Digital Opportunity Structures: Spheres, Fields, Networks, and Digital Mobilization

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Abstract

In this essay, I develop the concept of ‘digital opportunity structures’ that integrates various theories of spheres, fields, and networks to provide an analytical framework for understanding digital mobilization. Through a preliminary empirical analysis of Bernie Sanders’s 2016 bid for the presidency, and the digital mobilization it was premised upon, I argue that the candidate successfully navigated and drew symbolic resources from the civil sphere, a culturally-defined and institutionally regulated domain of democratic solidarity, capitalized on his field position, and took strategic symbolic and social action through networks of campaign staffers with particular sets of skills and technologies with particular affordances. Taken together, this paper argues that features of the political environment shaped by spheres, fields, and networks together constitute the digital opportunity structure that a candidate faces, and must navigate, in order to realize digital mobilization in the service of her electoral goals.
In early 2016, the Bernie Sanders campaign for president released a campaign ad titled, simply, *America*. The ad consisted of troubadours Simon and Garfunkel’s classic 1960s song of the same name played over a video of old and young, heterosexual and LGBTQ people, farmers and young creatives, moms and dads, carrying out their daily lives of work and care and participation in the political process. The implicit message seemed to be that the Sanders campaign is made up of ordinary Americans, and the candidate, his policies, and, ultimately, his presidency, would represent them. Perhaps because these images are so easily associated with deep-seated ideals many Americans have of democracy as being about ‘the people’ (Alexander, 2010, Morone, 1998), it is easy to forget that the vision of America contained in the ad is a particularistic, not universalistic, representation of what the country is, and ultimately should be. There was, for instance, nary a banker to be found in Sanders’s particular version of America.

Critiques aside, it was clear that this ad resonated with a lot of people, and I suspect among Democrats that were Sanders and Clinton supporters alike. *America* was viewed over 3.5 million times on YouTube and 1.6 million times on Facebook at the time of this writing. It received widespread acclaim in the political press, with laudatory headlines such as Esquire’s declaration that “This Bernie Ad May Be the Best Political Commercial I’ve Ever Seen.” The digital mobilization around Sanders extended beyond this one ad, however. The Sanders campaign set nearly every record for digital fundraising during the 2016 cycle, including raising $54 million in 2015 and $8 million in 48 hours after the candidate’s NH primary victory.

*America* and the digital interaction and fundraising that it, the candidate, and the campaign inspired raises a set of issues that are at the heart of this paper, which broadly
asks: what shapes the opportunities for, and ultimately the success of, digital mobilization? In this speculative essay I argue that, despite the candidate’s faltering in the delegate count, Sanders has been successful precisely because his rhetoric and message encode a set of moral claims deeply in accord with normative understandings of democracy and narratives of identity that resonated with his supporters and others both within the Democratic Party and ideologically aligned with it. These moral claims and identity narratives are powerful because of Sanders’s position in a field of candidates and their amplification by the legacy press. These claims and narratives are given force and made material by being artfully incorporated into media forms such as digital ads by Sanders’s campaign staffers who perceived the opportunity to both mobilize supporters and fashion new ones through digital and social media distribution.

In the theoretical terms of this paper, Sanders successfully navigated and drew symbolic resources from the civil sphere, a culturally-defined and institutionally regulated domain of democratic solidarity (Alexander, 2006, 31), capitalized on his field position, and took strategic symbolic and social action through networks of campaign staffers with particular sets of skills and technologies with particular affordances. Taken together, this paper argues that features of the political environment shaped by spheres, fields, and networks together constitute the “digital opportunity structure” that a candidate faces, and must navigate, in order to realize digital mobilization in the service of her electoral goals. The theorization of digital opportunity structures offered here is not limited to electoral politics. I believe this concept offers a framework for understanding collective action more generally, but I apply it here in the context of digital mobilization during an electoral campaign as a case study. My argument here is also intended to
advance the sociological concept of ‘political opportunity structures’ more generally. I hope to more systematically theorize and integrate what I take to be the foundational elements of social life: spheres of cultural meaning that are institutionally regulated, fields of relational symbolic and social activity, and networks of symbolic and social relations that cross, shape, and change both spheres and fields.

In the pages that follow in this extended essay, first I turn to the concepts of spheres, fields, and networks and seek to integrate the vast bodies of work around them. I bring these ideas together in the concept of ‘digital opportunity structures.’ Finally, I show how we can analyze the Sanders campaign’s digital organizing success through the analytical resources of this concept. I conclude with an argument about how this argument can be more broadly applied.

**Literature Review**

*Spheres, Fields, and Networks as the Building Blocks of the Social*

Before developing the concept of ‘digital opportunity structures,’ I want to sketch a broader conceptual framework that integrates a number of different analytical perspectives on social life. In the context of electoral politics, my argument is that candidates are embedded in larger spheres, fields, and networks that shape their capacities for, and the outcomes of, strategic social and symbolic action. The building blocks of the idea of digital opportunity structures are these three levels of analysis – spheres, fields, and networks – that theorists and empirical researchers in different literatures have generally failed to integrate (See Figure 1). And, the concepts of spheres, fields, and networks all have cultural, social, and technological dimensions, which all need to be accounted for.
First, by spheres, I build from Alexander’s (2010, 2006, 4) conceptualization of the ‘civil sphere’ as “a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time.” There are many spheres in social life, such as religious and market spheres, but it is the ‘civil’ that is the most germane for the discussion here. Spheres consist of durable structures of cultural and moral meaning that give shape to distinct domains of social life, as well as the institutions that organize and regulate them (for a related idea in different theoretical terms, see McCloskey, 2016). The democratic values of the civil sphere consist of equality, liberty, and justice (Alexander, 2006), which its communicative (such as mass media and technologies of public opinion) and regulative (such as political parties, electoral rules, offices, and the law) institutions both give shape to and protect. The civil sphere encompasses the moral understandings, values, and meanings that animate democratic life and provide the grounds for civil solidarity, as well as the institutions that give equality, liberty, and justice communicative shape and regulative force.
I depart here from Alexander’s specific theoretical formulation in *The Civil Sphere* and argue for a more historically-specific idea of the civil sphere as made up of durable, yet ultimately flexible and changeable, cultural repertoires of democratic meaning and practice that have more or less legitimacy to political actors and citizens at moments in time, are subject to contestation, and change over the course of history (not always through intentional action). Michael Schudson’s (1998) *The Good Citizen*, for instance, revealed how the cultural meanings of citizenship and its practices are open to change. Similarly, Jonathan Israel’s (e.g.: 2014) body of work shows how the ideas of ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’ were not universal features of the Enlightenment, but values that had to be contested against other normative meanings of democracy that resisted radical egalitarianism (although his conclusions are the subject of active debate.)

Taken together, from these various works comes the important idea that cultural frameworks underpin, bound, and shape the possibilities for social and symbolic action, through orienting the discourse and action of actors, and providing the criteria for evaluation for what others consider legitimate and inspiring to work toward. The concept of ‘spheres’ more broadly provides us with the broad framework for understanding the “landscape of meaning” (Reed, 2011) that all action within civil life must proceed from. What this is idea of spheres offers, at root, is a way of understanding meaning as both central to the democratic process and bounded (i.e.: not endlessly interpretively flexible or free to be remade). For example, Smith (2003) argues that too often identity, and the narratives and “stories of peoplehood” that give rise to it, gets vacated from the analyses of political scientists. And yet, stories of peoplehood are a key way that political identity is crafted. While these stories of peoplehood can be particularistic in many domains of
social life that do not require universalistic democratic solidarity, in the civil sphere these stories of peoplehood likely have been articulated through, and brought into accordance with, the cultural repertoires of the civil sphere in order to be considered legitimate. The LGBT movement articulates a distinct sexual and political identity in domains outside the civil sphere, which can then be articulated within the civil sphere as a claim for equality amid difference.

As my colleagues and I have previously argued, “fields texture the civil sphere” (Kreiss, Meadows, and Remensperger, 2014, 16). There are sprawling literatures about ‘fields,’ a concept originally formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (e.g.: 2005). While I cannot address the different strains of the literature here, I follow Fligstein and McAdam (2012) in conceptualizing fields as arenas of contestation populated by individuals, groups, or organizations that are nested within one another in ways that span micro- and macro-levels of social action. The idea of nesting offers an important advance over existing theory in conceptualizing hierarchical and vertical relations within and between fields. That said, Fligstein and McAdam’s conceptualization of fields lacks an explanation of what culturally or institutionally bounds or organizes multiple fields into coherent, higher-order domains (such as ‘democratic processes’). To this end, fields should be seen as being embedded within spheres, more or less fully and alone or in combinations with other fields, and fields can also spill across the boundaries of spheres. For example, a strategic action field defined by conflict between regulators and the biotechnology industry crosses both the civil sphere (regulators are part of the state bureaucracy and defined by its cultural logics and regulatory institutions that require equality under the law) and the economic sphere (in terms of commercial and marketplace logics and
regulatory institutions such as the FTC) – (not unlike Boltanski and Thevenot’s (2006 [1991]) work on “justification,” which posits multiple orders of worth that may come into conflict or that actors may create temporary compromises around.)

Most relevant for this essay are the meso-level political and media fields that are largely within the civil sphere and made up of heterogeneous institutional, organizational, and individual actors that generally see themselves, and actors in other related fields, engaging in similar sets of activities. The organizational fields of politics and media (Cook, 1998) feature coherent groups of actors whose relations are organized through field-specific logics, and are held accountable by external actors (such as citizens and regulative institutions) for their actions vis-à-vis these logics (there is also hybridity among organizations that bridge the fields of politics and media, such as the movement media organization of FOX News; e.g.: Skocpol and Williamson, 2011).

The workings of the field of politics are highly consequential for actors in the media field, and vice versa. As Tim Cook (1998) demonstrated, political actors seek out, are constrained by, and work through, media actors, while the latter need political actors to hold accountable, provide them with and organize their access to political power, and ultimately to legitimate them as a part of governance and electoral processes. These two fields are, simply, entwined in their workings but organized according to different logics. Following Fligstein and McAdam, there are also nested fields within the political and media fields. In the context of electoral politics, for instance, there are primary fields of candidates within the Republican and Democratic primaries who vie for electoral resources, party-network endorsements, media attention from the adjacent field, and ultimately citizen support at the ballot box. During general elections, there is a field of
struggle between the two parties’ nominees and their extended network of actors. In other words, nested within the political field are smaller domains of strategic contested action, where candidates vie for votes (or activists such as the Koch brothers organize against the Republican establishment.)

Finally, networks cross both spheres and fields. Networks are historically-conditioned patterns of relations that encompass ties between individuals, organizations, organizations and individuals (Padgett and Powell, 2012), technologies, or more broadly humans and non-humans (Latour, 2005). Networks can serve as conduits of cultural meaning (DiMaggio, 1997), resources, knowledge, skills, practice, information, and opinion (e.g.: Christakis and Fowler, 2009). We can also posit the existence of networks of cultural associations and meanings that transcend specific ties between humans and non-humans, and are embedded in and constituted through durable institutions, laws, media forms, practices, etc. (see, for instance Schudson, 1989; Sewell, 1980; Wuthnow, 2009).

Extending the work of Padgett and Powell (2012), I posit that the folding of networks (social, cultural, or technological) across social domains works to transform fields and spheres over time. Boundary crossing and domain switching can give rise to innovations that ultimately spur the emergence of new organizational, cultural, social, or technological forms. I conceptualize ‘organizations’ here as comparatively stabilized networks, which are held in place by fields, institutions, and spheres. Organizations fix networks in place by holding people and their multiple ties and associations through both formal means (such as employment obligations, contractual labor, boards of directors,
etc.) and informal means (such as repeated patterns of exchange between organizations), subject to the regulations of fields, institutions, and spheres.

**Digital Opportunity Structures**

Spheres, fields, and networks give rise to what I call ‘digital opportunity structures.’ The social movement scholar Sidney Tarrow (2011, 32) defined “political opportunity structure” as the “consistent — but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.” Scholars such as Elizabeth Clemens (1997, 72) have used the concept in their empirical, historical work, for instance to detail how institutional rules, elite divisions, and broader political environments provided opportunities for and constraints on challenges to the party system by women’s, workers, and farmer’s movements, setting into the motion the organizational innovation of the interest group.

Building from, but also more explicitly adding considerations of culture and technology to this line of work, I conceptualize digital opportunity structures as features of the political environment and candidates and campaigns’ symbolic, material, and relational position in it which shapes the possibilities for using digital media for strategic ends. These opportunities are only realized, however, when a candidate and her staffers perceive them, and have the skills to navigate the networked, hybrid media environment. Every candidate faces a different digital opportunity structure. Digital opportunity structures are the hands campaigns are dealt by the electoral context, the candidate, and the fields of politics and media that shape the possibility for specifically digital mobilization. And, staffers have to perceive the salient features of their environment and
candidate so as to be able to act within this structure more or less well for competitive advantage, even as structures change over time as the result of the actions that campaigns and parties take and the outcomes of electoral contexts (such as primary contests).

Elements of digital opportunity structures map onto the conceptual levels of spheres, fields, and networks. As Alexander (2010) persuasively argues, candidates vie to become a collective representation of the body politic, which entails aligning themselves with the civil side of the democratic moral binary while symbolically polluting their opponents. These binaries, as well as the broader cultural context that shapes what narratives democratic citizens perceive are legitimate, are structural in the sense that they bound candidates’ attempts to narrate themselves and shape what will resonate with democratic citizens. For instance, Alexander (2010) furnishes the example of the war hero John McCain attempting to narrate himself as a civil hero in 2008, a moment in time when the public was resolutely focused on domestic issues. The candidate’s biography interacted with the cultural structure of the civil sphere to bound the script that McCain was able to perform and the possibilities that his life story would resonate with the public. Broadly speaking, there are some issues favored by the political context, and a candidate’s biography shapes the ability to credibly and legitimately speak to them.

On the field-level, candidates are bound relationally within the fields they occupy, and by the logics of the adjacent fields that shape them (and these fields, detailed above in the discussion of the work of Fligstein and McAdam, need not be as formally structured as in models such as Bourdieu’s). For instance, during the 2016 cycle, Republican candidates vied against one another to occupy different cultural spaces that would connect with, mobilize, and ultimately represent different categories of Republican
voters. What is important about the idea of ‘fields’ is that it is a fundamentally relational concept; candidates have to vie to occupy or create new cultural spaces against one another for electoral gain. For example, as Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron’s (2015) work has revealed, rhetoric such as populist claims can be understood through the lens of field theory: challengers to incumbents or elites generally rely on more populist claims during primaries, and then mitigate this rhetoric as they move toward general elections. There are other field-level dynamics at play that relate to candidates’ relational position in a field. A number of scholars have noted that insurgent candidates have greater incentives to use digital media in the attempt to inspire collective social and symbolic action among their Supporters and to secure resources in the absence of institutional party support. In part, this is because challengers to establishment frontrunners can often inspire digital mobilization among passionate subgroups of party activists. Where a candidate is situated in a field of other candidates shapes the possibilities for digital mobilization.

In sum, the field of candidates, the composition of the electorate, the relative power of groups in the party network, which party holds office, the issues the candidate is running on vis-à-vis the field, the candidate’s charisma (a candidate’s public persona and the willingness of people to believe and follow her), the media habits of the candidate’s supporters and the ideological and party activists she appeals to, all shape the field-level possibilities for digital mobilization. At the same time, as Tim Cook (1998) pointed out two decades ago, the field of journalism is deeply intertwined with the field of politics. Structures and patterns of legacy media coverage and the perceptions of viability among journalists shape how successful candidates are and can be (e.g.: Williams and Delli
Carpini, 2011), and media coverage also attracts the “bystanders” that candidates can leverage to support their cause (e.g.: Gamson, 2004).

I view networks as a comparatively less organized domain than spheres and fields, one where strategic gain is to be had through the mobilizing of existing networks, constitution of new networks, and reconfiguring of networks across domains of social life. Existing patterns of relations, such as what Andrew Chadwick (2013) calls “sedimentary networks,” are resources that candidates have the potential to mobilize. Candidates also have the potential to create new political networks and group identities based on who they are and the stories they craft to constitute peoplehood and bring identities into existence (Smith, 2003).

Spheres, fields, and networks together constitute the features of the political environment that shape the possibilities for and constraints on digital mobilization, but a campaign’s staffers need to perceive these opportunities and take advantage of them. These are learned perceptual and social skills that are, in part, the product of the historical workings of party networks in producing people conditioned for the recognition of and skills to capitalize upon digital opportunities, and the possibilities for innovation that arise from creative recombinations of ways of seeing, knowledge, and skills across domains (Kreiss, 2016). Candidates and their campaign staffers or consultants need to have the perceptual ability to recognize digital opportunity structures and skill to navigate them. Ways of seeing are produced by the networks that campaigns draw together, the biographies they assemble through their staffers, and the institutions and party-networks they are connected to, even as skills are also something produced through networks and transpositions across domains. Following organizational sociologists de Vaan, Stark, and
Vedres (2015), what matters is “cognitive diversity” coupled with the “structural folding” that holds assemblages of disparate people together and makes their work recognizable to particular fields (in other words, recombinations of political-field based knowledge with those from outsiders generates innovation in line with electoral goals).

For example, social skill and, in the context of digital opportunity structures, ‘technological skill,’ are produced by networked social relations, fields, and institutions in ways that shape biographies, which are then carried across disparate domains including the technology industry and electoral politics and contentious action. In my work with Christopher Jasinski (2016), for instance, we showed how ‘field crossers’ were sources of innovation in electoral politics in bringing the insights of the technology and commercial data industries to bear on campaigns and party politics. The idea of networks is the right way to conceptualize this, because networks are an analytical tool that enables us to trace, over time, how people are constructed as they move through organizations, fields, and institutions. In other words, following Padgett and Powell (2012), specific biographies are produced through relations, and those biographies command social and technological skills, knowledge, and ways of seeing at moments in time.

People emerge from networks of relations, and those relations should be conceptualized broadly enough to encompass ties with other people, organizations, institutions, and fields. And, following the insight of Bruno Latour and the actor-network theory framework more broadly, technologies are also embedded in networks and share relations with other non-humans and humans. In the context of electoral politics, campaigns assemble technologies from party-networks but also commercial firms, open source development projects, and nonprofit and advocacy organizations. The
opportunities to assemble these technologies again relate to perception and skill, as well as the range of available technologies and their affordances (which also affect the possibilities for digital mobilization). For example, with respect to the latter, the digital mobilization affordances of the technologies of the mid-1990s would have been quite limited given lengthy donation processing times, the comparatively limited social affordances of the internet, and lack of infrastructural political sites to facilitate digital engagement (such as ACT Blue for fundraising or, on the Democratic side of the aisle, NGP VAN for voter databases). Affordances matter, as do their specific ways that technologies can be assembled; for instance, the lack of integration on the data backend of campaign technologies limits the possibilities for digital mobilization (Kreiss, 2016).

In sum, the idea of digital opportunity structures and the perception and skills needed to navigate them pushes simultaneously against the ideas that candidates are interchangeable and that there are infinite opportunities for mobilization and agency if only technologies were wielded correctly (i.e.: the campaign strategy view that tends to glamorize consultancies). Some candidates are better suited to navigate digital (or other) structures by virtue of their biography, relational position vis-à-vis opponents, and the electoral and cultural contexts that create the opportunities for successful outcomes. At the same time, candidates and their campaigns must act within the structure they face, and performance in the moment, rhetorical and cultural work based on the political context, the cultural stylings of candidate personas with respect to particular audiences, and the technologies campaigns use, all matter as well.
I turn now to the case of the Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign for president as a way to show how this framework of digital opportunity structures helps us understand the possibilities for digital social and symbolic action.

**Digital Mobilization and the 2016 Bernie Sanders Campaign**

*Spheres and Stories*

To date, we have wonderfully descriptive accounts of successful digital mobilization in the realms of electoral politics (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015) and social movements (Schradie, 2015). In the realm of politics, it is now well demonstrated that challengers or insurgents have incentives to take up digital technologies and make them central to their collective action efforts, with the campaigns of candidates such as Howard Dean, Barack Obama, and Ron Paul serving as primary examples in the literature. In the context of movements, we have extensively detailed case studies of some protest efforts such as Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party (Papacharissi, 2014). Scholars have also pushed the conceptualization of these efforts forward through the lens of things such as ‘connective action’ (e.g: Bennett and Segerbgerg, 2013).

And yet, we generally lack a theoretically-grounded account of why it was these candidates, or these movements, that were able to mobilize digitally, and not others. One way to reframe this is to say, why did Howard Dean catch fire in 2003 and 2004, but not the sunny populism of John Edwards? In 2008, the Obama campaign used the same tools as Tom Vilsack and Bill Richardson, and but it was only the former who was able to leverage them in an ultimately successful challenge to Hillary Clinton. At the same time, few works in the research literature have taken up the question of the failure to realize collective, digital social and symbolic action. For every successful story of digital
mobilization – whether it is a candidate or a social movement – there are many more cases where people work very hard and very little happens.

So, during the 2016 cycle what is it about Bernie Sanders as a candidate and the campaign that has ignited digital mobilization? Building from the digital opportunity structures framework outlined above, starting with the persona of the candidate, it appears that the candidate’s biography interacts with both the political culture and the field in ways that provide a highly favorable context for digital mobilization. Bernie Sanders is a longtime independent senator who also has a biography that intersects with the civil rights and labor movements. And, as a comparative newcomer to the national political stage, Sanders is also able to narrate himself in particularly civil terms, as opposed to a candidate such as Hillary Clinton with a long background in politics and the pragmatic compromises that come with it.

For example, the campaign has sought to capitalize on Sanders’s biography in the attempt to narrate the candidate on the side of the civil moral binary of the civil sphere, to use Jeffrey Alexander’s terms. While a systematic review of the Sanders’s campaign’s communications are beyond the scope of this analytical essay, one example provides an illustrative example: Sanders’s America advertisement, discussed in the introduction (See Figure 2).
As detailed above, the ad, which features a particular vision of an America, capitalizes on a normative vision of a country, and a campaign, made up of ordinary, hardworking, and (implicitly) progressive citizens (the LGBT couples in the ad, for instance). The message of the America ad is backed up by Sanders’s rhetoric that rails against income inequality and Wall Street, supports the working and middle class, and endorses policies such as the provision of free college tuition (See Figure 3). These appeals and policies are aspirational and espouse values that have proved to be markedly popular with younger voters; indeed, Hillary Clinton criticized Sanders (and Obama before him in 2008) for his lack of specific policy-details and empty, dream-like promises. As Alexander specifically argues, policy statements are less important from a cultural perspective than how candidates narrate themselves on the civil side of the moral binary of the civil sphere. That said, we can see this narration as not only appealing on a cultural structural level to deep-seated civil morality, but also telling a particular story of peoplehood in Smith’s (2013) terms. This is a particular narration of what America is
and should be that celebrates diversity (not demographic homogeneity), middle-class people (as opposed to economic elites or the destitute), civil harmony (not partisan agonism), etc. As such, it is an ideational story of Sanders’s supporters designed to draw others in through their identification with the campaign and their aspirations for America.

It would help us greatly if you could retweet our posts from @BernieSanders, and then adopt the hashtag as your own! Share your stories. What does it mean to you? Why do you think it’s important that we #VoteTogether? Remember: having many unique tweets in addition to all the retweets is necessary to get us trending – so please improvise! And don’t forget, we have a huge repository of amazing posters at the bottom of this page!

**EXAMPLE TWEETS (CLICK TO SHARE)**

- America becomes a greater nation when we stand together and say no to racism, hatred, and bigotry. #VoteTogether
- When people come together, we can beat any amount of money thrown around by the Koch Brothers, Goldman Sachs executives. #VoteTogether
- Our most important task is to revitalize American democracy. When we do that we change America. #VoteTogether
- #VoteTogether so we can build a future that works for all of us, not just the few on top.
- When people stand together, and are prepared to fight back, there’s nothing we can’t accomplish. #VoteTogether
- We need a revolution in how healthcare is provided in this country. #VoteTogether
- America should work for all of us, not just a handful of billionaires. Watch, share, and #VoteTogether
- New Hampshire, every vote counts. Take back your Democracy on Tuesday and let’s #VoteTogether
- Let us understand that when we stand together, we will always win. #VoteTogether

*Figure 3: VoteTogether Social Sharing: https://bernesanders.com/vote-together/

The Sanders campaign’s cultural appeals such as the *America* ad were successful in terms of resonating with members of the public precisely because of the alignment of the biography of the candidate, the cultural context and its favorability to populist, anti-institutional appeals as well as progressive message on economic issues, the field that the candidate exists within, and the composition of the electorate (*See Figure 4*). Martin O’Malley’s performance fell flat because the candidate was not a cultural outsider, nor could he claim the mantle of the progressive movement that Sanders could. Hillary Clinton’s campaign certainly has not been foreign to digital mobilization, but it has not been anywhere near the record-setting performance of the Sanders campaign. Clinton
cannot narrate herself as an outsider, a populist, or as a purely civil candidate because she is a known insider with a long record in government (she can certainly narrate her historic candidacy, however, and she has). And, Clinton has had less success articulating a narrative that creates new identities and a movement behind her for similar reasons – which Sanders has done on the basis of stories of generational change, populism, economic deprivation, and Black Lives Matter.

Figure 4: Sanders Art: https://bernie sanders.com/vote-together/
One final note. Much of the literature on digital journalism and mobilization is narrowly concerned with information, instead of the cultural and moral narratives that give shape to democracy. Sanders’s America ad, after all, conveyed little in the way of information. It was a meaningful symbolic object precisely for its conveyance of the candidate’s values and morals and vision of what America is and should be, in addition to its invitation for citizens to imagine themselves in terms of the advertisement. And, this fit between civil values, Sanders’s position in a field of Democratic candidates, and the audiences in the electorate meant that the campaign’s appeals resonated with a lot of people and resulted in digital mobilization.

Campaign Strategy and Field Dynamics
I want to go into field dynamics in greater detail here. Politics is an organized field of activity. Conceptually, we can think about the political field encompassing party and advocacy organizations such as Super PACs, representatives and their staffs, and other entities that are engaged in electoral processes, policy-making, or governance more generally. On a smaller scale, there is a field of candidates that vie with one another for political power in terms of the ability to hold office through victory at the ballot box, according to highly delimited institutional rules (such as how the parties’ govern their nomination processes) and formal laws (such as population standards for political representation). During primary campaigns, the parties have their own fields of candidates that exist relationally to one another, and to the field of the opposing party and its candidates. The 2016 cycle, for instance, pitted a comparatively wide field of Republican candidates against one another compared with a trio of Democrats. These candidates seek to differentiate themselves from one another (as Alexander (2010)
argued, “meaning is difference”) to secure resources such as money and volunteers, endorsements from elected officials and other party network actors, and, ultimately, votes.

Candidates and their campaigns think through their political biography and persona in relation to the field of other candidates and the electorate in the course of their electoral runs. A political biography encompasses the candidate’s public persona, which is an amalgam of her public performances, narrations of self, and actions (such as policies introduced) that over time creates an image of the candidate in the minds of voters, other political actors, and journalists. Campaign staffers use polling, data and analytics technologies, focus groups, and intuition to try and discover a path to electoral victory for the candidate given this political biography, their understanding of the electoral context, and what they perceive to be the paths of the opposition, asking questions such as how should the candidate talk about the election, what messages and policies should they stress, what elements of their biography should they emphasize, how should they respond to anticipated attacks, and what electoral technologies should the candidate espouse to put together a winning coalition? The answers to these questions ultimately shape how candidates narrate themselves, their campaigns, and the meaning of the election, the messages and strategies they adopt, and the ways that they use digital technologies.

For example, while it would have been difficult (if not impossible) to conduct interviews with Sanders staffers during the active primary season itself about how they perceived their candidate and his path to victory, we can infer aspects of these things through public statements and analysis of the campaign. For one, it appears that the Sanders campaign recognized the candidate’s potential appeal to liberal and younger
voters early on – in essence, the coalition that Howard Dean ran on in 2004 and Barack Obama mobilized four years later (although with the latter drawing support from significantly more people of color). At the same time, the campaign also saw itself running an insurgent campaign to the establishment frontrunner Hillary Clinton.

Given this nexus of the candidate’s biography, his potential base, and the need for non-institutional resources (given the sweep of party endorsements for Clinton), I believe that we could have predicted a *digital-intensive strategy* compared with the Clinton campaign (which, while it would also have digital components, would be more reliant on other technologies and appeals designed to activate elite networks of resources). We can see this in both the comparative spend on digital that the Sanders campaign engaged in, with the candidate investing more in digital ads and merchandising through their online store through much of 2015 (compared with broadcast advertising by Clinton) (Associated Press, 2015). And, we can see the fruits of this strategy, with the Sanders campaign far outstripping all others of the cycle with respect to digital fundraising, reach, and engagement.

In short, the argument here is that field-level dynamics shape campaign strategy and are premised, in part, on understanding who a candidate is, who she will appeal to given a field of competitors, and how to mobilize the electorate she needs to turn out. The record breaking online response to the Sanders campaign reveals the fruits of this strategy. The candidate’s rhetoric and digital reach mobilized the campaign’s young and liberal supporters, and the campaign used digital media to translate this interest and enthusiasm into resources.

*Networks*
I suspect that this campaign strategy was not accidental. It appears that the Sanders campaign, as an organization, drew together a set of staffers with biographies that provided them with the perceptual sensitivity and technological skills to both navigate and take advantage of the digital opportunity structure that the candidate faced. In other words, the Sanders campaign built an organization that drew together staffers with a number of different orientations and work experiences, leveraging skills from the political and other fields in the service of its electoral bid. It is precisely the blend of domain shifting that Padgett and Powell (2012) argue has the potential to give rise to new technologies and practices, with the cognitive diversity that de Vaan, Stark, and Vedres (2015) and his colleagues have argued ensures that these new technologies and practices are relevant to innovation in the political field, that appears to be at work in the Sanders campaign.

For example, the Sanders campaign hired Revolution Messaging to handle its digital operations. Revolution Messaging was founded by the Obama 2008 campaign’s external online director, Scott Goodstein. The firm itself employs a number of employees with extensive backgrounds in progressive political causes. Among them are Tim Tagaris, who served as the Internet communications director at the DNC under Howard Dean, digital lead for Ned Lamont’s insurgent campaign against senator Joe Lieberman, digital director for the presidential campaign of Chris Dodd and, founder of the Service Employees International Union’s new media department. Revolution Messaging also has people such as Douglas Busk, who joined to support the development of the firm’s digital platform after working for a number of wireless technology firms such as Verizon Wireless and Cingular (and who also leads mobile brand strategy for
Coca-Cola), and Arun Chaudhary, the former first official White House videographer who was the new media road director of the 2008 campaign, who joined the 2008 bid after serving on the NYU Graduate Film Department faculty. The campaign also hired Zack Exley, a former labor organizer who subsequently became the organizing director of MoveOn.org, an advisor to the Dean campaign, director of online organizing for Kerry, and co-founder and president of the New Organizing Institute.

Finally, it seems as if the Sanders campaign was able to use digital media to knit supporters together into new networks and, ultimately, leverage them for resources. The Bernie Sanders campaign attracted a bevy of grassroots volunteers to work on technical projects through a technologically-enabled vision of electoral politics, which included the volunteer development of an ‘Field the Bern” field canvassing application (Corasaniti, 2015). Through the campaign’s cultural work and its inspirational message that resonated with many young, technically skilled individuals – along with the campaign’s decision as an organization to provide these individuals with the autonomy to develop and launch projects for the campaign – new networks were formed around the campaign and the campaign was able to leverage them for electoral purposes.

Discussion

I have focused specifically on electoral politics and digital mobilization here, but this framework is designed to be portable across domains of social life and applied to collective action in various settings more generally. Indeed, this essay strives to integrate various strands of social theory to create a conceptual model for understanding opportunities for and constraints on action and conditions for agency more broadly.
I want to end with a discussion here of what an integrated framework of spheres, fields, and networks may provide us analytically over existing approaches, which largely analyze these things in isolation (e.g: Alexander, 2006; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Padgett and Powell, 2012). The concept of digital opportunity structures reveals how thinking across different levels of analysis simultaneously a) provides an opportunity to think about culture and meaning that is patterned and durable across time (although certainly not unchanging) and provides the background context for strategic action; b) it enables us to think about the logic of fields as more or less coherent domains of activity and the relational positions of actors within them on cultural, material, and resource levels; and, c) dynamics of change through networks that can be gathered together, and new networks formed, that can be leveraged by organizations. While a number of scholars detail the workings of cultural structures and the domain-specific meaning of spheres, adding field and network-level perspectives facilitates analysis of meso-level dynamics and mechanisms for understanding cultural change. For scholars of fields, larger, more durable patterns of cultural meaning and institutional regulation that can give rise to fields, shape their routine workings, and ground their legitimacy as organized domains of social life, are often left out of the analysis, even as we often lack accounts for how fields change through the dynamics that scholars such as Padgett and Powell (2012) detail. The field perspective of Fligstein and McAdam and network perspective of Padgett and Powell, meanwhile, lack explicit considerations of meaning, culture, power, and intentionality that theories of spheres often provide. For example, why do people cross fields to take jobs in electoral politics if not because of some deep-seated belief in a candidate, her message, and democracy more broadly? Meanwhile, we need to
understand how networks are shaped by power embedded in spheres and fields, including symbolic and economic power.

I believe the concept of digital opportunity structures explicitly offers a way of bringing these disparate theoretical perspectives together (See Figure 5). In the context of electoral politics (but I believe able to be ported more widely), the idea of digital opportunity structures specifically accounts for deep-seated patterns of cultural meaning that shape the rhetoric that candidates can craft and the cultural scripts they can perform, in large part because in the civil sphere the audiences for these electoral performances, whether they are other field actors or citizens, use the moral logic of democracy as part of their criteria of evaluation of what they do. As detailed above, Alexander’s framework does much to anticipate the specific rhetorical stylings of the Sanders campaign in terms of the framing of ‘we’ and the populist appeals to ‘take back our country’ (which are narrated on civil terms.) At the same time, what is missing from Alexander’s account, and that field-perspectives can provide (specifically the Fligstein and McAdam version), is that quite apart from structural moral binaries, to understand the Sanders phenomenon requires understanding how the candidate is positioned relationally within the Democratic Party’s field of presidential candidates, and specifically the ideological, cultural, and policy appeals that he is able to make to certain factions within the electorate. Finally, understanding the Sanders phenomenon also requires analysis of the networks that, in part, gave rise to it in terms of enabling the candidate to capitalize on digital opportunities, and that the campaign itself created through the appeals of the candidate. Sanders was able to capitalize on the cultural context and his position in the Democratic field, in part because he had the staffers with the perceptual knowledge and social skill in
place to recognize these opportunities, build the necessary infrastructure, and grow the phenomenon through digital performance.

**Figure 5: Integration of Sphere, Field, and Network Theory**

Even further, the integrated framework of spheres, fields, and networks in the context of digital opportunity structures offers much for the theory of ‘political opportunity structures’ more generally. For one, explicitly thinking about spheres, fields, and networks provides more explicit levels of analysis to what are often undifferentiated features of the ‘environment’ in scholarship. Second, it offers an integrated framework for thinking about the conceptual areas of spheres, fields, and networks that in the literature on collective action are too often kept separate: spheres of cultural meaning, fields of activity, and networks of relations. Thinking across all three helps explain their mutual imbrication.

**Conclusion**
This paper provides an admittedly preliminary empirical analysis of the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign through the lens of an analytical framework that brings together conceptual work on fields, spheres, and networks through a model of digital opportunity structures. While in this paper I have been primarily concerned with specifically digital mobilization, I believe that this framework can been applied to collective or “connective” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) action more generally. As my analysis of the Sanders run suggested, the campaign was the product not only of democratic rhetoric that remains a powerful force as scholars from John Morone (1998) and Michael Schudson (1998) have argued, but how it was situated relationally within the field more generally. At the same time, none of which would have been successful without the talent in place to capitalize on opportunities. Thinking across these three levels of analysis, and the ways that the idea of digital opportunity structures ties them together, will hopefully provide a framework for understanding the success or failure of digital collective action.

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