WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COLLABORATE: COLLECTIVE ACTION, COLLABORATION, AND MISINFORMATION IN THE NEW JERSEY ANTI-WIND COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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The construction of offshore wind farms in New Jersey has been contested since 2019, when the first contracts for exploration and development were signed. While polls indicated that the vast majority of state residents favored the development of offshore wind, many Jersey Shore residents vehemently opposed the project. There was little organized opposition until a January 2023 press conference, where five organizations alleged without proof or scientific documentation a connection between the deaths of marine mammals and wind energy companies' exploration of the ocean floor. The conference received widespread media attention, and misinformation about marine mammal deaths caused a dramatic shift in public support for offshore wind. Although it might be expected that the success of the press conference would galvanize organizing efforts to oppose offshore wind, this did not happen. The five organizations did not continue to collaborate, nor was there a groundswell of community organizational efforts for collective action.

This dissertation looks at the failure of community-based collaboration or collective action through the multiple lens of organizational communication and misinformation theories.

Collaboration theories suggest several reasons that organizations seek to partner with others, but the size, governance, or capacities of smaller organizations may constrain their choices. Theories of interorganizational collaboration in collective action suggest that patterns of interaction and engagement among organizations determine how they will come together to resolve common issues. Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) theories suggest that organization occurs through a communicative process where representatives find commonalities in conversations that are then codified into texts and discourses that define the collaboration. Failure results from communicative breakdown at any of these points. Climate denial and anti-wind misinformation is widely circulated among the anti-wind organizations on the Jersey Shore; this dissertation investigated whether these commonly accepted messages affected organizational efforts within these groups even as they impacted the wider stakeholder network.

This study used a mixed-methods approach that combined open-ended interviews, content analysis of documents and websites, and computational analysis of a Facebook network of local anti-wind organizations. The results indicate that the dominance of one group in both the informant and Facebook networks was sufficient to inhibit collaboration or collective action among the smaller groups. In a highly charged, political environment, the group's political ties and ability to draw resources from the national climate denial, anti-wind network small groups were constrained either by circumstance or choice. Thus, organizations need to consider whether an organization that offers outsized resources that can assure short-term wins are a good fit for long-term collaboration. Additionally, misinformation about marine mammals resulted in increased interaction within the Facebook network, but did not increase engagement among the organizations. However, the content spilled into the wider discussion, increasing discussion among other stakeholders and affecting public opinion about offshore wind.

Acknowledgements

In many ways, this dissertation is a study in hubris. What I thought I was looking at turned out to be something else entirely. This probably happens more often than I realize, but for those of us with imposter syndrome, novel findings are as much a source of anxiety as excitement.

Even before I had a vocabulary for it, I have been interested in how people without power organize to challenge established interests. It dates back to my years at summer camp, where we sang civil rights anthems, talked about consciousness raising and Vietnam, and where Color War was banned as too competitive. Over the past seven years, it has been nurtured by Dr. Marya Doerfel, an extraordinary scholar, academic advisor, mentor, and person. Marya took a chance on an untraditional graduate student who knew nothing (and I am not exaggerating this point) about how to work on a doctoral level. When I was accepted at Rutgers, we met at Sook Café, and she told me all about her research in community resilience processes. I was really fascinated, but (I can admit it now) clueless. Marya's interests in organizational resilience, social networks, and stakeholder communication were like the Yellow Brick Road for me. It started me on a path of my own. My ability to find my way at Rutgers and learn how to both fit in and stand out is due to her unwavering support and the untold hours of conversation that merged the personal and the professional in perfect proportions.

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with warmth and emotional generosity. Every conversation I've had with her ended with a version of "You've got this." And that made me feel like maybe I did. I asked Dr. Adam Saffer to serve as my outside member because I respect and admire his work on multi-issue stakeholder networks. I'm grateful for his advice and assistance, particularly during the formative stages of the dissertation.

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Sitting in classes, especially those without windows, can be tedious, but a good professor can make the hours go much more quickly. I was lucky to have some of the best during my two years of classwork. Each one contributed to the making of a scholar, and I am truly thankful to every one of my teachers. I wasn't the perfect student, so I hope you take this as the compliment it's meant to be.

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While I was writing the final chapters of this dissertation, my sister and only sibling died unexpectedly. While we weren't close, I know she was really proud of me. It's just like the Joni Mitchell song goes, "You don't know what you got till it's gone." Miss you, Bev.

Finally, this dissertation, and really, everything I do, is dedicated to the people who make it all worthwhile: Adina and Yosh, Pauly and Heidi, Aviya, Nathaniel, Aaron, Marcus, and the next baby K. (Please stay inside until after graduation.) I love you all.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Offshore wind policy in New Jersey dates back to 2010 and the Offshore Wind Economic Development act signed by Governor Chris Christie (Rahim, 2017). It took nine years and a change in administration for policy to become reality and the first contract to be awarded. (Appendix A shows where the initial wind farms would be situated according to these contracts.) At the time, public opinion was clearly in favor of the development of offshore wind in the state (Gilbert, 2020). However, in early 2023, a group of five local Jersey Shore organizations, some newly formed, held a press conference alleging that offshore wind exploration was directly responsible for the deaths of six marine mammals in 33 days. Their charges were reported in the media and amplified on social media. Within months, support for offshore wind plummeted (*New Jersey wants to halt development of offshore wind farms*, 2023). These five groups might have coalesced into an issue network aimed at changing wind energy policies (Kwestel & Doerfel, 2023), but in fact there was limited organizational activity or collective action among anti-wind groups. A coalition of three organizations filed suit against the state of New Jersey to halt the development of wind farms (Parry, 2024b) in May, but otherwise local community organization was largely limited to information sharing on social media, attendance at public hearings, hyperlocal community events, and lawsuits originated by municipalities.

The theory of collective action suggests that individuals come together to achieve goals impossible to reach on their own. Olson (1965) hypothesized that only organizations could afford the real costs associated with these efforts, and thus posited that collective action was an organizational process. Less than 30 years after the publication of *The Logic of Collective Action*, the ubiquity of personal computers brought the cost of collective action to a negligible amount (Coeira, 2000). As a result, collective action organizations were forced to reorient their member

relationships to accomplish social missions. Moving past Olson's economic theory as well as well as Gray's (1989) management perspective, Flanagin et al. (2006) conceive of collective action as a "communicative phenomenon" (p. 32). They assert that it encompasses aspects of collective action, organization and social capital theories to explain the ways in which traditional collective action organizations interact and engage with their members. Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 2013) investigate the impact of the Internet on political communication and conclude that information and communication technologies (ICTs) make it possible to personalize collective action. They argue that formal organizations would not be necessary for successful collective action related to contentious political issues.

More than a decade ago, Flanagin et al. (2012) postulated that the availability of new technologies enabled organizations to relate to their memberships in new and different ways, transforming the practice of collective action. Internet technology and social media platforms allow activists to create their own organizational structures that either co-exist with existing organizations or bypass them altogether. The Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) theory agrees that the process of organizing for change has changed as a result of social media; collective action organizations can utilize technologies that allow for immediate feedback and adaptation of texts, blurring the boundaries between organizational leaders and followers and affecting how discussions, texts, and discourse are formed (Kavada, 2015). While these new, Internet-based organizations undoubtedly allow new voices to emerge, their structures may also constrain their capacity to influence public policy discussions and decisions (Kreiss & Tufekci, 2013; Tufekci, 2017).

Research into new forms of collective action and the impact of new technology on the development of collective identity focus on how information affects organizing behavior. In the

case of collective action, the ability to analyze large numbers of tweets and to examine large social networks allow researchers to map information flows through a network to discern how users mobilize during mass demonstrations (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), create counterpublics that bring the voices of marginalized users to the forefront (Foucault Welles & Jackson, 2019; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), exert networked power that challenges major institutions (Uysal & Yang, 2013), and explain the how information passes from the core to the periphery of networks (Barberá, Wang, et al., 2015), to name only a few of the ways network analysis has been used. Conversations, discourses and texts form the basis of CCO scholarship (see Melucci, 1996; Taylor and van Every, 2000). The multiplex nature of organizations (Lee & Monge, 2011) suggests that the social capital shared by friends and acquaintances can filter to the organizational level. Thus, organizations linked by the communication and information exchanges of their leaders or members can undertake collective action activities as a first step toward organizational collaboration. However, this requires that the members involved in these dialogues recognize their own and the others' organizational identities so that their communication can evolve into the collective identity that is necessary for collaboration (Koschmann, 2012).

Flanagin et al. (2006) conceive of collective action as occurring on a grid composed of two continua. The first describes the interaction between organizational leadership and their members. On one end of the continuum is impersonal interaction, On the organizational level, interaction from leadership to varies from impersonal, where the two have no direct interaction. At the other end are highly interpersonal ways of interacting where boundaries between personal and public actions are permeable (Bimber et al., 2012; Flanagin, et al, 2006). In the former, information processing and decision making reside at the organizational level; in the latter, these

functions reside among members. Thus, in organizations where personal interaction is high (relative to reliance of organizational guidance in collective action), members are connected through a collective identity born from sharing common narratives of their experiences (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

The second, intersecting continuum measures the quality of engagement between organizations and their members by gauging the autonomy of individual members to design collective actions within the structure of the focal organization (Flanagin, 2006; Bimber, 2012). Members of entrepreneurial organizations bring their personal preferences and information to one another; their collective action arises from within social networks rather than instructions from a focal organization. However, information, particularly when related to issues with partisan overtones, can be based on substantiated reports, or false materials (Nyhan, 2020). Further, information spreads quickly on social media, and individuals often follow the lead of those in their social groups even when the information is untrue (Kaiser et al., 2021; Margolin, 2021). Media trust is also shaped by our online and offline social groups (Ognyanova, 2019). Claims about climate-related issues are especially susceptible to misinformation. They are often interpreted by individuals through personal narratives based on experiences as it is difficult for laymen to accurately evaluate scientific information (Dahlstrom, 2021). Climate change misinformation is related to denial about climate change and other climate-related issues. Such misinformation often results from deliberate framing by the fossil fuel industry (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2022) and conservative think tanks (Oreskes & Conway, 2010), and is linked to conservative politicians and conservative nonprofit organizations (Treen et al., 2020). The misinformation gets introduced in social media and spread through filter bubbles to conservative audiences. Indeed, the strongest predictor of support or opposition to the construction of offshore

wind farms in New Jersey is political party (Brugger & Portundo, 2023; Murray & MacDonald, 2023).

Doerfel and Taylor (2017) extended Flanagin et al.'s (2006) model of collection action space to encompass organizational collaboration using the concept of engaged ties to represent modes of engagement and frequent ties to represent interaction. Engaged ties within a collaboration are those where communication is meaningful, equitable, and serves to enhance relationships (Doerfel, 2018) and social capital (Saffer, 2018). Engagement ranges from minimal, where organizations feel they have little sway over group deliberations, to highly engaged, where members communicate freely and with trust. Using this model, the degree of collaboration will be reflected by the frequency (interaction) and quality (engagement) of communication. This model is consistent with the CCO perspective on collaboration for collective action. CCO states that organizations are communicationally constituted as narratives are institutionalized as discourses that facilitate agency for the nascent organization (Taylor et al., 1996); It is the ability of organizational partners to negotiate a collective identity that enables them to successfully work toward a desired outcome (Koschmann et al., 2012). Successful collaboration requires that organizations trust the information they share with one another (Gulati, 1995a; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Congruent beliefs about information among organizations can lead to greater trust and prompt collection action toward a common goal. When this occurs, collaborating organizations share social capital that can enable their network to emerge as legitimate stakeholders in the larger network. Divergent beliefs about the same information may make it more difficult for organizations to find common ground and thus inhibit collaborative activity.

Academic literature is replete with literature explaining how and why collaborations succeed. (See Atouba and Shumate (2020).) Much less is known about those that fail

(Koschmann, 2016; Woo, 2018). However, failure can teach us many things about collaborations. It allows us to examine the internal workings of partnerships and the external pressures that affect them. In many ways, failure is akin to Tolstoy's observation about unhappy families: each is unique. Koschmann (2016) noted that more collaborations fail than succeed. Examining the failures may allow subsequent partnerships to avoid the patterns that lead to dissolution.

This dissertation tells a story of collaborative failure. It examines a network of anti-wind organizations on the Jersey Shore through the lens of collaboration theories, the interorganizational collective action space, CCO theory, and the impact that misinformation has on uniting the group. In the case of groups opposing offshore wind farms in New Jersey, the early, almost spontaneous, cooperative effort around misinformation did not foster long-term partnerships despite similarities in values, missions, and goals. Yet while these organizations did not form lasting alliances, their short-lived collaboration spread misinformation about the connection between marine mammal deaths and offshore wind exploration throughout the wider stakeholder community, effectively infecting it and causing public support for offshore wind to drop from 80% to less than 50% in favor (*New Jersey wants to halt development of offshore wind farms*, 2023; *New poll: Support for offshore wind in N.J. drops*, 2023). It enhances our understanding of the importance of collective identity and collective agency by demonstrating their importance to successful collaboration even when other acknowledged antecedents are present. It also allows us to examine the impact that external organizations or movements with nearly unlimited resources can have on local organizing efforts. It is unusual because the resources brought into New Jersey were not utilized to fight local groups, but to augment their efforts. While national political changes have wrought major policy changes on the national

level, these local groups have not yet successfully challenged the state's wind energy policies or activities, suggesting that dependence on national organizing efforts may inhibit local organizing.

Chapter 2: Interorganizational Collaboration

Organizations are motivated to work together during periods of environmental unrest or uncertainty, or when adversarial positions are no longer advantageous for them (Gray, 1985). When the problems they face are too great for any one organization to resolve on its own (Gray, 1989), they form cross-sector social partnerships (Waddock, 1989) guided by agreed-upon rules and structures (Wood & Gray, 1991). The essential purpose for collaboration is action: collaboration is goal directed, and successful collaborations are directed toward an outcome (Wood & Gray, 1991).

Organizations have several motives for working with others. Oliver's (1990) research concluded that there are six incentives for partnerships: necessity (e.g., to meet legal or regulatory requirements), to gain control over other organizations that possess needed resources, to pursue common goals, to improve their own metrics, reduce uncertainty and enhance stability, or to gain legitimacy with existing or potential stakeholders. Other scholars have suggested that organizations collaborate to take advantage of opportunities (Dentoni et al., 2016; Van de Ven, 1976; Vangen & Huxham, 2003), acquire (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) or exchange needed resources (Broom et al., 1997), seek reputational and social capital (Doerfel et al., 2013; Doerfel et al., 2010; Shumate & O'Connor, 2010), increase legitimacy and conform to environmental pressures (Barringer & Harrison, 2000) enhance efficiency and organizational stability (Oliver, 1990), or to promote social or regulatory change (Saffer, 2018, 2019). Cross-sector relationships also give organizations the chance to access new viewpoints and perspectives (Gray, 1989), advance knowledge, and propose innovative new solutions (Doerfel, 2016). Often, these objectives overlap, and one may facilitate or constrain others (Oliver, 1990). Successful

partnerships are themselves a learning tool for organizations: the probability of interorganizational collaboration increases with prior successful collaborations (Gulati, 1999).

Antecedents to Collaboration

Organizations use a two-step process in determining whether to initiate or enter coalitions. They first seek out available resources and then explore the environment for potential partners (Stephens, 2009). Atouba (2019) cited five qualities sought by organizations when considering cooperative relationships: homophily (Fu, 2022; Atouba, 2014; McPherson, 2001), social networks (Atouba & Shumate, 2010; Doerfel et al., 2010; Yuan & Gay, 2006), prior experience (Doerfel et al., 2013; Gulati, 1995a), reputation (Dollinger et al., 1997; Meijer, 2009; Selsky & Parker, 2005), and resource needs/complementarity (Pfeffer, 200; Guo, 2005; Pfeffer, 2003). The following section explores these five attributes and explains their importance to collaboration.

Homophily

Successful partnerships tend to have strategic similarities (McPherson et al., 2001) that either lead them to collaborate or result in long-lasting, strong partnerships. For example, geography is an important factor in partnerships. Saffer et al.'s (2021) examination of the Sustainable Sanitation Alliance concluded that geographic homophily positively impacted information exchange, communication value, and cooperation. Atouba and Shumate (2014) found that international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) in the infectious disease community were more likely to collaborate when they were headquartered in the same geographic region. However, they also connected with others that had common status, founding dates, and funding partners, leading the authors to surmise that the risks of collaboration are so great that INGOs desire multiple points of commonality. Organizations are also attracted to those