“Use Your Skills to Solve This Challenge!”: The Platform Affordances and Politics of Digital Microvolunteering

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Abstract
How does the rise of managed online platforms for civic engagement change the relationships between activists and organizations? While much has been written about Twitter- and Facebook-enabled mobilization, the emergence of platforms that organize “microaction” in contained ways is a phenomenon understudied by social movement and media scholars. This study draws on both literatures to analyze the hybrid case of Sparked, a microvolunteering platform created by web designers, not activists, that efficiently organizes volunteering through a microaction design. The case exhibits characteristics that social movement scholars understand as resource mobilization through leveraging of affordances by activists, but it also features the structural characteristics of platforms that media scholars identify as both enabling and constraining. To conceptualize the “digitally enabled activism” that takes place within the confines of a managed platform, this study investigates its microaction affordances and their implications. My analysis finds that high leveraging of online affordances can coincide with a shifted logic of engagement in the case of microaction platforms: Sparked’s microaction system affords high performance, but targets only a specialized niche of volunteering. I describe this model as “specialized supersizing” that addresses nonprofits’ needs for increasing organizational overhead services in the context of a professionalizing third sector. Sparked’s microvolunteering design has helped define a platform-centric constitution for microaction that is geared toward rationalization, professionalization, and productivity. Its platform “politics” promote depoliticization, where tactics, not causes, determine exchanges. This emergence of a market for mobilization tactics may have important implications for nonprofits, volunteers, and social movements.

Keywords
online platforms, affordances, mobilization, brokerage, volunteering

Introduction
How does the rise of managed online platforms for civic engagement change the relationships between activists and organizations? While much attention has been paid to Twitter- and Facebook-enabled mobilization, the emergence of platforms that organize “microaction” in managed and contained ways is a phenomenon yet uncharted by social movement scholarship and media studies. Most social movement theory on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) predates the rise of “Web 2.0” at large (Earl & Kimport, 2011; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Van de Donk, van de Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004), whereas more recent media studies have focused on how social networking sites enable activism (Caers et al., 2013; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Harlow, 2012; Nitschke, Donges, & Schade, 2014; Thorson et al., 2013; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014). It is clear that social movements and civic engagement have changed in the context of ICT over the past decades, but social movement theory has emphasized the changes in existing social movement organizations rather than the entrance of new organizations into the field of mobilization work—such as managed online platforms. The acts of activism carried out on Facebook or Twitter differ from the managed microaction analyzed in this study: Platforms such as Sparked or Kiva

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organize microaction in purposeful and constraining ways through an interface that enables a specific course of action—users of these platforms are mobilized to deliver partially predefined contributions in structured ways. The microaction element also distinguishes Sparked from, for example, VolunteerMatch.org, where online affordances are leveraged to match nonprofits and volunteers, but not to manage and exchange volunteer activity. Recent theorizing from media and communication scholarship not only articulates the “platform” phenomenon with a more media-centric perspective but also draws on social theory increasingly to understand the larger set of relations mediated by platforms. The often corporate provision of crowdsourcing and networking platforms has been discussed primarily by media scholars who spell out the characteristics of digital labor online as well as its economic and political consequences (Hirsch, 2011; Postigo, 2014). Social movement scholars have not analyzed this blurring of activist and economic spheres online yet—this may be due to a traditionally narrow focus on what constitutes legitimate “social movements,” causes and tactics fit for sociological study. Yet, the literature also exhibits a narrow perspective on technology as a neutral tool that is used by activists. Media scholars, on the other hand, have powerfully demonstrated that platforms are not neutral tools but structure users’ experiences as well as options. For example, the ownership structures of social networking sites tie users to providers’ policies and politics, as well as profits (Gillespie, 2010; Hands, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Postigo, 2014). This article focuses on this gap in our understanding of online mobilization: How can we conceptualize “digitally enabled activism” (Earl & Kimport, 2011) that takes place within the confines of a managed platform through the affordances of microaction?

The very concept of microaction is bound up with online platform design and the purposeful construction of affordances. The firms who create these affordances are not necessarily social movement organizations as scholars conceptualize them—mobilization online thus implies changes in the organizational ecology as well. For example, scholars have observed shifts in social movement organization membership and campaign participation. The strong claim of “organizing without organizations” (Shirky, 2009) has been amended in favor of an analysis that pays attention to the new organizations that now coordinate large-scale processes of mobilization (Karpf, 2012)—although digital interfaces sometimes obscure the organizational structure that underlies platforms. The microvolunteering platform analyzed in this article is one such organization.

The study presented here hopes to contribute to closing a gap between the social movement and media literatures. I investigate the structure, features, and social affordances of a microvolunteering platform which has been created by web designers, not activists, and which organizes volunteering in novel ways. The platform, Sparked, is a case of technologists entering the market for mobilization for civic engagement—a competitive field at this point, where persuasion and usability make a difference. The platform designers have constructed a system of features and affordances purposefully to offer an efficient service to volunteers and nonprofits. The analysis of Sparked’s microaction system enhances our understanding not only of how affordances work but how they are employed strategically to organize exchanges between actors. Affordances point well beyond their technical functions to the values and goals of designers who envision a certain set of economic and organizational relations. This set of relations is part of what has been termed the “politics” of platforms (Gillespie, 2010). Systems affordances can be understood as platform “constitutions” that spell out and propose—more or less forcefully—certain sets of relations. This is the conceptual approach that I am taking here: To understand how managed platforms organize and manage mobilization as brokers, I investigate the affordances of a platform’s microaction system and their implications.

The analysis reveals that “high leveraging of online affordances” (Earl & Kimport, 2011) can coincide with a shifted logic of engagement: The platform by Sparked, Inc. exhibits high leverage of microaction affordances and game features in a design geared toward productivity, but targets only a very specialized niche of volunteering. Sparked brokers media and marketing support to nonprofits, carried out in small online-only tasks by professionals. Sparked takes on a performance-oriented broker position to organize what is framed as social change activity. I suggest a conceptual addition to Earl and Kimport’s notion of a “continuum of online activism” and to think of Sparked’s model as specialized supersizing that addresses nonprofits’ needs for new organizational overhead services. Sparked’s platform “constitution” affords rationalization, professionalization, and productivity in a playful and depoliticized environment. The very meaning of engagement (here: volunteering) seems to be shifting with the emergence of performance-oriented broker platforms which bring their own politics to the table (Gillespie, 2010). The core conceptual piece that I am proposing is a connection of the social movement theory perspective on ICT as affordances leveraged by activists with media studies’ perspective on platform affordances as both enabling and constraining.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Mobilization Online**

The use of ICT by activists and movements has received increasing attention in recent years. In early web times, social movement actors used mailing lists and petitioning websites, but with the advent of Facebook- and Twitter-enabled activism, the boundaries of what constitutes “activism” have become more and more blurred. Causes, tactics, and tools become remixed in new ways, new groups of users become enrolled, and public debates around slacktivism, clicktivism, and Twitter revolutions have emerged.
**Supersizing Resource Mobilization**

Social movement scholarship has initially incorporated the use of ICT in its paradigmatic resource mobilization framework, claiming that electronic media change mostly the cost associated with activism and mobilization (Garrett, 2006; Jenkins, 1983). There is a general consensus that the cost of information, communication, and certain forms of participation has fallen substantially through the use of digital media (Biddix & Park, 2008; Mele, 1999). The ease of duplication, transfer, and speed is seen to greatly enhance mobilizing efforts by social movements, especially with regard to information distribution, issue framing venues, campaigning and knowledge creation/distribution (Baringhorst, 2006; Baringhorst, Kneip, & Niesyto, 2009; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Van de Donk et al., 2004). Another strand of literature focuses on communities that are facilitated by digital networks and specific network effects that arise from the new infrastructures (Bannon & Griffin, 2001; Day & Schuler, 2004; Diani, 2000, 2003; Doheny-Farina, 1996; Ferlander & Timms, 2001; Schuler, 2007; Schuler & Day, 2004; J. Svensson, 2014). On the level of more contentious activity, sousveillance and hacktivism have been analyzed as new extra-institutional strategies (Garrett, 2006; Jordan & Taylor, 2004; Lindgren & Lundström, 2011; Taylor, 2005). Potential pitfalls of ICT use—or the imperative to use it—have been identified especially for large, significant social movement organizations such as Amnesty International (Lebert, 2003). With the widespread usage of social networking sites and social media during the past decade, a literature on movement organizations’ use of these new outlets has emerged—usually following the logic of the question “how nonprofit organizations use [Twitter] to disseminate information, build engagement, and facilitate action” (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Nah & Saxton, 2013; P. G. Svensson, Mahoney, & Hambrick, 2014).

The emphasis in these studies remains on quantitative shifts in mobilization, for example, the “growth in social media-driven fundraising—and the increase in crowdfunding, slacktivism, impulse donating, and other new practices this entails” (Saxton & Wang, 2014). The discourse around slacktivism and other forms of short-term flash activism has a decidedly normative shade, as it is understood as a “description of those participatory processes supported by the simplification of social connectivity” (Halupka, 2014, p. 129) with a perceived decrease in risk-taking and personal investment. Because clicktivism has long been used as a “generalizable insult for new modes of engagement” (Halupka, 2014, p. 129), Halupka (2014) offers a heuristic that distinguishes clicktivism clearly from continuous forms of online engagement (p. 124). Clicktivism describes individual acts of online engagement in various outlets, but with no membership or prediction of future engagement—clicktivism is discontinuous. Microaction systems as I define them are distinct from this definition of clicktivism in that continuity is established through ongoing participation on a platform. The distinction is important for the argument put forward here: Clicktivism as a form of microaction may be the “cheapest” engagement available to users, but it does not analytically cover the microaction that happens in managed platforms that mobilize users long-term, as is the case in this study. Microaction systems provide an organizational affordance for the efficient coordination of user activities over time—users are expected to come back on a regular basis and identify as member-users with the platform.

**Web-Based Activism: Enter Platform Structure**

Some scholars have started pushing social movement theory beyond assessing the changed cost of mobilization. Even before “social media,” new websites seemed to not only accelerate communication and information flows but also offer new structures for these flows, for example, through “micro-contribution” strategies and the efficient aggregation of participation in complex systems (Garrett, 2006, p. 206). Myers (1994) has pointed to possible organizational shifts even before Web 2.0 was a coined term by describing dedicated “clearing house” organizations that offer tactics, not causes, and their function as a breeding ground for activists. Furthering questions in this organizational direction, Earl has researched mediated forms of participation such as e-petitions and e-letter-writing in detail with regard to their addressees (Earl & Kimport, 2008), diffusion (Earl, 2010), and organizational set-up (Earl, 2006). Similarly to Myers, she discerns the so-called warehouse websites that offer a range of online engagement options. These early platforms have signaled trends toward mobilization outside of traditional social movement organizations and through less hierarchical, decentralized networks. The increased agency on the part of individuals who set up warehouse platforms and e-tactics has been framed as “entrepreneur-led activism” (Garrett, 2006, p. 211).

In the agenda-setting book “Digitally Enabled Social Change,” Earl and Kimport make the distinction between a “supersizing” of activism through ICT on one hand, a quantitative improvement in mobilization, and qualitatively new web-based activism on the other hand (Earl & Kimport, 2011). A similar distinction between “Internet-enhanced” versus “Internet-enabled” activism has been made by Vegh (2003). Earl and Kimport have proposed a “theory 2.0” to capture this new phenomenon using the concept of affordances building on Hutchby (2001, 2003), where the affordances identified are lowered cost of mobilization and coordination without co-presence in time and space. They conceptualize a continuum of online activism on the dimension of “leveraging the affordances of the web,” where low leveraging is referred to as the “supersize” model: “[. . .] faster, wider, cheaper activism, but without fundamental changes to the dynamics of contention” (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 12). On the other end of the spectrum are “e-movements,” where collective action is transformed rather than
amplified in online-only structures with high leveraging of web affordances. Earl and Kimport’s analysis pointed the way for a social movement research agenda that has a fast moving target with new platforms being created every day. As Hands (2013) succinctly puts it, “[t]he Internet is vanishing,” and countless platforms unfold their specific “platformativity” (p. 1).

Media and communication scholarship has outpaced social movement studies when it comes to empirical studies of activism taking place via the most important US platforms (Ahy, 2014; Caers et al., 2013; Fotopoulou, 2014; Harlow, 2012; Lindgren & Lundström, 2011; Nitschke et al., 2014; Thorson et al., 2013; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014) and certainly with regard to conceptualizing media affordances and digital platforms. Social movement theory can now benefit enormously from the conceptual advances offered by media studies in recent years. The “Web” affordances discussed by Earl and Kimport—lowered cost of mobilization and coordination without co-presence in time and space—can be developed into a much more fine-grained tool to analyze the myriad platform designs that now organize participation. Similarly, the distinction between “Internet-enhanced” and “Internet-based” activism (Vegh, 2003) is too general because it ignores the organizational context that puts structures and users to work. The concept runs the risk of conferring explanatory power on technological features by ignoring those technologies’ origins and uses. Theory that focuses on technical performance without taking account of actor constellations and platform politics is missing part of the story, as the debates around digital labor show.

**Mobilization of Digital Labor?**

The sometimes obscured commercial basis of many Web 2.0 platforms has been criticized widely in media and communication studies. Early on in the development of social networking sites, a First Monday volume, “Critical Perspectives on Web 2.0” (13/2008), countered the idealistic narratives that governed the discourse: “From San Francisco to Silicon Valley, the newest gold rush is on, call it California Ideology 2.0, and hungry ghosts cover the city” (Silver, 2008). The massive uptake of social media and related economic gains have led scholars to analyze this new relation between platforms and users in terms of the labor that participants contribute. From her case study of an online philanthropic campaign, Tatarchevskiy (2011) concludes that “online social networks transform the division of labor online—organizational ‘experts’ take care of the mechanics of activism while lay citizens contribute what I term ‘visual labor’” (p. 298). Tatarchevskiy recognizes that web-based activism not only leverages web affordances successfully by making “activism convenient and standardized” but also results in a new division of labor between organizers and “the public,” who is asked to participate in this “visual labor” of performing the organization’s campaign online (Tatarchevskiy, 2011). While Tatarchevskiy focuses on the “representational” labor of demonstrating support, others who study content-generating platforms have described them as “social factory where our social interactions are captured and monetized” (Postigo, 2014, p. 3). Postigo (2014) argues that such simplifying notions of digital labor as inevitably exploitative have been replaced by “attempts to theorize the political economy of Web 2.0 platforms” that hope to overcome theoretical dichotomies between participation and exploitation (p. 4).

**Mobilizing Volunteers**

The present case study is exemplary for the complexities that mark digital labor. As a platform that organizes volunteering online, Sparked occupies a hybrid position with regard to digital labor. On one hand, volunteering by definition involves the explicit donation of free work by volunteers (Cnaan & Amrofell, 1994)—at least in an ideal situation with no exercise of power through employers or labor market norms. As in Postigo’s (2009) study of America Online (AOL) volunteer work, no “claims of false consciousness on the part of volunteers who willingly engaged in free-labor” can be made in Sparked’s case (p. 452); yet, it is different in that no “co-production” happens between volunteers and platform provider—Sparked is not the mutual object of crowdsourced labor; it organizes the exchange of volunteering. At the same time, the degree of “capturing” labor and monetization is high: It has become common practice by nonprofits and firms to translate volunteer work into dollar value and to measure “impact” with quantified means (Brown, 1999); Sparked does this in a purposeful and performance-oriented way, and even sells a variant of its platform to companies who use it to manage and monetize their employees’ volunteering. Volunteering online, in other words, bears features of both digital labor and “digitally enabled social change” (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

Yet, volunteerism as an object of study is grouped within nonprofit and voluntary sector studies of social service provision with low potential for contention and protest. The disciplinary division between social movement studies and third sector studies notwithstanding, some of the tactics employed are similar, and it can be argued that the pervasive use of digital media supports this alignment of mobilization strategies. Nonprofits in an increasingly marketized field of advocacy and philanthropy (Bajde, 2013; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009) use social media for communication, outreach, and fundraising (Guo & Saxton, 2014; McInerney, 2014; P. G. Svensson et al., 2014). Scholars have been observing a trend toward professionalization, management, and rationalization in the nonprofit sector for decades. Volunteers provide the labor for much of this work, and they must be mobilized to do so—often in ways that resemble other activism for social change online. It is this hybridity that makes Sparked a valuable case study for managed platforms:
Volunteers and nonprofits coordinate efficiently through an online platform—within the confines of a microaction structure developed by the platform owners.

Using “Affordances” to Analyze Platform Politics

The concept of affordances as a structural quality of environments that “afford” certain possibilities for (inter)action and disallow others has been made fruitful for the analysis of designed socio-technical systems by media scholars (Ahy, 2014; boyd, 2011; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Graves, 2007; Postigo, 2014; Wellman et al., 2003). Scholars have worked to overcome the deterministic tendency of the concept with a more nuanced approach that understands technological affordances present in a given feature set as a potential for specific social affordances. Technical and design features such as “like buttons” and “rating systems” can thus be understood in a socio-technical way as systems that were designed with a purpose in mind, then offer a range of possibilities, and become used in certain ways (which may or may not depart from those initial intentions). The risks of leaning toward a technologically deterministic analysis still loom large when affordances are attributed to large-scale infrastructures. To remedy this methodologically, scholars have introduced analytic distinctions between systems that form a functional entity, their design features, and the social affordances that these entail (Postigo, 2014).

This study deciphers the systems, features, and social affordances exhibited by the Sparked microvolunteering platform. Specifically, I zoom in on microaction as a central element of the managed platform design that allows for the purposeful construction of certain social affordances. I use affordances as signposts that point well beyond technical features to the values and goals of designers who envision a certain set of relations and create the structure for these relations. Gillespie’s (2010) understanding of “the platform” as political is central for this endeavor: The platform must be understood as infrastructure, architecture, or “constitution” rather than just a tool or service. Platforms are attractive as spatial brokers, not as providers of specific tools, “because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact or sell” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 351). Platforms govern their space visibly, but subtly through design: “To the degree that information intermediaries like YouTube claim to be open, flat and neutral spaces open to all comers, the kinds of interventions and choices these providers actually do make can be harder to see” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 358). The seeming inclusion of all users veils the exclusion of certain uses. Platform conditions “are practical, technical, economic and legal” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 358); in other words, platforms enforce a whole set of institutions in their space. In the case of YouTube, this constitution concerns content creation and distribution. In the present case study of Sparked, the constitution lays out how volunteers and nonprofits relate to each other—far from being a tool, this platform constitutes a marketplace.

The goal of the following analysis is to understand these enabling as well as constraining interventions and choices that come packaged as “platform” through the lens of systems, features, and affordances.

Sparked: A Microaction Platform

Notes on Case Selection and Methodology

Sparked, Inc. is a platform that sits squarely at the intersection of the literatures reviewed here. As a microvolunteering platform, it mobilizes volunteers, who often conceive of their actions as activism. At the same time, this volunteer labor is managed in a process design geared toward productivity that sets clear rules for the exchanges between nonprofits and volunteers that are facilitated. Third, the platform is offered by a for-profit organization. It is this hybridity that makes Sparked a valuable case study for mobilization in managed platforms, which I conceive as distinct from mobilization through social networking sites or campaign websites. The case combines characteristics that social movement scholars understand as leveraging affordances by activists with structural platform characteristics identified by media scholars.

The focus of this structural analysis is an “order of discourse” rather than the single communicative events that take place on the platform (Fairclough, 2000, p. 310). Unit of analysis is thus the entire website of Sparked and its application elements, as well as a sample of interactions in the core design element, the “challenge.” Using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti, text, visuals, and elements have been selected and coded thematically. The analysis yielded lists of meaningful codes representing redundant patterns of structure and discourse on the platform. I have ordered codes analytically using Atlas.ti’s code families to group themes and code network tools to represent relations between codes. In order to situate the platform as a medium created by developers out of certain motivations and addressing a specific audience, an in-depth interview with a founder of Sparked was conducted, which was 1.5 hr long and covered the history of the platform’s inception, plans for the future, and the developers’ motivations and thoughts about online engagement. The interview was coded with the same qualitative software and compared with the analysis of platform affordances. One of the central questions of this analysis is what kind of social change Sparked claims to “enable digitally”—and whether the digitally enabling architecture constrains other discourses in the process.

The Sparked Structure: “Use Your Skills to Solve This Challenge”

Sparked.com greets the visitor with a large black and white header image of a cheering crowd, likely at a show, and the invitation to “Unleash their passion.” The subtitle informs
the potential client that “Sparked helps companies tap employee and customer expertise.” While Sparked’s landing page most heavily speaks to corporate clients who have volunteers to manage, a badge-shaped button on the header links to the public microvolunteering platform now called Global Giving Time.2

The platform matches registered volunteers and nonprofits in a sort of volunteering marketplace. When signing up, nonprofits indicate their causes as well as needs, which are matched with volunteers’ indicated causes and skills. This matching engine brings together volunteers and nonprofits in so-called challenges—the microaction element of the platform. Challenges consist of online-only, temporally limited tasks that are posted by nonprofits and that volunteers respond to in a blog-like format. Finally, the platform features a social networking element in the form of volunteer profiles that include pictures, bios, and, importantly, awards and thumbs up—the platform rewards system. Table 1 organizes these three design systems, their features, and the social affordances that make up the platform’s “politics” or “constitution,” to which I turn now.

| System           | Features                                      | Affordances                      |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Matching engine  | Two dimensions: causes and skills             | Specialization                   |
|                  |                                               | Volunteer discretion             |
|                  |                                               | Minimal commitment               |
|                  |                                               | Rationalization                  |
|                  |                                               | Individualization                |
| Sparked challenge| Blog format                                   | Picture book look and feel       |
|                  | Media mix                                     | Focused conversation             |
|                  | Always online                                 | Real-time presence               |
|                  | Limited short time frame                      | Sense of urgency                 |
|                  |                                               | Project character                |
|                  | Game structure: challenge, answers, thumbs up,| Interaction script and actions:   |
|                  | replies, thank you, awards, closing of        | announcements, requests, props,  |
|                  | challenge, quantification                     | user roles                       |
|                  |                                               | Productive paradigm              |
| Personal profiles| Self-presentation                             | Culture of appreciation          |
|                  | Award and thumbs up count                     | Self-branding                    |

Rationalizing the Nonprofit–Volunteer Relationship

Sparked’s social affordances are consistent with research on the marketization, professionalization, and rationalization of the nonprofit sector (Bajde, 2013; Davis, McAdam, Scott, & Zald, 2005; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; McCarthy & Zald, 1973; McInerney, 2014; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). A major affordance for rationalization in the process of volunteering can be found in the matching engine system with its technical feature of matching nonprofits’ causes with volunteers’ skills.

Needs indicated by nonprofits typically include requests for copy writing, brand design, website design, and other media-related or strategic advice—organizational professionalization activities. “Causes” are open-ended, but Sparked offers a general and non-contentious ready-made list, for example, “health” or “education.” “Skills” are similarly predefined for the targeted group of professional volunteers with language such as “SEO” (search engine optimization) as a predefined option. The only requirement for nonprofits is 501(c)3 incorporation status—this feature marks Sparked as a depoliticized “clearing house” platform. The matching engine affords volunteer discretion: Volunteers pick challenges every time they use the platform, “when it’s convenient” (Sparked.com). Nonprofits do not choose or screen volunteers, but await responses. At Sparked, nonprofits are not looking for a person but for a result. By the same token, volunteers do not bring their whole identity to the interaction but offer tailored skills and a product at the time of their choosing. The same feature establishes minimal commitment to individual organizations. While volunteers may repeatedly choose the same organization, the matching engine suggests ever new challenges by new nonprofits based on skills and causes, not organizations. The membership relation shifts from nonprofits to the platform organization. All of these features emphasize individualization. While “teams” can be formed, most volunteering is individual. The features of “challenges” equally support individualization and the professional nature of the space. Most challenges result in very structured discussions between a number of users, focusing directly on submitted work or ideas, evaluating designs or slogans. In the sample analyzed, little departure from challenge goals was observed. As a result, no acts of moderation and leadership are needed—media professionals used to freelancing manage
themselves. Personal information or conversation is rarely exchanged. When users disclose personal information, it is about their professional affiliations, interests, and enthusiasm rather than related to other spheres of life. Challenges exhibit project character in that they are attributed deadlines, have a dedicated blog-like space, and aim to produce specified outcomes. This project character structures volunteering through a professional sense of urgency, which is tangible in announcements of action and constant nonprofit presence in response to volunteers.

Overall, the matching engine and challenge systems are structures that rationalize the otherwise time- and energy-intensive process of establishing relationships between nonprofits and volunteers. The one-sidedness of the matching engine as well as the project character of challenges seems to reinforce a power asymmetry between needy nonprofits and increasingly agentic volunteers, a dynamic in the politics of volunteering that has been documented by Eliasoph (2013).

The Figure of the Professional Volunteer

A rationalized volunteering relation shifts the actor roles involved in the exchange as well. The matching engine’s skills and needs matrix affords volunteer specialization with regard to capabilities and experience. Unskilled volunteers cannot be put to work within the context of this platform. In addition to this content-related constraint, the project character of challenges requires volunteers with self-direction and an understanding of specific work processes. Nonprofit representatives act as project managers without power to direct. Requesters of a volunteering product delicately balance between motivating volunteers (through answering, thanking, and commenting) and getting results (through specifications, critique, and non-response). Especially in design products, a balance must be struck between the freedom of expression of the skilled, professional, rather powerful volunteers, and the needy, but nonetheless evaluative nonprofit representative who can take it or leave it. Volunteer expression is facilitated throughout: Volunteers have personal profiles that afford racking up a portfolio of successful contributions, lists of nonprofits served, and “awards of excellence.” Profiles afford volunteer branding that can be used as a form of capital by professional volunteers in contexts outside the platform.

The high-performance rationalization of volunteering enabled through microaction, coupled with the figure of the professional volunteer, represents a configuration of affordances that I describe as “specialized supersizing.” This variation of Earl and Kimport’s concept combines the quantitative element of resource leveraging with the qualitative element of imposing professional, social, and content constraints to volunteering relations through the platform structure.

Use Your Skills to Solve This Challenge: Playful Productivity

The professional and instrumental characteristics of Sparked are complemented by design elements and language that elicit a rewarding and possibly fun experience for volunteers, all the while motivating contributions. All platform features exhibit playful and colorful visuals as well as elements of game structure. “Awards of excellence,” “thumbs up” buttons, and success stories help rank volunteer achievements and mobilize participants. Some displays of quantification, such as the total US Dollar value of contributed volunteer work to date, emphasize the economic aspect of volunteer productivity. The productive paradigm enforced through the challenge system is closely linked to a norm of positive language throughout the platform. A culture of appreciation is wired into features such as the statement of gratitude that concludes a challenge, which consists of a showcased text field where nonprofit representatives write acknowledgments. Praise is awarded abundantly in interactions—to Sparked as a facilitator, to nonprofits for what they do, to volunteers for contributions. Esteem is also inscribed in the rating system within challenges, where users value contributions by clicking a “thumbs up” button—which are tracked in user profiles.

The various features to allocate praise afford a pronounced culture of positivity. A negative tone is absolutely uncommon, and criticism is voiced almost exclusively in a constructive way with a focus on specific objects, never with regard to nonprofits’ causes or politics. The apolitical, but entrepreneurial spirit of the platform is in line with its revenue source: Corporate volunteering tools are offered by Sparked to for-profits in order to enhance their team experience and to satisfy Corporate Social Responsibility reporting needs. The productive paradigm seems to foreclose structural criticism, and no opponents are named in the struggle to “make a difference.”

The Politics of Microvolunteering Platforms

Sparked’s constitution lays down a “microvolunteering law” of rationalization, professionalization, and productivity in a playful and depoliticized environment. To theorize online mobilization beyond activists and traditional movements, we need to reconsider the relationship between actors, causes, and tactics: Tactics can be provided to movements from outsiders. With the emergence of a whole ecology of technology-based tactics, mobilization is increasingly facilitated by third parties who deliver a “platform service,” but are not themselves a social movement organization, nonprofit, or even “movement entrepreneur” in the narrow sense. Hirsch’s (2011) distinction between “activist technology” and “technology used by activists” provides a starting point for this analysis. But not only do activists use proprietary platforms.
for their mobilization efforts, there are platforms designed
for the very purpose of mobilizing people—by for-profit
firms. Sparked is one such platform that has entered the
market for mobilization. Founded a few years ago in San
Francisco by a small team of programmers and web design-
ers turned “social entrepreneurs,” Sparked originated in
the cultural framework dubbed the Californian Ideology by
Silver above. It is crucial to take the platform’s economic
context into account to understand what “making a differ-
ence” means in the framing presented by Sparked—it’s orga-
nized microactions would likely not pass social movement
studies’ ideology test for acceptable causes and tactics. Yet,
users have a sense of activism about what they are doing
when they microvolunteer. In order to understand this plat-
form, we need to pay attention to its organizational position:
It performs the role of proprietary broker for the exchange of
voluntary labor in the third sector. This is not “activist tech-
nology,” and it goes well beyond a “technology used by
activists”; it might make sense to speak of a mobilization
platform service used by activists—and corporate actors, in
the context of a market for volunteer labor. While microvol-
unteering through Sparked remains free of charge for non-
profits, the next generation of digital volunteer match-making
is marketizing the process further: Catchafire.org exhibits
almost the same constitution afforded by Sparked—rational-
ization, professionalization, and productivity—but profes-
sionals its own market making role by charging nonprofits
and requiring an application process for volunteers.
Catchafire has also adopted the discourse of social entrepre-
neurship more strategically through certification as a B-Corp
while growing with venture capital funding. Compared to
Sparked, Catchafire claims a tenfold impact with numbers
such as “75,000 hrs volunteered” and “$42 million saved by
our organizations.”

Platforms such as Sparked and its microlending coun-
terpart Kiva have helped define this platform-centric con-
stitution for microaction that comes with distinct values.
The “politics” of Sparked are effectively a depoliticiza-
tion—the platform exhibits an “instrumental rationality”
(Weber, 1964, p. 115) where tactics, not causes, determine
exchanges. This emergence of a market for mobilization
tactics may have important implications for nonprofits,
volunteers, and social movements. The broker position
can be powerful when actors have few ways of connecting oth-
erwise (Burt, 1982). Similarly to the creation of a moral
market for “technology assistance providers dedicated to
serving nonprofit organizations” studied by McInerney
(2014), nonprofits that are “served” by social enterprise
have little power in negotiating the terms of the exchange.
While McInerney observes a movement turned market
through corporate investment and institutional entrepre-
neurship, platforms seem to create markets in more subtle,
design-driven ways—matching and microaction systems
did not require much capital to launch, but have created
lasting socio-technical constitutions that marketize and
professionalize volunteering further. This begs the ques-
tion why Sparked or Catchafire, providing apparently vital
support to nonprofits, was not launched by nonprofits.
Social movement scholarship needs to consider why tac-
tics that leverage technological affordances innovatively
are rarely produced by those who mobilize around causes.
Another set of questions that follows from the practice of
brokerage is how volunteers or activists navigate the
empowering, but also rationalizing and disciplining aspects
of platforms—is the “activist subject” being reconstituted
(Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012)? Last but not least, questions
of inclusion and exclusion come to the fore when platform
constitutions explicitly limit access to privileged groups.

Conclusion
Managed platforms for civic engagement reorganize the
relationships between volunteers and organizations in ways
that neither social movement scholarship nor media studies
have examined extensively yet. This study is an attempt to
bridge a gap between these literatures by analyzing the
hybrid case of Sparked, a microvolunteering platform which
has been created by web designers, not activists, and which
efficiently organizes volunteering through a microaction
design. The case exhibits characteristics that social move-
ment scholars understand as resource mobilization through
leveraging of affordances by activists, but it also features the
structural characteristics of platforms that media scholars
have identified as both enabling and constraining. In order to
conceptualize the “digitally enabled activism” that takes
place within the confines of this managed platform, I have
investigated its microaction affordances and their implica-
tions. I combine elements of Earl and Kimport’s (2011) anal-
ysis of “supersized” versus qualitatively changed activism
with recent approaches to the concept of affordances from
media studies to come to a more integrating perspective on
the role of platforms in mobilizing. My analysis finds that
high leveraging of online affordances can coincide with a
shifted logic of engagement in the case of microaction plat-
forms: Sparked’s microaction system is geared toward per-
f ormance but targets only a very specialized niche of
volunteering. Sparked brokers media and marketing support
to nonprofits, carried out in small online-only tasks by pro-
fessionals. This case points to the emergence of a perfor-
mance-oriented broker position to organize what is framed as
social change activity. To capture this simultaneity of high
leveraging of resources by volunteers and nonprofits with an
exclusionary and constraining platform scope, I suggest a
conceptual addition to Earl and Kimport’s theorizing of a
“continuum of online activism.” Combining features from
both ends of the spectrum, Sparked’s model could be desig-
nated as specialized supersizing that addresses nonprofits’
needs for increasing organizational overhead services in the
context of a professionalizing third sector. The analytic dis-
tinction between platform systems, technical features, and
social affordances established in media scholarship has been a fruitful conceptual tool to work out Sparked’s platform “constitution” and “politics” (Gillespie, 2010)—the set of social and economic relations that the platform proposes. I have found that Sparked’s constitution lays down a “micro-volunteering law” of rationalization, professionalization, and productivity in a playful and depoliticized environment. Its core microaction systems, the “matching engine” and “challenge,” afford project-style exchanges between nonprofits and professional individuals in non-committal ways, where volunteers become members of the platform rather than of nonprofits. This process of matching nonprofit needs with volunteer skills on a case-by-case basis not only rationalizes the nonprofit–volunteer relationship but also provides volunteers with greater discretion. In addition, professional volunteers are afforded potential benefits beyond “doing good” through portfolio building features and ranking mechanisms. Finally, playful visuals and simple game elements afford a culture of positivity. The productive paradigm that rules interactions in challenges is accompanied by a pronounced expression of appreciation, afforded partially through pre-defined accolade features.

Sparked’s microvolunteering design geared toward rationalization, professionalization, and productivity has helped define a platform-centric constitution for microaction that comes with distinct values. The “politics” of Sparked are effectively a depoliticization, where tactics, not causes, determine exchanges. This emergence of a market for mobilization tactics may have important implications for nonprofits, volunteers, and social movements more broadly—a development that we can only understand if we close some considerable gaps between social movement and media studies. This case study has focused on connecting theory on mobilization with theory on the structural characteristics of platforms. Beyond this, I hope that future research will integrate knowledge from organization theory and technology studies more systematically to understand the shifting relations between activists, movements, organizations, and technology.

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Notes

1. The interview was conducted by the author and Hector Postigo.
2. Since this study was completed, Sparked has moved on to focus on customer retention tools; the microvolunteering platform remains operational and active at http://globalgiving.sparked.com/
3. Catchafire Annual Impact Report (http://catchafireblog.org/2014/12/23/sparks-newsletter-archive/).

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