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## Myth #31: The internet enables organizing without organization

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# MYTH #31

*Sebastian Berg*

## **The Internet enables organizing without organization.**

**Myth:** The Internet provides a form of social and political organization without hierarchical and rigid structures. The reduction in communication and transformation costs resulting from digital technologies enables bottom-up networking, which makes institutional forms of politics obsolete, minimizes the exercise of power and brings about a radical democratic society.

**Busted:** The idea of the egalitarian and inclusive community is one of the founding myths of the Internet, as John Perry Barlow declared: “We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth” (Barlow 1996). (→ #28) From the beginning, it was assumed that the Internet provides tools or platforms that are easy to use and foster communication, thus naturally promoting the formation of new groups, mutual cooperation, and the possibility of participation without formal organization (Shirky 2008).

Although we have seen the disappearance of gatekeepers and instances in many areas, this does not apply to hierarchies and (political) institutions per se. As Melvin Kranzberg wrote, “Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.” It is open to design and reflects the conditions under which it is implemented. Every infrastructure must be operated, financed, and is integrated into given social structures so that “newer media practices in the interpenetrated fields of media and politics adapt and integrate the logics of older media practices” (Chadwick 2013). In fact, as the phrase “code is law” indicates (Lessig 1999) (→ #3), Internet based tools are by and large (material) institutions around which organization takes place. They have a structuring effect depending on the architecture of the platform and the social imaginaries according to which they are designed.

The myth has its origin in the “Californian Ideology”, a combination of an anarchistic-alternative counterculture and libertarian technological utopia that rejects the need for formal power structures in favor of “unfettered

interactions between autonomous individuals and their software” (Barbrook/Cameron 1996). It can be regarded as the founding myth of the Silicon Valley economy and has found global acceptance with the success of the large Internet companies (Turner 2006). However, this should not be equated with the current state of the Internet and the social appropriation of digital technology. Facing dubious proclamations about the importance “to develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us” (Zuckerberg 2017), we should not forget the fact that the Internet based platform economy is neither egalitarian nor exclusively bottom-up nor democratic, but characterized by centralization, institutionalization, and the establishment of new gatekeepers (van Dijck/Poell 2018). As technology always reflects the conditions of its social realization, we would rather benefit from ideological criticism than the spread of marketing myths.

**Truth:** Although we can observe a structural transformation in the way of political organization and connective forms of action supplement collective ones, so far existing (political) institutions such as the state, parties or companies remain in a privileged position to adapt to the affordances of digital technology. Digital instruments are used to make organizations more inclusive and reduce old barriers, but they will not replace organizations and politics.

■ **Source**

Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody. The Power of Organizing without Organization* (London: Penguin Books, 2008); Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

## Das Internet ermöglicht Organisation ohne Organisation.

Nein, sagt Sebastian Berg: Auch wenn wir einen strukturellen Wandel in der Art der politischen Organisation beobachten können und konnektive Handlungsformen kollektiv ergänzen, sind bisher bestehende (politische) Institutionen wie der Staat, Parteien oder Unternehmen nach wie vor besser in der Lage, sich an die Fortschritte der digitalen Technologie anzupassen. Digitale Instrumente werden eingesetzt, um Organisationen integrativer zu machen und alte Barrieren abzubauen, aber sie werden Organisationen und die Politik nicht ersetzen.

### الإنترنت تتيح التنظيم من دون منظمات

كلا، هكذا يقول سيباستيان بيرغ: مع أننا نلاحظ تحولاً هيكلياً فيما يضيفه التنظيم السياسي وطرق العمل الرابط إلى أشكال العمل الجماعي، ما زالت المؤسسات (السياسية) الموجودة، كالدولة أو الأحزاب أو الشركات، في وضع مواتٍ للتكيف مع موارد التكنولوجيا الرقمية. وتستخدم الأدوات الرقمية لجعل المنظمات أكثر شمولاً ولتقليل الحواجز القديمة لكنها لن تحل محل التنظيمات والسياسة.

### 互联网使得无组织的组织成为可能

不，Sebastian Berg 写道：虽然我们可以察觉到政治组织方式的结构转型，而且行动的连接形式也对集体形式进行了补充，但到目前为止，现有的（政治）机构，如国家、政党或公司，仍在适应数字技术的功能可承受性方面享有特权。数字仪表用于使组织更具包容性并减少以往的障碍，但它们不会取代组织和政治。

## **Internet permet d'organiser sans organisation.**

Non, écrit Sebastian Berg: bien que nous assistions à une transformation structurelle de la manière dont l'organisation politique et les formes d'action « connectives » complètent les actions « collectives », les institutions (politiques) existantes telles que l'État, les partis ou les entreprises restent jusqu'à présent dans une position privilégiée pour s'adapter aux avantages du numérique. Les instruments numériques sont utilisés pour rendre les organisations plus inclusives et réduire les anciens obstacles, mais ils ne remplaceront pas les organisations et la politique.

## **Интернет можно организовать без организации**

Это не так, говорит Себастьян Берг: Хотя мы можем наблюдать структурное преобразование способа политической организации и связывающие меры, дополняющие коллективные, до сих пор существующие (политические) институты, такие как государство, партии или компании сохраняют привилегированное положение в плане приспособления к возможностям цифровых технологий. Цифровые инструменты используются для того, чтобы сделать организации более всесторонними и стереть старые барьеры, но они не заменят организации и политику.

## **El internet permite una organización sin organización.**

No, dice Sebastian Berg: aunque es posible observar una transformación estructural en la forma en que la organización política y las formas conectivas de acción se complementan con las colectivas, las instituciones (políticas) existentes tales como el Estado, los partidos y las compañías mantienen una posición privilegiada para adaptarse a las potencialidades de la tecnología digital. Los instrumentos digitales son utilizados para hacer a las organizaciones más inclusivas y para reducir viejas barreras, pero no reemplazarán a las organizaciones ni a la política.