfill a genuine public imperative agenda. With this in mind, I now turn to an analysis of three central Tea Party websites during the culminating moment of the movement's history to that point, the 2012 presidential election.

Chapter Five

The Public Imperative and Media Attitudes in Three Tea Party Websites

In Chapter Three, the public imperative was evident in the ways individual Tea Party members drew encouragement from connecting with like-minded others; how they felt and acted on their urgent need to express their frustrations; and how these impulses motivated a desire to pressure political leaders. Often, they used digital tools to begin the process, including Twitter groups, email lists, social networking platforms (particularly Ning.com), and so on. In Chapter Four, many Tea Party members reported that they saw mainstream news coverage as a challenge to their mission and identity, and that they turned to the internet as an alternative path to their political goals. From its inception, the Tea Party relied heavily on the internet and expectations were high that new media channels would help them transform the political landscape. Mack in Michigan captured a sentiment I heard in several different ways when he said, “I’m not sure this movement would exist without the internet.”

The internet would seem to be a natural domain for public imperative activity: the fundamental nature of the space is the creation of networks; expression is central to the maintenance of those networks; and, to the extent that individuals within networks choose to take action, the internet provides the means for creativity, collaboration, and communication. Despite important advantages that the internet conferred on the nascent Tea Party, digital media also limited members’ ability to achieve objectives central to their sense of the public imperative. It was important in this research, therefore, to examine both the affordances and the constraints of the internet in terms of this resonant social construct. On one hand, the internet could be a means by which to channel the intense personal political transformations of the public imperative; on

the other, the design and implementation of new media content may still be limiting important processes of civic engagement.

This chapter examines three major Tea Party websites in the context of the public imperative values that members expressed, both individually, as drawn from Chapter Three, and in terms of traditional media, as we saw in Chapter Four. The three websites represent a range of Tea Party strategies, all captured during a critical moment for the movement and for the nation, the 2012 presidential election. That election was the first major national contest since the Tea Party's substantial impact on the midterm elections of 2010, and many political commentators described it as a national referendum on President Obama and his legislative agenda. As such, this provides a chance to examine in detail three substantive approaches to the internet by the Tea Party, at moment when the stakes were highest and attention was most focused.

Conceptual Approach: Analyzing Themes, Features, and Links

Scholars take a multitude of approaches to understanding the forms and functions of social movements online. Lievrouw's (2011, p. 4) are particularly useful for an examination of the public imperative. Broadly, she situates new media phenomena like social movements within a nuanced communication perspective on mass media—that of *mediation*—which takes into account ways that individuals reconfigure technological systems to their own ends, and remediate, or remix, ideas to achieve new kinds of expression. This captures the essential interplay between traditional and new media that drives much of the current tensions—and creativity—in political discourse. It also reflects the dynamic that Tea Party members expressed to me in terms of their personal expectations for the movement and their subsequent frustrations in dealing with traditional media.

To effectively interpret a case, it is necessary to engage with specific elements of new media content. Lievrouw and Livingstone's useful framework (2006) identifies three core components that are central to their analysis: first, communication practices of people; second, artifacts utilized by people to share meanings; and third, the arrangements or organizational forms built around those meanings by the people. In the context of the public imperative and the Tea Party, this three-part framework can be refined further. Drawing on this contextualization of new media, and with respect to the public imperative goals of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back, three categories of analysis emerge. These are: the *thematic content* that individuals and groups produce; the *features* that producers employ in the construction of websites; and the *links* that groups use to connect with other organizations and create wider networks. These are analogous to Lievrouw and Livingstone's communication practices, artifacts for sharing, and broader arrangements, while also accommodating a more focused examination of Tea Party members' efforts in advancing their political goals online. The messages, features, and links employed by prominent Tea Party websites were primary elements in pursuing their political goals online. As such, they can be evaluated in terms of the affordances and constraints they manifest in terms of the public imperative. Below, I briefly consider each of these in turn, both generally and in terms of the Tea Party.

Messages are a central function of all social movements, and they constitute a significant cohesive force, especially in an online context. Thematic content, defined for this study in greater detail in Chapter Two, comprises the language and ideas that site producers employ in communicating to users, and which users employ in communicating among themselves or back to producers. Any movement's core ideas become the organizing purpose and the inspiration for action (Gamson, 1995; Snow & Benford, 1992) and in a text-rich environment such as the

internet, these are likely to be necessary touchstones for a disparate set of individual audience members. Popular political websites come to represent a complex movement that exists in both off- and online spaces (Castells, 2012), and as such can help spotlight particular issues and constrain or motivate politicians. As such, examining the messages that dominate discourse in key websites can be a valuable lens on movements' intentions, capabilities, and limitations.

Thematic content at Tea Party websites in this study represented a deliberate and considerable effort to shape political discourse and embolden members. To a significant degree, these efforts reflected the movement's public imperative goals. For example, themes at these sites functioned as a potent banner for their movement and the conservative grassroots as a community. The focus on economic issues—often explicitly to the exclusion of “social” issues, e.g. abortion and birth control—was a defining part of their discourse, as was an often-virulent frustration with politics and politicians in general and President Obama specifically. In addition to bringing people together, thematic content is often an explicit exercise in self-expression. Both through the repetition and reiteration of particular subjects, and through the proud declaration of their newfound voices (e.g. “We will be heard!”), the messages of these sites emphasized speaking out. Finally, as a means to direct attention and action toward specific issues and politicians, some of the messages that Tea Party sites produced were clearly being used to coordinate pushing back on leaders.

Features of online media, including social movement websites, are the tools that producers make available to users in order to provide communicative capacity or other key functions. As such, they significantly define what strategies a social movement is able to pursue through its online resources. The presence or absence of certain features offers insight into how producers conceive of the movement, its goals, and its possibilities. Social movements typically

deploy online media in one of two broad contexts (Earl & Kimport, 2011): first, they may use various online features to expand their reach and decrease traditional costs of organizing — for example, through email lists, website announcements, chat rooms, and so on; second, they may employ features that allow them to substantively change the way social movements function — such as in mobile coordination of protests, hacktivism, or rapidly convened and dissolved online groups. In both instances, the features available to contemporary website producers allow them the potential to exert pressure on policymakers by managing information and data in innovative ways.

Features of Tea Party websites in this study offer examples of how the movement in general strived to fulfill the public imperative expectations of its members, and how different approaches emphasized or deemphasized that goal. A primary function of these sites was to provide structures within which individuals could form groups and subsequently build larger networks. This was a powerful dimension of the movement as a whole and the vast majority of groups relied on some basic form of online communication to bring them together. In addition, certain sites explicitly set out to create a platform for members to express their views, both individually and collectively. From blogs to chat rooms to surveys, the act of speaking out was evident and salient on these sites. In terms of pushing back, sites were more limited, as discussed in the findings section of this chapter. It was still clear, however, that in many cases producers were attempting to employ specific features to pressure policy-makers.

Linking is a distinctive function of digital media and can be used as an analytical framework for understanding how sites seek to represent themselves and their place within larger networks. Within social movements, links typically convey either a basic form of affinity and alliance, as when sites link to similar organizations, or a relatively overt critique, as when sites

link to a political opponent or a news story casting them in a negative light (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002). Moreover, digital linking practices — in conjunction with traditional in-person contacts — can significantly expand the scope of activists’ social circles, increasing the reach and diversity of voices within a movement (Bennett, 2004). It is also reasonable to conclude that strategic linking to relevant information and to the websites of individual politicians may be able to facilitate direct forms of pressure. While the significance of individual links can be indeterminate, analysis of patterns in the context of a framework such as the public imperative offers a potentially useful approach.

At the Tea Party sites analyzed here, linking was a relatively common and robust practice, suggesting there could be value in examining how sites directed users to other points within the movement. With the Tea Party functioning as a newer social movement, it was evident that a significant amount of linking was dedicated to building individual groups and demonstrating the scope of the Tea Party in general. Sites seemed enthusiastic about promoting other organization and events, and linking helped convey a sense of a national groundswell. Considering the extent to which Tea Party events were oriented toward speaking out, it is relevant to ask how the linking practices at these specific sites were oriented toward expanding that capacity, and how they subsequently attempted to apply pressure on policy-makers.

Research Question and Method Review

Previous chapters demonstrated the importance of the public imperative to individual Tea Party members, as well as the ways that they embraced new media, both in the early days of the movement and specifically in response to frustrations with traditional media. In order to examine

how the Tea Party's web presence was or was not fulfilling members' public imperative expectations, the rest of this chapter is guided by the following research question:

RQ3: Do specific websites of leading Tea Party groups employ messages, features, and links that reflect the public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back on political power? If so, how do these elements facilitate these activities and how do they limit them?

To explore this question, in Chapter Two I detailed the method for a qualitative web analysis of three prominent Tea Party websites, each of which played its own role in a crucial political juncture for the movement. The sites were those of Tea Party Patriots, a national-level site dedicated to facilitating grassroots organization; Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, an independent regional site that acted as a hub for dozens of conservative groups; and the Tea Party News Network, a recently launched site modeled loosely on news sites and staffed by professionals with links to established conservative groups. To capture a period of significant importance and peak activity, I chose to evaluate these sites during a continuous three-week period before and after the 2012 Presidential Election, beginning on October 28, 2012 and concluding on November 17, 2012. This represented both a potential high point of the movement's power subsequent to the electoral successes of the 2010 Midterm Elections, and the culmination of a period of intensive activity both in messaging and in voter mobilization.

To evaluate these sites in the context of public imperative themes, I conducted a detailed qualitative analysis of the messages, features, and links contained at these sites. Each day of the study, I reviewed the home pages and primary sub-pages of each site, using criteria specified in Chapter Two. For every webpage that included new content, I captured a PDF file of the content and recorded all links to external URLs; this resulted in hundreds of pages of material to examine, as well as hundreds of links. To analyze this material consistently, I developed conceptual and operational definitions for the public imperative, based on the specific themes

that emerged in the interview data in the preceding chapters. To briefly recap the Operational Definitions detailed in Chapter Two:

Operational Definitions—Public Imperative

- 1) Meeting up: Content that addresses the personal experiences and organizational processes of individually making contact with other Tea Party members, forming Tea Party groups, and developing relationships among groups.
- 2) Speaking out: Content that addresses symbolic expressions of speaking and being heard, as well as deliberative processes within groups and organized public interactions with politicians.
- 3) Pushing back: Content that addresses or facilitates organized political action intended to influence policy-makers, or that addresses symbolic work to reclaim, re-unite, or otherwise restore the nation.

Operational Definitions—Media Attitudes

- 4) Media critiques: Content that addresses misconceptions or errors in representation of the movement by media outlets, inherent biases of the media, and attempts to undermine the movement.
- 5) Media alternatives: Content that encourages or facilitates multiple sourcing of news consumption, conducting independent research, and the use of digital media on their own merits or in response to problems with traditional media.
- 6) Media and the public imperative: Content that directly links media with the three key premises of the public imperative.

Taken together, this method allowed for a detailed, structured analysis of these key sites at a crucial moment in the Tea Party's history. The results point to specific areas where the sites did and did not successfully fulfill the kinds of expectations that individuals had brought to this powerful new movement.

Tea Party Websites and the Public Imperative

In the interviews I conducted, many Tea Party members reported a powerful sense of what it meant to *meet up* with like-minded people, to *speak out* so they could be heard in public,

and to *push back* on political leaders. Together, these constitute the public imperative, a process by which people in American political culture can move from a sense of isolation to a sense of political power and responsibility. This represents a valuable window into the experience of civic engagement for individuals. The first part of this chapter asks whether and how these principles were reflected in the three key Tea Party websites during the 2012 presidential election. Certain elements of the public imperative were clearly present, in particular the basic functions of meeting up, and, to a degree, the ability to speak out. There were also obvious constraints, some tied to technical limitations of the websites and some based on the behaviors of these particular online communities. Below, I examine the websites of the Tea Party Patriots, the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, and the Tea Party News Network; within each, I examine thematic content, features, and links that reflect the general public imperative concepts that Tea Party members shared in their interviews. All text excerpts presented here appear exactly as they did at the sites themselves, with the same spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

Tea Party Patriots

As the largest national Tea Party website, and the one with the greatest reach by some measures, it seemed likely that the Tea Party Patriots might have the expertise and resources to develop a robust site that reflected the learning of thousands of early activists who joined their ranks. Certain elements of the site reflected individuals' attitudes fairly well; for example, the basic functionality of bringing people together was central to the site's success. On the other hand, certain elements of the site also limited what users could do and what resources they could access.

Tea Party Patriots—Meeting Up: Thematic Content

From the earliest days of the movement, the Tea Party Patriots site established a national scope and reinforced the Tea Party identity in several ways, drawing heavily on patriotic language and symbols that were important to the movement's branding. The conceptual link between patriotism and forming groups, and in particular online groups, was explicit in their mission statement (TeaPartyPatriots.org, 2012):

Tea Party Patriots exists to support, network and grow the tea party movement. We are here to serve you. Our online tools you will enable you to collaborate with other patriots, share information, plan and promote future tea party patriots events. We will help you find a local tea party group or start your own tea party.

This ethos was reflected in the descriptions that several local-level groups used as well:

The Pierce County [Washington] Tea Party is a grassroots gathering of like-minded people. As we see it, the word “grassroots” describes the unique and unusual feature of American society. [...] We are here to take our country back from big government and those who want to impose in our daily lifestyles.

As groups formed around the country, they developed their own identities and procedures, sometimes working together. This was visible in the lead-up to the 2012 presidential election, when the site featured several videos showing activities of local Tea Party Patriots groups in battleground states around the country, doing get-out-the-vote activities such as canvassing or waving signs on roadsides.

The website worked on an individual level as well as a group level, which reflects the experience I heard about in the interviews I conducted with Tea Party members. In the aftermath of the 2012 presidential election, for example, some individuals echoed the public imperative impulses others first felt in 2008 and 2009, and came to the site, urgently seeking out fellow “Patriots” who would join them in taking action:

Steve Kish posted an update in the group National News
I am amazed by the things I read in this feed. I thought this was supposed to be a party about change. Bringing america back to what the founding fathers wanted. Not whining about fraud or impeachment. Did the founding fathers whine about how England had wronged them? No, they gathered the masses and stated their claim to freedoms they felt all men and women deserved. This is what this party should be about. If you are with me on this let me know. Message me. We need to organize, devise a plan of action, and execute this plan.

Lawatlanta posted an update in the group National News
I am new here with gloves off, ready and willing to help. I was sad to see that newest post in my state (GA) group was 80 days ago. Just let me know who needs help with what and I will do it if I can!

Ken
I joined yesterday and was surprised to see the same thing. I think it is going to take like-minded people to band together and take the initiative.

As one of the earliest and most successful Tea Party organizations, Tea Party Patriots did establish an ethos of bringing individuals together and helping groups coordinate. Although much of the content at their site focused on general issues, there was a strong basic framework of meeting up built into the site that individuals saw and responded to.

Tea Party Patriots—Meeting Up: Features

Via the Tea Party Patriots website, millions of individuals gained access to basic online tools for meeting up. In its early stages, the organization used a social networking platform (Ning.com), before developing a custom site; however, the same basic features and functions remained. These included features both for establishing one's identity as a Tea Party Patriot, and also for establishing and building local groups, which the organization then supported with offline resources and training, if the local group desired. These features were geared toward connecting and promoting individuals, groups, and the Tea Party Patriots organization. Individuals could use site registration, avatars or profile pictures, personal contact information, a "Browse Members" tool, and a "My Account" page, among other features. Groups were listed

and searchable in the directory, and could display contact information, logos, and mission statements, in addition to their own member-posted content. All visitors could promote the Tea Party Patriots site itself by “Liking” it on Facebook, sharing it on Pinterest, or by “following” the site via Twitter, all via buttons on the website, or by signing up for email newsletters. It seemed that these basic tools were useful to likely many tens of thousands of individuals who used them to set up their own Tea Party groups since 2008. Several of the people I interviewed found the Tea Party Patriots site when they first heard about the movement and searched online, then used the site to start their groups, although some of those eventually created their own sites using other platforms.

Not all meeting up features at the Tea Party Patriots site were effective however. The “Events” calendar ostensibly showed activities of groups around the country, but it was limited in its usefulness, most notably because it was not sortable and group names did not always reflect their location. In addition, it was mostly a list of recurring meetings, which offered little specific information beyond a location and time; it was unclear precisely how the national calendar would be effective, except perhaps a symbolic showcase of activity (although this was not demonstrated in an active way). In addition, leading up to the election, there were many offline programs that had a networking component—a virtual phone banking program, a “Post Card Blitz,” a conservative-themed video to share, etc.—but these were not fundamentally about building a lasting relationship between individuals or groups. One’s overall impression of the Tea Party Patriots site, from a national perspective, above the level of individual groups, is that while there were many basic tools for connecting, the amount of activity suggests the site itself was not very effective at bringing people together for organizing. The features helped individuals

and groups to metaphorically hang a shingle, but there was little sophisticated networking taking place on the main site itself.

Tea Party Patriots—Meeting Up: Links

The Tea Party Patriots was the site with the greatest potential number of members likely to be sharing content (in particular since the producers of the Tea Party News Network conceptualized it not as a content-sharing site). As such, there was a fairly active pattern of linking off-site, including to partner organizations. Most prominently, there were a number of ideologically compatible partners that offered different types of “training,” in addition to the Tea Party Patriots’ own resources. These included TeaPartyTraining.org, “powered by the Leadership Institute”; a “Grassroots Campaign Training” program from the same group; and the “Constitution Academy” from the National Center for Constitutional Studies. Beyond these links, most of the off-site efforts at TeaPartyPatriots.org during the timeframe of this study were, understandably, oriented toward get-out-the-vote efforts. This is where the linking practices of the site started to reveal a somewhat narrow picture of the Tea Party online. Their virtual phone bank technically fit the definition of meeting up links, but the GOTV emphasis was not designed to build the network in the long term. There were links to other conservative organization listed under various “Resources” categories, such as “Budget” and “Health Care,” but these were offered with minimal context and were not framed as reciprocal networking. Again, it is quite possible that Tea Party Patriots groups at the local level were sharing resources robustly, but in analyzing the national site, any linking practices were almost pro forma, and certainly not creatively energized in the way that individuals described themselves, as they connected with other groups offline. One exception was a collaboration with True The Vote, a conservative

group concerned with perceived issue of voter fraud. Site coordinator Mc noted shortly before the election:

Mc posted an update in the group National News Fellow Patriots:
Tea Party Patriots has teamed with True the Vote on an Election Integrity Hotline. Right now it is going to a monitored voice mail, but on 11/6 it will be answered by live volunteers. On November 6th if you see something that doesn't seem right, CALL US!!!
Toll free line is 855-444-6100
email is freeandfair@truethevote.org

By far the most active section for linking out from the Tea Party Patriots site was the Patriot Feed. This open forum offered to users, including some coordinators, free reign in posting links to a range of online content. As it turned out, very few of these links would actually fit the definitions of meeting up here. Most were media links, primarily from conservative-leaning sites, reinforcing familiar right-wing narratives and concerns. There were a number of links to the Tea Party Patriots Facebook page, which was a robustly active community, to be sure, although little of that content was visible on the main site. In a rare instance of promoting alternative Tea Party organizations a frequent poster wrote, “I would like to see you guys on <http://www.teapartycommunity.com> It’s a facebook like system and NOT affiliated with FB!” This was the only mention of this alternative site I encountered. Taken together, as focused as they were on launching local groups, and although coordinators made many personal contacts, the site itself offered relatively little in terms of linking. In essence, the Tea Party Patriots at the national level offered almost nothing in terms of connecting online with other groups.

Tea Party Patriots—Speaking Out: Thematic Content

The definition of speaking out themes in this study concerned symbolic expressions of vocality, deliberative processes within groups, or public interactions with politicians. There were many examples of the celebration of the collective voice, and vocality, in online Tea Party

discourse, including in the site's core mission. TeaPartyPatriots.org claimed the organization was created "to represent the us with a collective voice" (Tea Party Patriots, 2012). Further, it expressly made citizen voices a central part of its mission: according to the site's About page, their "state and national coordinators serve your local grassroots groups, support you with the tools and technology you need to address your local issues, listen to your voices, gather your ideas, and together help shape the overall direction of our national movement." The site's producers raised a number of issues via the main sections of the site that had the potential to invite deliberation by members. One post by contributor Dusty Siggins argued, "Obama's Tax Stand Puts Ideology Ahead of Practicality"; another suggested that Washington Examiner columnist "Tim Carney Lays Obama's Hipocrisy Bare." Clearly these were designed to appeal to their particular audience, but they were valid starting points for internal political discourse.

The site made a very strong shift to the election, urging members to engage and persuade others:

With only five days until the most important election in a generation, it's critical that grassroots activists work together to promote the core principles of Tea Party Patriots [...] we urge you to reach out to your respective local leaders so they can help you [...] help activists in and around your area.

Of course, the rambunctious Patriot Feed at the site included a significant amount of expressive content from members, most of which followed traditional conservative narratives about the deaths of Americans in Benghazi, President Obama's perceived corruption and hypocrisy, the outrage of gun control, and so on. In a few rare cases, members debated political philosophy:

Lesley Lawson posted an update in the group National News
Most Americans are still unaware of the tremendous inroads that relativism and Marxist theory have made in our culture, and most conservatives have yet to hear of Herbert Marcuse's 1965 essay "Repressive Tolerance" and remain unaware of its huge impact on liberal thought. In his essay Marcuse essentially makes the argument that [...]

Craig Sickler

What's truly intolerable is being tolerant of Marxism, which is the enemy of all freedoms and reactionary against the true revolution, the American Revolution. Our Revolution put people as masters over their government, creating a new order, proving that people ruling themselves in freedom is far better than governments ruling over people.

Mc

Herbert Marcuse's thesis Sounds like Euro-Style Socialist Idiocracy to me. Seems to me it follows the original aspects of the French Revolution that just changed masters with the same old repressive system kept in place to keep the peasants in check. [...]

More frequently, they offered each other political red meat and encouragement:

GERRY S posted an update in the group National News

Why the liberal democrats must vote for Obama... you can't destroy America in four years, it takes eight.

davienne

lets make sure we dont give him a chance...

In a small number of cases, they compared notes about reaching out and speaking with people outside the movement:

Mc posted an update in the group National News

Today is the Last Day that we get to stump for our chosen Candidates and try to sway the independent voters who still haven't admitted to themselves they have made up their minds to vote against Obama. We must use this time to the greatest benefit of removing the people in power who want to enslave first the USA then the World. [...]

RICH

I personally converted a union HVAC worker and a farmer with-in the last couple hours and got a handshake and guarantee from each of them that they would definitely vote, and that they would definitely vote for Romney/ Ryan. [...]

As encouraging as this was for individuals in the movement, it is important to note that real deliberation was rare, and the vast amount of expressive content seemed to tend toward tones of frustration, resentment, and sometimes vindictiveness. The tools available at the site had only limited effectiveness in fostering constructive

communication within the movement, and basically little to no capacity for reaching beyond it. While site producers provided regular content, it was often familiar narratives that echoed other conservative media. Moreover, as with the Greater Phoenix Tea Party, it seems that much of the content came from a relatively small group of power users, who maintained a certain level of engagement and, unfortunately, frequent vitriol. As valuable as it was for members to be speaking out, they also may have fallen prey to a closed-loop mentality that short-circuited any openness to their political opponents.

Tea Party Patriots—Speaking Out: Features

In this study, I define speaking up features as those elements that facilitated expression or deliberation within the movement or with politicians. At the Tea Party Patriots site, in the period leading up to the election, site producers were offering specialized election content, but little of it was designed to foster a constructive conversation at the website. The Tea Party Patriots undoubtedly did a significant amount of voter engagement during the 2012 campaign, and they mobilized many people who otherwise would likely have followed the events on television, in frustration. That said, in terms of using new media, their strategies were only moderately creative. Producers did create a series of videos of their on-the-ground activities, but they posted these in specific “channels”—a retrospective way to present online content—and did not seem to include much if any content submitted by regular members in their own communities. Instead of allowing members to share their stories, the organization reported on its own efforts:

In Northern Virginia, efforts to Get Out The Vote were very successful yesterday. Tea Party Patriots Mid-Atlantic Regional Support Team Coordinator Diana Reimer worked with Phillip Dennis to hand out factual information on the economy, the deficit, and Medicare. They handed out materials to people getting on the D.C. Metro System, which means information was handed to people of all different political and employment backgrounds. Northern Virginia is a critical state today, so we give a big thanks to Diana and Phillip for their work.

So, while the organization did important work leading up to the election, the websites were a less important part of the strategy, at least from the perspective of what might have been possible. In fact, the producers' section of the site seemed to experience a slow-down of content on Election Day, which would make sense if the site were a secondary priority.

By far the most active portion of the Tea Party Patriots site during the election period was the user-driven Patriot Feed. As noted above, this forum was much more about expression than it was about communication or deliberation. There were many links and frequent comments by several users right before and after November 6, 2012. They used the tools available to them, but this was basically limited to posting images, including photos and cartoons, along with links to other sites, and occasionally a video. This included some patriotic content (e.g. the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier), cartoons excoriating and humiliating President Obama and his wife: Obama as a jackass, as Humpty Dumpty, as an empty chair, or Michelle Obama as a monster from the TV show, "The Twilight Zone." Other content shared here included images and sentiments that might fairly be called juvenile or offensive. And, to a degree, that can be a normal part of the political process; certainly the Tea Party had no lock on crude behavior. The impression the site conveyed, however, was that rather than engage in an expressive, deliberative, and rewarding community—as many Tea Party members I interviewed told me they were doing—this site was more concerned with perpetuating the frustrations and anxieties of right-wing media narratives. This is not to say that some advanced form of technology would have made this different. Yet, there are ways to build certain kinds of discursive communities online and an untended garden is the one likely to become unruly.

Tea Party Patriots—Speaking Out: Links

The Tea Party Patriots site offered users a number of resources via linking, but not a large number, and not a wide variety of sources. The effect was almost that of a “walled garden,” or perhaps a garden with carefully managed pathways to other, extremely similar gardens. In the user-driven Patriot Feed, users could link actively, and often did so, but almost never in the spirit of “speaking up” as described by members in person. This is one example of an extremely simple tool that allows people, in perhaps the most basic way possible, with a simple graphic, to show support for a candidate or cause online. One user asked other Patriots to use a “Twibbon”:

golden posted an update in the group National News
Romney Logo
Please help support Romney Logo, add a #Twibbon now! <http://twb.ly/NPTaJr>
OR
<http://twibbon.com/support/romney-logo/twitter>

Despite its questionable efficacy, this technically meets the definition of speaking out that so many individuals highlighted in interviews. For the most part, there simply were few or no strong examples available in this study. In the following example, one user is posting to his own blog and, potentially at least, inviting some kind of deliberation about the upcoming election. The comment was affirmed by a site coordinator, but the conversation rapidly descended into ad hominem attacks against political opponents not present to defend their position:

Mike Engleman posted an update in the group National News
You can find a new Renegade Thought on Englemansarmy.com entitled “About Figuring Out How to Vote” in which I reveal what I’m going to do, once I get into a voting booth. It is here:
http://www.englemansarmy.com/Renegade_Thoughts/Renegade_Thoughts.html

Mc
Interesting commentary Mike. Everyone should read it especially the Progressives who intend to spend us into a collapsed Democracy so they can institute a Dictatorship.

RICH

WHEN, will Reagan Democrats figure out and finally understand the vile and evil leadership that has corrupted their party????

Again, this is not to say that there's no place for tough talk among compatriots in politics; of course there is. But the difference between the potential for creating the kind of positive, constructive experience that individuals reported in interviews, and the narrow, thin, reactive discourse in the websites here seems stark: from a voter's guide to dictatorship and evil in two quick steps. Undoubtedly, there was a significant amount of community and collaboration taking place among these groups offline; in fact, I observed a number of meetings first-hand, where individuals seemed to be drawing benefits that other Tea Party members talked to me about. The new media strategies of these groups, which were actually quite effective in the most basic functions of allowing people to connect online, seemed to have less potential as the public imperative challenges grow more urgent and more consequential.

Tea Party Patriots—Pushing Back: Thematic Content

The 2012 election, of course, was, in the words of the Tea Party Patriots site, about “fundamentally RESTORING our Constitution” (emphasis in the original). The language and the sentiment were clear and meaningful. Members were extremely excited at the prospect of regaining the presidency and Congress, and having a greater impact than ever before. Here, a member asked a site coordinator to have Tea Party National Coordinator Jenny Beth Martin take up their concerns with presumptive new Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell:

Mc

(Election day) is just the start, it does not stop there. We will have to be ready to block the Lame Duck session from enacting any new spending for programs. It's also needed to blitz the Senate to block that Traitor Harry Reid from pushing all the Anti-American Treaties that Obama and Hillary have worked so hard to get [...]

RICH

What is the plan? How to we enact the plan with massive force and power? When do we focus on funding the plan?

Mc

First we focus on getting the majority of votes to remove whoever we can and start building a power base that is Conservative. Step two, blocking whatever we can in the Lame Duck session of Congress, and that includes a total Blitz to the Senators [...]

RICH

Have Jenny Beth contact John Boehner and Mitch McConnell personally. Please find out at the highest levels what we can do to help.

Mc

I'll ask her on the Leadership webinar tonight.

This is about as direct a version of pushing back as one might expect to find, and it aligns with the cumulative expectations that many members seemed to have following a successful 2010 midterm election for the movement, both in person and in Tea Party discourse online. So, these themes—the ability to pressure politicians and the symbolic power of restoring the nation—were paramount for many Tea Party members heading into early November 2012. The reality of making these things happen, however, was more elusive. There were many reasons the Tea Party failed to achieve its goals at that crucial moment. Having thematic clarity, without the operational infrastructure to back it up, may have played a role. This seemed to be the case within the confines of the Tea Party's new media presence: the features and links could not keep pace with their imagination.

Tea Party Patriots—Pushing Back: Features

The features of the sites that might help the Tea Party push back in the years ahead were not clearly present in 2012. The definition for the study is elements to influence policy-makers or symbolically restore/reclaim the nation, which might include civic action tools, updated training guides, or online symbols around which members might rally. Perhaps to their detriment, the Tea

Party Patriots website was extremely effective at the first steps of the process, back in 2008 and 2010, but had relatively little in the way of potent online features to offer users. It seems clear the ground operations were first priority, which is understandable, but the power of meeting up cannot be matched by relatively weak guidelines such as these, at the Tea Party Patriots site. After registering and building your group, members should, “Continue being active in your community, state and nation – standing for the founding principles that made America the greatest nation on the planet!” Certainly lofty, but less functional. Different content elements of the site were framed as militaristic and firm: the Mission Statement, Accountability Archives, and the First Brigade, which was a very basic fundraising program. Their “Getting Started” page put the proposition in stark terms, offering them significant influence, asking: “Take a moment and think about WHY you want to be a Tea Party Patriot - Would you like to have more influence in realigning our Federal, State and Local Government with the US Constitution?” Compared to the language around these features, the practical functions could not live up to themes. The Patriot Feed—certainly active, but rarely constructive—offered significant amounts of symbolic banter rather than an anchor point for real leverage.

Tea Party Patriots—Pushing Back: Links

There were virtually no effective pushing back links at TeaPartyPatriots.org in the aftermath of the 2012 election. For the Tea Party Patriots, their focus on perceived media controversies seemed to use up the space that might have gone to building strong coalitions on behalf of issues and advocates. A week before the election, Benghazi seemed like promising leverage when site coordinator Mc posted Twitter handles of major media sites and suggested, “The hashtag #Benghazi or #Benghazigate should be in your tweets on the subject.” But this was an indirect strategy for influencing policies at that moment. As frustrated as members were with

the results in 2012, they were not able to immediately respond with a strong set of pushing back links.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots

Working a level below the national Tea Party website, the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots site had its own objectives and values. As a smaller site, they were more limited in resources and thus more dependent, perhaps, on the constraints of the web platform they used (Ning.com). Nonetheless, the site brought at least many hundreds of members to Arizona Tea Party groups. Like the national site, that basic premise of bringing people together was central to the site's success. The site was limited, however, both in how it could help people communicate online, and how it could facilitate direct action.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Meeting Up: Thematic Content

Thematic content at the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots site actively demonstrated how local-level groups might use the basic tools of new media to connect and organize. The site's mission statement also combined values of patriotism and meeting up: “[We are] a non-partisan group of Americans dedicated to embracing their civic duty and becoming more active in the political process. Consisting of local groups around the area, we accomplish great things that could not otherwise be accomplished by one person” (Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, 2012). The site was effective both for individuals and groups to connect in various ways, and there was a distinctive personal tone to much of the thematic content, including periodic personal messages of encouragement from the site's founder and frequent interactions among a group of regular users. New members were often welcomed with general and specific messages:

Comment by Vince Ansel

Hey all.....Let's welcome our newest web page member, Frank Merlo!

Comment by Vince Ansel

Frank.....if you wish to join us in Tempe for our documentary presentation, "They Come To America" Tuesday evening, just scroll up to our web site link and register. It's a freebie and you'll have an opportunity to meet some of our members. It's not too far from where you live (I think)! ”

(PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com, 2012)

In the lead-up to the election, members actively promoted a small number of events that would allow them to meet in person. These included: a heavily advertised “U.N. Poll Watcher Brigade” intended to protect against voter fraud perpetrated by a handful of U.N. representatives on hand to observe some American polling places (to symbolically help prevent voter fraud); showings of conservative political films and “documentary” videos (e.g. “They Come to America” and “Hating Breitbart”); and some small, limited political counter-protests on behalf of local candidates. Overall, the thematic content reflecting the meeting up impulse at the Greater Phoenix site was seemingly authentic and regular, though somewhat limited in scope.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Meeting Up: Features

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots website also included many basic features and individual members took advantage of some of them, while leaving others mostly unused. There was a common slate of meeting up features that the Ning.com platform (still used by this organization) makes available: site registration, group pages, chat (used here very little), a personal “Inbox,” and room for adding unspecified “widgets.” In addition, there was a fairly active events calendar with both live events (rallies and small protests) and media events (alternative-media conservative “documentary” films and local Web/radio broadcasts via a media partner). The calendar also included a feature allowing members to select and RSVP for certain events, which were then tracked with reminders. During the timeframe of this study, the comments in the calendar were actively used for coordination for offline meeting, as with free

movie tickets for the film “Hating Breitbart.” For those who registered, the front page of the site included a prominent panel encouraging members to “Invite Friends,” “Add Profile Photo,” and “Add Content.” Several of these features, including member profile pictures, coordinating details from group pages, and calendar events were profiled on the site’s home page each day, which generated an atmosphere of connection and communication. The site also included links to Facebook and Twitter.

Despite this abundance of meeting up features at Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, it was evident that many of the features were used either by a relatively small number of members (who used them a great deal) or were used rather sparingly by the membership at large. Many group and individual profile pictures were basic placeholders, rather than custom images, and many groups (though not all, by any means) were only sporadically active, sometimes going many months between posts, according to the “latest post” dates feature. In total, at the time of this study, there were 28 groups, some with only a handful of members. However, the active groups were very active, and the site founder would drop in regularly to post or leave encouraging messages for the community. I saw the same effect with the photo feature, which had thousands of images posted, but this included hundreds of images of a small number of events, posted by an even smaller number of members. So, even though there was a viable and even robust amount of activity on the site, it was the result of a relatively small group of extremely dedicated Patriots. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that several available features of the site were essentially untouched by members, the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots site seemed to create space for an active community even with very basic tools.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Meeting Up: Links

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, perhaps because of their local-level orientation, were somewhat more motivated than the national site to link out to other organizations. The site's home page included a static list of links to notable conservative groups, although without any explicit relationship to them. These included: conservative lobbying group FreedomWorks; Tea Party News Network; conservative Christian law firm American Center for Law & Justice; conservative advocacy group Landmark Legal Foundation; conservative "watchdog" site Progressive Structure; and, somewhat obscurely, a link to an emergency preparedness site. The most prevalent partnership at the site was a media-content-sharing relationship with the producer of a conservative Web podcast, "Crossroads with Van." Programs were linked from the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots site and live events were cross-promoted, so to some degree audiences were likely shared.

Linking practices beyond this at the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots site were limited and isolated. One member posted a link to a video from a conservative youth organization in which pre-voting-age teens ask voters to consider conservative values as they vote in the coming election ("Voices Without a Vote," <http://phoenixteaparty.ning.com/forum/topics/voices-without-a-vote-next-generation-pleads-save-our-country>). There were other links to conservative-themed videos online as well, but none of these were specifically geared toward building a larger community. This ran counter to the kind of experiences that many Tea Party members discussed in the interviews I conducted, in which they were eagerly connecting with multiple groups in their area from a (limited but observable) range of conservative perspectives.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Speaking Out: Thematic Content

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party site was probably more expressive and supportive than the Tea Party Patriots. They certainly took advantage of the site to register frustrations with Arizona politicians, including Senator John McCain, now-Senator Jeff Flake, and other local candidates. One frequent contributor, an immigrant whose Tea Party group aggressively opposed illegal immigration, posted images of letters-to-the-editor he had sent to local papers. He made the most of his opportunity to express himself in both traditional media and online:

THE PARTY OF OLD MEN

I have said we have to change the IMAGE of our Repulican Party! The news on T-V kept calling us The Party Of old white Prejudice Predatory Males. Most single WOMEN and other minorities VOTED for the Party that SPOKE to them and asked them to join them! They went with the people that came to the door! [...] People that are in power in the republican party are to buzy telling us what we have to do! Yet will not listen to what we need to do. They just need to be in charge right or wrong. [...] If the REPULICAN PARTY want's the support of the people! They better start representing the people!

Another commenter had strong opinions to share, responding to another member who bemoaned the community's post-election laments:

Patriot602 commented on Michael Bailey's group RidersUSA

No one is whining, We aer voicing our opinions, while it's still legal. What freedoms will KO (King Obama) squash now? We have a long four years of battles to win! They will have to kill me to shut me up!

These strong statements (and stronger ones) were common on the site. It is worth noting that relatively little deliberative talk occurred here, even compared to Tea Party Patriots, where there also was not a great deal. This did not seem to jibe with what I knew about groups in the area, having heard directly from several members that they frequently worked with other groups, and frequently held spirited conversations at their weekly in-person meetings. Understandably, the thin online tools may have been less valuable to these members, who were already connecting directly with friends and colleagues.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Speaking Out: Features

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots groups' pages were active, although this was based on a relatively small number of active users. Part of the reason the groups at this site had a broad impact was because of the "Latest Activity" function on the site's home page. This brought recent activity from the groups up to the front page, to create a sense of minute-by-minute conversations taking place. While this did not always generate a wide range of content—often the same topics would appear repeatedly over a period of days—it did expose members who came to the front page to the activity of other members. There was a larger conversation, more speaking out, that was visible because of this feature. If the national Tea Party Patriots organization had brought that kind of content to its top-level pages, they might have created a more participatory culture; since they did not, it is worth considering whether constraining that type of culture (as with the narrow selection of election work videos) was actually a goal.

It is also worth noting that the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots site, like TeaPartyPatriots.org, also grew quiet on Election Day. In fact, several of the main features of the site typically went unused for speaking out or much of anything else. The Forums section had new content posted intermittently, perhaps every week or two, but most of these had fewer than three comments, and several had none at all. The chat function on the group's Ning.com site also seemed to be used rarely; of the dozens of times I visited to read the site or collect data, almost always the chat room was empty. The sections that users did embrace seemed to be used somewhat sporadically. Specifically, the Blogs section was active, but this was primarily because of a small number of power users who filled those spaces with their own particular agendas and content. This is not to say that those posts were not valuable to the community, but posting was not frequent, and there were likewise very few, or often no, comments. Overall, it seemed that

only the most basic tools were offered to users at these sites, and with only minimal oversight of the site's culture. Perhaps this was because limited resources were going to offline activism, which certainly makes sense. And yet, based on the excitement that individual Tea Party members reported as they connected with one another for the first time, talked about ideas, and finally got to speak up and speak out, it seemed as though these new media sites may have been missing an important opportunity to help users express themselves.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Speaking Out: Links

PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com included a significant number of links mostly to news stories and political blogs in the daily “National Current Events” section of the home page, but there were no easily codable links that “supported an ethic of expression or facilitated deliberation,” as the operational definitions required. There were places on the site to speak out, but little or nothing in the way of resources to help people further develop the voices they had found.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Pushing Back: Thematic Content

As before, the Greater Phoenix group reflected many of the narratives of the national site, and the broader movement discourse in general. In particular, in the immediate aftermath of President Obama's re-election on November 6th, members were fired up, challenging one another and looking to any controversy as a possible point of leverage against the president. New members began signing up:

Jeffrey Cook posted a status
"New to the group...time to take back the Republican Party from the gutless moderates and progressives. Time to take our country back!"
Jeffrey Cook is now a member of Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots

Other members were taking action to escape Obama's second term:

Garn the Pict posted a status
"Citizens from 42 states have started petitions to withdraw their state from the U.S. at petitions.whitehouse.gov. Are you there, yet?"

Local candidate Ron Harders, who lost his race after working closely with the group, continued looking for angles:

Ron Harders commented on Michael Bailey's group RidersUSA
"There is something dirty going on with the vote totals in Dist 5. How can I help Carly?"

Notably, the site's producers began laying the groundwork for pushing back on a key second-term issue for the president, immigration:

IMPORTANT EXIT POLL INFO ON AMENSTY

Americans who voted last Tuesday DO NOT agree with Obama's illegal alien policies--they sided with Romney on enforcement. See this important exit poll information showing that 61% of voters agree with Arizona style immigration laws and many thought they didn't go far enough. [...] If amnesty is granted to the 20 million illegals in this country and paired with 80-100 million more illegals who will then come here through chain migration, the only people who will ever win an election again are socialists! [...] Stand up...fight for America and keep the pressure on government!

These communities, particularly those connecting and collaborating online, were not extremely well coordinated before the election. After the election, they were intensely motivated to reclaim their influence, but in a sense were grasping at anything that might help them deal with the results. The themes of pushing back were vividly present, but the site was not in a position to take advantage by transforming users' reactions into practical civic engagement activities.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Pushing Back: Features

Ultimately, the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots manifested the same type of problem as the national Tea Party Patriots site. There were few, if any, specific features that enabled people to influence politicians. Members found ways to use some of the limited tools they had to do some symbolic work, but not in specific, pragmatic ways. Certainly, users were doing active work online, but at a moment when the movement needed all its resources to be functioning in

top form, their new media strategy—which had been so good at creating groups—had few answers for the other critical elements of the public imperative.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Pushing Back: Links

After the election, the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots had to reevaluate their strategies, and determine a way forward. The thin channels of their online home meant they had little to share but pictures and frustration. Site producers took an enterprising anti-government stance against FEMA after Hurricane Sandy, responding to a Fox News story with a URL for a relief site:

ACTION ITEM - SUPERSTORM SANDY

Forgotten by Fema: Staten Island's residents vent over lack of aid

Forget FEMA. We don't look to Government to solve our problems, do we. We preach that government should stay out of our lives, we should shrink it, and citizens should rely on charity when they are hurting. Therefore, as FEMA is closed due to weather, citizens are taking action and creating their own FEMA. However, they need help. Your help. It's time to put our money (what's left of it) where our mouth is. You can help desperate citizens in Staten Island by going to this website: <https://www.fundraise.com/sandyrelief>

These good intentions were unlikely to do much beyond the immediate challenge for the movement, but they had little else to offer in that moment of shared suffering.

Tea Party News Network

The Tea Party News Network site was the most distinct of the three sites. It launched around November 1, 2012, just in time for the election, and it carved out a specific role as a dedicated “news” service for the Tea Party. While the site clearly had technical expertise and resources, it was not a site designed to bring people into contact, or explicitly to support their speaking out. It is possible to identify a few basic themes and features, but the clear applicability

of the site for this research will become clear in the second half of this chapter, in the context of media alternatives.

Tea Party News Network—Meeting Up: Thematic Content

The Tea Party News Network is, by name and design, a different type of Tea Party site. However, it proudly carries the brand name, and one might expect it to reflect the values of individual Tea Party members. Analysis of its thematic content—as with its features and links described below—shows that this site carved out a very specific kind of function for itself. Their strong alternative media orientation was certainly related to powerful themes in Tea Party discourse, but at best it only marginally reflected public imperative values, as defined here. There was no mention of individual experiences and no organizational function within the site to speak of. One prominent ad panel claimed, using star-spangled lettering, “NOT A DEMOCRAT—NOT A REPUBLICAN—I’M AN AMERICAN AND I WANT MY COUNTRY BACK”. Clearly, this aligned with key themes in the Tea Party experience, but this was only a tool allowing users to register for a free bumper sticker. There were some faint gestures toward thematic language referring to “we” (meaning the Tea Party) in blog post headlines and Tweets, but essentially any connection took place on other sites. One post-election Tweet said, “We need to come together NOW to reenergize. Don’t give up, carry on”. Another encouraged members to, “Get Up, Brush The Stink Of Tuesday’s Loss Off And Let’s Get Back To Work”. Apart from these small gestures, Tea Party News Network made no effort to facilitate meeting up among members or groups.

Tea Party News Network—Meeting Up: Features

The Tea Party News Network, as noted with its thematic content, was less concerned with offering features to facilitate meeting up in the public imperative sense. There was no clear

registration system for creating a permanent profile (in part because this may be done through other sites owned by the same organization), so I refer here to “users” of the site rather than “members.” To be fair, this could be, in part, because the site had launched only relatively recently. Users could sign up for newsletters, and they were invited to join for several hours of “live coverage” of the election results. The features that provided users the most opportunity to connect were a little-used Twitter feed on the home page, which was used almost exclusively by the official authors and bloggers with the site. There were only a scant handful of Tweets that were not from Tea Party News Network writers during the timeframe of the study. There was some indication of significant activity happening off the website itself, however: the “Facebook Social Plug-In” showed a large and growing number of “Likes” for the organization’s Facebook page. That number grew from roughly 16,000 to about 20,000 over the course of this study, about 300 per day, but this would not likely be solely due to traffic coming from the main website itself. Essentially, despite having a few basic tools present, there were no features genuinely designed to facilitate connection between Tea Party members.

Tea Party News Network—Meeting Up: Links

The Tea Party News Network, in keeping with their priorities noted above, had only a limited set of links to other organizations, and none of them went beyond the most basic link. They pointed users to other sites in their own network (i.e., TheTeaParty.net, Tea Party News Network Facebook, and their Twitter feed), as well as a handful of conservative blogs and media sites, including content partnerships with a few specific established right-wing media personalities. In addition, users could sign up for the organization’s newsletter and also receive a free bumper sticker. None of these links actively sought to grow the network in any but the most cursory ways.

In terms of speaking out and pushing back, as defined in this research, the Tea Party News Network offered only a small amount and very thin content, as noted below. There are likely two main reasons for this. First, the site had launched only recently, so there was not a large archive of content to analyze, nor had the site producers had extensive time to develop this type of content. Second, the Tea Party News Network positioned itself very strongly as an alternative news source for Tea Party members, which I examine closely in the second half of this chapter. As such, their priorities were not to enable members' speaking out and pushing back, as much as they were to connect members to a broader domain of conservative news and opinion.

Tea Party News Network—Speaking Out: Thematic Content

The site included a small number of interviews conducted by TPNN News Director Scottie Hughes with high-profile conservatives and media figures, including Rick Santelli and James Carville, while they were attending the New Orleans Investment Conference in early November 2012. Apart from this symbolic gesture at connecting users to a broader conservative discourse, the only other content that explicitly functioned in terms of speaking out was tied to the site's Twitter feed.

Tea Party News Network—Speaking Out: Features

As noted above, the site had only recently launched and, though it attracted several thousand visitors for its live election night coverage, it had not established a robust interactive user base at the time of this study.¹⁶ In some of the editorial content (but not on their regular, linked news stories), the site did include comment boxes for users to respond to Tea Party News

¹⁶ Since the site's launch, it still has not prioritized speaking out and pushing back in the ways that the other two sites did. Thus, the narrow channel that existed when the Tea Party News Network launched was likely an intentional strategy, rather than simply an effect of a small starting user base.

Network contributors. During the period of this study, there was virtually no activity in these spaces and site producers were not actively encouraging discussion there. The most obvious tool that the site offered users for speaking out functions was the Twitter feed, which was prominently featured in the center of the home page. Site producers were generating a small handful of tweets each day, but seemed to be actively encouraging interaction with users through this channel, offering the hashtag #tpnn, and including other related media hashtags, such as #tcot and #teaparty. Generally, these tweets were, like the news stories on the site, just links to other websites in the conservative mediasphere. In a very few cases, tweets specifically invited comment or participation, saying, “RT (retweet) if you want one of our giveaways,” and “Have you voted? Use the hashtag #TeaPartyVotes and let us know!” Though there were a few dozen tweets, these were the only ones that directly engaged users during the weeks that I collected data. The Twitter feed at the site had not started to be active during this period. A few users tweeted to criticize the site’s election night coverage, but it was not clear that there was yet an existing Twitter base for the site to access.

Tea Party News Network—Speaking Out: Links

Only one other feature, an automated list of headlines from conservative news source Newsmax, solicited user feedback via a link, prompting them by asking, “Do you support Obamacare? Tell us what you think. Click here.” This link led off the Tea Party News Network site to Newsmax. This was essentially the sum total of the site’s efforts at engaging users with interactive features and links.

Tea Party News Network—Pushing Back: Thematic Content

The site offered a surprisingly limited amount of thematic content in terms of pushing back, but not surprisingly, this was related to the election. In the days leading up to the election,

an editorial linked from the homepage boasted, “Next Tea Party rally is at... The Ballot Box!” Another brief column highlighted “TheTeaParty.net’s new \$1 Million ad blitz to Get Out the Vote.” Immediately after the election, the site linked to what was essentially a press release at another Tea Party site also managed by Cefaratti. Here, News Director Scottie Hughes was quoted as saying:

The Tea Party has not yet begun to fight. It’s time for a wholesale reassessment of the D.C. establishment politicians and party grandees who have no commitment or courage to reduce the size of government.... [...] I eagerly await the day the GOP establishment figures out that the ‘safe’ candidates are not getting the job done. The GOP needs to adhere to stricter ideological purity and put forth candidates that represent a significant difference in viewpoint from the Democrats that are creating devastating policies for Americans. The Republican Party has been shoving ‘their’ candidate down the throats of conservatives for years, and it’s not working. It’s time for them to wake up.

On the same page, Cefaratti was quoted saying:

We are disappointed tonight, but tomorrow morning the work begins. We will search every corner of this country for strong conservatives, not wishy-washy moderates. There’s a change coming to our national politics, and TheTeaParty.net and the Tea Party News Network will be on the frontlines waging this battle.

These quotes, and the circular nature of the content being posted at Tea Party News Network, strongly suggest that the site producers were not engaging Tea Party members in an interactive, public imperative mode. There was no content that could be coded as features or links in the category of pushing back. As noted, the site was much more oriented toward providing an “alternative” form of content, loosely categorized as news and opinion, from a range of other conservative media sources. I explore this in greater detail in the second part of this chapter.

In Summary

The pattern that emerged across these data was a visible but limited capacity for fulfilling the meeting up function, a narrow capacity to fulfill users' speaking out at a level beyond frustrated rhetoric, and an extremely limited channel for pushing back. The ethos of meeting up was present in various ways, in particular at TeaPartyPatriots.org and PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com, which were expressly created to bring individuals together under the banner of the Tea Party. There was less energy devoted to attracting new members during the 2012 election than there had been immediately after the 2008 election; sites offered some very basic tools to connect, and helped users make plans for a limited set of low-key, in-person activities. The newly launched Tea Party News Network site primarily brought people together as an online audience to receive ideologically tailored content. Similarly, the national and local Tea Party Patriots sites were rooted in creating ways for people to speak out, but they provided what were essentially very basic resources and encouragement to do so. Thematic content reflected this expressive element of the public imperative, but the tools and links provided did little to amplify users voices. Phoenix.TeaParty.ning.com brought some users' comments to the top page, but did little to organize anything beyond that. More often than not, speaking out consisted of sharing frustrations, anxieties, and critiques of political opponents. Pushing back was an essential goal of the individuals I spoke with, but despite a few limited opportunities, it was not effectively fostered at any of the three sites in this analysis.

Tea Party Websites and Media Attitudes

Tea Party members had strong attitudes about media, both traditional and new media. In general, they viewed traditional media more critically and new media more favorably. This was based, in large part, on the critical news coverage that many Tea Party groups received in the first waves of their public rallies in 2009. As such, members had a fairly sophisticated set of *media critiques*, as well as a sense of the *media alternatives* that they felt would help them meet their goals. In examining their responses, I also looked for ways that *media and the public imperative* might function together. These are the core media attitudes I examine in this second half of the chapter. As above, I examine the websites of the Tea Party Patriots, the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, and the Tea Party News Network; within each, I examine thematic content, features, and links that manifest the general concepts that Tea Party members shared in their interviews.

The first prominent theme among media attitudes from the interviews was a set of media critiques that included the following: misrepresenting the movement (deliberate or otherwise), media bias (especially liberal media bias, but also commercial bias), and, finally, attempts by media to undermine the movement. In general, websites reflected connections to these themes loosely, along with many narratives specific to the election (e.g. suspicions about the accuracy of polling data), and the period after (e.g. embracing Benghazi as a conspiracy theory). Media critiques were quite limited, and most of them were linked directly to the issue of Benghazi. There were very few features or links that developed the kinds of media critiques that individuals had raised in interviews. Media alternatives were often present in name, but not developed by site producers, or shared by users. The most direct types of alternative content were linked very closely to other conservative media sources (e.g. Fox News and popular conservative blogs). In

terms of using the media to pursue any type of public imperative goals, the connections were weak at best and sometimes completely absent.

Tea Party Patriots and Media Attitudes

The Tea Party Patriots was highly successful at attracting users in its early years and giving them an opportunity to connect and develop political identities outside traditional media narratives. In terms of media attitudes at the site, producers provided a relatively narrow set of critiques and alternatives during the period of this study. At the same time, users seemed to settle into a specific sort of ideological discourse, rather than use the basic tools they had to create a genuinely alternative approach to news and information. Much of the “alternative” content mimicked basic forms of news or leaned heavily on existing themes propagated in popular right-wing media outlets. Overall, the approach to media on this site only cursorily reflected the values and priorities that individuals had expressed in interviews.

Tea Party Patriots—Media Critiques: Thematic Content

The Tea Party Patriots website strongly reflected the movement’s embrace of patriotic images and language. The site’s producers and users rarely shrank from criticizing the Obama administration, the movement’s political opponents, or individual politicians. In general, members of many Tea Party groups expressed a strong antipathy between them and the media sources that have covered them. In late 2012, however, critiques of the media at the Tea Party Patriots site were not extensively focused on that longstanding tension. There were a limited number of direct references from producers and users within thematic content. Most of these were references to the coming election or to the developing Benghazi scandal. For example, shortly before the election, Tea Party Patriots National Coordinator Jenny Beth Martin

contributed a column to the popular conservative website Breitbart.com. It was reproduced at the Tea Party Patriots site and asserted the following (Martin, 2012):

It is election time again. Which means it is time again for the beltway establishment media, and politicians from both sides, to begin laying the groundwork to blame whatever happens on November 6th on the tea party.

Elsewhere on the site, in the days leading up to the election, visitors could watch videos of Tea Party campaign activities around the country. In a nod to movement's frustrations about media misrepresentations, the text introduction to one video read (TeaPartyPatriots.org, 2012):

When the media reports on Tea Party efforts, it often portrays the movement as exclusively made up of older Americans. In Orlando, Florida, however, hundreds of home-schooled students and their parents volunteered their time and effort to make calls to undecided voters. [...]

As the election approached, a political storm was brewing over the events of September 11, 2012 in Benghazi, Libya, during which an American ambassador and three military personnel were killed. Conservative critics, including many Tea Party members, described the Obama administration's response as weak and insufficient, often suggesting it may even have been linked to corruption. In many instances, the issue implicitly and explicitly linked suspicions about the administration with critiques of the media. For example, site producers posted a feature on November 2, 2012, under a large banner headline that read, "Tea Party Patriots Demand Clarity in Benghazi Coverup." The piece directly confronted American news media and included an excerpt about freedom of the press and the press's obligation to inform the public (via the website of the U.S. Embassy in Germany):

Today, Tea Party Patriots, the nation's largest tea party organization, called on the nation's news media to thoroughly investigate the White House's cover-up of the details related to the deaths of U.S. Ambassador Stevens and three other brave Americans in Benghazi, Libya. In the weeks following the deaths, extensive conspiracy theories, rumors and misinformation have filled news reports that paint a devastating picture of an inept and thoughtless Administration that allowed these brave

individuals to be killed by al-Qaeda while U.S. forces were ordered to “stand-down.” [...]

The full statement [*link*] from the U.S. Embassy in Germany follows: “The public’s right to know is one of the central principles of American society. The framers of the Constitution of the United States determined that the power of knowledge should be placed in the hands of the people. To insure a healthy and uninhibited flow of information, they included freedom of the press among the basic human rights protected in the new nation’s Bill of Rights.”

Starting the day after the election, Benghazi became an increasingly potent touchstone for the Tea Party. On that November 7, the site featured an article under the title “Omaha, Nebraska – where Americans are taking a stand,” which included the following:

All over the country, Americans are demanding to know the truth about what happened in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012. [...] The dereliction of duty by the media is both dishonest and harmful to our great country. We have to keep the pressure up so the media remembers it is supposed to hold politicians accountable, not cover for them.

We all know last night’s results were disappointing, and the media is to blame for that. Had another politician been President, he or she would have rightly been hammered by the media for what happened in Benghazi. It’s now up to us to make sure all Americans know the facts about what happened two months ago, when four Americans died. Thank you for your work in making this a reality.

These words manifested a general feeling I had encountered among Tea Party members, but apart from these instances they were not developed in depth at the Tea Party Patriots website. Several users tapped into these concepts, although as with the site itself, specific critiques were almost perfunctory. User Square posted these two comments immediately after the election:

Square posted an update in the group National News
Five ways the mainstream media tipped the scales in favor of Obama:
Read more: <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/11/07/five-ways-mainstream-media-tipped-scales-in-favor-obama/#ixzz2BW3sIGeN>

Square
If we had a FAIR and unbiased mainstream media, Romney would have won by a very large margin. That said, how do we, as Pro-Constitution

Patriots, proceed to make sure this never happens again? Boycott EVERY SHOW on ABC – CBS – NBC?

In the days after the election, many users were trying to regroup and get motivated after a difficult loss. One frequent commenter suggested that the “Tea Party” name had been compromised, and felt the media was too set against the movement:

Craig Sickler

I just thought- The Patriot Party! That’s probably ruined too. Say ”Patriot” and the media (plus the Republicans and Democrats) create images of crazed gun toting survivalists fomenting bloody revolution.... [...]

Mc

The media and the existing parties treating us that way would be something we would have to fight back against...

Another member echoed a common critique that I heard in interviews, that media routinely misrepresented the movement:

annie200000

I don’t feel we are paranoid. Most of us don’t push our religious beliefs on others. Most of us care about the constitution. We don’t want it trashed. We want to live within our means. We want a limited government. The left will continue to demonize us because that is what they see on television and read in their papers. [...]

Others were freer with their critiques, including site coordinator Mc who wrote the following posts on different days shortly before the election:

Mc posted an update in the group National News

[...] The Administration has already been caught in several lies and I personally think they believe they can continue to lie their way out of this with the help of the Democratic Socialist oriented Media. [...]

Mc posted an update in the group National News

[...] Call out the Lap Dog Socialist Oriented Press on their contributing to the Administration’s Cover-Up by not reporting on Benghazi. Our Main Stream Media now has the credibility of Pravda and Tass. [...]

This type of hyperbole was more common among users than producers, although there was no focused, ongoing discussion about news media during the time frame of this study. In many

cases, resentment of the media blended with resentment of the Obama administration and Obama himself, as in this comment from a frequent poster:

Lesley Lawson posted an update in the group National News
This double standard mindset is most visible in the liberal media, whose water carrying for Obama continues apace with their lack of coverage on Benghazi-Gate. They would be digging up dirt like moles on meth if a conservative president was involved—yet they rarely mention the Obama Administration’s gun-running to [our] radical Islamic enemies ...

Not all skepticism was so vitriolic. During the run up to the election, and immediately after, the accuracy of polling numbers was a widely discussed topic in corporate and independent media across the political spectrum. User Mc doubted the polls:

Mc
Personally I don’t believe the polls, they can make too many of our people stay away if they think Romney is already the winner. This poll could have been tricked up to make us have a false sense of security and keep needed voters away from the polls. the only poll I will believe is the tally of votes from Nov. 6

These comments represented a significant portion of this type of critique of the media during this study.¹⁷ Most of the criticisms during this period were directed at specific political scandals, political opponents, and government corruption. Distrust of media was present but primarily implicit, and despite some of the practices and comments below, the Tea Party Patriots website did not devote an extensive amount of resources to combating problems with media.

The site did not, for example, have any features that could be analyzed for this portion of the study. These exist on other sites, such as forms or tools for contacting media outlets or reporting instances of bias. Essentially all of the media critique at TeaPartyPatriots.org was

¹⁷ While these critiques did reflect concerns about misrepresentation, bias, and the undermining of the movement that emerged in the interviews, the expression of such concerns was more deeply embedded in other types of content, specifically the sharing of information that was not always directly critical, but instead functioned as an “alternative media” network for conservatives. I address this in the second Tea Party Patriots section below, *Media Alternatives*.

conducted either through thematic content or linking. As such, there was no codable content for a *Features* section regarding Media Critiques, so below I address linking practices.

Tea Party Patriots—Media Critiques: Links

Linking is a primary function of each of the sites in this study, but linking to identify or combat media issues like bias and misrepresentation was not extensive at TeaPartyPatriots.org. In fact, the site itself included no content that was clearly codable in this way. Users did offer some links in a critical context, with some caveats. It was clear that the context of the linked story could shape how users deployed the link, with varying results. For example, one user, davienne, took several different approaches to media sources through linking. Davienne highlighted to an exceedingly light story about the Obama campaign's email, but framed an unexpected source as a case of liberal media bias:

davienne posted an update in the group National News
straight from leftwing politico..... obama's urgent emails.....
<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1012/83006.html>

Davienne perhaps gave an implicit nod to perceived liberal media bias by linking to a story at the conservative website the Daily Caller, which noted that some newspaper editorial boards were swinging from Obama to Mitt Romney:

davienne posted an update in the group National News
via.... the daily caller
Republicans are touting a list of newspapers that have switched their
endorsements from then-Sen. Barack Obama in 2008 to Gov Mitt Romney
in 2012. Their list is topped by the Des Moines Register, the largest
newspaper in swing-state Iowa. But it also includes five Florida papers ...

In the days before the election, davienne linked to a site that purported to offer a more accurate picture of polling data by “unskewing” the data, or recalculating based on different demographic weighting:

davienne posted a new picture
unskewed polls as of 11 /2/ 2012... rassmussen is pretty much the same,
they are saying 316 for romney
<http://www.unskewedpolls.com/>

Each of these shows a different way that linking might be used to critique the media, including by linking with a positive message when media content might support one's political preferences, even if indirectly. Such nuances may be difficult to confirm, but the contextual shorthand of the Tea Party community suggests that these interpretations are reasonable. The media were still an enemy of sorts during this time period, but they were not the focus of Tea Party attention as much as they might have been in the past.

Tea Party Patriots—Media Alternatives: Thematic Content

There was a strong impulse present in the interviews I conducted whereby Tea Party members were eager to push beyond the boundaries of traditional media and discover new ways to learn and to share information. When coming to the Tea Party Patriots website during the 2012 election, a user would have found certain gestures to that impulse, but they also would be constrained by certain assumptions about what constituted a valid “alternative” to mainstream media. Technically, the site did offer digital media “resources,” as well as alternative media content loosely organized under the name “blogs.” All of these, however, were generally thin in content. “News,” “Blogs,” and the “Accountability Archive” all contained a small number of posts, relative to other political websites. Any of these sections might have included short columns, opinion pieces, news updates, or an ideological framing of a news story. Moreover, site producers cross-posted content in several areas, blurring the lines between content types. Posting was sometimes on an erratic schedule, and, with the exception of the group's National Coordinator Jenny Beth Martin, writers did not seem to develop distinctive personas. “News” stories and “blog” posts were mixed with promotional content, volunteer recruitment, opinion

pieces, and other content, seemingly at random. In short, while there were distinct spaces to deliver content, there was little in the way of actual alternative media development. This is not to say that site producers were not achieving their goals, or satisfying their users. However, there was a marked discrepancy between the way individuals talked in the interviews—where they expressed eagerness to access multiple sources, independent research, and digital tools—and the way the site functioned.

One prominent alternative project was the “GOTV Live” section of the site, which offered short videos highlighting pre-election get-out-the-vote efforts by Tea Party Patriots coordinators and volunteers in battleground states. These short videos were organized into “Channels” on one page at the site, and included the official Tea Party Patriots branded introduction and conclusion; it was basic but with video graphics and an authoritative-sounding voice over. This handful of videos showed Jenny Beth Martin and other coordinators leading small teams of volunteers in canvassing and sign waving, along with short interviews and footage of motivational talks. This content was a kind of simulacrum of television, borrowing tropes and forms from an older medium to communicate in a new one. While certainly inspiring to some, the “GOTV Live” pages were not particularly interactive or groundbreaking in any way. In a small number of cases, the videos showed an individual Tea Party member reporting some kind of irregularity that would resonate in the broader movement with anxieties about voter fraud. Beyond this basic encouragement, the content did not directly engage users in election activities.

Perhaps the thematic content that most closely fit an alternative media ideal was the “Government Accountability Network,” a set of links and features that encouraged users to “Keep Informed” about certain conservative hot-button topics, including: “Abuse of Power,

Benghazi, Big Government... Healthcare, Immigration, IRS & Tax Reform... Second Amendment Rights... Voter Integrity,” and more. Users also could register as a sort of media watchdog to track individual politicians with support from the Tea Party Patriots. At least one reporter with basic journalistic training filed stories under the “GAN” banner on the site, but the project was intentionally open to non-professionals:

Do you wonder what your Congressman is up to? Does the mainstream media let the government get away with anything? If you have 6-10 hours a month to hold Congress responsible, Government Accountability Network is what you’ve been looking for! GAN is committed to fair and accurate reporting on Congressional activity relating to the three core values of fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government and free markets.

If you are interested in following and reporting on a specific Representative or Senator, fill out this form and you will be contacted. Journalist training materials are available for reporters, so prior experience in journalism is not necessary.

Help America get instant accountability from their Congress!

The program clearly had potential benefits and would seem to fit many individual Tea Party members’ interest in becoming more involved in sharing information. There was limited evidence on the site, however, about how many members might be participating and what, if any, information they were collecting; the promotional video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVrgvDFv3Xw>) had strong words for American media, but well under 1,000 views. The “GAN” brand appeared periodically in select corners of the site, so there was some activity. There was at least one “youth reporter,” Greyson Peltier, with actual journalistic training who produced a small number of articles with an investigative tone. However, in general, the GAN seems not to have generated any significant content that was widely shared during the election period.

In a few cases, TeaPartyPatriots.org producers drew upon conservative or mainstream media content to develop an alternative media take on some aspect of the Obama administration. For example, site contributor Dusty Siggins used a Washington Examiner article, which had drawn on a Politico.com article, to argue the administration was hypocritical regarding its stance on lobbyists. Siggins shared highlights—what he called “zingers”— bracketing the article this way:

Recently, The Washington Examiner’s Timothy Carney laid down one of the biggest smackdowns of the President’s hypocrisy on lobbyists... [...] [T]his is yet another example of ridiculous media bias by *Politico*, and Carney deserves great praise for his complete and total takedown of the Administration that claimed openness, transparency, and a clean house were going to be hallmarks of its time in the White House.

There was not a systematic approach to developing multiple sources or encouraging independent research and, as the election neared, virtually all of the new content was targeted at get-out-the-vote efforts.

Users of the site were more likely than site producers to share information and opinions in ways similar to political blogs. This was still somewhat rare, and happened almost exclusively within the one unstructured, extended chat forum, the “Patriot Feed.” In this space, users compared notes on the coming election and tipped one another to provocative media stories. Some of these included information sourced from the major national polling firm Rasmussen, as in davienne’s post of October 30:

davienne posted an update in the group National News
The latest state-by-state polling from Rasmussen Reports shows Mitt Romney leading President Obama by a tally of 279 to 243 in projected electoral votes. Among the nine key swing states, Rasmussen Reports now shows Romney leading in Florida (by 2 percentage points), Ohio (by 2 points), Virginia (by 2 points), Colorado (by 4 points)...

These numbers would prove to be incorrect (due in part to similar issues of “unskewing” among some conservative pollsters), but they did represent a mainstream information source, albeit one running counter to other prominent media narratives. Elsewhere on the site, the information being shared was perhaps less credible. It still functioned as “alternative,” however, at least for the established hierarchy of conservative media figures. A post by user and site coordinator Mc pointed to a potential case where pressure from conservative media pundit Glenn Beck presumably caused CBS to release additional information:

Mc posted an update in the group National News
Something Interesting from Karen B. After the threat of exposure by Glenn Beck; CBS finally released part of an interview that was done by CBS 60 Minutes (Sept. 12) in which they suppressed an incriminating piece of information about Benghazi. It was cut out of the interview and not aired. It is obvious Obama spilled the beans....

In another instance, Mc used a more explicit, alternative media theme, urging other users to help an unsubstantiated report “go viral,” in other words encouraging the use of digital platforms to circumvent traditional media:

Mc posted an update in the group National News
I learned something on the Tea Party leadership webinar tonight that has to go viral as fast as it can. It is expected that since Obama is so vulnerable on the Benghazi issue that he will make a drone strike on someone he says was responsible for the attacks on the Embassy and we will have no proof [...]

So, while thematic content about media alternatives was present, it was not a highly prominent theme. A small number of users shared an impulse to create a broad conservative media coalition to help combat media bias and support conservative values. User Wendel, for example, suggested:

Wendel
[...] Tea Party, Town Hall, The Heritage Foundation any Republican organization need to come together in new movement, pool our resources, educate the public of really who we are and not allow propoganda define

us, leveraging what media resources we have....

Meanwhile, user Fausto Diaz sketched out a similar plan, but was met with cynicism from a frequent commenter:

Fausto Diaz said on November 10, 2012

My thoughts and several others in our community is , after witnessing the disaster of an election we just had we are thinking that for the next four years we should all work together to build a conservative fund to buy up as many media outlets across the nation as possible . This fund would be owned by all who invest in it open to the public but with a clear mandate to foster and protect America and its conservative values. The goal is to have the media working to build and support the conservative values we all have enjoyed and believe in. [...]

Craig Sickler said on November 10, 2012

Buying up the media and controlling it's content is an idea the "progressives" had a long time ago.

So, in these two instances addressing "media resources" and "media outlets," there was a desire for an alternative media strategy that would represent the movement and its values at a broad level of "the public" and "America." These comments did not account for extensive conservative online networks, nor Fox News and other conservative-leaning cable TV outlets, to say nothing of the site they are actually posted on. There seemed to still be a sense of "establishment" media that needs to be conquered before "Americans" will properly understand the movement. Thus, the sense of needing an "alternative" approach to media ran deep, even within existing alternative channels.

Tea Party Patriots—Media Alternatives: Features

In the interviews I conducted, many Tea Party members had high praise for the value of alternative media strategies and tools, especially digital platforms that allowed them to communicate and discover information. As such, it seemed possible that one of the most prominent Tea Party websites would provide a robust set of alternative media features. In the

most basic terms, TeaPartyPatriots.org was fulfilling this function: it offered a place to connect with like-minded others, to learn about alternative information sources, and to coordinate local, regional, and state groups via email and the internet. In practice, however, these “alternative” features constituted only the most basic types of tools and services. The digital platform the organization chose to use, Ning.com, is a popular social networking service. Beyond its most basic functions, however, there were essentially no genuine alternative media features present.

A few common web features were available on the site, but none that reflected what Tea Party members told me about their alternative approaches to media. The site had “share” buttons for the social media networks Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, and a search function to find local groups by zip code. Users could create profiles and groups, adding images and avatars, and share messages within the site. The “Events” page of the site was a calendar with basic listings for meetings around the country — and, thus, not highly useful for any individual group. Perhaps the most prominent interactive feature at this site during the study was a two-part project that involved a provocative pseudo-documentary, “The Determinators,” technically “produced by the Tea Party Patriots,” which was also tied to the Tea Party’s online phone-banking campaign. In the weeks leading up to the election, visitors to the site were encouraged daily to log into a web-based tool and telephone voters in other parts of the country; at the same time, they were encouraged to share links to the documentary and also to donate \$15 “to help us distribute the film to as many undecided voters as possible.” At one point, the program received support from Fox News host Sean Hannity, who lent his name to the project, and to the associated get-out-the-vote efforts:

Recently, Tea Party Patriots and Sean Hannity joined forces to help send *The Determinators*, the Tea Party Patriots’ first original film, and a copy of the Constitution to the homes of 360,000 undecided voters.

Unfortunately, this cannot be done just by Hannity. We need all grassroots activists to join in the effort and send *The Determinators* to even more people. That's why we're asking for donations of \$15 to send one copy of the Constitution and one copy of *The Determinators* to the home of an undecided voter. Your donation will also ensure you receive an electronic copy of both the movie and the Constitution a few days later.

The details about this great opportunity can be seen on the Tea Party Patriots' website. And if you haven't seen it yet, be sure to watch *The Determinators* on YouTube.

So, while the call campaign and the movie promotion had digital elements linked from the Tea Party Patriots site, both were focused on traditional and mainstream campaign tools (e.g. phone banking, fundraising, and direct mail), rather than anything native to the internet. Features in general were limited to the most basic types of connectivity and search already built into the publishing platform.

Tea Party Patriots—Media Alternatives: Links

Linking allows site producers and users to create a network of meaningful content, sharing information and resources that reflect the community and its values. Sites and users may connect to broader discursive communities in different ways, reflecting different attitudes and approaches. Tea Party members told me in person they were interested in multiple sourcing of news, doing their own independent research, and using digital tools to discover and share information. Site producers included very few links to outside sources or tools in terms of media, despite some instances of strong critical language. Users, though linking more actively, focused on relatively narrow objectives, generally related to ideologically driven narratives and a tight circle of right-wing media outlets.

The Tea Party Patriots site included a limited number of links to “training resources,” and to materials that stood in as sources for independent research. These were narrow in scope, however, and did not directly train users to engage with either traditional or new media. The

“Resources” section included links to subpages on four issues: Education, Budget, Healthcare, and Government Transparency. Each of these pages offered some basic talking points, a small number of downloadable position papers, and a handful of links to affiliated sites. A “Training” page in the same section offered links to four different categories of resources: 1) some audio files of a webinar on Forming Nonprofit Organizations and articles on how to use the website; 2) a link to the well-established conservative training organization The Leadership Institute; 3) a link to “Constitution Academy” seminars from the conservative National Center for Constitutional Studies (incidentally, a primary source of the ubiquitous pocket Constitutions available at Tea Party events around the country); and, finally, 4) a handful of “Grassroots Campaign Training” resources, also by the Leadership Institute. Rather than developing original features and robust alternative content streams, the Tea Party Patriots site, at this point in their evolution, offered users only basic tools and links to partners with longstanding credentials in conservative politics.

Site producers also offered relatively few resources for “independent research.” In one case when they did so, they offered a handful of links to conservative blog HotAir.com and a nominally independent site called JustFacts.com, whose producers identify as “conservative/libertarian” in their views. The links on the page offered users talking points to refute arguments about the “useless policy” of “taxing the rich.” Rather than objective points and sources, the producers framed the material as “four points for convincing your friends.” On the whole, the Tea Party Patriots site delivered basic content and links where “alternate sourcing” meant conservative blogs, and “independent research” meant conservative-friendly information to convince others and, perhaps, to reinforce existing beliefs while doing so.

Users at the site took a related approach, but followed a more active practice of linking. That is, links were typically either aligned with existing values and narratives among users, or they were framed to reinforce them. The majority of links focused on presumed corruption and scandals of the Obama administration, with very little outreach beyond traditional conservative media circles. In the lead up to the election, links helped reinforce critiques of the administration; immediately after the election, as might be expected in any partisan community, links cast doubt on the results, affirmed negative narratives, and aided commiseration. In late October, for example, user Mc linked to conservative media website The Blaze (created by conservative pundit Glenn Beck) which featured a person-on-the-street style interview deceiving subjects about certain controversial policies:

Mc posted an update in the group National News
Check out what Obama supporters think of Romney's plans before they
find out the plans are in fact Obama's, source The Blaze;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Skw-0jv9kts

davienne
pretty disgusting... thay hate it if it was Romney.... but ok for oblamer in
chief... makes me want to throw-up

In another pre-election post, user Sick Monkey linked to a Fox Business channel interview with Wayne LaPierre, the head of the National Rifle Association. In this case, the content itself functioned as thematic content that supported an existing anxiety among many conservative voters:

Sick Monkey! posted an update in the group National News
NRA EVP: Obama Will Go After Guns if He Wins
<http://video.foxbusiness.com/v/1907127061001/>

One prominent theme on the Tea Party Patriots site during this time was voter fraud. Site coordinator Mc linked to TrueTheVote.org, a conservative voting watchdog group:

Mc

this is why we all have to be extra watchful at the polls because if my information is correct every voting machine can be rigged in one way or another. Be Extra Careful and Report Report Report on any suspected discrepancies. USE THIS TOLL FREE HOTLINE: 855-444-6100, and learn more at <http://www.truevote.org> Follow up with an E-MAIL on what you [saw]...

A great number of links in the pre-election period addressed the issue of Benghazi and conservatives' firm conviction that it represented a major political weakness for the Obama administration. It was common to link to conservative media sources, in particular to Fox News, which devoted considerable resources to the issue. Users shared links in a variety of ways, framing interviews and opinion pieces as alternative perspectives on the presumed "cover up" by the administration—sometimes supported by former military officials—which was in turn supported by mainstream media outlets. These two examples were posted by site coordinator

Mc:

Mc posted an update in the group National News
This Information on Benghazi was posted by Ron Nelson on another site;
Listen to Glen Beck's reporting and commentary on serious allegations
that Pres. Barack Obama is running guns to Al Qaeda and other radical
Islamic organizations, using Turkey to launder the gun running. Two Flag
officers (one Admiral and one General) are reportedly relieved for
refusing to stand down... indicating that they were ready and able to save
our Ambassador?
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0EfXnSFVfc&> [Broken link.]

Mc posted an update in the group National News
Video of former Asst. Defense Secretary Bing West on Benghazi " there
was no order to secure Benghazi"
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=8IA7qmSywD4#!

In some cases, links became arguments in themselves, points of data laid out with little or no context, but which reinforced particular narratives. Links sometimes stood in for comments, as in this sequence on October 29, 2012:

davienne posted an update in the group National News
http://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2012/10/has_general_ham_been_fired.html

Lesley Lawson posted an update in the group National News
<http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/50626>
Benghazi: No Other Explanation

davienne
this just broke....
<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/libyan-witnesses-recount-organized-benghazi-attack>

This was a tactic particularly favored by user davienne, who might post a sequence of links about an issue, presumably in the interest of discovering and sharing information. In this sequence, in response to a general call to electoral action by site coordinator Mc, the “alternative” in media alternatives was limited to conservative outlets:

Mc
Key Point is to ACT NOW demanding an accounting from Obama and the Administration on Benghazi, and again in November to oust Obama, his Administration, and all like him in Congress and the other levels of Government.

davienne
video....<http://www.therightscoop.com/lt-col-tony-shaffer-my-sources-tell-me-obama-was-in-the-room-watching-benghazi-attack/>

davienne posted an update in the group National News
<http://washingtonexaminer.com/spending-on-white-house-dinners-soars-under-obama/article/2511758#.UIqVo8XA-4d>

davienne posted an update in the group National News
<http://revealingpolitics.com/blog/video/nothing-to-do-with-politics-leaked-doe-emails-suggest-otherwise/>

It is worth noting that not every Tea Party Patriots link connected to a conservative media source. As is common in virtually all political blogging, users also linked to mainstream media when the content either directly supported a favorable point, or when it could be framed to do so.

In these instances, both the *New York Times* and Politico.com, outlets that were criticized elsewhere on the site, were useful in making a strong assertion:

[October 29, 2014]

Craig Sickler posted an update in the group National News

Looks like the U.S./U.N. is going to get involved in another war. There goes the budget surplus! (And more American lives)

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/30/world/africa/us-tries-to-coordinate-anti-militant-push-in-mali.html?_r=0

[November 15, 2014]

Sick Monkey! posted an update in the group National News

The tea party was not an Election Day loser

<http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=61CC29DE-AFA5-4A01-956E-A84EE911C931>

This last post raised the issue of how site users at TeaPartyPatriots.org addressed the results of the 2012 election. There was, as one would expect, an immediate increase in linking; also as one might expect, many of the links were to prominent conservative commentators and news outlets. On November 8, 2014, sites for all of the following sources had been linked to on the main user forum at TeaPartyPatriots.org, among others: Fox News; World Net Daily; The Blaze (Glenn Beck); Michelle Malkin; Michael Savage; Duffelblog.com; ObamaReleaseYourRecords.blogspot.com; CommieBlaster.com; ExposeObama.com; OrlyTaitzEsq.com; NewSonsOfLiberty.com. There were also links to Bloomberg News and CNN, which were framed by users within the context of troubling consequences of the election.

While several links offered encouragement after a defeat for the Republican candidate and a difficult night for Republicans in general, many other links reiterated scandal narratives around voter fraud:

davienne posted an update in the group National News

NO VOTER FRAUD ??????

<http://newsbusters.org/blogs/noel-sheppard/2012/11/12/breaking-romney-got-zero-votes-59-philadelphia-voting-divisions-zero>

[...]

<http://beforeitsnews.com/election-2012/2012/11/election-fraud-obama-won-more-than-99-percent-of-the-vote-in-more-than-100-ohio-precincts-2446944.html>

Darren posted an update in the group National News
Article on Philly voter fraud where Romney got ZERO votes!
<http://www.examiner.com/article/philly-s-blacks-would-have-made-for-good-soviets>

Links were also used to process the election results personally. The user forum constituted a place where despondent conservatives could express their feelings, and many did so by sharing links to illustrate their particular positions. These three posts, for example, showed that in the ten days following the election, some users went from lamenting the loss to encouraging others, and in at least one case, user lawatlanta wanted to start pushing back by linking and promoting a Fox News special report called “Death and Deceit in Benghazi”:

Ken posted an update in the group National News
When I hear people talk about how we are doomed, hopeless, helpless- it makes me kinda sick. Here’s why. EMBARRASSING, SHAMEFUL, PITIFUL:
<http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Government/2012/11/11/333-000-Votes-in-4-Swing-States-Would-Have-Given-Romney-the-Presidency>

Ken posted an update in the group National News
Wake up and win!
<http://hotair.com/archives/2012/11/16/martinez-republicans-need-to-be-going-after-every-single-vote/>
Or keep complaining and LOSE!

lawatlanta said on November 9, 2012 Reply
A third party is not the answer. That would guarantee 2014 went to the lefties. We need to gently educate the public with information. Beat them in multi-media. This is a fabulous video both on message and delivery style. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIAE6vLct-0>
When need to really get the views up on the Benghazi stuff. Why does this educational video only have 53,000 views? It needs 5 million hit by tomorrow. We all need to be active. Put links everywhere you can where appropriate. Bengahzi

As the shock of the election receded, linking fell back into a more normal pattern of sharing articles and resources, still ideologically oriented, but with a broader scope. The election created the conditions for some new themes to come to the fore, and for others to be revisited with new urgency, as in these two posts from user Sick Monkey! on November 17, 2014:

Sick Monkey! posted an update in the group National News
Obama to Congress: I'll decide what's constitutional
<http://dailycaller.com/2012/01/05/obama-to-congress-ill-decide-whats-constitutional>

Sick Monkey! posted an update in the group National News
The Second American Revolution is Up to You
Infowars.com – November 17, 2012
<http://www.infowars.com/the-second-american-revolution-is-in-your-hands/>
On Thursday's worldwide syndicated broadcast, radio host Alex Jones called for all Americans to take heed that our country has been captured and conquered by the political and financial elite

As is evident here, site producers and users were approaching linking practices in different ways. This suggests that the two groups may have had different agendas, although in general the site and its users maintained a coherent affinity for strongly conservative content networks.

Tea Party Patriots—Media and the Public Imperative: Thematic Content

In terms of thematic content, there very few places where site producers or users discussed using media for purposes of bringing people together, speaking out, and pushing back. To a degree, this may be because those practices were being embodied just by participation in an active political site like TeaPartyPatriots.org. The active and enthusiastic nature of the interview content, however, suggested that Tea Party members might be highly motivated to deploy aggressive online media strategies. There was one notable instance where that tone came through. On November 1, under a large banner reading, “TELL THE MEDIA – COVER

BENGHAZI” site producers encouraged users to engage the media via Twitter with this message:

The attacks in Benghazi that cost 4 Americans their lives is a tragedy, and Americans deserve to know the truth about what really happened. The NY Post is asking: ”Where is the Benghazi media feeding frenzy?”

Let’s use Twitter to demand the news media do their jobs and uncover the truth about Benghazi and what the White House knew and when they knew it.

Click on the buttons below to send Tweets to major news outlets to tell them “Please do your job and cover #Benghazi”

Below this, the page offered links to contact the major networks and a number of cable channels (but not Fox News). The next day, this was promoted again under the name “#TWEET4TRUTH” and described as a “24-hour” campaign in which users were specifically Tweeting this message: “Stop the media / White House cover-up on Benghazi. Full investigation now.” This was the most explicit and high-profile message among a small handful of instances where the site or its users attempted to pressure media outlets. The issue of Benghazi was a multi-part discourse, rich with implications and assumptions, essentially all of which were seen to confirm users’ worst criticisms of the Obama administration and, in conjunction, national news media.

In one other case, a week before the election, site producers encouraged users to contact local newspapers with sincere, tempered letters-to-the-editor:

[...] write a final letter to the editor of your local newspaper encouraging people to use Tea Party principles to guide their decisions next week. Very little is more convincing than a heartfelt, articulate, principled letter about the direction of the country. Unlike political ads – of which we are all exhausted – a letter is non-aggressive, and is all the more convincing for it.

Beyond these two examples, there was little to nothing that ascribed any public imperative power directly to media. Although content on each category was frequent, site producers made very few such connections.

The same was mostly true for site users, with one notable exception posted by site coordinator Mc, who, three days after the election, strongly encouraged users to push on the Benghazi issue by pressuring conservative Congressional representative Darrell Issa:

Mc posted an update in the group National News
Seems kinda funny how the head of the CIA resigned just three days before he was to testify to congress about Benghazi, and now can't testify. Can You Say Administration Cover Up? Major Alert Status!!! Don't let Benghazi-Gate Slip Through The Cracks!!! We can sit around and chew over how we lost the election, what the future of our country will look like under another Obama administration or we can grab on to the only hope we have of getting Obama out of our White House. I fail to believe I am the only person outraged over the murder of 4 Americans or the fact that Obama remains in the White House. So lets try to do something about it. I am trying to get something going in the way of a march on DC but until something worthwhile materializes we MUST do something. I say POUND the HELL out of Issa. Email, his facebook page, his twitter account. Put this on your schedule for a daily activity. Please continue to contact Darrell Issa's office and demand he schedule another hearing on Benghazi. If you cannot get through to his office then fax him a letter. As we all know last week we hit him with so many calls and fax letters they shut down the phones and disconnected the fax machine. We were greeted with a full voice mail box. We need to be creative and figure ways around it. I think the frenzy has died down so we need to start it up again. [...]

We also need to create a firestorm of active daily protests and Tweet the Main News Media (Papers, Radio, Television, Webcasts, Talk Shows etc) on a daily basis and demand they cover it thoroughly and impartially. the more noise we make the better the chance we will have. The media is still a profit based group and anything that may seriously cut into those profits will be taken seriously by them, at least for now until the Obama crowd consolidates their stranglehold on America.

This was a case of using digital media to directly push back on a policy-maker, and the themes that Mc highlighted match closely with the pushing back themes that came up in my interviews

with Tea Party members. Apart from this example, there were few if any calls to directly engage with media.

Tea Party Patriots—Media and the Public Imperative: Features

As noted, the direct connections between media and the public imperative were limited. This was true with regard to features at the Tea Party Patriots site as well. In fact, the only features that were designed to connect with or directly influence media were the embedded Twitter links for the Benghazi feature mentioned above. Under the message “Click on the buttons below to send Tweets to major news outlets to tell them ‘Please do your job and cover #Benghazi,’” users could click and Tweet to the following accounts: @CBSNews; @ABC; @NBCNews; @cnnbrk; @politicalticker @CNN; @CNNEE; and @msnbc. Apart from this, site producers offered users no tools with which to directly engage media.

Tea Party Patriots—Media and the Public Imperative: Links

The same, again, was true for links allowing users to act on any public imperative instincts with regard to media. Shortly before the feature on Tweeting the media about Benghazi appeared, site coordinator Mc had assembled the same list of Twitter accounts, which he encouraged other users to “slam with protest”:

Mc posted an update in the group National News
List of twitter accounts to slam with protest over their lack of honest
coverage of the Benghazi Debacle and administration dropping the ball;
Twitter accounts of mainstream media. The hashtag #Benghazi or
#Benghazigate should be in your tweets on the subject.
@CBSNews
@ABC
@NBCNews
@cnnbrk
@politicalticker

@CNN
@CNNEE (CNN in Spanish)
@msnbc

As for other media-related links, the example that stood out was from Mc's planned targeting of Darrell Issa. In addition to the enthusiastic messaging in which he encouraged users to "POUND the HELL out of Issa," he offered contact information and multiple links:

Darrel Issa DC Office: 202-225-3906 (Issa is the only person that can schedule a hearing)
Darrel Issa Fax: 202-225-3303 (fax him a letter)
Darrell Issa Email:
http://issa.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=597&Itemid=73
Darrell Issa Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/darrellissa>
Darrell Issa Twitter: @DarrellIssa and @GOPOversight
If all else fails call your own US Representative.
Other Links to Congress; <http://www.conservativeusa.org/mega-cong.htm>,
<http://www.contactingthecongress.org/>, <http://clerk.house.gov/>,
http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/a_three_sections_with_...

In one other case, as the Twitter campaign was coming together, Mc also offered a link to a conservative media watchdog in response to another user's comment:

Mc
[...] there is a move to use tweets and other means to slam the communis er Main Stream Media over their not covering this story. Here is a link to 'FAIR's (Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting) Media Contact List;
<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=111> [...]

This focus was not widely pursued by other users, despite the fact that an election period potentially offered an opportunity to push back on political leaders.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots and Media Attitudes

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots had their own approach to media, which differed from the national group, but which also amounted to relatively narrow channels of communication regarding media. The group emphasized more links to media—with a strong but

not exclusive emphasis on conservative sources—but it also generated relatively narrow forms of media critiques and an “alternative” approach that was not robust. Very few links sought to help users engage in public imperative activities.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Media Critiques: Thematic Content

It was rare to see thematic content that directly engaged the media critiques I heard from Tea Party members in person. Though perceived media attempts to undermine the movement were highly salient in interviews, there was relatively little that reflected that view, either from site producers or users at PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com. As with the national Tea Party Patriots site, Benghazi was a main driver of commentary, although it was typically in the context of alleged corruption in the Obama administration. The best example of a user posting a media-related message was on October 28, 2012, when user Brian uploaded a simple graphic that included the logos of the three major broadcast networks and CNN, along with this message:

At this point it's beyond favoritism and beyond bias!
Revoke their press credentials! This is not Journalism! They should be treated like campaign bundlers and lobbyists. They should all be removed from the White House Press Core.
Negligence
It now borders on Complicity and Cover up! The FCC should be investigating this manipulation of the American people's Right to be told the truth. Free Speech and the Freedom of the press was created so the American people would be protected from Soviet like Propaganda and outright lies!

In another direct instance of media critique, frequent commenter Art Olivas posted a scan of an email he had written to five local news outlets. Olivas had posted frequently about local activist Randy Parazz, then president of the left-leaning non-profit group Citizens for a Better Arizona. On November 17, 2012, Olivas added the scan to his profile page, under the title, “JUST A LETTER”:

This is an open letter to all the TV station in Phoenix, AZ. When are you going to start acting like journalists and stop trying to be sales people or comedians. Stop kissing the wrong people's butts!!! You follow Randy Parraza and his dreamers and illegal food stampers, that we pay for. You try to make us Legal Hispanics look like Racists. [...] A true journalist would have his people go out and investigate, by asking legal Hispanics about Illegal Immigration for you see they are taking our jobs also, but then lets say that you know this already, because you don't look retarded or ignorant, OH!! [...]

In general, critiques on the site were reserved for the Obama administration and local politicians.

Although members of Tea Party groups in Arizona had confronted media coverage they considered biased or worse, very little of that attitude was reflected on the top levels of the site.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Media Critiques: Features

There was no codable content that satisfied the operational definition for features in this category.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Media Critiques: Links

Producers of the site were more likely to express critiques of media through linking practices, although this, too, was limited. These links touched on common themes among the Tea Party at this time, specifically polling discrepancies before the election and Benghazi. On November 1, 2012, on the front page of the site, under the heading “National Current Events,” producers linked to a story at Politico.com about the challenges of polling a national race (<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1012/83107.html>). The link at the site, and the title of the story at Politico.com, were the same: “Media stumped by 2012 outcome.” A few days later, on November 4, producers linked to a story at conservative blog Breitbart.com that criticized a CNN poll and questioned how mainstream news outlets report polling numbers:

If you want to understand why voters no longer trust pollsters, look no further than the latest CNN poll of Ohio voters, showing President Barack Obama with a 50%-47% lead over Gov. Mitt Romney--a result that is within the poll's 3.5% margin of error, but which suggests a slight Obama

lead. The internal numbers [from the poll] reveal that Romney is leading among independents by 2%, and winning Election Day voters by a staggering 13%.

The lead for Obama is based entirely on the poll's survey of those Ohioans who say they have voted early, or who are likely to vote early. The hard numbers behind early voting, however--independent from the CNN poll--suggest that Republicans are doing far better than they were in 2008, and that Democrats are lagging significantly in stronghold areas. Turnout models from Gallup and Rasmussen also favor the GOP. [...]

The other prominent media link from PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com was a post to a conservative blog called GilbertWatch.com, under the title, "Dem. Pat Caddell: Liberal media greatest threat to America." The link featured video of a Fox News interview segment with conservative pundit Ann Coulter and former Democratic Pollster for Jimmy Carter, Pat Cadell. The segment was premised on the complicity of news media in concealing facts about Benghazi, as was evident by host Jeanine Pirro's first question, asking, "Why is the media not dealing with the fact that there is a clear cover up here?" Rather than dealing with these specific questions on the site, linking serves as a way to keep the issue active for users, with a very low use of resources.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Media Alternatives: Thematic Content

The Greater Phoenix Tea Party site employed very basic technology to communicate, essentially just the simplest elements available through the Ning social media platform. There were sections on the site labeled for "Blogs" and "News" but they were under used or simply not used. The main page title "News" was left blank; a few links, months old, were present but obviously not active. Some posting did take place on the page titled "Blogs," although it would not fit most political bloggers' idea of a functional blog: posting was rare, content was often cut-and-pasted from elsewhere, and there had been only one comment in the previous two weeks at the time I first examined the site. The site was not robustly encouraging users to combat bias in the media, but at a stretch, one could say they were encouraging the use of digital media by

adding opinion pieces and discussing media online. User JPD posted a detailed critique of then-candidate Jeff Flake's campaign for U.S. Senator, including insights probably not available to the average news reader:

Posted by JPD on October 16, 2012 at 8:00am

Before you vote for John S. McCain Jr. Jeffery Lane Flake, review Dr. Cristina Beato's resume/past and ask yourself, is the McCain Progressive Machine so desperate as to throw caution aside and go with the Beato angle, an individual who is compromised. Jeff Flake's (Andrew Wilder) campaign doubled down on Press Releases on Sonoran Alliance when they should have folded and the Flake campaign trash Beato's commercial given what they failed to scrub off the net as detailed below.

In 2010 it was all about getting rid of McCain, anyone but McCain – Jeff Flake is McCain's PROGRESSIVE replacement so for me, a constitutional conservative, my vote goes to Carmona [...] A VOTE FOR FLAKE IS A VOTE FOR McCAIN [...]

In a sense, this functions as alternative media, creating online space to share details that are usually behind the scenes. As above, media were not often direct targets and content on the site—at least at the top levels analyzed here—did not generally stake out an alternative media position in thematic content.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Media Alternative: Features

Features at the site were also very basic, which allowed for a limited space in which to carve out alternative sourcing or independent research. Two main features used by the site, both parts of the Ning platform, were the poll and the photo gallery. With the former, site producers offered a daily non-scientific poll that touched on current topics and offered a range of informal answers. Topics in the weeks leading up to the election included:

- Will Americans revolt over gun confiscation?
- Should the Governor override the legislators and extend unemployment benefits?
- Do you support Israel?
- What is the most essential component of an emergency survival kit?
- What do you think of S.679 giving Obama ability to make appointments without Senate confirmation?
- Have you noticed food prices going up?

- Will you buy a Don't Tread On Me license plate?
- Will you join the new AZ Militia?
- Do you think the Dollar is about to crash?
- Rate AZGOP Tom Morrissey's job so far.
- Who should replace Speaker Adams when he steps down?
- Does today's birth certificate establish natural born citizenship?
- Who here still supports Jan Brewer?
- Is the tea party starting to fizzle?
- What is going on with Glenn Beck?

Topics varied and choices were likely to include Tea Party-approved answers alongside some presumably meant to provoke. Interestingly, a poll for entertainment value can perhaps give site producers another tool with which to frame issues and events. On October 31, as Hurricane Sandy approached the East Coast, the poll asked: Will the elections be postponed due to Sandy? Responses included: No, there would be a massive public outcry; This is what they were hoping for; Yes, and it will allow for more voter fraud; Nothing to see here, folks.; Not sure; and Other.

The other feature that users took advantage of at the site was the photo gallery, which contained thousands of photos of events from various groups in the region. On one hand, this was precisely the kind of alternative tool that could offer protesters a different way to represent themselves. On the other hand, the site was used as an informal, unmoderated space, so any single event might include several dozen photos of essentially the same thing, or many photos of unidentified individuals. As such, this feature was perhaps not used to its fullest potential, but it did allow at least some members a way to encourage cohesion in the community. Several users also posted political cartoons, images, and graphics that circulated in conservative networks. Tea Party members would likely consider many of these messages and images to be inspirational, but there's little question that at least some of them would be considered overly provocative at best.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Media Alternatives: Links

The strongest way that the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots site argued for alternative approaches was through its linking practices. As with the national Tea Party Patriots site, the links were narrow in scope, often—but not exclusively—drawing heavily on familiar conservative sources. In some cases, links were so-called “red meat” for the more conservative members of the site, as with a link on the site that read, “OBAMA TO GO TO PRISON?” The link directed users to a Glenn Beck video at YouTube.com titled, “BREAKING NEWS!!! Obama a Hitman or Terrorist Arms Dealer??? Why He Hid the Truth of Benghazi...” In a similar vein, a link categorized as an “Education Piece” was titled “Step-by-step Timeline of Obama Lies on Libya's Attack on the US Consulate” and linked to an 18-minute Fox News segment. In a somewhat more even-handed link, the site directed users to a short video by conservative youth activists, “Voices Without a Vote,” in which people too young to vote encourage older voters to protect conservative principles at the ballot box.

Other links were more oriented toward bringing people together and fostering conversation, online and off. For example, users were directed to a site where they could get free tickets to a theatrical showing of the documentary, “Hating Breitbart,” which explored the views and activities of the controversial conservative figure. The site promoted other free media events as well, including “They Come to America,” described at IMDB.com as a “documentary that explores the human and financial costs of illegal immigration.” Elsewhere, the site regularly linked to its primary media partner, an online, radio-style talk show called “Crossroads with Van,” which focused on political issues from a conservative and Christian perspective.

The most prominent linking at PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com was on the home page where several links were posted daily in four categories: National Current Events; Arizona Current

Events; International Current Events; and one rotating category that might include Education, “Just For Fun,” or the like. These links were presented without commentary and took users off the site, so they functioned less as material for debate and more as a conservative news feed that allowed users to keep abreast of a range of right-leaning media outlets, along with the occasional mainstream source. Sources were included along with the links, so users knew where they were being directed. A sense of the alternative atmosphere generated by these links is gained by looking at several examples; these reflected a strong emphasis on the Benghazi issue and voter fraud, but also offered a somewhat wider scope. These are items selectively sampled from a single day, October 27, 2012, in the categories in which they originally appeared:

NATIONAL CURRENT EVENTS

Republican Enthusiasm at Record High

Newsmax.com

Harry Reid Rushed to Hospital after Accident

LVRJ.com

The UN: On the brink of becoming a world government

NewAmerican.com

Disrespect from Obama/Biden to Father of Slain SEAL

TheBlaze.com

Criminal Probe into Video Taped Democrat Voter Fraud

Foxnews.com

Supreme Court to Decide on Government Spying

YahooNews.com

NC residents say voting machines gave their Romney vote to Obama

FoxNews.com

ARIZONA CURRENT EVENTS

AZ to Decide on Taking Back Grand Canyon

Foxnew.com

Mayor, Ed Foster, finally seated!

DesertFreedomPress.com

Mitchell wins, declared legitimate candidate

KPHO.com

AZ unemployment at 8.2 percent in September

AZCapitolTimes.com

Dems seek control of solar by dominating State utility board

BusinessWeek.com

INTERNATIONAL CURRENT EVENTS

Churchill Shrugged: Muslim Opposition Members Jailed in England

AmericanThinker.com

Queen Elizabeth II: Not the rightful heir to the throne?

YouTube.com

Mali crisis: Foreign fighters come to help Islamists

BBC.com

Tokyo Governor quits to form new National Party

NYTimes.com

Together, these links constituted a certain approach to local, national, and world news, with some breadth, but also with a distinct conservative lens. In this way, the links themselves helped frame both specific issues and political figures: Obama was disrespectful to soldiers, the government was spying, unemployment numbers were high, and “Islamists” were on the move globally. In the days after the 2012 presidential election, the tone shifted rather dramatically, of course, to questions of voter fraud and conservative reaction. The following links appeared on the site on November 12 and 13:

NATIONAL NEWS [11/12]

Did Voter Fraud Determine 2012 Presidential Outcome?

WND.com

No Votes for Romney in Multiple Philly and Ohio Precincts

TheBlaze.com

Flashback: Voting Machines Questioned in Reid vs. Angle Senate Race

TheIntelhub.com

333,000 Votes in 4 States would have made the difference

Breitbart.com

Gun Sales Soar

UKTelegraph.com

Record Foodstamp Numbers Released Day After Election

BrevardTimes.com

Petraeus Testimony on Hold

WashingtonTimes.com

[...]

NATIONAL NEWS [11/13]

People of 30 States Petition for Secession

TheBlaze.com

Arpaio to Obama: Let's meet man-to-man

Breitbart.com

Wealthy dumping assets
CNBC.com
Protests over Obama Re-election growing
CBSPittsburgh.com
[...]

In this way, the site was presumably providing a haven for anxious conservatives, perhaps reflecting their suspicions that the vote was fraudulent and reassuring them it was an appropriate time to purchase guns. As with the Tea Party Patriots site, the linking practices here seemed strategic and oriented to their audience, which suits a political site very well. If this does align with individuals' attitudes, the "alternative" sourcing and independent research that members spoke about, however, may not reach far beyond these familiar touchstones of conservative media.

Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots—Media and the Public Imperative: Links Only

The site for the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots had a fairly focused mission. It undoubtedly allowed hundreds of Arizonans to connect with others and plan events, and it provided users with links and resources relevant to their political interests. In terms of media, however, it did not actively encourage users to engage local news sources during the period of the study. As such, there was no codable thematic content related to public imperative premises. Similarly, because of the basic technical profile the site producers followed, there were no features that linked news media to meeting up, speaking out, or pushing back.

The closest connection to the public imperative appeared in a single post. In the weeks before the election, a group affiliated with the United Nations announced it had been asked by American civil liberties groups to observe a number of voting activities at locations around the country on Election Day. This caused significant concern among conservative groups, which mobilized to confront them. On October 27, 2012, the home page of PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com

included specific information and encouraged users to respectfully monitor the election monitors:

Friday Update:

The names and nationalities of the UN Representatives in charge of "observing" the US election and their duty stations have been announced. For Arizona the lead representative is Aida Alzhanova from Kazakhstan--duty station Phoenix. We will let you know when we find out the specific polling locations so that we can greet the UN with a message of US Sovereignty!

Complete list of representatives and their states is here.

[<http://patdollard.com/2012/10/complete-list-of-where-u-n-poll-watchers-will-be-stationed/>]

All the Arizona authorities are now aware of the UN Affiliated group coming to monitor our elections. Our recommendation to you is to observe anyone at the polls who violates the 75ft distance barrier and report them to the Poll Marshall. They will not be allowed to usurp our voting procedures.

In this case, site producers were using digital media to help users assert themselves in a narrow but highly charged part of the election process. This was the most active engagement that producers offered, although there probably was a significant amount of coordination taking place within the site at the local group level. In general, though, PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com did not emphasize public imperative activities during the period of this study.

Tea Party News Network and Media Attitudes

The Tea Party News Network was especially interesting in terms of media attitudes. It established itself very explicitly as an alternative media source for Tea Party conservatives, then did very little beyond linking to other sites in the right-wing mediasphere: in essence, it did not engage in alternative media practices, so much as it tried to simply embody and reinforce an alternative worldview. A limited number of editorials and columns accounted for content on the site, but even some of these were simply reposted from elsewhere. There was little opportunity

for users to engage with the site beyond reading and following links, although there was a healthy slate of conservative-friendly links posted each day, echoing narratives that appeared elsewhere.

Tea Party News Network—Media Critiques: Thematic Content and Links

Tea Party News Network was a site born out of explicit critiques of the media. As founder Todd Cefaratti told Politico.com (Byers, 2012), ““We don’t need our supposed betters in the mainstream media telling us which stories matter or what we should think.” And yet, in terms of direct critiques of the media, the site contained very little thematic content as it launched that November. In the lead up to the election, contributor and conservative media activist Judson Phillips addressed the issue of polling discrepancies, suggesting that Mitt Romney’s chances of winning were much higher than most polls suggested, and that this was caused by media bias:

The media has done its best to maintain the façade that Obama was winning or this election is even close. CNN, the most busted name in news, came out with a poll that showed a 49%-49% tie. However, CNN oversampled Democrats by 11%.

This was a common line of critique among conservative media at the time, and it resonated with longstanding suspicions about the media showing favoritism to more liberal candidates. Apart from this, Tea Party News Network contributors offered essentially no direct critiques of media, choosing instead to focus on politicians and specific scandals. The site did not receive a large number of comments during the period of this study, and the site was set up less like a community and more like a news service. As such, comments from users were few and far between, including media critiques. One user, Bryan Saunders, did respond to Phillips’ article quoted above, saying: “It sucks that we have a media that left so many questions on the table

about a President in office!” There was very little in the way of commentary at the site in general, however.

Similarly, Tea Party News Network did not position itself as a media watchdog site at all, so there were virtually no links out to sites that offered evidence of bias or misrepresentation. In one case, a full ten days after the election, the home page offered a link to an article at the conservative Daily Caller website, which referenced another writer’s appearance on a conservative radio talk show. The link, “Mark Steyn calls out WH Press Corps for lack of journalistic integrity,” (which took users to an article titled, “Mark Steyn rips White House press corps ‘court eunuchs’: ‘You made fools of yourselves’”) featured a short audio clip and notably abrasive language. So, while occasionally dipping into some rough critiques of the media, the site’s producers mostly avoided this topic, preferring instead to position the site as a credible alternative to mainstream media.

Tea Party News Network—Media Alternatives: Thematic Content

The Tea Party News Network expressly established itself as an alternative to mainstream media, a site that Tea Party members, specifically, could trust implicitly. Like the home page at PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com, a central function of the site was to deliver an array of news stories, carefully curated for their specific audience. In doing so, the site producers not only provided many dozens of links (some of which are analyzed below), but they also shaped a thematic picture of the political world, as well as the nation in general. For this reason, it is useful to consider the thematic content of the site’s primary output—the links that appeared most prominently on its home page—as an effort to shape Tea Party attitudes. In this, the producers strongly supported scandals and issues that were popular on conservative media at the time. This list is a sampling from November 1, 2012:

Reuters: Beyond debate, Pennsylvania is in play
The death of polling industry credibility...Is Nate Silver's value at risk?
Levin on Benghazi: "They didn't have to die."
Menendez sex scandal too little too late
On polling models, skewed & unskewed
Final message from man that gave benediction at O's inauguration: All
whites go to hell
Tea Party dead? Nope.
Gingrich says networks may have more Benghazi -gate emails
Benghazi coverup worse than Watergate
WATCH: American Crossroads video on Benghazi lies
Some polls released today use 08 turnout
Obama's independent voter problem
GOP voting "tsunami" coming?
Malkin: Obama's layoff bomb
Morris: Here comes the landslide

These links clearly echoed the issues that also dominated the Tea Party Patriots website and the Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots website. At Tea Party News Network, there were a greater variety of such stories, but the emphases could not be missed: the impending polling fiasco (and the subsequent Romney landslide), the endless murmurs about Benghazi, and a few intimations of corruption, racism, and economic trouble.

The second main content portion of the site was a list of articles and editorials from Tea Party News Network contributors. The topics that contributors wrote about showed a similar emphasis as the sites links, which helped establish Tea Party News Network as a quasi-original source for other conservative sites to link to. The following titles functioned in the same way as linking text, helping shape the conservative media agenda with intentionally provocative and sometimes judgmental language¹⁸:

Todd Cefaratti—Editor of TPNN
The Media Should Report the News, Not Control It

¹⁸ By March 2013, the Tea Party News Network site had undergone the first of several site redesigns; subsequently, articles from February 2013 and earlier were no longer available in accessible archives, and are typically not available through public search.

John Hawkins—TPNN Contributor
Alan Grayson’s Rapetastic Fundraiser

John Hawkins—TPNN Contributor
The Polling Spread In Ohio: Is It Real?

Todd Cefaratti—Editor of TPNN
Obama’s Issues with Truth: Americans Deserve Answers

John Hawkins—TPNN Contributor
How Could Barack Obama Lose Independents By Numbers Like These
And Win?

Todd Cefaratti—Editor of TPNN
Growing Trend of Violent Threats Against Romney Ignored by Media

John Hawkins—TPNN Contributor
Would It Surprise You To Know That Barack Obama Used To Deal Coke?

Todd Cefaratti—Editor of TPNN
Obama Admin Web of Lies About Benghazi Continues to Entangle

Jennifer Burke—TPNN Blogger
Fort Hood, Fast & Furious, Benghazi . . . A Pattern of Failed Leadership

This slate of topics, which aligned closely with those of the other two websites, created a sanitized alternative media stream for conservatives. On one hand, it met the objectives of finding alternative sourcing, doing independent research, and using digital tools; but of course, it also was not exactly “alternative,” inasmuch as it offered a kind of pre-approved controversy and conspiracy.

The Tea Party News Network benefited from controversial content, of course, by generating page views and name recognition. As such, contributors may have cultivated a provocative tone in order to attract and even thrill audiences. The “independent research” that Tea Party members spoke to me about was distinct, however, from some of the more unrestrained editorializing within the movement. Two examples carried the principle of

alternative media orientations beyond where many professionals would follow. The first was Judson Phillips' editorial titled, "The Great Election Theft of 2012." This piece was a robust critique of electronic voting machines, the basic premise of which—that such machines can be tampered with and we need paper records—is actually not very controversial. However, in Phillips's view, this was an opportunity for the Obama administration to steal an election and further corrupt American democracy:

[...] Is the election of 2012 already being stolen? [...]

If one of the parties is going to steal this election by tampering with voting machines, neither you nor I are going to see it. If the Democrats are trying to steal the election, the electronic voting machines will tally the votes for Obama, regardless of who you actually voted for.

How could this happen? [...]

All it takes is a computer virus that infects the machines and has them alter the vote tallies. If the virus is sophisticated, there will be no way to tell what the original vote tally was.

How could these machines be infected?

The Stuxnet virus was introduced in Iran by a compromised flash drive.

A sophisticated virus does not need to change all of the votes in a voting precinct. If a precinct reported 100% of their votes for Obama, particularly in an area with a strong Republican presence, people would be suspicious. However, a virus that changed one out of four votes for Romney might not be discovered and might not even trigger scrutiny.

How many votes would need to be changed? Remember, Florida was decided by 537 votes in 2000. How many would they need?

The biggest threat to our American Republic is the possibility that our elections could be stolen. One of the reasons our government works is we believe that our elections are fair. We believe the government is an expression of the will of the people.

If we lose that confidence, we lose our nation. [...]

It is difficult to overstate the importance of confidence in elections, and I concur with Phillips about the American belief in the will of the people. Phillips pushed his role as a media outsider here, however, inviting and perhaps even condoning visceral reactions among readers. The value of an alternative media system is not to be validated in one's indignation, but rather to move independently toward truth when established media cannot or will not do so. The second example demonstrates the lengths to which site producers were willing to go to generate that indignation. Conservative writer John Hawkins, a Tea Party News Network contributor, cross-posted a story from his own site titled, "Would It Surprise You To Know That Barack Obama Used To Deal Coke?" The article was a pastiche of innuendo and deceptive sourcing:

Barack Obama didn't use drugs once, nor was he a casual user – he was a hard core druggie who was part of a "Choom gang." [...] When was the last time Barack Obama got high? We don't know. Has he ever snorted coke in the Oval Office? We don't know. Has he ever made an important decision about the country's future while he was high? Maybe, we don't know. Has Barack Obama ever dealt drugs? Maybe, we don't know – but if you had to bet, the smart money would be on "Yes." [...] Is this story true? If so, did Barack Obama ever sell drugs to kids? Did anyone overdose and die on the drugs he sold? What a disgrace to the country. How far we've fallen when a former drug dealer could be in the White House — and let's face it, given Obama's background, this is a VERY plausible story.

This type of content gave lie to the notion that the Tea Party News Network was trying to construct an alternative media system that would help people discover and share information. This, in turn, raised the prospect that the site was, to a significant degree, borrowing forms and styles of "news" to lend an air of legitimacy to their practical objectives.

In positioning itself as an alternative to mainstream news, the site drew extensively on the language of news and its familiar types of content. The site's slogan at its launch was, simply, "The *Real* News," which positioned them against other media, but with an even greater claim to legitimacy (among their audience). This construction of "real media" elements to support their

alternative media positioning was most prominent in the site's election coverage. They heavily promoted their "Live from Vegas: TPNN Election Coverage," which consisted of an internet feed at an investment conference the night of November 6, 2012. The day before, the site featured promo language that echoed the major networks and cable channels: "We'll have updates from around the country! Join us Tuesday night!" The site's News Director, Scottie Hughes, interviewed conservative icons CNBC's Rick Santelli and Fox News' Charles Krauthammer, Democratic strategist James Carville, and even Tea Party Patriots' Jenny Beth Martin. Throughout the evening, the webcast's hosts sat at a small desk, discussing returns and talking with conservative media figures. Though a decidedly low-budget production, the objective was to provide a conservative message that looked enough like news to claim they had the "real" story.

Tea Party News Network—Media Alternatives: Features

The Tea Party News Network site was technologically quite basic, but the Election Day live event required a level of coordination that few political blogs try to achieve. This was by far the high point of feature-driven content at the site during the period of this study. For roughly nine hours on November 6, the site shifted its format completely. In the live webcast of their coverage, site producers featured interviews, commentary, and updates, along with a Twitter feed and a chat room that allowed viewers to interact with the hosts. Site producers later claimed that tens of thousands of people interacted via the various channels on Election Day, although those numbers were difficult to verify. At least 1,600 users appeared to be online in the site's chat room at one point; the Twitter feed, however, generated only a few dozen Tweets during the evening. After the election, the site returned to its normal format, which included news links, contributor columns, the site's Twitter feed, embedded videos of interviews, and headlines

imported from conservative news service Newsmax. It was a large commitment to a high-stakes production, and perhaps represented the most feature-rich content of any of the three Tea party websites during this timeframe.

Tea Party News Network—Media Alternatives: Links

The linking practices at Tea Party News Network were fairly extensive compared to the other sites, at least in terms of quantity; as with the other sites, however, the scope of outlinks was limited primarily to other conservative sites. Thus, while multiple sourcing and independent research were valued by the Tea Party members I talked to, the greater number of links at Tea Party News Network did not necessarily produce a much wider range of sources. In the period leading up to the election, links fit much the same pattern as elsewhere, largely focused on polls and Benghazi (selections from November 1, 2012):

Gingrich says networks may have more Benghazi -gate emails
Benghazi coverup worse than Watergate
WATCH: American Crossroads video on Benghazi lies
Obama's independent voter problem
MSNBC ridicules Mitt for collecting supplies for Sandy victims
GOP voting "tsunami" coming?
NH newspaper that backed Obama in 2008 now
 'confidently' endorses Romney
Pennsylvania in play...
[...]
Benghazi Security Requests/Denials:
 Obama Claims Ignorance, Incompetence
 Petraeus Throws Obama Under the Bus
 CIA Operatives were DENIED requests for help during Benghazi attack

As with other sites, the targets for these links included a healthy portion of conservative political blogs and news sites (e.g. HotAir.com, the Daily Caller, TownHall.com, the Blaze, Breitbart.com, etc.), alongside a few more mainstream sources (e.g. BBC.co.uk, BuzzFeed,

ABCNews.com, various local newspapers). Also as with other sites, the tone shifted after the election, certainly to lament the consequences and presume the worst, but also to share a variety of post-mortems from familiar conservative media voices (selections from November 7-9):

Two Days after Obama Win, Massive Layoffs Around the Country
Obama admin. teaming with UN on blocking 2nd amendment
Biden ready to raise taxes on the wealthy
Time to clean house in GOP establishment
Surprise! Obama supporters want Israel dead
Coulter & Ingraham Debate How Romney Lost Election
Dow Jones closes down 300 on Wednesday, down 121 Thursday
Beyonce's Vulgar Tweet after Obama Win
Exit poll summary on how Obama won
Daily Caller's Tucker Carlson & Neil Patel on what happened...

This suggested that the forms of news remained important—anchors and commentators reviewing the battleground the next day—but there was also no mistaking this as content that was designed for conservative audiences. As much as Tea Party News Network sought credibility through mimicking the news, it remained clear how site producers positioned themselves against “mainstream” media. They offered users a safe range of sources, away from critical voices, such that independent research would be rewarded with information that fit expectations.

Tea Party News Network—Media and the Public Imperative: Thematic Content Only

The Tea Party News Network arguably had the greatest distance between the site's producers and its users: there was very limited opportunity to comment, groups were not formed at the site, and the site did not claim to be delivering resources to activists. As such, they did not lean heavily on a public imperative approach. Across the site, a number of themes appeared that echoed certain public imperative language from elsewhere in the movement. In late October, the site's editor Todd Cefaratti published a feature titled, “The Next Big Tea Party Rally Is Coming...At the Ballot Box!” In it, he touched on the movement's shift from protests to other

forms of action, the power of being heard, and the importance of digital media:

Many people have been asking, “Where is the Tea Party and where are those big rallies you used to have?” The answer is simple; the day of millions marching at the Capitol and other places were good in the beginning, but now we are organized and making things happen. As a grassroots movement, our agenda has been heard, and our movement is growing and maturing each and every day. We have taken the Tea Party into the cyber world—much as the Democrats did to help Barack Obama win in 2008. Sometimes we have to acknowledge when our opponents do something better than we do, and in 2008 the Democrats understood the power of the internet and social media to organize and get their people out to vote.

Vote early and then help get out the conservative and Tea Party Vote. We can't survive four more years of Obama.

This was likely a compelling message, and it came from an experienced communicator who knew his audience. The Tea Party members I spoke to were finding their way to civic engagement step-by-step, on their own and with friends; Cefaratti had an instinct for how to package that message. He captured the rebel attitude of the public imperative a week later when, after the election, the top of the site featured a photo of an early Tea Party rally in front of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. The headline read simply, “NO RETREAT.” So, while there was little to no opportunity for users to engage in any public imperative activity, the kernel of the idea was still valuable to the site’s producers.

In Summary

Taken together, the three Tea Party sites had varied approaches to media, and in certain senses they undoubtedly served their users well. In general, however, the sites did not rigorously engage with traditional media outlets, nor did they offer high levels of alternative media training or tools. Most certainly, they did very little to help their users effectively pursue the objectives of the public imperative that individuals so clearly articulated in interviews. One can reasonably

speculate as to why this was might have been so: for example, limited financial and technological resources can inhibit the way websites function and the value they can offer users. However, even in cases where these resources should have been in ample supply, there was little effort to engage users in this way. Users, for their part, were more active in terms of speaking out and sharing links, but these, too, were narrow examples of what might have been possible. Based on the content and functionality of the sites as they were in 2012, compared with the enthusiasm and eagerness of members I spoke with in 2010, there was a notable difference between the potential of the internet and what users encountered online.

Conclusion

At the broadest level, the three sites in this study were essentially narrow channels of communication. Both in terms of the public imperative, and in terms of media attitudes, sites offered the most basic capacities of interactive platforms, and showed limited interest in working with their online communities to create a robust environment for learning and civic engagement. In part, this may have reflected the fact that many Tea Party groups were assuredly more active offline than online, and surely the two “Tea Party Patriots” sites had provided a valuable service in bringing isolated individuals together in the first place. There was some overlap of functionality between the three sites, such as linking to conservative media sources. Likewise, certain functions existed at all the sites, such as reiterating and reinforcing popular conservative themes. Ultimately, however, beyond providing a basic platform to connect (in the case of the two “Tea Party Patriots” sites), and providing a nominal “alternative” source of news (in the case of the Tea Party News Network), the sites pursued only very limited civic engagement goals.

The sites offered an extremely limited range of the full public imperative experience that emerged in the interviews described in previous chapters. The core function of meeting up worked well, at least in the early stages of the movement, but opportunities to speak out were relatively constrained, and more active types of pushing back were barely present at all. Sites also did not genuinely move members beyond the limitations of traditional media. They enthusiastically delivered ideological content and perpetuated narratives that were popular in right-wing media, but they did not help members truly engage in effective media criticism or learn alternative media practices. The sites were alternative in form, but extremely familiar and traditional in terms of the content and perspectives they advanced.

This analysis suggests that the shift to the internet through these sites was not complementary to the ideals of the public imperative, nor to the attitudes toward media that I encountered when speaking with individuals in the movement. Stepping back, the broader conclusion to draw is that any organization or social movement that relies too much on the basic forms of internet-based communication risks creating an online community where certain lowest-common denominators, both technical and discursive, may come to limit the potential of the movement. This represents a problem in light of the enthusiasm and excitement that brings many individuals to the public square in the first place. In the following chapter, I will discuss some of the ways the public imperative interacts with traditional and online media, as well as certain implications for the study and practice of civic engagement.

Chapter Six

Conclusions and Connections

In the intense debates that shaped the emerging American Constitution after the Revolutionary War, leaders, political thinkers, and citizens clashed over rival conceptions of government, social class, and power. Individuals' experiences during that crucial period, in which claims against a tyrannical government were rooted in daily practices as much as in rhetoric, helped bind the power of civic association with the promise of political liberty in the American imagination. That contentious political context was successfully resolved largely because of the broad embrace of "the public" as the sole sovereign authority (Wood, 2011). One of the most cherished principles of the moment—that, in James Madison's words, "the people are the only legitimate fountain of power" (Federalist #49)—infused the thought and actions of individuals across many social strata including, in particular, the architects of the new nation.

None of this suggested that such a path would be easy to follow. In fact, more than two centuries later this potent idea remains elusive, even as the reach of democratic government expands globally and communication technology grows more sophisticated. Dewey (1927), perhaps an unmatched diagnostician of democratic society, noted both the trend toward giving people a voice in their own governance and the challenge inherent in doing so:

We have every reason to think that whatever changes may take place in existing democratic machinery, they will be of a sort to make the interest of the public a more supreme guide and criterion of governmental activity, and to enable the public to form and manifest its purpose still more authoritatively. In this sense, the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy. The prime difficulty... is that discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests. This discovery is necessarily precedent to any fundamental change in the machinery. (p. 146)

This dissertation was designed, in part, as a response to Dewey’s assertion. The process of self-discovery as a public is frequently a critical element in periods of social change, a failsafe written into the founding documents that is available to subsequent generations, especially in times of crisis. Yet, how and why this happens is sometimes glossed over in scholarship, in favor of more readily observable data. The evidence in this dissertation suggests that an underlying expectation about public power is indeed present and vital in American political culture, and that the challenges to a “scattered, mobile, and manifold public” remain acute.

Two and a half centuries after the Revolutionary Era, this idea still resonates when citizens come together, raise their voices, and make demands of political leaders—that is, when they act on the public imperative by meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back. It would be inaccurate to suggest that all individuals within American political culture have equal access to a broadly shared history and identity; far too much of this country’s history, up to and including the present day, is bound up in how we exclude and deny American identity to people who so obviously share the American experience (Hart, Jennings & Dixon, 2003). Nonetheless, U.S. political culture seems to sustain a narrative—rooted in complex historical realities and reiterated across generations—that offers many individuals the prospect of meaningful, authentic engagement with the political system. The premise is simple; the practice is much more complex.

In the decade preceding the Tea Party’s appearance, protest movements formed in the United States to oppose globalization and American military action in the Middle East, to derail restrictive immigration legislation, and to short-circuit California’s Proposition 8 denying marriage equality to same-sex partners. In the years since, America has seen the evolution of the Occupy Movement, a global People’s Climate March, and most recently, protests over racialized police violence. Sparked by rulings in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City, in which grand

juries declined to indict White police officers involved in the brutal deaths of Black citizens, marches in late 2014 spread across the country from New York to Los Angeles and in dozens of cities in between. In November 2014, students from Seattle's Garfield High School left their classrooms to march in support of the national protests. Garfield student Matt Caldwell told reporters for a local magazine (Schultz & Hansen, 2014):

I feel like we need to help. You shouldn't shoot anyone six times. This is why I'm here. There was an announcement over the intercom. Someone from the Black Student Union came up and talked about how we were going to have a little bit of time in the commons, the big lunchroom, to talk about what happened. They said that it was important for us to march to get our voices heard.

In all these movements, protesters were enacting a social pattern that, thus far, has never needed to be reinvented. At times it may be refreshed or reimaged, and as technology transforms communication, scholars must continually develop better questions with which to examine it. The performance of public protest, however, has familiar elements that organizations can easily draw upon: marches, chanting, speeches, signs, and so on. Moreover, many forms of civic action, such as jury duty and voting, operate within discourses of duty and moral obligation, often resonating with an implicit sense of history. These social practices are not in themselves inherently positive or negative, and in fact, some such routinized elements of civic life may be rightly criticized as tendencies that can mask the power of the state while keeping citizens compliant (Anderson, 2011; Billig, 2005). Behind the more rote expressions of civic fealty, however, there seems to be a deeper wellspring for civic engagement. At least in American politics, people often seem to undertake civic action with a sense not only that such behaviors are legitimate but also that our shared history and identity compel us to engage.

In this dissertation I explored whether and how this principle might work in practical contexts, both in person, at rallies and other events, and in online spaces that have become so

essential to modern political communication. In the interviews I conducted, many individuals who claimed never to have been previously politically active were brimming with excitement at the prospect of meeting up with like-minded people, speaking out and being heard, and pushing back on politicians with whom they had never connected. Time and again, the core elements of the public imperative emerged spontaneously in my conversations with Tea Party members. Many were passionate about what they saw as an opportunity and even a duty to serve their country. Naturally, the path that these individuals found to the public square was different than that of some others, and not every person in America begins with the advantages that many Tea Party members enjoyed. Nevertheless, when I spoke with Sarah, she articulated a story that I believe would resonate with many Americans, as well as others who are integral to this political culture:

Interviewer: You mentioned a sense of sort of growing up with an idea that your voice can be heard. Where does that come from?

Sarah: I think because a lot of the founders' writings and a lot of the big moments in our history came, come from people standing up, you know? My parents were really involved in the civil rights movement, and they used to live in D.C., and we grew up, in particular, in my family, we grew up with their stories and their photographs from marches and things like that. [...]

There's so many instances in America's history of the people saying, "No, this is the way we want it to be," and then the government followed their, the people's, opinion, rather than the people following the government's opinions of how things should be [...]. I just think there's just story after story from the founding onward you know, in very recent history too, where this has happened. So, it's not just stories, its history. It's like things that have actually happened, so you can point backwards and say, "We did it there, why can't we do it here?"

Not every person I interviewed was so articulate, but many were equally confident about the value and morality of their efforts. To date, the Tea Party has been something of an unusual social movement, but the experiences that individuals described were not explicitly ideological,

nor were they linked to obvious demographic traits. In this final chapter I will address the findings of my interview data and web analysis, along with certain limitations of the study. I will conclude with some of the ways that the public imperative aligns with and builds on existing research, and suggest some possible directions for future research.

Primary Findings

In this dissertation I explored how individual Tea Party members talked about their experiences in the movement, as well as how they perceived and used both traditional and new media to pursue their objectives. Broadly, the evidence suggests that the core components of the public imperative were vividly present in individuals' personal narratives about joining and participating in the Tea Party movement. Responding to open-ended questions and minimal prompting, individuals routinely, enthusiastically spoke about the importance of connecting with like-minded others, the symbolic power of speaking out, and the identity-driven goals of pressuring leaders. These themes emerged in conversations with Tea Party members all across the country, and with many types of participants, from first-time activists to seasoned political organizers. In terms of media, they reported mixed but mostly wary attitudes toward traditional news outlets, and eagerly described successes using new media tools to form groups and stay connected. Within these broad strokes, specific patterns and themes offered a closer look at how the public imperative functioned for the Tea Party specifically, and how both traditional media and new media fell short of the civic engagement expectations that members brought to the public square.

In Chapter Three, I asked whether and how the principles of the public imperative that I proposed in Chapter One actually appeared in members' descriptions of their experiences in the Tea Party movement. To do so, I developed the first of three Research Questions:

RQ1: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members invoke or echo the three public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back? If so, how do they talk about these experiences?

In virtually every interview I conducted, the principles of the public imperative constituted critical elements in individuals' experiences of civic engagement. Members emphasized different parts of their experience, and each had a personal path into the movement. Whether implicit or explicit, however, each of the three premises of the public imperative appeared repeatedly and emphatically throughout the discourse. In terms of "meeting up," members frequently described the experience of connecting with others as a profound transformative experience. It was common for members to begin their personal narratives by reporting deep feelings of frustration and isolation, in large part based on their consumption of news media. According to many people I spoke with, this anxiety increased during the last years of President Bush's second term and reached a crescendo over the perceived fecklessness of John McCain's presidential campaign in 2008 and the subsequent election of Barack Obama. Many individuals reported that connecting with like-minded others facilitated a huge shift in their outlook about the state of the country. Many echoed the words of Wayne in Arizona, who said he "just couldn't take it anymore" and began urgently looking for a way to participate. Once in contact with others, virtually all members reported a deep feeling of camaraderie, as Andrew in New York did. For him, meeting up was not only a tremendous relief, it also represented a catalyst for activity and engagement: "I felt finally happy because I felt like there were people around me that understood how I felt.... You know, like, 'We're here. Together.' And, you know, you can turn this angst into action."

This powerful individual experience eventually developed into broader forms of networking, such that groups began connecting with other groups nearby, sometimes forming larger coalitions and even sharing resources and expertise statewide or regionally.

The earliest stages of the Tea Party focused primarily on bringing people together for public protests. They connected in order to “speak out,” and they did so with gusto. Directly or indirectly, virtually everyone I interviewed described a profound feeling of liberation that came with “finding our voice.” Members were pointedly frustrated with leaders whom they saw as being out of touch with members’ values, and this helped foster both an ethic of internal discussion and a new priority to talk back to politicians, first metaphorically, then directly. As Sarah in Washington put it:

The only thing I could think of to do, since I wasn’t being listened to by the people who were supposed to be listening, was to try to take it to the public square and see if we could get somebody to listen there.

In developing strategies for bringing their message into public spaces, many Tea Party groups developed rigorous, if loosely organized, processes to deliberate, reach out, and eventually, to begin interacting with political leaders.

In this research, I defined “pushing back” as attempts to directly influence politicians. Tea Party members reveled in such opportunities, casting themselves as rebellious citizens putting their leaders on notice. The broader theme of restoration was also essential to the Tea Party narrative: members did not merely wish to upset the current corrupt order, but to restore America to an idealized version of cultural stability and propriety that so many of them recalled from their youth. Groups varied in their levels of expertise and capacity for pushing back, but virtually every group had at least a symbolic mission to change the country in this way. Rick in

Arizona, co-founder of one of the most active groups I encountered, captured this urge to move beyond a protest phase and start pushing back when he said:

We're organizing behind the scenes, trying to figure out what is the most effective way that we can use our members to make the most amount of impact as possible. As opposed to just making noise, what can we do behind the scenes to actually create a difference?

In many cases, this move toward more active engagement followed a growing realization that speaking out, on its own, did not guarantee the movement's desired outcomes. This suggested, at least in a general way, a sense of the public imperative as a process that developed in stages.

The similarity of these themes across Tea Party members' responses suggested that they shared a common ethic about civic engagement. To a degree, this was a conscious and strategic effort: across the board, the Tea Party members and groups I spoke with were remarkably congruent in their messaging and their general approach. It was clear that, for a variety of reasons, groups were adopting very similar agendas. For example, every Tea Party group I spoke with had its own set of "core principles" that included some combination of "free markets," "fiscal responsibility," and "Constitutionally limited government." This tight coordination was useful for groups to share and amplify their message, while sidestepping socially divisive issues such as religion and abortion. More broadly, however, the similarities among their personal experiences, and the coherence in the public imperative path that all of them were following did not strike me as merely a messaging strategy. The individual stories that people told me were too distinctive to be coordinated, and yet highly congruent in their structure and implications. The "core principles" of the Tea Party were the message of the movement, but the public imperative was the process that individuals were experiencing as they felt their way forward. The commonality among them seemed to me to be spontaneous and genuine.

In Chapter Four, I explored Tea Party attitudes about traditional and digital media, and the ways that these may or may not have supported their public imperative goals. For this chapter, I developed the following Research Question:

RQ2: In describing their political experiences and motivations, do Tea Party members talk about traditional news media and digital media, either generally or in relation to the Tea Party? If so, how do they describe these types of media in the context of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back?

Despite the urgency of their public imperative goals, most Tea Party members with whom I spoke felt they were not able to effectively convey their messages in traditional media. This was not surprising, as many social movements experience similar challenges. Members offered several distinct media critiques, and they reported pursuing alternative approaches to media, most commonly by using multiple sources, conducting independent “research,” and turning to digital media. Like other social movements in recent years, the Tea Party began to rely on new media tools and platforms (e.g. email, websites, social media, etc.) to propagate their messages. I asked members to elaborate on these critiques and alternatives, and examined their stories to understand how their media usage intersected specifically with their public imperative goals.

In terms of media critiques, many members said traditional media misrepresented the Tea Party, that media were biased, and that in some cases media deliberately tried to undermine the movement. Misrepresentation usually centered on media claims that members were racist or ignorant, and that the Tea Party was motivated primarily by resentment and anger. While many such critiques by media observers were based on evidence (see Parker & Barreto, 2013; Skocpol & Williamson, 2013; Zernike, 2010), members across the country spontaneously and emphatically disavowed these assertions. Many were personally offended by such claims and cited them as evidence that media outlets were intentionally misrepresenting the movement. Several members pointed to specific perceived biases built into news organizations that they

believed hampered the movement's ability to get a fair hearing in the media. Bob in Idaho offered a common assessment, suggesting that news media "are still a dyed-in-the-wool liberal Democrat type of thing. And the national media has villainized the Tea Party.... [...] They look for confrontation and conflict. That's how they make their money." In a few cases, members suggested that media producers were intentionally trying to subvert or "destroy" the Tea Party movement, but this was a relatively rare opinion. In general, there was a broad sense that media presented a distorted picture of reality and were, for the most part, detrimental to the movement's goals.

It was common for Tea Party members to describe various alternative strategies they were pursuing in order to avoid relying on traditional media. Many sincerely wished to develop a better understanding of the world and to communicate more effectively. Several members told me they followed multiple different media sources in order to avoid media bias and maintain a broader, more accurate view of the world. Nevertheless, most of them fell back on Fox News as the best or only source available for "fair and balanced" news coverage. Many members said they conducted their own research, looking for alternative sources online in order to maintain a better grasp on society and its challenges. When speaking about specific sources, however, they generally mentioned a relatively narrow field of conservative and strongly ideological sources (e.g. Glenn Beck, W. Cleon Skousen, and other conservative media groups). Still, they were proud to engage in alternative media practices and positioned themselves as authorities within their own networks. As Ellen in Arizona put it, their friends and family would:

...come to us for verification of some stories that they hear. Because we might be the only people who are plugged in enough [...] to take responsibility to do the research to understand whether something is or is not true [...]. We're kind of journalists in our own way.

The other common alternative strategy that members mentioned was the use of basic digital tools (e.g. email, Facebook, Twitter, websites, and free online or telephone conferencing services). These were generally more useful for coordinating meetings than specifically influencing the media or developing original content. It was clear, though, that members were relying heavily on basic digital tools in the early stages of the movement, and that many felt these would help them achieve their broadest goals.

Finally, I examined the ways that Tea Party members talked about traditional and digital media to see if they were using them in support of the public imperative goals that were clearly so important. Although I could not ask this question directly, my analysis suggested that there were some valuable but limited benefits of traditional media, but that ultimately digital media were far more effective for the movement. Traditional media did play a key a role in the movement's history: perhaps the most widely recognized spark for the Tea Party movement was CNBC host Rick Santelli's 2009 "rant" criticizing government programs during the mortgage crisis. In addition, Fox News and conservative talk radio hosts helped build awareness of the movement in its early stages, with Fox going so far as to host nationwide televised Tea Party Tax Day events on April 15, 2009 (Media Matters, 2009). While this coverage was obviously useful in motivating individuals to meet up with others, the members with whom I spoke generally felt that traditional media denied them a real voice in political culture; moreover, there was little or no evidence in these interviews of members using traditional media to push back on politicians directly.

By contrast, digital media were exceedingly valuable to the movement, primarily in facilitating the widespread meeting up and formation of groups that took place starting in 2009. Digital media allowed members to find one another via the web, to stay in touch via email, and

to debate issues via social media. According to Janel in Massachusetts, the internet was “absolutely critical” to the movement:

It became pretty evident we needed to put together some sort of official organization [...]. Do a website, get a Facebook page.... We just sent out emails to everyone who had signed up with us [and said] ‘Here are a couple of meeting times, come and voice your opinion.’

In terms of pushing back, probably the most complex of the public imperative goals, there was little that traditional media could do for the Tea Party directly, but digital media allowed members to pressure politicians with email campaigns, surveys, and comments at politicians’ official sites.

Overall, Tea Party members had mixed, but mostly negative attitudes toward traditional media. They were wary of most mainstream news outlets, and they ultimately relied most on Fox News and other ideologically conservative sources, even if they sampled across a range of sources. Digital media were extremely effective in the early stages for helping individuals connect and form groups; however, few members talked about building more sophisticated tools or developing more professional technological capacity. In the context of both traditional and new media, what worked very well in the earliest stages of the movement offered less utility as the movement’s goals became more complex and direct.

Chapter Five shifted the focus from individual members’ attitudes to a web analysis of three key Tea Party websites. The objective was to examine whether and how the public imperative and media attitudes that members described in interviews were being manifested in certain prominent digital media sites. For this chapter, I developed the following Research Question:

RQ3: Do specific websites of leading Tea Party groups employ messages, features, and links that reflect the public imperative premises of meeting up, speaking out, and pushing back on political power? If so, how do these

elements facilitate these activities and how do they limit them?

Drawing on concepts and methodology from research in digital civic engagement, I analyzed the websites of three organizations: Tea Party Patriots, a national group focused on organizing; Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots, a large local-level group based in Arizona; and Tea Party News Network, a self-styled news source targeted at Tea Party members. I examined these sites in terms of three important constituent elements: their thematic content, the digital features they offered, and links out to other organizations. Each of these elements was fundamental in shaping what kind of communication site producers were making available to users. Building on the priorities that members described in Chapter Three, I first analyzed sites in the context of the public imperative's three main principles. Then, drawing on themes that emerged in Chapter Four, I analyzed the sites in the context of media critiques, media alternatives, and media and the public imperative.

Generally speaking, the Tea Party Patriots and Greater Phoenix Tea Party Patriots sites offered users relatively useful content to support the public imperative goals of meeting up and, to a somewhat lesser degree, of speaking out. Although pushing back was a high priority for members I spoke with, this type of practice was limited or not visibly present at these websites during this period. The two Tea Party Patriots sites were similar in their basic structure and objectives. At the national-level site, TeaPartyPatriots.org, there was a strong emphasis on guiding users to form their own groups; lists of groups by state were available with contact information for regional coordinators from the national Tea Party Patriots organization. Similarly, PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com allowed people to form local groups, and a few volunteer coordinators seemed to offer help as members first registered. The national site had a single, contiguous user forum, the "Patriot Feed," where members who had registered for the site could

comment and reply to one another. The local site in Phoenix included a few areas for comments, and automatically highlighted some of these comments on the front page. In general, these were the primary functions of these two sites, along with a news feed of conservative links, and small amounts of original content. The Tea Party Patriots site aggressively promoted a call-from-home campaign in a partnership with a conservative get-out-the-vote organization, but this was not original Tea Party content. The Tea Party News Network offered very little in terms of the public imperative, instead positioning itself primarily as an alternative news source.

In terms of media attitudes, the three sites together did relatively little to actively engage users in media critiques, alternative practices, or media-driven public imperative activities. There was a limited amount of informal media critique at the two Tea Party Patriots site; producers or users occasionally mentioned problems with media bias (in particular around the issues of Benghazi and election fraud), but there was very little active critique at this time. The Tea Party News Network was nominally an “alternative” media site, although it primarily functioned as an alternative to “mainstream media” as defined by conservatives. The site borrowed heavily from news media formats (e.g. opinion columns, interviews, low-budget election night coverage), although its primary function seemed to be simply linking to other conservative news sources. The site included only limited original content in the form of editorials, many of which were cross-posted elsewhere at conservative media sites, and none of which featured robust independent research or a non-ideological orientation. None of the three sites revealed producers or users engaging in systematic analysis of media, nor the development of independent or alternative media systems beyond basic linking, usually to friendly affiliates.

There were a few notable if limited differences between the strategies of producers and users, and also in the tone of thematic content before and after the election. Based on the sites

and how they functioned during the period of this study, it seemed producers had a very narrow sense of their obligation to users: they offered a set of basic tools (e.g. an email address, individual and group profiles, a forum), links to a handful of online training resources (typically by established conservative interest groups such as Americans For Prosperity), and some general content. Beyond this, there was little to be gained for users of the websites in terms of organizing, recruiting, planning, or disseminating messages. Tea Party News Network, in fact, did not seem to offer any tools to support members connecting directly with one another. Some individual producers and moderators maintained a regular online presence at the Tea Party Patriots sites, but in general there was relatively limited engagement between producers and users. For their part, users initiated some basic networking, information-sharing, and deliberation activities. These were limited, however, to what users could accomplish with basic email addresses and comment forums. For users, the primary function of the sites seemed to be as a low-maintenance contact resource—more like a bulletin board than a highly interactive community—and as a resource for links to familiar conservative news sites.

As the 2012 election approached, there was a modest increase in user activity at the two Tea Party Patriots sites, and all the sites focused on what would prove to be incorrect assumptions about “skewed” poll numbers they assumed were being presented by mainstream media outlets to depress the level of support for Mitt Romney. After the election, all of the sites provided a certain amount of space to commiserate over Romney’s loss, to speculate on voter fraud, to lament the further destruction of the country, and, eventually, to start encouraging one another for the fights ahead. Ironically, since the bulk of the post-election content consisted of dire predictions about the country’s fate and anger over political corruption, the tone reflected precisely the kind of content that had driven many Tea Party members to engage with one

another in the first place. Thus, rather than enabling a genuine public imperative strategy to unfold, these sites were recreating the kind of narrow content that left so many individuals isolated, anxious, and frustrated at the end of the 2008 election.

In summary, the evidence and analysis in this dissertation suggest that the public imperative is potentially a useful framework through which to examine civic engagement and political communication. The three core principles described in this study were clearly important to a wide range of individuals who were deeply engaged in one of the most high-profile social movements of the last decade. Beginning from a state of isolation and anxiety, these individuals reported an almost overwhelming feeling of joy and camaraderie when they met up with like-minded others. Subsequently, they took to the public square to raise their voices and similarly felt a tremendous surge of pride and community; many of them emphasized the historical continuity of their protests and their patriotic duty of speaking out. As their experience and their movement grew, members discovered that their voices alone were not sufficient to effect the change they wanted to see. In response, they began pushing back on political leaders directly, in the hopes of restoring what they saw as traditional American values. Within complex personal and political discourses, these narratives appeared repeatedly, as sincere testaments to the transformative experience that these people had gone through. After engaging with the public imperative process, many Tea Party members had become highly motivated, optimistic, and dedicated members of widespread regional and national networks for civic engagement.

As they encountered traditional media in a public imperative mindset, individuals I spoke with were mostly wary, disaffected, and suspicious about how they were being represented. After an initial burst of attention, members saw traditional media as mostly irrelevant, if not hostile. A few members still believed news media should serve the public, but these members reported

feeling a sense of loss and betrayal at how their movement was represented. This motivated several of them to try and broaden the news sources they consumed, in order to find “the truth.” Many tried to do additional research online, striving to be more critical and discerning. For virtually everyone I spoke with, the basic communication tools of the internet were tremendously valuable in building and sustaining the foundations of the movement. For these Tea Party members, traditional media were a problem at best, while digital media offered them effective tools and greater hope that they could grow their ranks and expand their power.

In examining key websites within the movement, it became clear that while the internet was very effective in bringing individuals together, the sites ultimately offered little beyond the basics. During a critical presidential election, and with the movement’s credibility at stake, the three sites of analysis followed relatively low-impact strategies for engaging members. None of the sites matched the intensity, effectiveness, and sense of community that individual members had described in their first experiences with their local groups. During the 2012 election, members could meet online, and engage in some political banter, but there were no sustained online projects that manifested the energy and enthusiasm of the public imperative articulated by individuals. Alternative news and information amounted to links to ideologically compatible sites offering familiar critiques of political opponents. For this movement, at this period, the sites I analyzed largely failed to fulfill the promise of digital media and the public imperative.

Tea Party members were acting on deep-seated impulses, and doing so in ways that reflected their immediate, lived experiences. At their best, people were engaging in cultural practices, connecting through rituals, and discovering identities that made them part of a broader national story. They clearly yearned to take a role in shaping their own political destiny. They wanted news media to help them, and when they felt rejected by traditional sources, they

embraced new digital tools. In that new space, they confronted limitations of resources and expertise, and they risked reverting to a state of anxiety and frustration similar to that from which they had come. This story is not an unusual one for social movements; it has certainly played out before, and likely will do so in the future. Based on this examination using the lens of the public imperative, however, there are newly illuminated phenomena to explore, and the potential for more productive research ahead.

Limitations of the Study

I designed this dissertation as an exploratory inquiry into what I believed to be an extant but little-examined social construct in American political culture. Even with the strong evidence that emerged from the interviews I conducted, it was inevitable that individuals would encounter and experience the public imperative in different ways. As such, the subject of this research is a contingent and situational concept. There are a number of limitations to address, both to reiterate details about the design of the study and to look ahead in developing subsequent research. Three components of the study deserve a closer look, in particular: the Tea Party as an object of study; methodological challenges of qualitative, in-depth interviews and web analysis; and the position of the author of the study.

I selected the Tea Party as an object of study for reasons described in Chapter Two. In short, it was a successful, high-profile movement commanding a tremendous amount of media attention and, in some cases at least, exerting observable political influence. In addition, it was a rare chance to study an active social movement in person, as it evolved. Still, the Tea Party was somewhat unusual compared to other protest movements. Scholars have identified a number of properties that distinguish most members of the Tea Party from other populations. In general,

Tea Party members are older, better educated, and more affluent than the average American (Skocpol & Williamson, 2013; Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010). In addition, most Tea Party members are staunch conservatives, with views on race and other social issues that put them well to the right of their fellow citizens (Parker & Barreto, 2013; Gallup, 2010; Montopoli, 2012). Some research suggests that far-right conservatives see the world differently than others, favoring highly patriotic language and authoritarian worldviews (Lakoff, 2004; Westen, 2007). Any of these factors could help explain evidence within the study, from the high levels of anxiety based on consumption of right-wing media, to a heightened appreciation for traditional, simplified narratives of American history. The sense of shared identity with wealthy, white, male figures from our national mythology may come more easily to those who continue to benefit from privileged social structures. By contrast, the fact that more members are older may limit experience and facility with more complex computer systems that might better serve the pushing back function of the public imperative. These are all points to keep in mind when drawing conclusions, and they suggest several ways to expand future research. Nevertheless, based on my experiences talking with Tea Party members around the country, and comparing their enthusiastic, spontaneous statements with strategic messaging from the conservative political establishment, I believe that these individuals and websites still offer a highly relevant and valuable starting point for this research.

Next, it is worth considering the method of qualitative in-depth interviews, and the inherent challenges it presents. As suggested in Chapter Two, this method is valuable for exploratory work such as this, and there are techniques by which we mitigate some of the more obvious problems (e.g. using semi-structured interview instruments, inductive coding, and so on). Still, the method limits the number of subjects that can reasonably be included in the study,

introducing the possibility that data will not capture more patterned concepts or contradictions. To mitigate this, I contacted more than three-dozen individuals in order to approach or achieve the saturation point for concepts I could capture (Francis et al., 2009; Guest et al., 2006). In addition, I interviewed Tea Party members in sixteen states across five regions of the country. Still, it is possible that my interview subjects, many of whom were initially wary due to unsatisfactory experiences with reporters, may have projected a more positive attitude about the movement than they actually felt. Some of the interviews were conducted on site, in small groups or in front of friends and colleagues; this also may have colored how some people presented themselves. Based on the detail of individuals' reports, and the unbridled enthusiasm that many showed (e.g. one interview subject talked freely for well over two hours), I believe this is a lesser concern. A more pressing question would be whether the categories and themes that I captured in the interviews were sufficient for subsequently analyzing the websites. To avoid a too-narrow field of vision, I analyzed the sites relying a bit more on the broader categories (e.g. meeting up, media critiques) than on the specific categories (e.g. meeting up as groups, media critiques about bias). Still, the connection between concepts that individuals raised at public events and concepts that producers used to guide website design may need to be explored more deeply in subsequent rounds of research.

It is also possible that the discourse within the Tea Party shifted between the time I concluded my interviews in June 2011 and when I captured website data in November 2012. During that period, the public objectives of Tea Party leaders and figures did not appear to change dramatically, but of course the movement was engaged in series of ongoing political battles, locally and nationally, and the ebb and flow of participants will alter the makeup of any group. Two of the websites I studied had originally launched shortly after the movement began.

By the time of the presidential election, one (TeaPartyPatriots.org) had undergone a revision to streamline its appearance, but this did not significantly change the content or functionality; the other (PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com) remained largely unchanged. The third site, Tea Party News Network, launched just a week or so before the election and positioned itself differently, representing a more strategic and institutional face of the movement, the D.C. “insider” element that several local-level members had criticized. During the entire presidential campaign season, I continued to follow the Tea Party closely in the news and online. Even in light of the candidacy of Tea Party-favorite Michele Bachmann, nothing directly suggested that there was a major sea change in the movement’s approach.

Another limitation to consider is that the web represents only one dimension in which important discourse and activity might be taking place within a social movement. Websites potentially offer a useful view of producers’ and users’ strategies and priorities for communication. However, in the kind of close web analysis I conducted here, there is a potential risk that this very small set of sites was comprised of outliers in some way. Presumably, some other local Tea Party websites were more adept at engaging their users in direct action than PhoenixTeaParty.ning.com; likewise, some other sites were probably not as good. It is impossible to say, based on this data, where this site might lie on such a spectrum. I selected a variety of sites to try to capture different approaches to digital media, but the disparity between these sites might complicate the interpretation of data. Tea Party Patriots is sui generis within the movement, and Tea Party News Network had only recently launched when I was collecting data. These sites were each important in their own way within their various Tea Party networks, but their differences do introduce more variability into the study. While the sites are different, they

can not be viewed as representative of the entire Tea Party movement online. Again, these are familiar tradeoffs in qualitative analysis, but they do represent real limitations.

I would also note that a great deal of Tea Party discourse was taking place on Facebook and in Twitter accounts. These high-traffic channels were important to the movement in a variety of ways, and it seems clear that many individuals who interact with Tea Party sources online do so primarily or even exclusively through these tools. Producers and users of the sites I examined noted the importance of Facebook and Twitter to the movement in general. Though a thorough analysis of such content was beyond the scope of this study, there is certainly more work to be done on how the movement operates in these online spaces.

Finally, in qualitative analysis, it is important to address the perspective of the observer and author. Naturally, all investigators bring their own cultural frameworks into a research project, and they should be aware of their own worldviews to the extent possible. In meeting and interviewing Tea Party members around the country, we undoubtedly approached each other with certain assumptions. I was keenly aware of my position as a university researcher and even as a Seattle resident—both of which were pointed out to me more than once, although usually in a lighthearted way. On the other hand, being a White man meant that I could blend in quite easily with most of these crowds. There are particular challenges in studying practices that incorporate formal or informal kinds of rituals: as much as possible, it is important to interpret events within their own context and to produce empirical data that can be compared with other data (Schudson, 2001; Lukes, 1977). To the extent possible, my research colleague and I made a dedicated effort to separate out any pre-existing judgments about the Tea Party before going into the field, both as scholars and as political partisans. The process of developing open-ended questions, an

effective interview instrument, and the required consent documentation all helped to develop what I believe was a fair and open-minded channel for communication.

Nevertheless, it would be impossible to say that the content of the interviews and website analysis had no effect on me; positive or negative, I felt this process acutely. In several cases, I wholeheartedly agreed with members' statements about the need for broader participation and the promise of a political system predicated on citizen involvement. In other cases, I found myself in strong disagreement with statements that shaded toward political exclusivity, and with information sources that traded on ideological appeals while positioning themselves as neutral or non-partisan. Over the course of the project, I learned the value of withholding and minimizing my own reactions, in order to better hear and understand the attitudes of those with whom I was interacting. This allowed me to connect with subjects as individuals motivated by their own complex personal stories and experiences. Although the content in this study was often highly politically charged, I was committed to showing my data and findings in what I believe to be an assiduously fair and judicious way. Remaining aware of these dynamics will be equally important in future research into the public imperative, where I would expect to encounter a wide range of political views. My own political attitudes will inform my scholarship directly or indirectly, depending on the situation; after this experience, I understand much better how I can develop more useful research by continually striving for openness, transparency, accuracy, and validity.

Implications and Future Directions

In Chapter One, I mapped out a range of scholarly perspectives that informed the early stages of this exploratory research. With some evidence that the public imperative does seem to

operate in certain civic engagement contexts, I can address how this might build on existing research. I believe there are two primary bodies of scholarship to which the public imperative might contribute. The first is political communication, where this work could potentially help scholars conceptualize “the public” in a more grounded way. The second relates to the area of politics, culture, and technology, and in particular issues around digital civic engagement, which become increasingly relevant as our means of communication grow ever faster, cheaper, and more pervasive. In addition, I will address the valuable work of a group of scholars at the University of Washington who also focused on key questions about the Tea Party itself.

There is traditionally a strong emphasis in political communication scholarship on two of the three principal players in the political system: political actors and news media. Both of these groups operate in relation to “the public” and often work with long-established assumptions about what or who the public is, its goals, its capabilities, its limits, and so on. Politicians strategically invoke “the people,” based on their own communication objectives (Hart, Jennings & Dixon, 2003). News media typically describe protesters and social movements as deviant or unpatriotic (Di Cicco, 2010; Gitlin, 1980; Jha, 2007), while social movements may mistake the value of news coverage even when it is favorable (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). An analytical framework that bridged the gap between isolated individuals and collective political action could help balance scholars’ view of these three pillars of political communication.

The public imperative can raise the profile of a politically engaged collective by helping decipher the significance of certain behaviors among organized, or organizing, constituencies. Schudson (2001) describes how political practices function as guides to the cultural ideas that drive them, and the public imperative could provide a blueprint to explore certain kinds of communication within emerging social movements: for example, how groups communicate or

fail to communicate with media and politicians, and with what types of consequences. Similarly, Carey's (1988) "ritual" mode of communication addresses the "maintenance of society in time; [...] the representation of shared belief [and] the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (p. 42). The public imperative potentially functions as a ritualized form of political communication available to citizens and individuals; a cultural process that catalyzes public power when representation by politicians and media fails. Carey reaches back to Greek democracy as a "practice of assembly, debate, disputation, and talk" (p. 4) and argues for the discursive, engaged citizen identity as an essential mode of continuity in maintaining our republics. Among his valuable contributions is the definition of communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (p. 23). The "imperative" in the public imperative is about maintaining a concept of "the people" across time, repairing damage done to their sovereign status, and reserving the right to transform their political condition. As a ritual of political communication, the public imperative may be a parsimonious construct for analyzing dynamics of power and influence in political culture.

To illustrate how one might use the public imperative in political communication, I can briefly describe two potential paths of future research. The Tea Party provided a propitious and relevant case for this exploratory study. Having now identified clear and robust public imperative themes in the discourse of the Tea Party, the stage is set for additional research on other social movements featuring more diverse ideological and sociological contexts. There is no shortage of active social movements that have come together to raise their voices and push for change. One of these, the Occupy movement, represented a very different agenda than the Tea Party's, as well as a distinct demographic makeup. Nevertheless, the broad contours of Occupy's actions and intentions were similar: individuals gathered in public spaces, developed sophisticated tactics for

being heard internally and externally, and attempted to push back on social institutions and political leaders. The public imperative model suggests it could be meaningful to ask how individuals felt when they first came together, what happened as they raised their voices, and how the movement did or did not successfully pressure political leaders. Viewing the Occupy experience through the lens of the public imperative would open the door for comparative analyses (with the Tea Party, for example), and could help illuminate issues related to the sharp divide within modern movements between tech-savvy protesters and traditional protesters.

Another potentially constructive approach within political communication would be to examine social movements in different historical periods, asking how the public imperative premises functioned in those specific socio-cultural contexts. For example, looking to the Civil Rights movement as a paragon of civic engagement, the public imperative could help illuminate strategies and tactics that united diverse constituencies in a profoundly complex political moment. The genius of Martin Luther King derived, in part, from his ability to speak out with a wholly integrated public imperative message, one that brought many Americans together in a common purpose, that demanded that silenced voices be heard, and that pushed back fiercely on centuries of ingrained social repression. Analyzing the movement in this framework might renew important questions scholars have already asked, or even raise new ones. A public imperative analysis in an historical case might point toward the value of different types of documentation, sources, or sites of social influence. The process of such an inquiry might emphasize distinct nuances in a case where the successes and limitations of the movement are already a well-established part of the public record.

The second area of scholarship this dissertation addresses is the study of the broad social shift from traditional, top-down media, to a more diverse, complex, and interactive media

paradigm. In particular, the topic of digital civic engagement raises issues that are both urgent and elusive. The mass view of society has evolved to encompass densely linked virtual spaces where nodes and networks constitute relationships of power and influence (Castells, 1996). Scholars can navigate this complexity by maintaining focus on fundamental social uses of technology, that is, the basic human experiences that underpin our digital lives (Yzer & Southwell, 2008). Kimport and Earl (2011) moved toward simplifying the vast scope of online activism by asking a key question: Does the internet allow activists to do the same thing faster, or to do something entirely new? The public imperative offers a way to examine online behavior and the production and use of online tools, evaluating them not simply as structures of connection, but as cultural instruments in a deeper, broader, identity-driven process. In this way, the public imperative also evokes Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber's (2006) model of "collective action spaces," which can be used to map how collective action moves from private motivations to public power. Today, this process is frequently mediated by an array of digital tools and platforms, but these authors situate communication at the core of collective action, an approach that helps scholars "account for the expanding communicative affordances of technology without being premised on technological change..." (p. 32). The public imperative can be used analytically in a similar way, helping to categorize motivations and expectations of users and producers, while remaining flexible enough to accommodate a variety of technologies.

It can be challenging to tease out underlying patterns of human behaviors and ideas in interactive spaces. This is complicated when scholars are addressing technical systems designed to facilitate complex behaviors like negotiating social power in politics and government. To manage this, Lievrouw (2011) developed a framework she called "mediated mobilization," which addressed: "the nature and distribution of power in communities and societies, and the

promotion of [...] widespread, direct involvement of citizens in both political processes and governance” (p. 149). The public imperative is oriented toward similar relationships. Lievrouw identified “mobilization” as “the process in which people convert their collective concerns into collective actions to bring about change,” further adding that it is “arguably the most important, and the most problematic, aspect of social movement development” (p. 154). This is akin to the culminating dimension of the public imperative, “pushing back.” Hierarchical organizations led by charismatic individuals with specific agendas are no longer the best or only approach. In new social movements, Lievrouw suggests: “mobilization is accomplished by cultivating collective identities, shared values, and a sense of belonging among people linked in diffuse, decentralized social and community networks” (p. 155). In much the same way, the public imperative is a framework for evaluating how individuals move into collectives, online and otherwise, and what becomes possible in those spaces. It can be a cultural point of reference, a social construct that persists even through periods of rapid transformation in communication technology. As such, the public imperative can operate across diverse and evolving contexts of individual experiences, networked communities, and democratic social change.

I would also like to acknowledge important research by other scholars at the University of Washington who engaged with the complexities and contradictions of the Tea Party movement during this period, and from whom I learned a great deal. The first two are Dr. Christopher Parker and his co-author Dr. Matt Barreto, who together wrote an essential guide for understanding this conservative movement in its broader historical and social context. The second is Dr. Damon Di Cicco, my research colleague and collaborator during a long period of planning, data-collection, and analysis. These scholars approach the Tea Party in ways that are distinct from my own work, but extremely valuable in understanding this political phenomenon.

Parker and Barreto's (2013) text is a broad analysis of the Tea Party, specifically identifying it as a modern iteration of reactionary conservative movements that date back to the nineteenth century. The authors mapped the conceptual antecedents of the Tea Party and explored to what degree the current Tea Party aligns with traditional conservatism, as well as the ways that certain more extreme conservative views are expressed. In particular the authors found that much of the economic and political anxiety expressed by Tea Party members appears to be rooted primarily in antipathy toward President Obama, his policies, and the cultural shifts that these represent (p. 62–65). Throughout their detailed analysis, they demonstrate how the ideas and attitudes that motivated Tea Party members tended to be more politically strident than those of other conservatives. While much of the activity of Tea Party members was situated in discourses of patriotism and freedom, these were accompanied to a significant degree by a restrictive view of democratic inclusion and liberty for others, particularly for racial minorities (p. 238–240). Parker and Barreto make their case that, for many members of the Tea Party, the contours of reactionary conservatism were salient and influential.

Much of this is recognizable in my own experience working with members of the Tea Party directly. To a significant extent, the people I spoke with harbored deep feelings about the state of the country and what they saw as its impending collapse; they felt intense anxiety about corruption in government and its subsequent illegitimacy; and, in some instances (though not all), they expressed extreme attitudes toward political actors they saw as existential threats, specifically liberals, Democrats, and undocumented workers. Moreover, Parker and Barreto's data and analysis illuminate an important distinction between narratives advanced for public communications, and equally potent narratives that animated this movement below the surface.

Overall, their work strikes me as accurate, insightful, and extremely valuable for understanding both the movement itself and broader trends in American political culture.

Parker and Barreto's approach was distinct from my own, but I also perceived a surface and sub-surface dynamic. My research showed that—whatever the ideological position of individuals may have been—there were also underlying concepts that motivated their actions as they moved from isolation toward political efficacy. These imperatives were structured around civic engagement generally, separate from the ideological frameworks that were obviously also in play. Parker and Barreto successfully make the case that conservative psychology and ideology is a motivating factor and, in their words, a “source” of the movement. In addition, my research found that individuals were tapping into historical narratives that are likely to be more broadly available, across lines of political ideology. That is, though the Tea Party may have been motivated by cultural anxiety and antipathy toward President Obama, my data suggest the mechanisms they used to meet up, speak out, and push back were not inherent to reactionary conservatism itself.

As such, what I encountered was the Tea Party's version of the public imperative, which would not be animated by the same concepts as that of another movement. This raises an important potential benefit of the public imperative framework: by looking beneath ideological discourses, we should be able to identify core functions of civic engagement that would be available to a broader range of political actors, especially including groups that struggle to establish legitimate claims to public identity.

I was also fortunate to work with Dr. Damon Di Cicco, my research colleague on this project. Di Cicco (2013) also approached his analysis of the Tea Party with an analytical eye toward the use of nationalist and patriotic discourse, both at the individual level and in news. The

power of such discourse was clear in the interviews we conducted, and Di Cicco creatively linked the personal expressions that we heard during our interviews first with broader symbolic behaviors at public events, and then, significantly, with the discursive construction of the movement in news media. According to his analysis, the Tea Party set out to construct itself as a legitimate movement within a strongly nationalist conceptual framework, and were subsequently driven by specific motives to pursue actions within the same patriotic, but notably insular, posture. This further reflects Parker and Barreto's (2013) findings. The public events of the Tea Party strongly reflected individuals' attitudes through symbolic and discursive content, such as images, messages, and behaviors that reified certain patriotic themes. Finally, Di Cicco addressed how this potent nationalist discourse may have influenced news media coverage of the Tea Party compared to other high-profile social movements in the same decade. Results indicated that the challenges faced by all social movements in news media (e.g. dismissive and demeaning framing) were still present for the Tea Party, but that the Tea Party was more frequently described in positively inflected, nationalist, and patriotic terms.

There were, of course, similarities in the work that Dr. Di Cicco and I undertook. The focus on nation-centric discourses in this particular social movement reflects an emphasis in both studies regarding the power of national identity not only to convey a deeply meaningful sense of self, but also, in certain circumstances, to inform and guide certain types of political behavior. Also, both studies emphasized an exploration of the dynamics between the Tea Party and news media, albeit with different perspectives and methodologies. Di Cicco's work and my own attempt to untangle the role that national identity can play in shaping political action and civic engagement, and, even as our specific projects diverged, we both acknowledged the unique opportunity to explore these ideas first-hand as they developed in real-world sites.

In addition to certain similarities, there are also points of distinction and complementarity between Di Cicco's research and this study. His work engages the movement at the point when it is moving into the public sphere, constructing itself in events and visual rhetorics, and then, significantly, confronting its own further construction in news media. My own study examines digital spaces rather than public events, although several similar principles apply, for example the use of messages, symbols, and modes of expression. In concert with Di Cicco, our research shows a good deal about the development of the Tea Party between early 2009 and late 2012, along with what we hope is a useful mapping of key challenges facing social movements in contemporary political culture.

I hope eventually to test the public imperative in comparative work examining relationships between social movements internationally. Over the last two decades, as digital technology has reshaped global communication, political activists around the world have gained access to an array of online platforms and software applications. Some data suggest that during this period protests and protest movements have become, if not more frequent, then at least more visible to national and international audiences (Beaumont, 2013; Stuster, 2013). As an example, consider the diversity of social, political, geographic, and technological factors involved in the events many know as the "Arab Spring." Howard and Parks (2012) suggest that communication scholars are particularly well positioned to study these protests, and that this field will require a balanced view of individual and comparative analyses to more fully appreciate the "subtle, often unexpected ways, in which social media, traditional media, and political culture interact" (p. 361). The public imperative offers one potentially useful way to organize an inquiry into this complex arena. The model identifies three fundamental assumptions common to virtually all social movements, and invites analysis of the principal actors, their objectives, and their

capacities. Moreover, this approach should be specific enough to identify significant issues within a given object of study, and also flexible enough to accommodate complexity within an individual case or a comparison of cases. The model that I have mapped out in this dissertation is based on broadly shared cultural understandings of U.S. history, but it should be possible to consider the core functions of the public imperative in other national contexts. Across several protest movements of the Arab Spring, for example, it was evident that individuals in countries as diverse as Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere faced similar challenges in coming together, being heard, and achieving their political goals. Likewise, it was clear that digital media played a key role in many of these protests. In fact, the unrestricted nature of digital spaces opens the door to new kinds of networks, affiliations, and shared meanings both within and across national borders. Applying a public imperative framework to a diverse and densely interconnected field of social movements could provide a structured starting point to compare, for example: motivations of participants; similarities and differences in their cultural narratives; processes and limitations based on social patterns and governmental regulation; types of internal and external vocality; and successful or unsuccessful strategies for exerting political pressure. At each stage, technology and media are implicated, but their significance can remain grounded in the ideas and lived experiences of participants who, broadly speaking, are all making the same kind of journey, beginning from a state of isolation and frustration, moving toward the collective identity of power and political efficacy that comes from assembling a community of action and asserting its public imperative.

Concluding Thoughts

The autumn of 2014 was a season of protest in America. From the torrents of news coverage that began in late summer and persisted into a cold December, three particular photos stood out to me. Taken in three cities, on three different days, together their message seemed as eloquent a description of the public imperative as anything I might conjure. A Colorado high school student stood by the side of the freeway with her friends, smiling and waving at passing cars, showing a brightly lettered sign that read, “There is nothing more patriotic than protest.” In New York City, as furious citizens flooded the chilly streets, a woman in a sea of parkas and knit hats displayed a simple placard, in clean white type on black: “We will not be silent.” In Washington, D.C., on yet another frigid day, a young Black girl bundled up, smiling proudly for the camera, holding a wide piece of poster board with the message: “Sorry for the inconvenience—We are trying to change the world.” Three people among the many thousands who gathered when they felt they must, to be together, to share a collective voice, to be part of a solution. This is the public imperative in action, resonating in messages, symbols, and crowds—alive in the streets, captured by a camera, shared online. Many people understand it instinctively and many will never have to doubt its presence or its potential.

As a scholar and a citizen, I was challenged and deeply gratified to spend time with the people I met in the Tea Party movement. They were earnest, hopeful, deeply committed to their values, and generous in their willingness to sit down and talk politics with a stranger. We met in city parks and coffee shops, community centers and convention centers, rural campgrounds, New York City’s Financial District, and a park in Washington, D.C., just steps away from the U.S. Capitol Building. In some ways, their attitudes defied the media representations by which most people learned about the Tea Party; in other ways, and especially over time, news media got the

story mostly right. They were not a demographically diverse group, but there were many individuals who found themselves taking a leap of faith based on broadly shared American ideals. Over a cold drink on a summer night in Lower Manhattan, Andrew said to me:

I would love to see America get back to where, the people, the true people, are running the country, and they care, and they take the time. [...] They see who their leaders are, and they understand that *they* are the boss, and the politicians report up to them, not vice versa.

The sovereign public, “we the people,” are not of one party, one ideology, or one movement. For Andrew and others, taking an active role in American democracy was urgent and thrilling, and virtually everyone with whom I spoke was emphatic about the crucial need for participation. The Tea Party offered its members a transformative discovery, a new way to experience their political system, and their own identity within it. As in any group of strong partisans, some held ideas that seemed contradictory or convenient. Like most people, they were confident in their values and the facts that resonated with them. Like most people, they stuck to their guns. Because of their generosity, however, I learned more about civic engagement in American politics than I might have by other means and methods.

I believe the United States and other nations have now reached critical junctures on several profoundly important issues, and the need for a deeper understanding of civic engagement is acute. The public imperative can help explain how and why millions of people have turned to collective action in recent years on climate change, on economic inequality, on racial justice, and other issues. As communication technology evolves, the opportunities for civic engagement multiply, and the tools that activists are discovering will naturally influence new social formations. Communication scholars understand the need to engage with protests and social movements on this level, because the instruments we use to connect will shape the connections we create. At the same time, we must stay attuned to the deeper roots that give

meaning to individuals' experience of civic engagement. Responding to the nationwide protests over police killings of Black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow (2014) wrote: "One of the people's greatest strengths in a democracy is the flexing of political muscle and the exercising of political power, through ballots and boot leather. This new activism has the potential to create a new political reality." This is a pervasive idea in American political culture, but there is a great deal more to learn about how each premise of the public imperative functions, and how they may work together to effect social change. Social movements will fail more than they succeed, and the public imperative is a tool for realists: the elements I examined in this dissertation offer no guarantees. Best intentions can founder at any point in the process, and traditional and new media will continue to confound efforts at civic engagement as much as they facilitate it. Nevertheless, there is a potent cultural narrative woven deeply into American national identity, and many people seem to know this instinctively: that communication is the key to living out our public imperative, to engaging in a symbolic process by which "we the people" can, in James Carey's words, transform our reality.

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Appendix

Long Form Interview Instrument

Process

How did you first hear about the tea party? What made you want to get involved in it?

What Tea Party groups do you work with? How does your group work with other Tea Party you know about?

- Do you know about any other Tea Party Groups?

Have you done other political work before?

- [This could include protesting, volunteering for a political party, speaking at city council meetings, writing letters to officials, or any other activities that go beyond voting.]

Participation

Since you got involved with the Tea Party, what have been some of the ways you've participated in it?

- [Where appropriate: Can you tell me a bit about the sign/t-shirt/costume you were carrying/wearing at the rally where we met?]

What issues are you concerned about that the Tea Party is working on?

What makes the Tea Party different from other types of political activities you might have done before?

- [If none: How do you think the Tea Party might be different from other political groups?]

Is your Tea Party group being effective? How so?

What has been the greatest success of the Tea Party so far?

What is something that the Tea Party might be able to do better than it is right now?

Thinking in the long term, what do you think the Tea Party's goals should be?

Is the Tea Party a protest movement? How so? Why/why not?

Effectiveness

How does the Tea Party fit into American history?

- Are there other moments in American history that you think are similar to the Tea Party?
- [Who is your favorite American hero? Why?]

Tell me about what you personally have gotten out of working with the Tea Party?

How do you talk to your friends about the tea party?

- What would you tell someone who was interested in getting involved in the Tea Party?
- What would you tell a friend who was skeptical about the Tea Party?

Fifty years from now, what do you think people will say about the Tea Party?

Media

How are people talking about the Tea Party right now?

- How is the Tea Party being talked about in the media?
- Are they getting it right? Is it fair?

Do you think the Tea Party can get its message out in the media?

- How could it do a better job of getting its message out?

What news sources do you trust? Why?

Demographics

How would you describe yourself politically?

What is your profession?

Are you over thirty? ... over fifty?

Does your family make over \$50,000 per year? ... over \$100,000 per year?

What's the highest level of education that you've completed?

Anything you would like to add?

Short Form Interview Instrument

Process

How did you first hear about the Tea Party? What made you want to get involved in it?

Participation

What makes the Tea Party different from other political groups?

Is the Tea Party a protest movement?

Effectiveness

How do you talk to your friends about the Tea Party?

Media

Do you think the Tea Party can get its message out in the media?

Demographics

How would you describe yourself politically?

Anything you would like to add?