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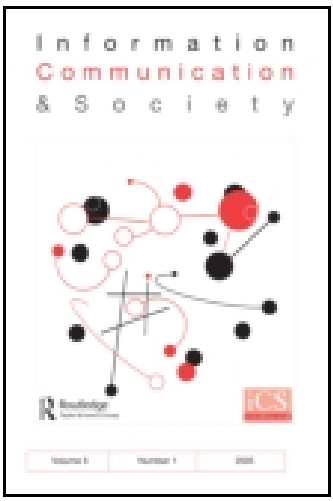

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CIRCULATING STRUGGLE

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Geoffrey Baym & Chirag Shah

CIRCULATING STRUGGLE
The on-line flow of environmental advocacy clips from *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

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The US hybrid comedy/public affairs programs The Daily Show *and* The Colbert Report *have become surprising media spaces in which a wide variety of political and social activists are allowed to advance ideas and advocate issues rarely given voice on corporate television. Increasingly, that novel source of political information and argument is converging with internet-based activist networks, which are using information communication technologies (ICTs) to reappropriate television clips in pursuit of socially and politically transformative agendas. This study explores the convergence between alternative political television and these emergent public spheres. We consider a set of environmental advocacy clips from* TDS *and* Colbert *first broadcast in the spring and summer of 2009, respectively, and then track their circulation on-line. Identifying both websites that link to the original clips and sites that in turn link to those linking sites, we examine the multi-tiered networks of information and activism within which contemporary political television is now embedded. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for both political media and networked collective action.*

Keywords *The Daily Show*; *The Colbert Report*; networked politics; issue networks; collective action; digital activism; environmental movement

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Despite their ostensible label as 'fake news', the hybrid comedy/public affairs programs *The Daily Show* (*TDS*) and *The Colbert Report* have emerged as surprisingly serious locations for political information and conversation on US television (Baym 2005, 2010; Jones 2010). Although their piercing political satire has received the bulk of attention, their interview segments (*TDS* regularly features one; *Colbert* often has two per program) have also become important spaces for

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those hoping to promote themselves and to influence the national conversation (see also Baym 2007). In addition to interviews with actors and musicians, both shows regularly feature high-ranking members of the political establishment – Barack Obama, for example, has appeared on both programs – as well as national journalists, policy makers, pundits, and opinion makers who regularly have voice in other popular forms of political media.

At times, however, *TDS* and *Colbert* also push the boundaries of the televisual sphere, featuring a wide array of scholars, authors, and activists who rarely appear on mainstream television. The two shows are willing not just to take on presidential politics and high-profile legislative debates, but also to provide a platform for proponents of domestic social movements who advance ideas and advocate issues usually ignored on most forms of corporate TV. Reaching as many as two million people with each show, they offer a widely visible entry point into a network of alternative political discourse – a flow of information and argument articulated in print, on-line, and through independent film and video, but existing largely beyond the purview of the mainstream media.

Straddling a number of discursive divides – between information and entertainment, politics and pop culture, mainstream and movement media – *TDS* and *Colbert* equally straddle the decreasing divide between television and the internet. The exposure they offer to domestic activists in turn expands as the shows themselves migrate into a networked environment shaped as much by the horizontal exchange of text and video as by the vertical distribution of media products (see Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006). In this study, we consider the convergence between hybrid political television and alternative public spheres enabled by the enhanced connectivity of the internet. First, we locate the two shows within the developing context of post-network television (Lotz 2007) and emerging, networked political practices. We then explore a particular set of environmental advocacy clips from *TDS* and *Colbert* and track their flow on-line, examining the points of interface among the television segments and the multi-tiered networks of information and activism within which they become embedded. In so doing, we hope to further elucidate an increasingly central aspect of contemporary political communication and collective action.

Networked politics and post-network TV

TDS and *Colbert* are exemplars of television in the digital 'post-network' era, a time in which the industry's long-held conventions have become open to reconsideration, if not entirely abandoned (Lotz 2007). The very nature of the television show itself has been reconceptualized, no longer assumed to be a linear, bounded object, but instead understood as a divisible stream of content to be *repurposed* – segmented, repackaged, and reformatted – across multiple delivery systems (Caldwell 2004). Both *TDS* and *Colbert* are comprised of distinct segments

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generally running around five to seven minutes in length, which are posted on the shows' websites in the form of individually accessible video clips. Available on demand shortly after their original airing, the clips are then housed indefinitely in a searchable archive, indexed by date and keyword. With that, clips that quickly would have faded from public view in their initial context of daily television, now instead remain continuously viewable, while the shows themselves become transformed into unlikely databases of information and argument.

At the same time, the relationship between the content and its audience has been reimagined. If the television business once envisioned its audience as passive receptors, today the audience is enabled by new technologies – transformed into active users for whom the content is an unfinished good, more a resource to be worked with than a product simply to be consumed. Both shows' websites facilitate such active audience engagement, providing a variety of tools that allow people to e-mail clips, embed them on their own websites, or post them to social networking and content aggregation sites. Thus, at the same time that the show producers repurpose their content on-line, any number of individuals, organizations, and institutions can *reappropriate* that content: extract it from its original context, insert it into new discursive forms, and in so doing, reshape it into a resource in pursuit of a myriad of ends.

These changes in media content and audience expectations are themselves components of wider transformations in political behavior. Scholars such as Castells (1997), Jenkins (2006), and Benkler (2006) together describe the rise of the contemporary network society – a technologically enabled shift in which social arrangements, information flows, and power itself are being reworked from formally arranged vertical structures into more informal and shifting, horizontal and interlinked configurations (see also Varnelis 2008). Castells (1997), in particular, describes the emergence of a new locus of agency within this 'networking, decentered form of organization and intervention', one in which individuals and organizations at all levels of society are interlinked and contribute to the production and circulation of what he calls 'cultural code' (p. 362). Benkler (2006) likewise describes a set of alternative 'models of information and cultural production' shaped not by the 'hub-and-spoke architecture' of the traditional mass media, but through a 'distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes' (p. 212).

Benkler and others suggest the development of *alterative public spheres*, open exchanges of ideas, comment, and criticism unconstrained by the capital-intensive, commercial logic that governs the mass media, but rather shaped by 'emergent patterns of cooperation and sharing', and often 'simple coordinate coexistence' among technologically enabled, individual-level contributors (pp. 32–33, see also Dahlgren 2005). Here, information communication technologies allow for the propagation of what Habermas (1997) has described as 'unsubverted circuits of communication' that engage in the discursive labor of 'discovering issues relevant for all of society, contributing possible solutions

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to problems, interpreting values, producing good reasons, and invalidating others' (pp. 57–58).

In turn, the emergence of a new architecture of public communication has allowed for the development of decentralized forms of political practice that function alongside of, and perhaps in response to, the increasing disinterest in formal politics characteristic of contemporary western democracies. Scholars such as Dahlgren (2004) have identified modes of political engagement no longer 'dependent on traditional organizations and on elites mobilizing standing cadres of supporters', and instead ad hoc, expressive and performative, located in the informational and cultural exchanges among multiple publics, citizen networks, and affinity groups increasingly linked through horizontal channels (see also Juris 2008). Heterogeneous and loosely structured, such new social movements (NSMs) and related forms of digital activism often are less focussed on advancing broad partisan or ideological agendas than on single issues – simultaneously cultural and legislative, interwoven with lifestyle choices and practical knowledge (e.g. della Porta 2009; McCaughey & Ayers 2003; Pickerill 2003; van de Donk *et al.* 2004).

Marres (2006) suggests the term 'issue network' to 'characterize a variety of political practices that add to and intervene in' formal representative processes. The concept of the issue network, she explains, highlights 'the open-ended alliances' among grassroots organizations and non-governmental or civil society organizations – what Dean *et al.* (2006) have referred to as 'dot-orgs' – that share commitments to 'common social, environmental, and humanitarian issues'. Through both loosely coupled and more strategically organized efforts, heterogeneous constituencies work to mobilize 'around affairs that affect people in their daily lives' and to get those concerns 'on the agendas of political institutions' (p. 5). An increasingly primary terrain for collective action, issue networks are equally shaped by shifting patterns of cooperation and antagonism with dot.coms and dot.govs, institutions of state and economy with vested interests in or regulatory authority over the issues at hand.

At the same time, grassroots publics and otherwise unaffiliated individuals are able to contribute to issue networks and participate in collective action far more easily than once possible. Bimber *et al.* (2005) explain that public participation in collective action always necessitates movement from the private realm of opinion and consumption to the public domain of advocacy and action. With the low cost and horizontal structure of internet communication, that threshold – the point at which one's behaviors transition from private to public – has been radically lowered compared to an earlier age. 'One of the primary effects of new technologies of communication and information', they write, 'is precisely to make boundaries between private and public domains porous and easily crossed'. The decision to contribute to collective action involves 'less intentionality and calculation' than it once did, and has become less reliant on 'formal structures designed to broker the private to public transition' (p. 378). At the heart of the argument is a recognition of the significance of individual-level

contributions to what the literature on social movements considers 'communal goods' – the informational resources that facilitate understanding and action. Simply by posting a news article – or, for that matter, a clip from *TDS* – to one's *Facebook* page or an advocacy blog makes a small contribution to a social movement's *communality* – 'the public food that is derived from successfully collecting, storing, and sharing ... information resources among members of some public' (p. 371; see also Shumate & Lipp 2008).

E-mailing a *Colbert* clip or embedding a *TDS* video thus can be seen as a political act or a performance of citizenship – a means of engaging with and intervening in matters of personal and public concern. As do *TDS* and *Colbert* themselves, this modality of 'discursive citizenship' (Asen 2004) obscures the lines between private consumption and public action, interpersonal interaction and mass communication, and creative expression and civic engagement. And increasingly, it is one of the primary modes of public, political action in a network society for which popular culture provides valuable 'semiotic resources for political struggle' (Jenkins 2010).

Baym (2010) provides an exploratory case study of this phenomenon, examining the ways in which one particular clip from *TDS* – a 2008 interview with the CBS News Foreign Correspondent Lara Logan – was circulated on-line as such a resource for struggle. In her appearance, Logan offered a surprisingly scathing critique of the US news media's coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Less than 24 hours after its original airing, the clip had rapidly disseminated through overlapping issue networks, reappropriated by thousands of individuals, activists, and organizations that used it to voice anti-war sentiments and advocate for media reform. As this example suggests, *TDS* and *Colbert* provide not only a televisual platform for critical comment and issue advocacy, but also a continually expanding set of discursive resources – communal goods that can be circulated in pursuit of socially and politically transformative agendas.

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Environmental advocacy

To explore the convergence between *TDS*, *Colbert*, and activist issue networks, we now turn to a consideration of 10 particular clips aired during the spring and summer of 2009 dealing with environmental politics and practices. Although none of the 10 clips contained the shock value of Stewart's interview with Lara Logan, they featured a range of speakers, including academic experts and authors, media activists, federal officials, and industry representatives who rarely appear on other forms of US public affairs television. In turn, they drew connections to the wider environmental movement – itself the exemplar of an NSM (Pickerill 2003; van de Donk *et al.* 2004) – discussing a constellation of issues, including energy use and climate change, water quality and supply, and food politics and agricultural policy.

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Four clips represent the emerging 'slow food' movement, which advocates in favor of local and organic food production, and against corporate-industrial farming. The nascent movement has only recently begun attracting national attention in the United States (see Pollan 2010), and remains largely invisible on television news and absent in legislative debate. The movement received considerable attention on *TDS* and *Colbert*, however, largely because of the release of the independent activist documentary *Food Inc*. The film's co-producer Eric Schlosser, who also wrote the influential book *Fast Food Nation*, appeared on *Colbert*, while the director, Robert Kenner, appeared on *TDS*. Colbert also interviewed the author Michael Pollan, whose book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is considered by many to be the charter statement of the slow food movement and who appeared on the program to promote his more recent work *In Defense of Food*. Finally, on *TDS*, comedian Samantha Bee filed a four-minute satirical report entitled 'Little Crop of Horrors', which highlighted the debate between slow food activists and industry spokespeople over Michelle Obama's planting of an organic garden at the White House.

Two of the clips deal with questions of water, a subset of the environmental movement with a longer history than food politics and a wider range of advocates. Here, two different types of speakers discussed overlapping but distinct concerns. Law professor and water policy expert Robert Glennon appeared on *TDS* to discuss his book *Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It*, which argues for a reconsideration of policies of distribution and conservation in the face of increasing demand and decreasing supply. On *Colbert*, the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof – the most centrally positioned media voice among the 10 clips – shared his concerns about high levels of chemical pollutants, particularly estrogen, found in the country's major water sources.

The other four clips deal with the production and consumption of energy. Aired in the context of congressional debate over the proposed 'Cap and Trade' bill intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the clips feature a number of high-profile speakers and address the central front in the contemporary environmental movement. These include two cabinet level members of the Obama Administration. Lisa P. Jackson, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), appeared on *TDS* to discuss the Cap and Trade proposal, as well as transformations in the EPA following the Bush years. Also on *TDS*, Secretary of Energy Steven Chu discussed Cap and Trade and also suggested several steps individuals and organizations could take to lower everyday energy demands. On *Colbert*, Jim Rogers, the CEO of the power company Duke Energy, appeared to promote his company's efforts to invest in clean and renewable energy sources. Finally, author and activist Bill McKibben appeared on *Colbert* to discuss his global project 350.org, a web-based civil society effort to reduce the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to the suggested 'safe' level of 350 parts per million.

In these 10 segments, *TDS* and *Colbert* provide a televisual platform for a range of environmental stakeholders – dot.org, dot.gov, and dot.com – to disseminate information, articulate arguments, and advance particular issue frames, the logico-ethical interpretations that draw connections between issues and everyday life and seek to motivate individuals to action (see Marres 2006; van de Donk *et al.* 2004). As such, *TDS* and *Colbert* function here as a kind of *movement media*, giving voice and support to slow food activists, clean water advocates, and green energy proponents. What is unclear, however, is the extent to which this televisual advocacy content is circulated on-line, and whether it is reappropriated by various discursive agents in overlapping issue networks.

To answer those questions, we conducted an extensive web crawl to identify where, after their original airing, the 10 clips appeared on-line. To do this, we began with the specific URLs attached to each of the individual video segments.[1] Every website that embeds or otherwise shares *TDS* and *Colbert* clips must include hyperlinks to those particular URLs. Using Yahoo! and its supplied API (Application Programming Interface), we made daily calls to its SiteExplorer service[2] in July 2009 to find and collect individual web pages containing one or more of the 10 URLs in question. Because Yahoo! imposes limits on the number of such calls that can be made each day, we ran daily processes of making calls and collecting inlinks for several weeks.

This process allowed us to identify pages that function as a point of dissemination or reappropriation by embedding or directly linking to one of the 10 clips. For example, our search identified a page from the *Huffington Post* entitled 'Michael Pollan on Colbert: I was Busted Buying Fruity Pebbles' that embedded the Pollan interview. Here, we differentiate between the individual web *page* (in this example, the one with the URL of www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/14/michael-pollan-on-Colbert_n_203498.html) and the larger *domain*, in this case huffingtonpost.com, from within which those pages are generated. Further, recognizing that much individual-level grassroots activism is being conducted on personal blogs built through platforms such as Blogspot, Wordpress, and Typepad, we subdivided results from those three domains to identify the individual websites contained therein. Thus for example, our search found pages such as the one titled 'Michael Pollan says our bodies don't know what to do with HFCS [high fructose corn syrup]' that also embedded the Pollan clip. That page came from the blog *Balance of Food*, which itself located within the larger domain of typepad.com (balanceoffood.typepad.com).

We refer to these findings as 'level-1' pages and domains (with the original clip serving as 'level-0'). To further explore the circulation of the clips, however, we then extended the search to what we call 'level-2' – the pages and domains that link to the level-1 pages. The methodology here draws on hyperlink network analysis (e.g. Garrido & Halavais 2003; Park & Thelwall 2003; Tremayne *et al.* 2006; Adamic 2008; Shumate & Lipp 2008; Caiani & Wagemann 2009), repeating the search process described above, only this time collecting pages

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containing hyperlinks to the individual pages found in the level-1 search. This allowed us to identify sites that linked not just to broad domains (such as huffingtonpost.com), but to the exact pages that reposted the original *TDS* and *Colbert* clips. Thus, for example, our search process revealed a page from the community-based blog *OC Rag* (Ocean Beach, California) titled 'The Real Problem With Our Food System' and containing a hyperlink to 'Michael Pollan on Colbert', the level-1 page from the *Huffington Post*. Proceeding from the assumption that the hyperlinks between level-1 and -2 function as the 'currency and connective tissue of the networked society' (Halavais 2008, p. 48), the search at level-2 begins to reveal the networks within which the clips become embedded.

Of course, given the infinite and continually changing population of the web, we cannot claim that our data are exhaustive, capturing every web page that links either to one of the clips or to a level-1 site. We also recognize that the data contain a certain unavoidable measure of noise (generating results such as 'www' or 'com' due to issues in parsing URLs which offer no further information). Further, the results of our crawl are necessarily limited to the proprietary search code of Yahoo!, and a search using another web crawler would likely return slightly different results.[3] That being said, our data collection process was systematic and consistent, and as we discuss below, successful in identifying hundreds of interlinked domains and hundreds of thousands of interlinked pages that together constitute a varied structure of circulation through which the advocacy content from *TDS* and *Colbert* is disseminated well beyond the context of daily television.

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Level-1

Our search at level-1 reveals that each of the 10 clips was reposted multiple times, with the average appearing in 55 domains and on more than 3,300 pages. Table 1 summarizes these findings. By far, the most popular clip was Jon Stewart's interview with the Secretary of Energy, Steven Chu, which appeared in 177 domains and on 7,789 pages. Colbert's conversation with the climate activist Bill McKibben also was widely circulated, appearing in 132 domains and 4,532 pages. At the domain level, Colbert's interview with the increasingly visible food author and activist Michael Pollan was the third most disseminated, appearing in 84 domains and 5,461 pages. Surprisingly, Stewart's discussion with Lisa P. Jackson, the administrator of the EPA, was the least circulated, showing up on only seven domains and 692 pages. As a whole, however, the energy clips were reposted the most, appearing in an average of 87 domains. Those are followed by the water clips, which averaged 69.5 domains each, and then the food segments at 47. That order seems to correlate with the wider popular salience of and media attention to the particular issues.

To better understand the flow of *TDS* and *Colbert* advocacy clips, we can look more closely at the nature of the level-1 sites, considering both the 74 unique

TABLE 1 Level-1 domains and pages.

Clip	*Level-1 domains*	*Level-1 web pages*
Food		
Michael Pollan	84	5,461
Eric Scholsser	56	2,948
Robert Kenner	25	1,103
Little Crop of Horrors	24	746
Water		
Nicholas Kristof	71	3,161
Robert Glennon	68	4,801
Energy		
Lisa Jackson	7	692
Jim Rogers	32	2,596
Steven Chu	177	7,789
Bill McKibben	132	4,532
Total unique	552	33,829

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domains that link to two or more of the 10 clips, as well as the larger collection that link to only one. For the purpose of analysis, we organize our efforts by the three topical areas of food, water, and energy. Our goal is not to provide an exhaustive catalogue of the web sites that repost the clips, but rather to explore some of the prevalent discursive nodes, or horizontal points of distribution, that direct attention to them.

Food. The four clips on food politics are notable for the coverage they offer to the nascent slow food movement, a truly grassroots effort interwoven with lifestyle and everyday practices yet largely nonexistent at the level of both mainstream news media and legislative politics. In turn, as we follow them on-line, we see clear indications of what Benkler (2006) and others have described as an alternative public sphere, one comprised of both a few 'superstar' sites and a larger number of small, topically focussed efforts. Among the level-1 sites linking to the food politics clips, for example, the *Huffington Post* emerges as a prominent and recurring locale for the circulation of *TDS* and *Colbert* content. The site, which is ranked by the blog aggregator Technorati as the most influential blog on the web, produces pages embedding both the comedy clip 'Little Crop of Horrors', which offers a satirical rebuttal to the food industry's attempts to discredit Michelle Obama's support for organic gardening, and *Colbert*'s interview with Michael Pollan. A central hub in the flow of progressive political news and commentary on-line (see Kerbel 2009), the *Huffington Post* also maintains a close relationship with *TDS* and *Colbert*. Its founder,

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Arianna Huffington, is a regular guest on both programs, while the show writers often mine the site itself for content. The *Huffington Post* appears throughout our data, reposting five of the 10 clips.

The efforts of the *Huffington Post* to disseminate the clips are complemented by more topically specific sites, including the non-profit *Grist* magazine, which focusses on environmental issues. With the tag line 'laugh now – or the planet gets it', *Grist* offers its own brand of serious humor – a light-hearted effort to 'connect big issues' facing the environment to the practice of 'everyday life'. As part of that agenda, the site reposts both the Pollan segment and Colbert's interview with the writer Eric Schlosser, as well as two of the energy videos. Here, *TDS* and *Colbert* are explicitly reappropriated as resources that can help bridge the gap from global issues and abstract concerns to the realm of lived experience. The same thing occurs on the site *Elephant Journal*, which reposts the Pollan interview as part of its efforts to provide a 'guide to the mindful life', including organic eating, sustainability, and 'conscious consumerism'. Along with these environmentally focussed magazines, a number of food-specific sites also post clips. Examples include *Eat Me Daily*, which adds the interviews with Pollan, Schlosser, and the *Food Inc.* director Robert Kenner to its collection of links offering 'commentary and criticism' about 'food, media, and culture'; and the activist blog *Sustainable Table*, a non-profit site that reposts the Pollan interview as part of its efforts to 'promote the sustainable food movement, educate consumers on food-related issues, and work to build community through food'.

The food clips are also disseminated through highly local web sites that reappropriate them as resources for community building. The 'Little Crop' clip, for example, is reposted on the site *Rockridge Residents*, a non-profit effort to 'increase the sense of community' in the Oakland, California, neighborhood. Likewise, the Pollan interview appears on the *Richmond Food Collective* site, which promotes local, organic food in Richmond, Virginia. The Kenner interview is reposted by the Brooklyn-based *Greenspoint-Williamsburg CSA* (Community Supported Agriculture), the local farm supporting *Chicago Gardener*, and *South Maui Sustainability*, a blog promoting 'sustainability awareness and action through education, growing our own food, producing our own energy and conserving and sharing our resources' among residents of the Hawaiian island.

This multi-tiered public sphere is further comprised of individual-level contributions, which reappropriate the clips as part of a personal interest in sharing information and experiences related to slow food. For example, the 'Little Crop' clip appears on *Tom's Gardening Organic*, a site produced by an English man detailing his efforts to maintain an organic garden. The Pollan interview likewise appears on the site *Our Victory Garden*, where a Pennsylvania family chronicles its efforts to learn 'how to live more sustainably'. Similarly, the St. Louis-based site *Adventures in Eating Locally* reposts both the Pollan and Schlosser clips, as does the local food advocacy blog *Kale for Sale*.

Finally, the food clips appear on a number of social networking sites. Although we lack the means to track the circulation of clips among individual *Facebook* profiles, a number of publically accessible group pages appear in our level-1 data. The 'Little Crop' segment, for example, appears on the 'Boycott Whole Foods' page and the *Facebook* blog 'Garden Help'. The Pollan segment not surprisingly is reposted on the fan page 'Michael Pollan for Secretary of Agriculture', while the Schlosser interview appears on the page 'Documentaries You Don't Want to Miss'. We also see the food clips occurring among Yahoo! groups. The Schlosser segment appears on the groups 'Veg News' and 'Viva Veggie', which reposts the interview with *Food Inc.* director Robert Kenner as well.

Water. The food politics clips offer entry points into a highly local, grassroots movement, and are reposted by individual activist, community groups, and a range of editorial blogs that focus on more or less specifically defined environmental issues. By contrast, the clips dealing with water interweave with more organized and long-standing efforts to protect and improve water resources. In turn, we see another kind of website appearing prominently among the level-1 domains that repost the water clips: sites from formally organized, non-profit civil society or non-governmental organizations – what Dean *et al.* (2006) have called *dot.orgs*.

Thus the Robert Glennon clip, in which the law professor and water policy expert discuss the need to avert an impending crisis of supply, appears on a number of websites from well-established civil society organizations (CSOs) focussed on water resources. These range from the international UNESCO.org, to the very local Elkhart River Alliance, an activist group in Indiana working to protect the Elkhart River watershed. The national group American Water Resources Association reposts the Glennon clip as part of its efforts 'to advance multidisciplinary water resources education, management and research'. The interview similarly appears on americanrivers.org and watershed.org. The former is the site from the non-profit America Rivers, established in 1973 to protect the nation's rivers. The latter is from the Watershed Management Council, which describes itself as 'advancing the art and science of watershed management since 1987'.

Many of the dot.orgs that reappropriate the water clips focus narrowly on the specific concerns addressed by the two clips. Thus, if the dot.orgs that repost the Glennon interview are focussed on issues of water supply and policy, many of those reposting Colbert's interview with Nicholas Kristof, which discusses the dangers of estrogen in US water supplies, are specifically concerned with the interconnection between environment and public health. For example, the clip appears on the dot.org from Clean Water Action, the 1.2 million-member organization that promotes itself as 'one of the largest grassroots environmental organizations' and celebrates its role in the 1972 federal Clean Water Act. Likewise, the Kristof interview appears on the website from the Center for Environmental Health, which describes itself as 'protect[ing]

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people from toxic chemicals and promot[ing] business products and practices that are safe for public health and the environment'. We also find it reposted by the cancer-fighting Lance Armstrong Foundation's livestrong.org; the Silent Spring Institute, which describes itself as a 'partnership of scientists, physicians, public health advocates, and community activists' concerned with the links between the environment and breast cancer; and rhrealitycheck.org, a self-described 'resource for evidence-based information, provocative commentary, and interactive dialogue' about reproductive health.

Energy. Unlike both the food and water segments, the energy clips tap into a mainstream movement and its concordant high-visibility legislative and cultural dialogue. That is evidenced in part by the nature of the four speakers – two cabinet-level appointments in the Obama Administration, the CEO of a major energy corporation, and one of the better known climate activists. Receiving the widest circulation of the three topical areas, the energy clips not surprisingly appear on all of the kinds of sites already discussed – including the *Huffington Post* and *Grist*, a wide range of dot.orgs, social networking sites, community activists, and individual-level advocacy blogs. Given the high-profile nature of both the speakers and issues, however, we also see a number of websites from large and capital-rich institutions disseminating, amplifying, and reappropriating them.

Among these are several national and local news media sites, for whom the energy clips have a measure of *news* value. The *New York Times*, for example, posts Stewart's interview with Steven Chu. Like the *Huffington Post*, the *Times* maintains close connections to *TDS* and *Colbert*. In addition to Nick Kristof, whose water segment was one of multiple appearances on *Colbert*, a number of its columnists and reporters, including Paul Krugman, Frank Rich, Thomas Friedman, Maureen Dowd, Bill Kristol, and David Leonhardt, have also appeared on the two shows. The *Times* itself also regularly reports on the programs, most recently covering Stewart's increased attention to and criticism of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News. Perhaps surprisingly, then, another of Murdoch's holdings, the *Wall Street Journal*, also reposts the Chu interview, as does the conservative magazine *National Review*. By contrast, the progressive *Mother Jones* circulates the interview with climate activist Bill McKibben. On the local level, the Charlotte (NC) *Observer*, which is located in Duke Energy's home town, reposts Colbert's interview with CEO Jim Rogers, as does the Raleigh (NC) *News and Observer*. The Raleigh paper also links to the Chu interview, while the *Baltimore Sun* reposts the McKibben segment.

For other institutions, the energy clips have *promotional* value. Duke Energy, for example, reposts the clip featuring its CEO. The McKibben interview appears on the website for Middlebury College, where McKibben is a scholar in residence. Likewise, UC Berkeley reposts the interview with its former physics professor Chu. That clip is also posted to the *Facebook* pages for the National Energy Technology Laboratory and National Nuclear Security

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Administration – both divisions within the Department of Energy. The Chu interview further appears on the re-election campaign site for California Senator Barbara Boxer, for whom the clip may have some *political* value.

Finally, the energy clips are reappropriated by a number of for-profit enterprises that see in them the potential for *economic* value. Bizjournals.com, which produces a number of city-based business newspapers, reposts both the Chu and Rogers clips. Likewise, the site *Triple Pundit*, which describes itself as an 'innovative new-media company for the business community focussed on ecologically and socially responsible, profitable businesses' reposts the Chu and McKibben segments. The Chu interview also appears on the blog from the Oxford Princeton Programme, a UK-based business that promises to help its clients build a 'professional career and competitive edge' in 'today's dynamic energy and derivatives markets'. Here, we see multiple stakeholders in the energy issue network – both those seeking change as well as those seeking profit – reappropriating the *TDS* and *Colbert* clips in pursuit of diverse but overlapping agendas.

The 10 environmental clips exemplify the function of *TDS* and *Colbert* as a portal into a wider sphere of alternative political discourse. In turn, our level-1 data suggest that in a convergent age, that alternative televisual conversation is weaving its way through a broad range of web-based discursive locales. From mainstream media outlets to major web portals, and from social-networking platforms to a host of dot.orgs, community-based, and individual-level activist sites, web producers and individual contributors alike actively attempt to direct audience attention to them. That circulation expands exponentially when we broaden our view to include the level-2 inlinks – the web pages containing hyperlinks directly to the specific level-1 pages linking to the original clips.

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Level-2

At level-2, the linking dynamic itself changes, with web producers directing attention not to the clips themselves, but rather to the clips in their reappropriated form, as they are relocated, repackaged, and re-interpreted by the level-1 sites and their interests and concerns. Scholars of contemporary web politics suggest that such hyperlinks constitute networks of attention and affiliation, functioning both as *communal* goods by providing pathways to informational resources, and as *connective* goods by linking like-minded individuals and organizations (Shumante & Lipp 2008). The level-2 sites thus are nodes within wider interpretive networks, sharing both in the exchange of information and in the necessary labor of framing issues: of defining, translating, and labeling them in ways that draw connections to private choices and motivate public engagement (Marres 2006; van de Donk *et al.* 2004).

Our search at level-2 reveals that this discursive exchange occurs broadly. We find hundreds of thousands of hyperlinks that collectively provide pathways to more than 84 per cent of the level-1 domains. These findings are summarized

TABLE 2 Level-2 pages and domains.

Clip	*Level-2 domains*	*Level-2 web pages*
Food		
Michael Pollan	631	49,183
Eric Schlosser	918	46,196
Robert Kenner	95	8,328
Little Crop of Horrors	130	6,320
Water		
Nicholas Kristof	817	50,433
Robert Glennon	1,259	85,219
Energy		
Lisa Jackson	166	2,058
Jim Rogers	533	29,167
Steven Chu	1,611	163,978
Bill McKibben	1,004	87,240
Total unique	5,557	528,122

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in Table 2. The nearly 34,000 level-1 web pages receive inlinks from more than a half-million pages, while the 552 level-1 domains are linked to by more than 5,500 unique level-2 domains. The level-1 pages reposting the Steven Chu interview alone are linked to by more than 160,000 pages from some 1,600 domains. Even the Lisa P. Jackson segment, which was the least circulated at level-1, receives inlinks from more than 2,000 pages coming from 166 unique domains – an average of 23.7 inlinks for each of the level-1 sites that reposted the original clip. In all, 464 level-1 domains receive inlinks, with the average of slightly less than 12 level-2 domains per site.

Our data further identify a number of specific sites that function as recurrent circuits for the exchange of reappropriated *TDS* and *Colbert* content. These include content aggregators such as *Digg*, which links to 15 level-1 domains that together repost all 10 clips; *Technorati*, which links to 51 domains reaching nine clips; and *Daily Radar*, whose topically specific pages 'earthblips' and 'scienceblips' link to 35 level-1 domains that repost nine clips. We likewise find hyperlink pathways reaching back to all 10 clips on *Facebook*, and to seven clips on *Wikipedia*.

As it did at level-1, the *Hufffington Post* also occupies a prominent position at level-2, providing secondary linkages to 38 other level-1 domains that together reach all 10 clips. We further find pathways to multiple clips through major media sites such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and NPR. Interestingly, several of the

level-1 domains linked to by the national press sites are dot.orgs and other advocacy blogs. The *Times*, for example, links, among several others, to pages from the activist coalition Apollo Alliance, while the *Journal* links to the pro-nuclear-power blog *Atomic Insights*. This suggests complex points of intersection among the traditional media, *TDS* and *Colbert*, and on-line activism. Several activist sites themselves also appear throughout our level-2 results. These include environmental information and commentary sites such as *Grist* and *Treehugger*, formal organizations such as the Sierra Club and NRDC, and individually produced sites such as *Green LA Girl* and *EnviroKnow*.

If the level-1 domains are highly linked by a range of discursive agents, they also are *interlinked*. As the example of the *Huffington Post*, which appears five times at level-1 and 38 times at level-2, suggests, many of the sites that pay the most attention to the advocacy content from *TDS* and *Colbert* both repost clips themselves and link to other level-1 domains. Indeed, 410 of the 552 domains we identify at level-1 – nearly 75 per cent – also link to at least one other level-1 site. We thus begin to see *TDS* and *Colbert* content interwoven within a highly interconnected network of information and advocacy. Scholars of networked politics suggest that hyperlink networks function as a 'kind of collective unconscious', a structure of 'knowledge and social relations' (Halavais 2008, p. 39). Here, *TDS* and *Colbert* appear to play an important role, functioning as an *authority*, or central node, that highlights individuals, issues, and concerns important to the network's multiple stakeholders.

The level-2 data also provide us a means of assessing the potential centrality of various discursive agents within this structure of information and interpretation. Proceeding from the common assumption in network analysis that the more inlinks a site receives, the more central it can be said to be within a given network (e.g. Park & Thelwall 2003), we charted the number of level-2 links

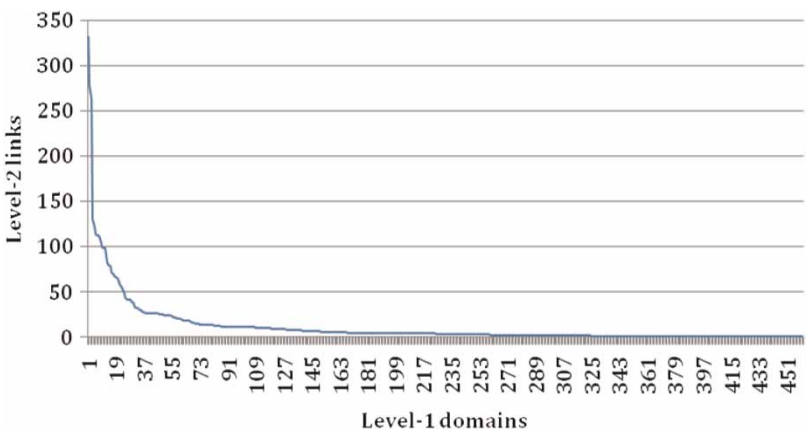

FIGURE 1 Distribution of Level-2 links.

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that specific level-1 domains receive. As we see in Figure 1, this reveals a familiar pattern, a power law distribution (Shirky 2006) in which the top 20 per cent of level-1 domains receive roughly 77 per cent of all the level-2 inlinks. This is even more pronounced in the so-called short head of the distribution, in which some 2 per cent of the level-1 domains receive more than 30 per cent of all level-2 links. A closer look at the nature of the sites that constitute the short head, however, is equally revealing. Although the most *active* domains, at both levels-1 and -2, are primarily mass-attention sites such as *Huffington Post* and *Digg*, those do not appear among the most linked. Rather, the level-1s with the most incoming links are largely sites from non-profit civil society organizations – dot.orgs and closely related activist blogs, whose explicit purpose is to collect and disseminate informational resources pertaining to narrowly defined advocacy agendas.

The Steven Chu interview – the most disseminated of the 10 clips – provides a powerful example. In his conversation with Stewart, Chu suggests that if roofs of buildings were white rather than dark colors, the energy savings and decreased environmental impact would be significant. Remarkably, the single most linked to level-1 domain that reposts that interview is newbuildings.org, a site that collects information about environmentally sound construction practices. In contrast to the *New York Times* page linking to the Chu interview, which received only one level-2 link, or the *Huffington Post* level-1 pages, which received 40 inlinks, *New Buildings* had links from 264 level-2 domains. Here, the clip becomes highlighted and housed in the kind of database of specialized knowledge – including both scientific information and movement-specific news – whose construction is a central element in the contemporary repertoire of digital activism (see Mosca & della Porta 2009).

We see the same thing occurring with several of the clips. For the Robert Glennon interview on water policy, the most linked-to level-1 domain was islandpress.org, a non-profit publisher focussed on environmental solutions. Again, where the *Huffington Post* pages reposting the Glennon interview had 39 inlinks, the *Island Press* pages had 279. The second-most linked-to level-1 for the Glennon interview was the blog from the American Water Resources Association, which received inlinks from 122 level-2 domains. Similarly, the most heavily linked website that reposted Nick Kristof's discussion about estrogen in US water supplies was from the non-profit *Endocrine Disruption Exchange*, an organization that collects information about the health risks of exposure to chemicals in the environment. Its level-1 pages received 114 incoming level-2 links. That was closely followed by the *Center for Environmental Health*, which had 100 level-2 links. Again, that compares with the pages from the *Times* that linked to its own columnist's interview, which had 21 incoming links. So too for the Bill McKibben interview on the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the most linked-to level-1 domain was *No Impact Man*, the site promoting activist Colin Beaven's efforts to minimize his environmental footprint. The *No Impact Man* pages reposting the McKibben clip had 131 inlinks from sites ranging

from the aggregators *Daily Radar* and *Science Blogs*, to the media sites *Nature* and *US News*, to more than 40 small blogs focussed on sustainability.

Circulating struggle

Colin Beavan himself serves as an exemplar of the new, convergent face of collective activism. He was far outside the mainstream of political discourse when he undertook his experiment in 'zero-impact' living, a grassroots exercise that eventually resulted in a book and an award-winning independent documentary. But well before that, his project landed him an appearance on *Colbert*. Whether he received the 'Colbert bump' is unclear, but since then, Beavan has become an increasingly visible environmental advocate. He would make a second appearance on *Colbert* to promote the release of the film *No Impact Man*, while his blog of the same title has been ranked seventh on *Time* magazine's list of top environmental websites (Roston 2008). That blog well illustrates the new locus of political action in the realm of daily practice, trying less to influence the legislative process than explore 'what each of us can do to end our environmental crisis, make a better place to live for ourselves and everyone else, and hopefully come up with a happier way of life along the way'. For Beavan, that exploration includes circulating Colbert's interview with Bill McKibben among the activist network within which his site serves as a central resource.

Beavan's efforts thus interweave with *Colbert*, illustrating the intersections among grassroots activism, web-based advocacy, and the media forms that support them. Scholars of collective action have long suggested that a movement's relationship to the media is a critical aspect of its ability to affect change (e.g. Gitlin 1980; Rucht 2004). Contemporary activists are more able than ever to produce 'micro' media serving informational and mobilization functions within narrowly defined networks of the like-minded. However, the mass media remain crucial in disseminating a movement's message to the broader populace (Pickerill 2003; Rucht 2004). Not necessarily 'mass' in the traditional sense of the word, *TDS* and *Colbert* might be better conceptualized as a kind of 'meso' media, positioned between the micro and the mass. As the digital flow of advocacy clips demonstrates, they facilitate the simultaneous distribution of movement messages both vertically, through mass attention, editorially produced sites – or what Sunstein (2007) has called 'general interest intermediaries' – and horizontally, through an assortment of topically specific dot.orgs and a vast range of resource-poor, individual-level micromedia channels.

For the latter, the reappropriation of clips represents a new form of media activism – not the original production of alternative or indy media (i.e. Meikle 2002), but rather the circulation of professionally produced and popularly engaging content that articulates a movement's dominant concerns and preferred solutions. As such, the act of reappropriation becomes a means of 'circulating struggle' (Cleaver 1998), exchanging the ideas and ideals that connect the

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like-minded but often geographically dispersed, and enable them to struggle in complementary ways. The value of the *TDS* and *Colbert* clips thus surpasses their entertaining qualities. They certainly are embraced as entertainment – many of the websites that repost the environmental advocacy segments celebrate them for their humor – but they equally come to function as a particular kind of communal good, a resource for emergent forms of collective action.

In part, the clips are harnessed as *informational resources*. We find numerous instances in which the environmental clips are added to on-line archives of information, argument, comment, and criticism. Here, popular culture artifacts are aggregated along with news reports, scientific studies, polemical statements, and other discursive objects that address what are often quite narrowly defined aspects of the environmental movement. At the same time, the reappropriated clips also function as *affinity resources*, helping to develop the 'networks of belonging' that lie at the heart of contemporary collective action (see Bennett 2003; Bimber *et al.* 2005). Thus we see the clips circulated through social networking platforms and appearing on sites for whom environmental activism and community building are inseparable agendas. If this appears explicitly in numerous locations, it likely occurs implicitly on many, if not most, of the sites we encounter here. Third, the clips have the potential to serve as *deliberative* resources, providing a means of formulating issue positions that are often elided in other channels of public debate and thus enhancing 'the social argument pool' (see Sunstein 2007, p. 77; della Porta 2009, p. 267).

Although a close reading of individual web sites lies beyond the scope of this study, future research could tease out the particular processes of reappropriation – the various ways that particular clips are used within specific networks as informational, affinity, or deliberative resources. Future research could also explore the extent to which individual clips become 'enclaved' in an increasingly segmented civic landscape, or whether they can cross partisan boundaries and engage the less like-minded. The data here suggest that although clips primarily are reappropriated by the sympathetic, there is some measure of cross-partisan circulation. Subsequent research could explicate this further. Finally, this study looks particularly at *TDS* and *Colbert* – it remains unclear the extent to which a similar phenomenon might be occurring with other public affairs media, including both traditional television news as well as other emergent, hybrid forms, such as the conservative *Glenn Beck Program* on Fox News.

What the data here does make clear, though, is that activist clips from TDS and Colbert are readily reappropriated by diverse social actors, and circulated through multi-tiered issue networks. Facilitating the distribution of movement messages across discursive, institutional, and technological boundaries, these hybrid media forms – which themselves obscure the edges between the pleasurable and playful, the serious and civic – are imbricated within new practices of citizenship. With just a few key strokes, they enable complex modes of popular information, public voice, and mediated activism.

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Notes

1 http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/227618/may-13-2009/michael-pollan, http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-may-14-2009/little-crop-of-horrors, http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-may-14-2009/lisa-p-jackson, http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/220021/june-03-2009/eric-schlosser, http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/230610/june-16-2009/jim-rogers, http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/232640/july-01-2009/nicholas-kristof, http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-july-2-2009/robert-kenner, http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-july-16-2009/robert-glennon, http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-july-21-2009/steven-chu, and http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/246941/august-17-2009/bill-mckibben.

2 http://developer.yahoo.com/search/siteexplorer/

3 Our data set represents every website Yahoo!'s crawl could find that fit our search parameters, independent of any individual site's popularity. A data set generated from another search engine such as Google would have varied slightly in terms of the total number of websites collected and inlinks identified. However, due to our strategy of running the collection process repeatedly over several weeks, we believe that the bias inherent with any particular web crawl service has been minimized.

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