

Blog Post: Tools for Activists and SMOs: Part 1, The SMO Perspective

Part of my thesis research on networked social movements is exploring the roles digital technologies play in connecting traditional social movement organizations (SMOs) with their highly networked supporters. Many of these supporters live within a complex digital ecosystem in which they encounter media and calls to action from multiple SMOs and other movement actors. This analysis looks at these digital relationships from the organization's perspective. My questions include:

- Which features appear most often across these nine tools?
- To what degree do these common features also meet the needs of networked activists?

For the analysis, nine technologies commonly used by social movement organizations were selected based on their approximate frequency of appearance in web searches and industry publications, as well as recommendations from organizers. These nine tools primarily fall into the category of "customer relationship management" (CRM) technologies. CRMs enable organizations to track and interact with not only customers but also volunteers, donors, legislators, and other supporters.

Reviewing the websites and promotional materials of these nine tools revealed a set of 25 features. The five most common features across all nine tools were 1) event management, 2) reports, 3) contact management, 4) emails, and 5) donations and fundraising management. Other common features used by three or more tools were 1) customization features, 2) groups, 3) campaign management, and 4) forms. The remaining fourteen feature categories were used by only one or two of the tools. Of the nine tools that were reviewed, CiviCRM included the most features (15), followed by The Action Network (11), ActionKit (9) and Mobilize (9). The full results of the analysis can be viewed in Table 1.

	Name	CiviCRM	The Action Network	ActionKit	Mobilize	Nation builder	Crowd scout	Salsa	Amplify	Facebook	Percent of tools that use this feature
72	TOTAL FEATURES	15	11	9	9	7	6	6	3	6	32.00%
8	Events	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	88.89%
8	Reports	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Dashb	Dashb	Dashb	88.89%

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7	Contact Management	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			77.78%
6	Email	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y				66.67%
6	Donations/ Fundraisers	Y	Y	Y		Y		Y		Y	66.67%
5	Customization	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y				55.56%
5	Groups		Y		Y	Add-on			Y	Y	55.56%
4	Advocacy campaigns	Y	Y	Y			Y				44.44%
3	Forms		Y		Y			Y			33.33%
2	Member directory for users				Y					Follow er list	22.22%
2	Member fundraising	Y						Y			22.22%
2	Community Resources/ Wiki	Wiki			Y						22.22%
2	Private Chat				Y					Y	22.22%
1	Points								Y		11.11%
1	Project Coordination				Y						11.11%
1	Petitions		Y								11.11%
1	File Storage		Y								11.11%
1	Peer-to-peer fundraising	Y									11.11%
1	Case Management	Y									11.11%
1	Security			Y							11.11%
1	Accounting Integration	Y									11.11%
1	Supports Multiple Languages			Y							11.11%

1	Wordpress compatible	Y									11.11%
1	Drupal compatible	Y									11.11%
1	Joomla compatible	Y									11.11%

Table 1

It should be noted that this tally is based on the features highlighted in promotional materials for each tool, not extensive use of the tools themselves. This means there are likely inaccuracies in the dataset in cases where a feature is included in a tool, but was not recorded because that feature was not mentioned in marketing materials. However, as the purpose of this analysis is to broadly identify common features in tools used by SMOs, this margin of error is acceptable.

As expected, this analysis reflects an overall preference for traditional forms of organizational engagement and volunteer management, including events, contact lists, emails, and reports that reflect these particular types of activity within the network. In many cases the tools are equipped with advanced features such as automated ladders of engagement, dynamic profiles, user targeting, and advanced list segmentation. Six tools include the ability to email supporters from within the tool itself. That said, the types of actions available to supporters comprise a fairly narrow repertoire of contention. Beyond more common asks for supporters to make donations, call their representatives, and attend events, only a few tools also ask supporters to write letters to the editor or share personal stories.

This analysis also revealed a few surprises. First, the tools reflect a significant preference for email communication (8 of 9 tools) over other forms private chat, which was less-frequently available than expected (2 of 9 tools). Second, only one tool highlighted an ability to support multiple languages, which is deeply problematic for any organization seeking to reach the general American public, and particularly challenging for movements that predominantly serve non-English speakers. Third, the ability to integrate with Wordpress, Drupal, Joomla and other open-source tools was far less common than the ability to integrate with private social networking sites like Facebook (although this was also rare).

Today's activists, particularly those who are digital natives, access the internet using a wide variety of tools and platforms. A 2018 Pew report found that only 51% of teens in the U.S. now use Facebook, while far more use Snapchat, Instagram and Youtube ([Anderson and Jiang 2018](#)). Only four years ago, in 2014, another Pew report found that "71% of teens reported being Facebook users. No other platform was used by a clear majority of teens at the time" ([Anderson and Jiang 2018](#)). Clearly, usage patterns change quickly and vary between people of different age groups. Unfortunately, the tools that serve social movement organizations are comparatively slow in adapting to

these changing usage patterns, and therefore adequately serve only a fraction of potential supporters.

In conclusion, CRM tools are crucial for organizational success. SMOs must be able to track their supporters and donors, but existing tools often fail to engage activists beyond a narrow set of actions that are predominantly delivered using email and Facebook. In this diverse digital ecosystem, CRM tools should integrate with a wider variety of popular platforms and promote engagement that extends beyond the traditional repertoire of contention.

Source: Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2018). *Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018*. Pew Research Center.

Blog Post: Tools for Activists and SMOs: Part 2, The Activist Perspective

As mentioned in Part 1 of this blog post, part of my thesis research on networked social movements is exploring the roles digital technologies play in connecting traditional social movement organizations (SMOs) with their highly networked supporters. Many of these supporters live within a complex digital ecosystem in which they encounter media and calls to action from multiple SMOs and other movement actors. This analysis looks at these digital relationships from the perspective of the individual activist. My questions include:

- Which features appear most often across digital tools used by activists?
- To what degree do these common features also meet the needs of SMOs?

For the analysis, ten technologies designed to support activist activities were selected based on their approximate frequency of appearance in web searches and searching in the iTunes App Store, as well as recommendations from activists. These ten tools are primarily apps, although some, such as Facebook, also include web platforms. DoSomething.org is the only tool that does not also have an app. (It appears there was once a DoSomething.org app but it is no longer supported.)

For each tool, a user journey map was created by capturing screenshots of every key screen in the app. These journey maps were then analyzed to identify 44 features in 5 categories. The first category, actions, includes 18 features that enable users to take actions related to the issue they care about. These actions include things like calling reps, taking quizzes, and tracking bills. The 7 login and integration features describe the login and registration experience and the tool's integration options with social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. The 9 community features include chat, internal member directories, and the ability to invite others to the tool. Personalization

covers 5 features that enable users to filter their experience based on things like personal interests and location. Finally, the 5 gamification features reflect the inclusion of game features like statistics, points, ranks and leaderboards. Of these five categories, login and integration features were the most common across all ten apps. In total, the apps had a usage rate of 41% across all the features included in this category. The usage rate for other categories were 28% for community features, 24% for action features, 22% for personalization features, and 18% for gamification features. The full results of the analysis can be viewed in Table 1.

	Name	Brigade App	CounTable App	Facebook Town Hall	Indivisible App	OutVote App	imPACT App	ActOn App	SDGs in Action App	DoSomething.org	Stumble & Rise App	Percent of this category's features used across all 10 tools
		22	17	11	9	6	2	22	19	8	7	
29	Login/Integration	3	3	3	3	2	1	4	6	3	1	41.43%
6	Tour/Intro	Y	Y	Y		Y		Y	Y			60.00%
4	Can explore without registering				Y			Y	Y	Y		40.00%
9	Register/login with email	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	90.00%
7	Register/login with Facebook	Y	Y	Y	Y			Y	Y	Y		70.00%
1	Register/login with Google								Y			10.00%
1	Register/login with Twitter								Y			10.00%
1	Register/login with phone					Y						10.00%
9	Gamification	2	1	0	0	0	1	3	2	0	0	18.00%
4	Individual Statistics	Y					Y	Y	Y			40.00%
2	Ranks							Y	Y			20.00%
1	Points		Y									10.00%
1	Badges							Y				10.00%
1	Leaderboards	Y										10.00%
12	Personalization	1	2	1	1	0	0	4	2	1	0	22.00%
4	Follow reps	Y	Y	Y	Y							40.00%
4	Follow issues		Y					Y	Y	Y		40.00%
1	Follow organizations							Y				10.00%
2	Follow locations							Y	Y			20.00%

[illegible]

2	Predict voting behavior of your contacts	?				Y						20.00%
1	Member directory									Y		10.00%
	Notes											

Table 1

It was generally observed that there are very few active users on any of these platforms, particularly those that focus on single issues or single organizations. Even the SDGs in Action app from the United Nations appeared to have limited regular engagement. This is likely caused in part by the prevalence of static and outdated content. More broad-based apps such as Countable, Brigade, Indivisible, and ActOn serve more as platforms for a variety of organizations and causes and have more dynamic content. Countable was the most active and well-maintained of all tools assessed.

However, higher usage rates and dynamic content does not correlate with more features. Although the Brigade and ActOn apps were the two tools with the most features in the analysis - 22 each - Countable only included 17 of the 44 features, Facebook Town Hall included 11, and the Indivisible app included 9. Information on the overall number of users for each of these platforms is not publicly available, but it is likely that DoSomething.org (which advertises that it is used by people “in every zip code in America”) is the most frequently used. DoSomething.org only includes 8 features, and, notably, none of these fall into the community category. This imbalance in features is not surprising, since each app has its own distinct use cases. Official descriptions of each app and my assessment of their use cases is covered in Table 2.

Tool	Description from Tool	Use Case	Last updated, as of 11/26/18
Brigade App	Use Brigade to tell your elected officials what you want them do, work with other like-minded users on the issues you care about and track over time how they are doing their job!	Focused on state-level representatives; brigades seem good for organizing groups of people who already know each other	Unknown
Countable App	Countable makes learning about what your government is up to easy and fun. Learn about issues you care about, influence Congress with one-tap voting, and rally your friends around specific legislation.	Great tool for tracking state-level representatives and bills	Latest post 7hrs ago

Facebook Town Hall	N/A	Best for tracking and communicating with representatives; not designed to facilitate organizing in groups	Unknown
Indivisible App	The Indivisible App helps you be more engaged as an activist in the Indivisible movement, and it provides tools for group organizers to connect with activists.	Best for finding local actions and tracking votes of state-level reps; scrapes and aggregates meeting and action data but not everything is supported by humans	Town Hall function does not appear to be used
OutVote App	Outvote makes it easy to remind your friends to vote. In a world filled with dark money, bots, and fake news, that's what friends are for.	Elections focused; only one (now outdated) action, regarding the Mueller protests	11/8/18, 18 days ago
imPACT App	Unknown	Tool to self-track organizing activity	11/2/18, 24 days ago
ActOn App	ActOn is a free platform for nonprofit and for-profit social enterprises to leverage the power of mobile, social networking and data analytics to deepen relationships with supporters.	Issue-focused; little attention to politics	Unknown
SDGs in Action App	Learn about the 17 SDGs, get news on your favourite goals, find out what you can do how you can take action to help achieve them, create your own events actions and invite others to join you in sustainable actions and events.	Issue-focused; little attention to politics	Not frequently updated
DoSomething.org	DoSomething.org is mobilizing young people in every US area code and in 131 countries! Sign up for a volunteer, social change, or civic action campaign to make real-world impact on a cause you care about	Provides youth interested in socially progressive volunteering with a predetermined set of actions.	Actions updated monthly

Stumble & Rise App	Get perspectives and trending social justice stories. Save and bookmark your favorites, share with friends on social media to keep the conversation going.	Social network for progressives with media, actions and events	Fewer than 100 users; unknown
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Table 2

There are four notable conclusion from this analysis.

First, the repertoire of contention offered to activists via these apps is only slightly more expansive than the actions recommended by traditional social movements. A few innovative features do exist. One example is Brigade's set of ideology quizzes, which allow users to compare their stances and beliefs to other users on the platform. Countable also includes features which enable users to take a stance on issues and legislation and provide evidence and justification to support those positions. However, only two apps allow users to submit their own actions to the platform and, in the Brigade case, this is positioned as more of a feedback feature through a one-direction Google form. Additionally, only half of the tools analyzed point users to actions that can be taken beyond the confines of the tool itself.

Second, none of these tools appears to pay particularly close attention to privacy or data security. For activists engaging with issues online, the ability to customize privacy settings should be a top priority and users should be educated about the implications of the information they make public. For example, all but one the the ten tools assessed allow users to register and login with Facebook. It should be made clear to users that connecting their Facebook accounts with an activism app may expose them to certain privacy and surveillance risks.

A particularly worrisome example of inattention to privacy concerns was seen in the Y-Combinator-backed OutVote app. This app scrapes the user's address book to match contacts with public voting records and attempts to predict who those contacts will vote for in the future. This is intended to enable users to identify which of their contacts are least likely to vote and contact them, however it does so without permission of any of the contacts who are being entered into the OutVote database. Furthermore, the app's voting record matching and prediction algorithms for political affiliation were both found be inaccurate in many cases.

Third, none of these tools provide information to users on representatives or legislation below the state level. Although both Facebook and the Indivisible app aggregate lists of issue organizations that exist at the local level (with limited reliability in both cases), neither track actual votes or proposals at the municipal or county level. I believe the creation and maintenance of a dataset at the hyperlocal level may be one of the most important untapped opportunities within the field of digital tools for organizing.

Fourth and finally, the most frequently used apps generally have limited direct ties to traditional SMOs. They may aggregate information posted elsewhere by SMOs (as in the case of the Indivisible app) but only DoSomething.org appears to regularly collaborate with existing organizations. They accomplish this through carefully managed partnerships, but this approach can be resource-intensive and one-directional. Additionally, no tools other than (perhaps) DoSomething.org appear to provide activity reports to potential partner SMOs that could help them understand the potential value the tool might bring to their organizing efforts. This disconnect renders tools incapable of benefiting from the years of strategic organizing experience and in-depth content knowledge traditional SMOs can offer.

In conclusion, digital tools designed to connect activists to the issues they care about are most successful when they function as platforms that serve multiple issues and organizations. Despite some innovative features and the growing functionality of tools like Brigade, Countable, and Facebook Town Hall, most tools in this space still only support a relatively limited subset of actions related to either increasing awareness about generalized issues such as "water" or "health," achieving specific political outcomes, or broadcasting one-directional information about events and issues. As was also found in my separate assessment of SMO tools, there is potential to increase engagement with issues through digital tools by offering users a larger and more inclusive repertoire of contention to draw from.

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In this diverse digital ecosystem, feature sets based on the needs of traditional social movement organization structures only meet the needs of a fraction of supporters.