Institutional analysis in a digital era: Mechanisms and methods to understand emerging fields

Chapter · October 2016

DOI: 10.4337/9781784716875.00016

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Institutional analysis in a digital era:

Mechanisms and methods to understand emerging fields

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Final Draft – January 2016

For

New Themes in Institutional Analysis: Topics and Issues from European Research,

G. Krücken, C. Mazza, R. Meyer, and P. Walgenbach (editors),

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar

- forthcoming -

In recent years, numerous writers have criticized the current state of institutional theory, and organization theory in general (Davis 2010, 2015; Suddaby, Hardy, and Huy, 2011; Greenwood, Hinings, and Whetten, 2014). We have found these hand-wringing discussions somewhat odd, as they routinely focus on papers written back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, treating them like biblical texts, and then arguing that the old canon is no longer relevant. This form of critique both obscures the context in which the early statements were written and avoids considering how older ideas might be profitably amended for contemporary times.

Rather than join this chorus that clamors for more agency, pluralism, ambidexterity, or other forms of complexity, in this chapter we develop new mechanisms in the spirit of the initial ideas about institutional analysis. We think attention to a new set of social processes can prove analytically useful. Put differently, rather than come up with more nouns and labels, we focus on verbs, that is, on the processes and mechanisms that can be used to illuminate moments of organizational change and field transformation.

A bit of intellectual history

New institutional theory was developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by scholars in sociology departments (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). These researchers were reacting to both empirical anomalies in their ongoing studies and the lack of fit of their observations with the then-prevailing views about organizations. Much research at the time examined how departments within different types of organizations varied in their formal structure, goals, and internal dynamics. Painstaking efforts were under way to explain how differing factors such as size, technology, and environmental uncertainty shaped organizational structure (see Blau and Scott, 1962; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Mouzelis, 1968, for useful summaries).

This line of research was referred to as contingency theory, and looking back, it was gray indeed. Peter Blau, an important contributor to organizational research in the 1950s and ’60s, famously said in an interview that he didn’t want to be associated with the study of bureaucracy because it was too boring (see Friedberg, 2011). Robert Merton helped then–graduate student Blau by titling his dissertation “The Dynamics of Bureaucracy.”

Nevertheless, the research lens was focused on accounting for variations in the structure of organizations. To the new institutionalists, it seemed that scholars were looking through the wrong end of the telescope. As research attended ever more carefully to within-organization contingencies, the macro-environment of organizations was changing in ways that transformed the organizational landscape. Institutionalists emphasized that organizations were increasingly shaped by their social, cultural, and political environments. Most notably, they cast in relief the manner in which the state, through its regulatory efforts, the professions, through training and graduate schools of business, and the law and mass media were prescribing appropriate and socially legitimate ways of organizing.

The new line of research focused on sectors and fields, not on individual organizations and their small variations. Its proponents began to think about organizations as collective entities, responding to one another’s actions. Building on ideas from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu—“to think in terms of fields is *to think relationally”* (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992:96), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggested that the mechanisms inducing structural and normative isomorphism operated most strongly within fields, rather than at a diffuse societal level. These authors also recognized that field-level influences might well operate at cross-purposes. Richard Scott and John Meyer published a series of studies in the early 1980s on fragmented and decentralized environments, particularly in domains such as schools, which generated competing notions of what was appropriate (see Scott and Meyer, 1983).

The general argument ran as follows: “organizations located in environments in which conflicting demands are made upon them will be especially likely to generate complex organizational structures with disproportionately large administrative components and boundary spanning units” (Powell, 1988:126; also see Meyer, Scott, and Strang, 1987). In the Powell and DiMaggio (1991) volume, Scott, Jepperson, and Powell all wrote chapters arguing that organizations are often the loci of jurisdictional fights among rival professions. Consideration of overlapping jurisdictions, competing professions, and different reference groups was a hot topic. The general thrust of institutional theorizing at the time was to examine the ways in which the forces within a field exerted pressure on its members, often resulting in adoption of common practices.

This work in sociology had unusual legs. It traveled to cultural studies, finding a receptive audience who took up the institutional turn in the social sciences. The ideas also crossed the Atlantic to Europe, where scholars such as Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) and Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) drew on this work but added an important twist that emphasized how ideas and practices are edited as they travel and are translated in local contexts.

Perhaps surprisingly, the ideas were taken up by scholars in business schools. Numerous studies of the diffusion of management fads and practices ensued, and a literature on diffusion sprang up. Much of this work lacked the temporal context of the early theories and was less concerned with how the environments of organizations were organized. The early attention to specific fields or sectors also tended to be elided, as studies focused on the general spread of practices across industries. Remarkably, early research primarily based on schools, nonprofits, and governmental organizations became a staple of organization theory in management schools.

Not surprisingly, some scholars found institutional studies lacking in attention to agency and intentional organizational change. Management research, in general, celebrates heroes and mavericks, and thus focuses more on agency, entrepreneurship, and just being different (Meyer and Hoellerer, 2014). In a recent paper, Greenwood et al. (2014) illustrate the contrast between managerial and sociological views. They lament that organizational scholarship proceeds as if the Mayo Clinic, General Motors, the Museum of Modern Art, Emirates Airline, Leeds United, and Apple have more in common than they have differences (Greenwood et al., 2014: 1207). Of course, these organizations differ: they are in different fields and have divergent peer groups and respond to distinctive cultural and economic pressures. But the authors also miss a core institutional insight, indeed a central tenet of Weberian sociology. The organizations are all formal bureaucracies, with a chain of command, a division of labor, a modern work force governed by a contemporary human resource management department, a public face represented by a web page, and a heightened emphasis on customer relations. Compared to a soup kitchen, ISIS, Uber, or TaskRabbit, these organizations do have very much in common.

In this chapter, we take a different approach to advance institutional research. Rather than emphasize agency and differentiation, we recognize that the ideas of four decades ago were developed in response to a particular moment in organization theory and in the broader society. We should not expect the same sources of influence from that era to continue to be the most crucial carriers of institutional practices and structures today. Instead of the emphasis on the state and regulation that was suggested in the 1980s, we think a new set of influences are at play. In particular, we want to examine the manner in which foundations (Hwang and Powell, 2009), transnational non-governmental organizations (Djelic and Quack, 2010), social media (Aral and Alstyne, 2011), and rating services (Espeland and Sauder (2007) shape contemporary organization practices. Our goal is to complement the important early institutional focus on mechanisms with ideas illustrated with present-day concerns regarding social impact.

We recognize two aspects in which early work may need to be amended to account for the changing nature of organizational life. Initial research was based on the expectation that fields typically had a dominant type of organization or occupation, along with various types of supporting organizations; therefore studies of healthcare focused on doctors and hospitals, and higher education focused on universities and professors (Scott, 2014: Ch. 5).

Early work was also more focused on products and services, not on issues (Hoffman, 1997). Today, we need to analyze fields for the variety of their participants and how they compete to define norms of appropriateness. For example, in studies of contemporary life sciences research, it is the joint engagement among universities, biotech firms, nonprofit institutes, venture capitalists, government institutes and labs, and global pharmaceutical companies that has transformed both universities and industry (Colyvas and Powell, 2006; Powell, Whittington, and Packalen, 2012). The rich diversity of types of organizations allowed boundaries to be crossed and ideas and energy to be moved from one realm to another (Powell and Sandholtz, 2012). Today, it is seldom the case that a single type of organization has all the requiste skills or know-how to shape the trajectory of a field.

In an early stage of formation, an organizational field is a highly fluid system, populated by organizations that are subject to diverse and even contrasting pressures and influences. The technological developments of the last two decades amplify these conditions. The World Wide Web enhances the flow of ideas and concepts between disparate domains by allowing broad and open access to multiple sources of information.

The digital age makes substantial investments of human or financial resources in the acquisition of information obsolete, thereby rendering an organization's influence over its peers less a matter of size and resources, and more shaped by its ability to use social media and communication technologies. Under these conditions, digitally adept small organizations may gain substantial prominence and resonance. Blogs, for example, need only modest resources, but can reach a wide audience. More generally, intensified digital communication, closer connectivity between organizations, and the broad availability of information render large-scale mobilization efforts more feasible, thus enabling internal heretics, external agitators, and newcomers to upset institutional arrangements within organizational fields.

We take up the challenge of studying an issue currently debated by numerous participants. Put differently, we analyze a possible case of proto-institutionalization (Lawrence, Hardy, and Phillips, 2002) reflected in the growing chorus of voices involved in discussions of performance assessment, social value, and strategic philanthropy. These debates are bringing together disparate actors, both in the United States and in Europe. The discussions about how to measure social impact give us an excellent opportunity to develop both new ideas about mechanisms of proto-institutionalization and methods for detecting field development.

Debates over Social Impact

In the United States, civil society—the space inhabited by associations, churches, social movements, and nonprofit organizations—has undergone substantial change. The original associative legacy of civil society has been supplanted and extended by the introduction of scientific methods of analysis and business-like principles, culminating in a present-day focus on metrics and evaluation. This process has involved the meeting of previously separate spheres—civil society, professional science, and large-scale government agencies and business enterprises.

Newcomers to the social-associational field have brought heightened attention to measurable outputs. In the 1990s, a generation of high-net-worth individuals, flush with money made working in the technology and finance sectors, moved into the world of philanthropy with a desire to be "hands on" in their giving. This younger, engaged group of donors drew heavily on metrics and practices from the for-profit sector, mandating that nonprofits generate earned income and fees-for-service in order to stay fiscally sound. The rising popularity of venture philanthropy (Letts, Ryan, and Grossman 1997) and social entrepreneurship (Dees 1998) encouraged foundations and donors to adopt venture capital metrics (Letts et al. 1997). Similar trends are under way in Britain; Morley (2015) traces the rapid recent adoption of social impact reporting in the UK charitable sector to the efforts of elite managerial professionals involved in philanthropy.

The clamor for more business-minded approaches has been amplified by substantial growth in nonprofit management programs and nonprofit programs in traditional business schools. These programs have graduated a bevy of newly minted managers, propelling them, along with their accompanying professional norms and styles of operation, into a realm long noted for civic values and volunteer engagement. The confluence of these factors has created a perfect storm; indeed, the movement has spilled over outside the US and UK contexts into global discussions about the performance of non-governmental organizations, social enterprises, and all manner of organizational hybrids (Mair, Meyer, and Lutz, 2014).

Discussions of social impact are no longer limited to highly engaged philanthropists; they can be heard by casual, individual donors reflecting on their charitable donations (e.g., discussing a nonprofit's administrative overhead) and by government officials as they outsource public services. Funders, government officials, and some nonprofit managers have all embraced measurement and evaluation as solutions to accountability challenges. Some critics fear that this move comes at the expense of the expressive and associational goals of civil society (Frumkin 2006; Putnam 2007; Horvath and Powell, 2016). Despite such concerns, the voices of associations, nonprofit organizations, for-profit companies, governmental entities, and media outlets now contend to be heard in these discussions.

Taken together, these forces are altering the established meaning system of the nonprofit sector, shifting the focus from the intentions underlying charitable acts to their measurable outcomes. These trends have opened a new space for engagement, bringing into contact and mixing the ideas of a wide array of people and organizations—nonprofits, foundations, philanthropists, research institutes, government agencies, international organizations, watchdog groups, for-profit consultancies, and bloggers—all promoting their own ways to measure and assess performance in the social sector (Salamon, 2012; Brest and Born, 2013). These interactions are debated in webinars and on blogposts, and they are featured prominently on organizations' web pages.

The present moment is a propitious time to theorize about the new influences shaping civil society. No coherent set of metrics or generally accepted framework of evaluation yet exists. Instead a cacophony of voices, reflecting the contrasting orientations of civic ideals, scientific expertise, and managerial efficiency, contends for attention (Hall, 2012). None has yet succeeded in drowning out the voices of others. We sketch an analytical portrait of this juncture, during which connections between heterogeneous and contesting entities are forming to spark new conversations. Novel website-crawler technology, discussed below, enables us to identify a comprehensive sample of organizations involved in discussions of nonprofit performance evaluation and analyze the relations among them. Before turning to discuss sample construction, we first develop ideas about mechanisms that typify moments of discontinuity.

Mechanisms of proto-institutionalization

In a period of transition, the ability to gain influence and promote one's own approach shifts from coercion and fiat to soft power developed through facilitating and moderating contacts among organizations and jurisdictions (Nye, 1990; 2004). Power is not absent during such a moment, but its exercise becomes more subtle and unobtrusive, based on access to channels of communication, control over discourse and vocabularies, and the ability to set agendas and shape premises (Perrow, 1986).

To pursue this strategy, we argue, organizations engage in activities that enable them to influence the development and design of new institutional arrangements. We posit three mechanisms that characterize such actions: *proselytizing* of information and championing alternative visions, *convening* to create spaces for exchange among dissimilar participants, and *strengthening* as a means to fund and support the adoption of new practices and attract converts.

Proselytizing. Organizing and championing information is a crucial skill. Proselytizing disseminates information to a broad range of recipients, introducing ideas and practices to various audiences, facilitating recognition among former strangers. Besides fostering familiarity, proselytizing celebrates particular cases and stories. In a context in which there are only weak high-status role models, such efforts can provide guidance and orientation. Proselytizing sketches alternative futures and attempts to build agreement on values. It encompasses and goes beyond theorization (Strang and Meyer, 1993). Ideas are not simply transformed into compelling formats; those who proselytize attempt to enroll converts. With either the ability or the charisma to turn noise into a comprehensible signal, a proselytizer interprets the flow of news and values. Through decisions about which news to promote and which ideas to drop, such efforts have substantial influence on the content of information (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996).

Not all organizations seeking to spread the news, however, are heard equally. Producers of divergent approaches and standards may forcefully to promote their visions and deploy sophisticated rhetorical strategies in an effort to enroll others (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). The extent to which proselytizing succeeds depends on its ability to reach not just a large audience, but a diverse one. Although the former is relevant because it establishes recognition, the latter determines whether a champion can win support. Organizations with experience in communication are at an advantage in this regard. The ability to formulate messages in a compelling way and use varied media, from blog posts and webinars to technical reports and feature stories, can result in broad influence. Accordingly, we expect that media organizations, bloggers, and consultancies are likely to take the front row, actively engaging in developing proto-institutions through proselytizing.

Convening. A crucial prerequisite for the recombination of older views and the creation of new alternatives is the ability to bring organizations from formally distinct factions together in a way that allows them to exchange ideas and practices. Convening creates safe spaces for contact in which relations can be formed and formulations proposed—and possibly agreed upon. Kellogg's

(2009) analysis of the divergent realization of reforms intended to create more work/life balance in teaching hospitals illustrates the power of such relational spaces. Meetings among surgeons, residents, and hospital staff in favor of reduced work hours provided them with chances to discuss the issues, without either their status differences intruding or opponents observing. Without a safe space, no hierarchy-crossing collective could form, and the adoption of new medical practices was not possible.

Organizations that are adept at convening seek to create relational spaces by inviting representatives of differing perspectives and setting the agenda for discussion, as well as making provisions to ease the flow of information, such as arranging for translation. Given the potential to create consensus, such meetings can have lasting impact on the configuration of a field (Meyer, Gaba, and Colwell, 2005). Setting the agenda of widely noticed meetings is a central means to shape discourse and public perception (Kingdon, 1995; Lukes, 2005). Further, although the convening typically does not coerce others to participate, the power over whom to invite can encourage contacts between some but not others.

To engage in agenda-setting, an organization has to be widely accepted, so that potential participants will accept invitations to meetings. Conveners typically are well connected, with ties reaching into multiple communities. These capacities are typically associated with organizations with a more integrative, outward-reaching orientation. Convening may include providing guidance, offering advice, publicizing proposals, inviting participants, and setting the agenda (Dorado, 2005; Mair and Hehenberger, 2014). Foundations, especially, have long been identified as midwives to the emergence of new fields, beginning with their role in the professionalization of art in the United States in the early 20th century (DiMaggio, 1991). Therefore we expect that associations, foundations, and international governmental organizations will be regarded as serving wider interests and will be more able than other groups to pursue convening efforts.

Strengthening. Disturbance of the status quo—whether political or economic—is a shock that creates turbulence, challenging the coping capacities of many organizations. When previously taken-for-granted ways of doing things are no longer rewarded, organizations must scramble and use scarce resources to deal with the strains of transition. In unfamiliar times, some organizations need additional backing to build coping capacities. Strengthening resembles the seismic retrofitting we find in earthquake zones: vulnerable organizations are equipped with new structures and abilities to aid their survival during periods of transition. They may need material support through grants and infrastructure, or advice and protocols to guide organizational behavior. The strengthening mechanism sustains differences between organizations with regard to how they are affected by the disruption of an institutional setting: organizations endowed with ample resources are likely to be more resilient in times of turbulence.

Many scholars have noted that foundations use moments of transition to provide resources and guidance to fashion a consensus and engage in capacity-strengthening activities (Bartley, 2007; Hwang and Powell, 2009). Providers of resources can, of course, determine the conditions under which they are offered (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In the context of proto-institutionalization, these conditions often entail the adoption of a particular practice or framework advocated by a donor or financier (Jenkins, 1998). For example, the Hewlett Foundation, one of America's largest private philanthropies, focuses on measurable outcomes and requires its grantees to provide regular quantitative metrics of performance as a basis for sustained support.

Coercion is by no means absent; a foundation has substantial influence over its grantees. Such power, however, is a dyadic relation between funder and grantee and is not legitimized by an overarching framework that influences many others. Given the absence of common standards, a recipient may avoid submitting to the directives of one provider by seeking alternative sources.

In contrast, a successful strengthener may succeed in assembling communities of recipients, bestow on them its framework, and try to persuade other donors of its merits, thus actively engaging in field-building activities. In so doing, an organization with strengthening capacity comes to exert normative influence, encouraging organizations to adopt its preferred practices. Further, the power over which organizations to support, and the dependencies that follow, enable those that strengthen to tailor the membership of a field and the orientations of its participants. We believe that in addition to foundations, professional service firms and research institutes are involved in strengthening efforts.

Proselytizing, convening, and strengthening are critical mechanisms of proto-institutionalization because each increases contact and communication. The three mechanisms all entail the exercise of the soft powers of persuasion and cooptation to influence and promote certain visions and frameworks. An important factor influencing whether an organization pursues such efforts is the extent to which it has a stake in promoting an alternative framework. The perturbation of institutional arrangements seldom disturbs all the organizations within a field uniformly (Powell et al., 2005). Depending on the nature of their connections, activities, and resources—and not least, the type of disruption—some organizations experience turbulence as deeply unsettling, potentially challenging their identity and survival. Others are hardly touched by the commotion. Some may even regard it as an opportunity. For those affected—positively as well as negatively—reaching across jurisdictions and actively engaging in moves toward proto-institutionalization become important options to combat uncertainty and forge an order according to their own ideas. Indeed, some well-positioned organizations may find it possible to pursue more than one strategy.

Empirical approach: Methods and analyses

Web crawler and issue field identification. In order to capture the diversity and dynamism of an organizational field, the analyst must shift attention from the role of particular types of organizations to the interactions and relations among many participants. A conceptual transition alone, however, does not suffice. We need new methods to accommodate a wider focus, which requires asking how to identify the members of nascent fields. One answer to this challenge is a web crawler developed by Oberg and Schöllhorn at the University of Mannheim (see Oberg, Schöllhorn, and Woywode, 2003; Oberg, Huppertz, and Woywode, 2006). A web crawler brings relational properties and connections to the fore, tracking hyperlinks embedded within a website to identify the reference network to other websites.

Using a web crawler to identify field membership means that potential participants are identified on the basis of web connectivity rather than ontological properties. An organization is considered part of a field if it is recognized by and connected to other members; its form, function, and activities alone do not establish membership. The web crawler thus produces a relational, not a category-based, field, whereby the reference-based procedure permits preliminary boundaries to emerge independent of researcher bias or a priori definitions. This self-referencing process, akin to snowball sampling procedures, is especially useful in analyzing fields composed of multiple types of members, referred to as "multimodal networks" (Shumate and Contractor, 2013: 450).

Moreover, the fact that the references in question are hyperlinks, rather than resource flows or formal contracts, makes the web crawler particularly suitable for the analysis of dispersed fields, where interactions may be hard to observe in formats other than digital communication. Although it requires little financial investment, linking to an organization's website implies willingness to alert one's audiences to its existence and activities. Bidirectional references reflect mutual recognition, a common awareness and willingness to share traffic and thus a critical resource: attention.

To begin an iterative process of tracing links, one needs an active group of core participants. We enlisted the assistance of professionals in the field and drew on our experiences to identify a small number of active members' contributions to discussions of social impact. This method produced an initial set of 36 entities engaged in performance assessment. Among them we included funders of impact reviews such as *3ie Impact*, charity rankings and evaluators like *Charity Watch* and *GiveWell*, foundations with a strong emphasis on measurement including *Rockefeller* and *Gates*, providers of evaluation-centered professional services like *Keystone Accounting*, and a blog, *Monitoring and Evaluation News*. Using their websites, or more precisely URLs (uniform resource locators), the web crawler tracked all outgoing references, or hyperlinks, to other websites, identifying those frequently referenced as possible field members. After two complete iterations, the web crawler identified 1,394 websites that represented potential members for the sample.

This sampling method generates noise in the sense that URLs from highly active websites such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Amazon, Adobe,* and *Google* are included, as well as other search engines, newspapers, publishers, and software providers. To remove noise and identify organizations that are meaningfully involved in the debate on valuation, the web crawler sampling needs to be complemented by a qualitative assessment of potential members.[1] Five members of the research team examined website content to decide which potential members merited inclusion due to their engagement with evaluation activity. We specifically looked for entities that were: 1) creators of nonprofit assessment tools and metrics; 2) carriers or conduits of specific tools; 3) service providers who are heavy consumers of evaluation tools and have the potential to influence others by posting the metrics or descriptions of their use on their websites; and 4) funders that are vocal about evaluation practices.

The process of tracing web links and scrutinizing potential members produced a sample of 369 entities connected with at least one other participant with a bidirectional reference. Because the web crawler not only traces but also records hyperlinks, it affords analysis of the relational network of the identified issue-field. The resulting sample is remarkably linked: The 369 entities in our study have an average of 32 unidirectional connections to others and share 13 mutual references on average. With an average distance of just 2.2 degrees of separation between any two members, the issue field of nonprofit performance evaluation appears both well connected and cohesive.

Coding and field composition. After assessing the relational structure of our issue field, we turned to examining its demographic properties. Fields, we have argued, have grown less centered on particular types of organization. Instead, compelled by the possibilities of the digital age, field boundaries have become increasingly porous. To analyze the diversity of our issue field, we coded key characteristics of each entity, including demographic attributes, activities, sources of revenue, and audiences reached or served. Particular attention was paid to institutional

[1] Such assessment does not necessarily have to be qualitative in the sense of an interpretive analysis. A quantitative content analysis of organizations' websites can also be applied as a tool to determine membership based on organizations' usage of an issue-specific vocabulary.

form, which we treated as a mutually exclusive category and classified as nonprofit, for-profit, government, international organization—including both governmental such as the United Nations, as well as non-governmental, and such non-organizational entities as blogs and conferences. Given the thematic focus of our study, we further differentiated nonprofit organizations into subcategories, including associations, foundations, intermediaries, professional service organizations, operating charities, public research organizations, social movements, and churches.

Websites are a rich and accessible data source for organizational data. They are more detailed and widely read than annual reports, and they are increasingly the primary channel of organizational communication. Their interactive nature makes them an integral—in some cases even the only—point of contact between an organization and its audiences and consumers. This is true not just for retailers like *Amazon* or the airlines, but for global charities, social movements, and government agencies as well. Activities as varied as scheduling an appointment, making a donation, applying for a job, or making a purchase are commonly done through organizational websites. We capitalized on organizational websites as a data source and supplemented these data with information obtained through secondary sources, including Internal Revenue Service 990 forms and the online service *Guidestar*.

Our sample composition is quite heterogeneous: Among its 369 members, we find 70% nonprofits, 10% for-profits, 8% branches of government and international governmental organizations, 5% international non-governmental organizations, and 4% publications. The remaining 3% are non-organizational forms such as blogs, and conferences. Their inclusion may seem unusual to researchers who have traditionally studied brick-and-mortar organizations. But digital media have played a crucial role in recent large-scale efforts at social change, from the

Arab Spring to *los indignados* in Spain. Similarly, in discussions of social impact, a logic of "connective action," in which digital media and conferences are paramount, ties together a loose community of commentators and practitioners (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

The large confederation of nonprofit organizations in the sample includes foundations, intermediaries, associations, public research organizations, operating charities, and movement organizations. Foundations such as *Hewlett* and *Soros,* as well as intermediaries including *Ashoka* and *The Global Fund for Women*, at 14% and 17% respectively, are among the largest components of the sample. These organizations have an interest in evaluation based on their function as distributors of funds and supporters of operating charities. Professional service providers such as *Compass Point* and *Bridgespan* are another component: nearly 12% of the sample is composed of organizations that offer consulting, advice, and metrics and evaluation tools. Associations, particularly grantmakers' and financiers' consortia on the regional (e.g., *Boston Area Grantmakers*), national (in the United Kingdom, the *Association of Charitable Foundations*), and international level (such as *Cerise Microfinance*) are also active and make up 10.5%. Public research organizations, including *The Urban Institute, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government* and *Brookings,* are important contributors to the debate on social impact and represent 9% of our sample. Although less numerous at 3.5%, prominent operating charities such as *REDF* and *Teach for America* proclaim that they conduct rigorous assessments of their services. Similarly, social movements such as the *Coalition for Evidence* and *Ceres* that advocate alternative visions and offer ideological grounding in an often heated debate represent 4%.

The majority of sample members are located in and have a clear focus on the United States, yet at 21%, there is a substantial international constituency. Among these we count evaluation-oriented organizations of various types located elsewhere, such as the Brussels-based *European*

Foundation Center and the professional service provider in health care *Cochrane* in London. In addition, we find various organizations—located domestically and elsewhere—with an explicit international focus. These entail a large number of United Nations organizations, including the *UN Development Programme* (UNDP), the *UN High Commissioner on Refugees* (UNHCR), the *Food and Agricultural Organization* (FAO), the *UN Programme on HIV/Aids* (UNAIDS), the *United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO), the *World Food Programme*, and others. The *World Bank*, *OECD*, and the *African Union* are also represented. International non-governmental organizations also have a strong presence. They include organizations active in areas of humanitarian aid provision (*Doctors Without Borders* and the *International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*), the fight against corruption (*Transparency International*), health (*PATH*), environmental protection *(Convention of Biodiversity),* and education (*Room to Read*). These global members reflect that the debate about measurement has moved beyond the United States and is considered on a global scale. The relative frequency of institutional forms and geographic orientation are presented in table 1.

--------*Table 1 here*-------

We use a circular connection graph to illustrate the two central features of the sample: connectivity and diversity.[2] Graphs of this type were originally developed for the graphical representation of genomic data (Krzywinski et al., 2009), but they have since been used to represent global migration flows by world regions (Abel and Sander, 2014), the development of epidemics (Guo et al., 2013), patterns of musical beats (Lamere, 2012), and variations in bird populations (Jetz et al., 2012). The beauty of this method is that a plot of hierarchically

[2] We use a script for hierarchical edge bundling developed by Mike Bostock for the D3 toolset (http://bl.ocks.org/mbostock/1044242).

structured nodes—for instance, different types of organizations—forms a circular pattern with their connections displaying the relations between various components of the field. When drawing the paths of connections, the applied script bundles ties with regard to the hierarchical order—for instance, bundling relations between organizational forms. In doing so, the circular connection graph shows how field formation brings together different types of organizations, thus offering a visual tool to capture homogeneity or diversity. For the issue field of nonprofit evaluation, figure 1 shows the URLs of the 369 identified participants arranged in a circle and sorted by institutional form. Each member's hyperlinks to fellow organizations are displayed as lines, here representing all unidirectional ties between the sample organizations, which in their totality show a dense network connecting entities of highly diverse form.

----------------*Figure 1 here.*---------------

It is also possible to insert diverse types of connections, which allows differentiating among incoming, outgoing, and bidirectional ties. We present such detailed displays of relational structures later in the chapter, in figures 2a–c and 3a–d. Compared to a classic network graph, the circular display has the advantage of conveying the distribution of institutional forms within the sample, thus highlighting diversity, and simultaneously representing the ties between organizations, reflecting connectivity. In combination, these dimensions allow for an immediate appraisal of the configuration of a field and the relations between types of organizations.

By no means limited to the case in question, this tool is particularly appropriate for the analysis of nascent fields or fields in transition, where connections are made between organizations of diverse legal form. The sole precondition for applying this method is the availability of information on organizations' (or other entities') features such as form, function, size, or location that can be supplemented with relational data or, vice versa, the existence of network data for which supplementary information on nodes' particular features is available. For such data, circular connection graphs allow us to comprehensively and systematically represent the relational structure of a field composed of multiple contingents or factions.

Operationalization of mechanisms. The third step in our approach entails transforming the three mechanisms into empirically observable indicators of organizational behavior. As we argued above, proselytizing, convening, and strengthening are strategies some organizations pursue in an effort to steer to the debate on social impact. Each strategy can encompass a variety of activities and behaviors. Convening, for example, is not limited to organizing meetings; it can include creating online forums, mediating between conflicting organizations, or engaging in agenda-setting efforts. In pursuit of these strategies, organizations increasingly turn to their websites as a means of communication and relationship building. We use digital behaviors to explore the mechanisms. For example, the creation and receipt of hyperlink connections reflects whom an organization reaches out to, the scope of its intended audiences, and who recognizes it. Much like citations in academic papers, web links are not randomly created, but are indicative of an organization's strategy.

We thus use the relational features of web to operationalize the mechanisms. To evaluate the directionality of web links, we compute the following indicators (Wassermann and Faust, 1994): First, we find the *outdegree*, the number of other organizations in the sample that an organization references. This measure reflects the endorsements extended to other organizations, and thus the willingness of an organization to share its visitors' attention with them. Second, we identify the *indegree*, the number of other organizations that reference a target organization. This measure indicates recognition by others and the status accorded to an organization by members of the field. Third, we calculate the *bidegree*, the number of reciprocated links, which reflects mutual recognition. These measures of indegree, outdegree, and bidegree enable us to identify organizations that engage in proselytizing, convening, and strengthening.

An important feature of proselytizing new practices and ideas is spreading to others the attention that an organization receives. The outdegree indicator reflects the sharing of attention with others; proselytizing involves the creation of multiple hyperlinks to entities whose missions are to be publicized and endorsed. The typical proselytizer presented in figure 2a exhibits such web-based behavior: With outgoing hyperlinks across the entire field and to members of various types, incoming web traffic can be redirected to organizations that the proselytizer selects as worthy of attention. It purposefully channels the gaze of its audience to select partners. The outdegree as an indicator of efforts to guide attention is often correlated with the number of incoming references. To create an indicator of attention guidance that is independent of incoming links, we label an organization an *active proselytizer* if its outdegree is twice its indegree.

----------------*Figure 2a here.*--------------

Successful convening requires recognition and acceptance by potential attendees. Positive reputation and high status are reflected in the indegree; an ideal convener is referenced by a large number of peers, irrespective of the number of hyperlinks the convener itself creates. Figure 2b portrays such an esteemed entity. This organization draws recognition from an array of field members, irrespective of its own web-based referencing behavior. One simple heuristic assumes that the larger the indegree, the more appealing an organization's invitation and hence its ability to enroll others. To transform this assumption into an indicator, we develop a threshold: If an organization's indegree is larger than this threshold, we consider it a *notable convener*. By analyzing the inflection in the distribution of indegrees, we set the indegree threshold to 99. Garnering more than 99 references from the other 368 organizations is a very high bar.

----------------*Figure 2b here.*---------------

We described strengthening as a mutual endeavor between organizations: An organization provides support—financial or otherwise—to an organization in need in exchange for the recipient's implementation or endorsement of particular methods or practices. Although collaboration and support are rarely publicized, we can examine mutual web link references between organizations as indicative of such a cooperative relationship. The bidegree indicator reflects the shared recognition that we expect from organizations that take part in joint endeavors to build capacity. An organization that reciprocates an incoming hyperlink acknowledges the referencing other and demonstrates a willingness to form a bond. Ideal strengtheners have a large number of bidirectional ties that connect them with their fellow organizations. In contrast to the organizations in figures 2a and 2b, which feature either outgoing or incoming ties, the strengthener portrayed in figure 2c has both types of ties, as well as multiple bidirectional ties. The willingness to reciprocate indicates that this entity is embedded in a dense network of mutual recognition. As the bidegree indicator is technically dependent on the number of incoming and outgoing references, we identify as strengtheners those organizations whose bidegree is larger than 50% of their indegree.

----------------*Figure 2c here*---------------

Findings: Proselytizing, convening, and strengthening for social impact

When we apply the three measures above to our sample, we find the following distribution: Among the 369 members, there are 17 organizations that convene, 44 that proselytize, and 58 that are involved in strengthening. This outcome suggests that our criteria are quite stringent. Surely the other 250 organizations aspire to be influential and partake in the development of new tools and metrics, but judging from our web-link analyses, only about a third (32%) of the participants effectively do so.

Given the transformative potential of proselytizing, convening, and strengthening, it is both conceptually and realistically possible for some organizations to combine these activities. For example, an organization that is able to follow up on proselytizing or convening efforts with financial incentives or similar strengthening activities greatly enhances its ability to exert influence. On the other hand, a combination of convening and proselytizing may prove counter-productive. Recall that an organization's ability to bring together diverse participants in joint conversations is built on others' trust in its motives. Its legitimacy may be challenged if a convener brazenly champions particular ideas or is too strongly attached to controversial viewpoints.

Some combinations are difficult to achieve, whereas some are more compatible than others. The Venn diagram in figure 3 illustrates the solo and joint activities. The size of the circles represents the total number of organizations that engage in a particular activity; the non-overlapping part of each circle counts those that pursue this strategy exclusively, and the number in the overlap captures those that combine two or three strategies.

As far as we know, this effort is a novel attempt to reflect the simultaneous influences of institutional mechanisms. When examining possible combinations, we observe that 38 entities both proselytize and strengthen, but only four convene and strengthen. Merely one organization, the *Foundation Center*—-simultaneously a supporter, funder, and promoter of philanthropy in the United States and increasingly globally—does all three. Indeed, it appears that the work of promoting new practices, engaging others in them, and providing resources to support them is challenging. Were such efforts easy, institutional change would be much more commonplace.

--------- *Figure 3 here* ----------

To flesh out how the mechanisms are reflected in practice, we select four organizations that typify the features associated with convening, proselytizing, strengthening, and a combination of activities. These organizations are well known publicly, and they show high engagement according to our measures. We use them as illustrations of how the mechanisms are translated by notable organizations.

UNICEF - A global convener. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is an intergovernmental organization that offers humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers in developing countries. Although the majority of its programs focus on direct community-level services, UNICEF is also known for its global advocacy and efforts to mobilize expertise and engagement to promote children's well-being. Evaluation features prominently in these endeavors as a means to achieve "evidence-based decision-making and advocacy, transparency, coherence and effectiveness" (UNICEF website).

UNICEF is a popular partner. Civil society organizations, business corporations, and public sector agencies both national and international partner with it, which in turn allows UNICEF to draw on a vast pool of allies and associates. Figure 4a illustrates UNICEF's diverse connectivity by representing incoming, outgoing, and bidirectional ties to other members of the sample. The extensive incoming references draw from across the entire sample, even including businesses that seldom reference others, indicating UNICEF's convening ability. Among the organizations that link to UNICEF, endorsement is not limited to a particular ideology or orientation: UNICEF is referenced by both the conservative *American Enterprise Institute* and the liberal *Brookings Institution.* UNICEF also receives endorsement from movements as different as the Christian *Bread for the World* and impact investors *Social Capital Markets*. Some of these ties are reciprocated, although overall, UNICEF's bidirectional ties are concentrated in the world of international governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

Deep embedding among its peers and wide recognition enable UNICEF to enroll diverse participants in its convening efforts. Workshops, conferences, and consultations organized on child and maternal health, disability and integration, education, and children's well-being bring together representatives from across the board of organizational forms and orientations. Building on this capacity, in 2007 UNICEF set up an interdisciplinary Innovation Unit that seeks to identify, prototype, and scale up technologies and practices that improve children's lives worldwide. Globally dispersed, yet connected through digital media, the Innovation Unit brings together Silicon Valley tech firms, product developers and suppliers in Copenhagen, field testers in Nairobi, New York design thinkers, international academics, and public sector representatives to share their expertise and develop novel approaches and technologies By bringing together diverse groups to answer difficult questions in a way that encourages exploration and innovation, UNICEF establishes itself as a global convener.

--------- *Figure 4a here* ----------

The Hewlett Foundation—Building a culture of measurement. With assets of approximately $9 billion, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is one of the largest US foundations. Systematic evaluation of impact to ensure the effective use of resources is central to its values and core ambition of "helping people build measurably better lives." Hewlett capitalizes on its ample resource base, which enables the pursuit of a comprehensive strengthening strategy. Irrespective of recipient and cause, grants are tied to a clear appraisal system: To sustain support, grantees are required to provide regular quantitative metrics of performance in the form of standard progress reports. Hewlett also supports grantees in developing organizational capacity, seeking to endow nonprofit leaders with the managerial expertise to enhance social performance.

By holding its extensive network of recipients accountable to a clearly outlined theory of change, Hewlett also exerts substantial normative influence. Its efforts are apparent in its web-based behavior, as figure 4b illustrates. Hewlett holds 46 bidirectional ties to other sample members, representing 49% of their incoming web links. Despite its size and standing, Hewlett is not hesitant to reciprocate the references it receives. There is, nonetheless, a distinctive quality to those whom Hewlett recognizes. The majority of mutual links are to professional service providers, especially to ones that share Hewlett's emphasis on measurement. Among its many grantees are ranking services such as *Give Well*, *Charity Navigator*, and *Philanthropedia*, and data providers such as *The Center for Effective Philanthropy* and *GuideStar*.

The theme of measurement, impact, and systematic analysis resonates throughout Hewlett's bidirectional network with ties to public research organizations such as *The Center for Global Development*, the international nongovernmental organization *Management Science for Health*, and associations that emphasize managerial capacity such as *InterAction.* Hewlett actively employs its strengthening capacity to build a community of like-minded proponents of a measurement paradigm.

--------- *Figure 4b here* ----------

GiveWell—Proselytizing transparency. Among the many charity evaluators, GiveWell stands out as a rating service that complements classic quantitative measures, such as percentage of budget spent on overhead, with qualitative assessments to appraise the cost-effectiveness of nonprofits' impact. GiveWell requires that organizations must be willing to share information publicly, including data on failures. Besides effectiveness, transparency is a core value of GiveWell. It permeates the organization's relationship to clients and is prominent in its self-representation: Its own "mistakes" and shortcomings are listed prominently on its website. To convince organizations to share information, GiveWell capitalizes on its power as a proselytizer by emphasizing the amount of donations—almost $28 million in 2014—received by its recommended charities.

Apart from prominently featuring top-ranked organizations, GiveWell's hyperlink network, displayed in figure 4c, reflects its effort to channel public attention and contributions toward organizations that meet its threshold of "effective philanthropy." International nongovernmental organizations are extensively referenced, particularly those who promote systematic monitoring of both impact and fiscal prudence. Among those highlighted by GiveWell are *Doctors Without Borders, InterAction*, and *Room to Read*, as well as organizations pursuing poverty alleviation by means of direct financial support for individuals, including the microfinance funders *BRAC, Accion*, and the *Grameen Foundation*.

--------- *Figure 4c here* ----------

Acumen—Combining proselytizing and strengthening. Acumen is a global nonprofit venture fund, created in 2001 to invest in entrepreneurs working on solutions to poverty. Literally seeking to bring business "acumen" to the realm of international development, Acumen strives to build new organizational models and disseminate enterpreneurial approaches to alleviating poverty. To disseminate lessons from its portfolio of investments, various means of communication are used: Acumen distributes regular email newsletters, actively engages with almost half a million followers via *Twitter* and *Facebook*, and publishes a blog to broadcast activities, partnerships, and success stories. Proselytizing efforts are not limited to social media engagement. Acumen offers a fellowship program for young professionals, as well as free online courses and volunteering opportunities to propagate its distinctive vision. One module highlights the zeal with which Acumen tackles proselytizing: In the course "Storytelling for Change," participants learn how to use powerful stories to connect with audiences, change conversations, and inspire action.

As an investment fund, Acumen concentrates on providing funds to create financially sustainable organizations that deliver affordable goods and services to improve the lives of the poor. Acumen's web-based referencing, illustrated in figure 4d, reflects its combined strategy. Featuring a large number of both bidirectional and outgoing hyperlinks, the network spans the entire spectrum of institutional forms in the sample, with a particular emphasis on professional services, businesses, and other intermediaries. Although different in form, there is a commonality among the organizations. The operating charities and international nongovernmental organizations endorsed include *Teach for America*, *BRAC*, and *Room to Read*—all organizations that echo Acumen's emphasis on entrepreneurial leadership, management, and individual responsibility.

A similar theme resonates among those with whom Acumen holds bidirectional relations. Consultancies, including nonprofits *Bridgespan* and *Keystone Accounting*, and for-profit *Deloitte* and *McKinsey*, stand out here, suggesting that Acumen not only promotes a distinct approach, but seeks to build a community of organizations that can provide management tools to enhance organizational resilience and productivity. The combination of field-building with financial support, consulting, training, and communication enables Acumen to establish itself as a central contributor to the debate on social impact. Able to throw financial weight behind its vision, Acumen engages in both proselytizing and strengthening to great effect.

--------- *Figure 4d here* ----------

How are activities and organizational form related? We argued that in times of transformation, when new fields emerge and boundaries are in flux, some organizations actively engage in and shape proto-institutionalization. We identified proselytizing, convening, and strengthening as central activities, discussed their distribution in the sample, and illustrated the mechanisms with the cases of four organizations. One insight that emerges from this survey is that certain types of organizations are more adept at particular activities and better positioned than others to engage in them. We take up the challenge of explaining this observation in the following section. Figure 5 provides a first look, summarizing the distribution of organizational forms across the three mechanisms. Each circle represents one mechanism. Their size is adjusted to the relative occurrence of the approaches within the sample and the partitioning represents the percentage of organizations of a particular institutional form that pursue this strategy. For ease of presentation, we assign organizations that pursue several strategies to the mechanism which is least typical, as indicated by its frequency within the sample. For instance, if an organization both proselytizes and strengthens, we assign it to proselytizing because this choice distinguishes it from the more actively pursued strategy of strengthening.

--------- *Figure 5 here* ----------

Convening involves providing a safe space for open discussion and negotiation, which requires that a convener must be able to attract, but not overwhelm. By our criteria, relatively few organizations manage this delicate balance. Only 17 among the 369 sample members serve as conveners. The organizations that do so have much in common. Governmental organizations, especially international ones, including several UN agencies such as UNDP, UNICEF, and the WHO, the OECD, the World Bank, and US Aid, make up by far the largest contingent. Other organizational forms are less well represented. We find only two foundations (*Gates* and *Kellogg),* associations (*Council of Foundations* and *Independent Sector*), public research organizations (*Urban Institute* and *Brookings*), and publications (*Stanford Social Innovation Review* and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*) that serve as active conveners. These organizations share prominence and respect within the field.

The *Council of Foundations* is unusual in that it clearly positions itself as a supporter of philanthropic endeavors to advance the good of the sector. Its long history and transparency—audit and ISO details are immediately accessible on its website—also contribute to its ability to assemble more than 1,600 organizations in its membership network and attract a sizable audience for its frequent conferences. The *Urban Institute* is similarly considered a thought leader for the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit experts generally perceive its recent efforts to develop measurement tools and enhance the effectiveness of social programs, in the context of its PerformWell initiative, as supportive efforts, rather than as attempts to force a particular management doctrine on civil society organizations. The fact that no businesses, operating charities, international nongovernmental organizations, or social movements are successful conveners supports the view that strong identification with particular ideologies or approaches is at odds with the ability to convene.

Proselytizing entails both accumulating information and broadcasting it to a wide audience. To pursue this strategy, an organization needs to have visibility and be able to use channels of communication effectively. We find organizations with this ability across the entire spectrum of forms. Indeed, proselytizing is the only mechanism that all types of organizations engage in, including businesses and operating charities that are otherwise less involved digitally in the debate on social impact. The distribution of organizational forms varies markedly, however. *Acumen* and other intermediaries such as the *Global Philanthropy Forum* and *Grantmakers for Education* are highly active in promoting their own approaches and visions. Together with associations, particularly those that bring together grantmakers like *Donors Forum* and regional groups such as *Southern California Grantmakers* and *Philanthropy New York*, intermediaries are the most common organizational form among the proselytizers. Non-organizational forms, such as blogs, publications, and conferences, also have a notable presence. Although fewer in number, they have considerable involvement in proselytizing. Blogs, for instance *Philanthromedia* and *Gift Hub*, and publications, such as *Alliance Magazine,* draw on their communicative capacity to champion new futures. Movement organizations such as *Social Edge*, in turn, capitalize on their framing and mobilizing skills. Generally, media and movement organizations make shaping public perception an integral part of their missions. In contrast, hardly any public research organization proselytizes. Public science is considered by many to be above such promotion. Similarly, neither foundations nor international governmental organizations have active digital efforts at proselytizing.

Strengthening is perhaps the most straightforward of the three mechanisms, provided one has the necessary resources. There are fewer legitimacy or reputational constraints on the provision of funds or administrative assistance; therefore we see many more organizations involved, and a wide diversity as well. We again find intermediaries such as the *Free Management Library*, an open database for resources on leadership and organizational development, and the *Aspen Institute,* which also supports leadership skills through policy programs and training*,* to be quite active. Foundations and professional service organizations engage in strengthening either by providing direct financial support or, in the case of the *Center for Effective Philanthropy*, by offering consulting and toolkits. All these organizational types have inscribed in their core function the objective to support other organizations.

Strengthening helps organizations through periods of transition, seeking to install structures and practices that increase resilience in the face of challenges to demonstrate social impact. The *Mott Foundation*, for example, has specific grantmaking programs designed to "support efforts to build a vibrant and independent nonprofit and philanthropic sector." The nonprofit consultancy *Bridgespan* seeks to "strengthen the ability of mission-driven organizations" by offering both strategy and implementation advice as well as concrete support in developing performance metrics. Strengthening is also part of the strategy of some public research organizations, particularly those that conduct scientific studies with the expressed purpose to develop policy recommendations, such as the *World Resources Institute* and the liberal-progressive think tank *Center for American Progress.* For international nongovernmental organizations, strengthening is also a primary strategy, sometimes literally. *Pathfinder International*, for example, implements an "integrated systems strengthening model" to improve sexual and reproductive health on the levels of community and national health systems, whereas *Transparency International* develops tools to monitor, map, and reduce corruption and provides them to governments, businesses, and civil society organizations.

Combinations of multiple strategies. As we have posited, these three mechanisms are analytically distinct, deriving from different skill sets and association with particular communities and professions. But their impact may gain additional force when entities are able to engage in activities in tandem. A concerted effort to both convene and strengthen, for example, is an important strategy, as it affords organizations the opportunity to issue invitations, fund attendance of selected candidates, and continue support for the participating organizations. Among our sample, however, only four organizations combine these activities: two intermediaries, namely the *Council of Foundations* and *Independent Sector*, and two publications*,* the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and the *Chronicle of Philanthropy.* This finding suggests that combining convening and strengthening requires a delicate dance. Much more prevalent is the combination of proselytizing and strengthening. It affords 38 organizations—among them many associations and intermediaries—the opportunity to disseminate information and toolkits, as well as provide resources to support implementation. In keeping with the literal meanings of its name, the Christian nonprofit *Bread for the World* builds on religious values to advocate efforts to end hunger. It combines offering various information sources—newsletters as well as online cases, fact sheets, and research papers—with the direct empowerment of faith leaders and parishes by providing guidelines for mobilization. California-based *Roberts Enterprise Development Fund* (*REDF)* combines its investment and consulting services for social enterprises with the analysis and dissemination of best practices, case studies, and other expert advice. *REDF* promotes particular approaches and also offers funds to those willing to implement them; it is the only operating charity that engages in such a two-pronged effort. Other organizations that provide direct services to communities in need include *Charity Water*, working to provide safe drinking water, *Kaboom,* building playgrounds for children in poverty, and nonprofit workforce- and business-developer *Seedco*, all of which participate in discussion of social impact by highlighting the success of their projects.

The twin operation of two approaches highlights how soft power operates in defining social impact. By creating a venue in which new approaches are discussed and vetted, and then providing resources to implement them, organizations make new medicines freely available and easier to swallow. Similarly, offering webinars that explicate new tools at an affordable cost, subsequently creating user communities that experiment with the tools, and then backing them with sufficient financial resources, is a strategy to pursue evaluation without the pressure of coercion. In tandem as well as separately, the activities associated with the mechanisms of convening, proselytizing, and strengthening provide options for organizations to influence debates and affect institutional change.

Discussion and Implications

Early neo-institutional scholarship introduced the concept of the field to describe a community of similar organizations that shared a common meaning system and whose participants interacted more frequently and fatefully with one another than with those outside (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1994). Organizations in a well-defined field experience similar expectations that they jointly create and sustain. In these settings, policies that appear to be successful are often emulated, and normative influences arising from professional standards and membership in professional networks foster shared organizational practices and structures. Coercive pressures are exerted by powerful entities on which members depend for resources. These three mechanisms have been central in explaining how fields evolve over time.

This initial neo-institutional view was influential in explaining isomorphism and convergence. It was not intended, however, to account for how fields were disrupted, nor how disparate communities came together to form a nascent arena in response to new issues. Subsequent work took up these topics in different ways. One approach attempted to conceptualize fields as connected to and embedded within larger, conflicting institutional systems (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Hoffman, 1999; Seo and Creed, 2002).

As field members tried to reconcile their differences by bringing various practices in line with their needs and interests, change ensued. Scholars working under the labels of "institutional work" and "institutional entrepreneurship" developed an alternative approach, emphasizing the agency of individuals and organizations in creating, maintaining, and altering institutions (Garud, Jain, and Kumaraswamy, 2002; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca, 2009). Powell et al. (2005) used sophisticated network tools to examine how disparate parties became a community of common interests. They documented the development of the commercial field of biotechnology through analysis of the formation, dissolution, and rewiring of collaborative ties over a 12-year period (1988-1999). By mapping changing network configurations, they demonstrated that mechanisms of attachment shift over time. The interweaving of network topology and field dynamics showed that change is not an invariant process affecting all participants equally; reverberations were felt in different ways depending on an organization's institutional status and location as the field evolved.

Our perspective in this chapter builds on recent attention to theorizing mechanisms (Davis and Marquis, 2005; Hedstom and Ylikowski, 2010; Padgett and Powell, 2012). We introduce three mechanisms that explain how interactions among multiple organizations occur in the absence of a larger consensus, and highlight how these processes shape contemporary discussions of social impact. Moreover, we attend to how organizational fields have changed over the past four decades—they are more dynamic, boundaries are more porous, different organizations have come to populate them, and the power differentials among members have been altered, in part as a result of the advent of the World Wide Web. As a consequence, different relational possibilities are altering the configurations of fields.

In the late 20th century, the state, the professions, law, and communication media exerted considerable influence on organizations. The state remains an important force, particularly with regard to convening. The legitimacy required for convening still remains with governmental organizations; but we see in our case, however, that convening influence increasingly occurs at the international level.

The media also remain a relevant influence; but instead of corporate conglomerates we find informal, small-scale proselytizers such as blogs. And organizations of all stripes now have sophisticated social media strategies. These digital campaigns could be viewed as exerting normative and mimetic pressures, but we think proselytizing better captures a strategy that is no longer the exclusive province of the professions or leading high-status organizations. Instead, drawing on social media and digital communication, various organizations now try to broadcast their approaches, collect support, and shape public discourse.

Strengthening, too, has opened up the opportunity for engagement to a new cast of organizations, primary among them foundations, intermediaries, professional service firms, and consultancies.

The reduction in coercive power means that influence operates differently; organizations that dispense funds and are able to provide guidance and tools use them to create new networks and communities. The most profound change, however, pertains to the capacity that enables organizations to shape their environments: it is not their coercive power, normative high ground, or status as role models, but the ability to connect and recombine. Associations and intermediaries are the organizational forms that bring together and facilitate contacts with other organizations/entities, and, we show, are the most active in combining mechanisms of influence. Relational skills—the ability to connect and enroll—are at the heart of this institutional transformation. It is not the makers, but those who build bridges, that frame the debate over social impact (Korff, Oberg, and Powell, 2014).

In table 2 below, we sharpen our contrast of the mechanisms of early institutionalism and these current arguments. Whereas coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures operate to facilitate convergence of a field around existing sets of shared values and practices, mechanisms of proto-institutionalization catalyze the initial formation of standards. Proselytizing detaches ideas and practices from their original bailiwick and makes them generally accessible; convening provides room for negotiation on how to re-assemble disparate ideas into novel or semi-coherent bundles; and strengthening encourages the implementation of particular bundles among recipient organizations. Taken together, these activities engage formerly distant organizations in a new agenda. Such mobilization empowers new types of entities—foundations, intermediaries, movements, and blogs—to take an active part in proto-institutionalization.

--------- Table 2 here ---------

Convergence on a new set of beliefs and practices is by no means inevitable. Just as the mechanisms above can foster institutionalization, they can, if distorted or weak, also obstruct the formation of relations and impede recognition. For example, proselytizers that too aggressively push their own agenda and promote dubious practices may be considered hustlers who should be taken with a dose of salt. The presence of "snake oil peddlers" can retard trust if it becomes difficult to identify legitimate contributions amid the cacophony of proposals. As a result, rather than being open to unfamiliar voices, organizations may refocus on their original orientations, retreating to their home field. Convening, too, may have the unintended consequence of re-creating demarcations, even absent any agentic intent. Safe spaces that turn into enclaves provide protection to communities of organizations at odds with their larger institutional environment (Friedman, 2011). When convening produces such enclaves, as opposed to bridging social worlds, it results in greater fragmentation.

Strengthening helps install bundles of concepts in recipient organizations, thereby implementing and solidifying practices. Efforts to encourage the adoption of new approaches can easily take on a transactional character, however. Rather than implementing practices because their utility is recognized, such framing may make recipients interpret their adoption behavior as a service they are providing and for which they are compensated by the strengthener, irrespective of actual outcomes. They follow rules and blueprints without actually appropriating an approach or developing it further.

Our observations depart from recent ideas about purposeful institutional change at the hand of muscular institutional entrepreneurs that deploy different logics to disrupt fields. Instead, our view is more attuned with long-standing interpretations of organizations acting in a relational space—the field—with strategies and approaches shaped by their structural position. Old mechanisms of influence do not disappear, but alongside them we observe new forms of relational influence. The ability to convene and strengthen, in particular, derives from an organization's ties with its peers. Of course, organizations can actively engage in building connections. In fact, the web, and especially hyperlink creation, provides new opportunities for organizations to establish ties. We offer a perspective that attends —both conceptually and methodologically— to the digital landscape in which much contemporary organizational action is taking place.

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Table 1 – Sample composition

		Nonprofit		Other		International		National	
Organizational form	count	count	percent	count	percent	count	percent	count	percent
Association	40	40	11%			6	2%	34	9%
Blogs & Publisher	12			12	3%			12	3%
Business	36			36	10%			36	10%
Foundation	50	50	14%					50	14%
Government & IGO	31			31	8%	31	8%		
INGO	17			17	5%	17	5%		
Intermediary & Program	61	61	17%			12	3%	49	13%
Movement & Conference	14	14	4%			1	0%	13	4%
Operating Charity	13	13	4%			2	1%	11	3%
Professional Service	47	47	13%			5	1%	42	11%
Public Research	34			34	9%	2	1%	32	9%
Publication	14			14	4%			14	4%
Total	369	225	61%	144	39%	76	21%	293	79%

Table 2 – Expanding the institutional toolkit

		PROTO-INSTUTIONALIZATION Exploration and Construction			ISOMORPHISM Convergence and Settlement		
Conceptual	Mechanisms	Proselytize	Convene	Strengthen	Coercive	Normative	Mimetic
	Basis of order	Broadcast	Round table	Retrofit	Regulatory sanctions	Moral authority	Cognitive schema
	Key Activities	Publicize and champion information and tools	Set agendas, Resolve conflicts	Build capacity, Harmonize practice	Create rules and policies	Draw on professional expertise	Observe successful peers
Empirical	Indicators	Seminars, Webinars, Reports	Networks, Conferences, Meetings	Grants, Infra-structure, Protocols	Rules, Laws	Standards, Certification	Taken for granted routines, Scripts
	Typical organizations	Consultants, Media, Bloggers, Standards creators	Associations, Foundations, INGOs	Foundations, Funders, Consultants	Government, Regulatory authorities, Powerful organizations	Professions, Universities	High status organizations

Figure 1: Circular network graph grouped by organizational forms

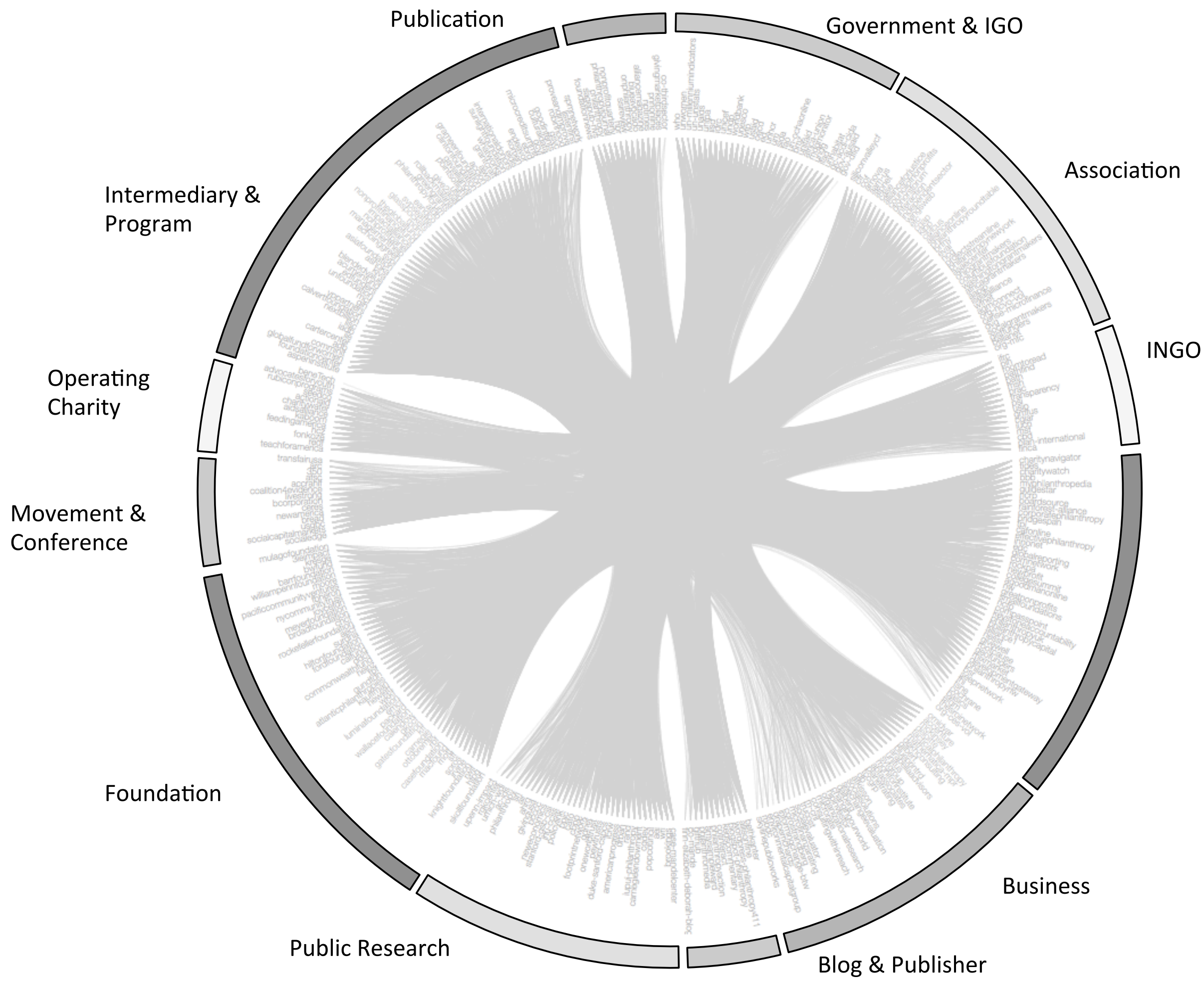

Figure 2a: Ideal-type proselytizer

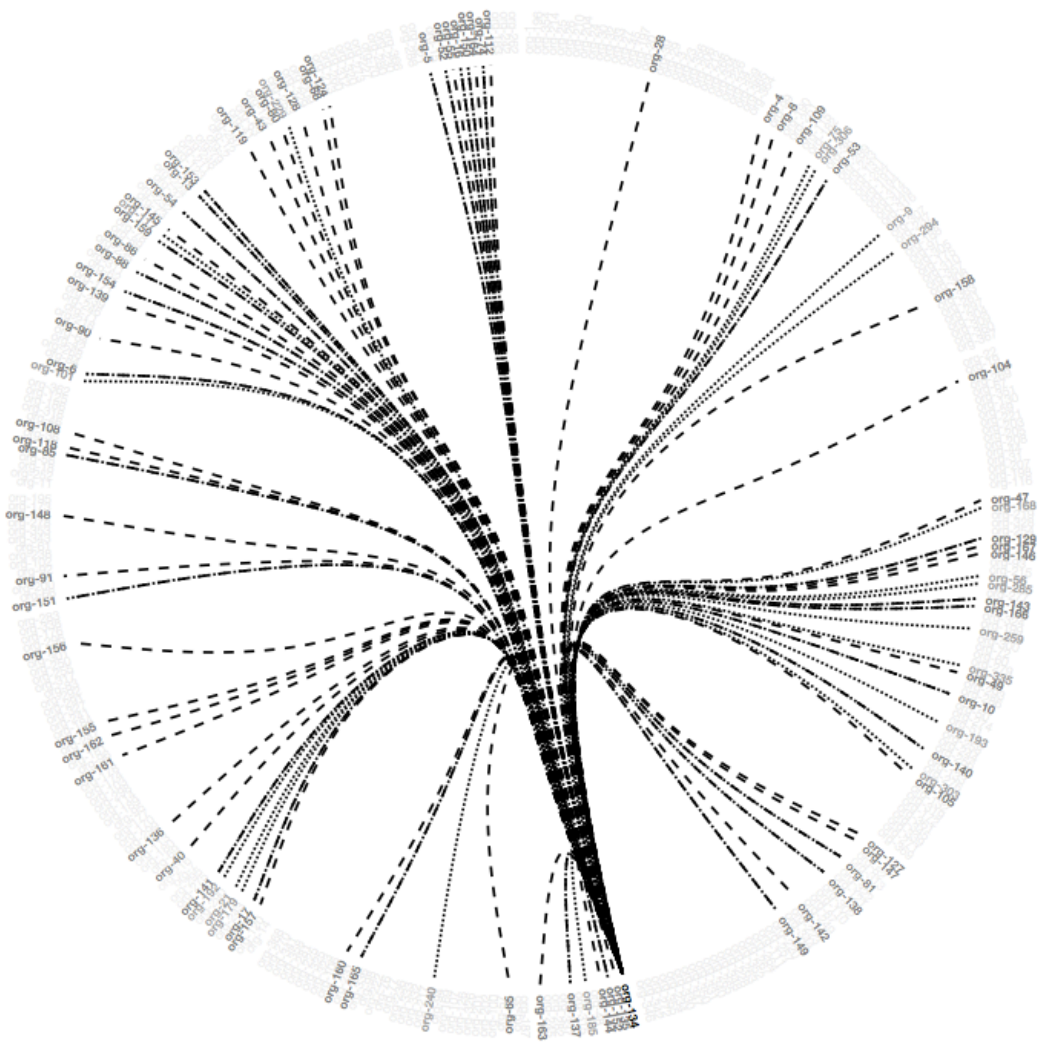

Figure 2b: Ideal-type convener

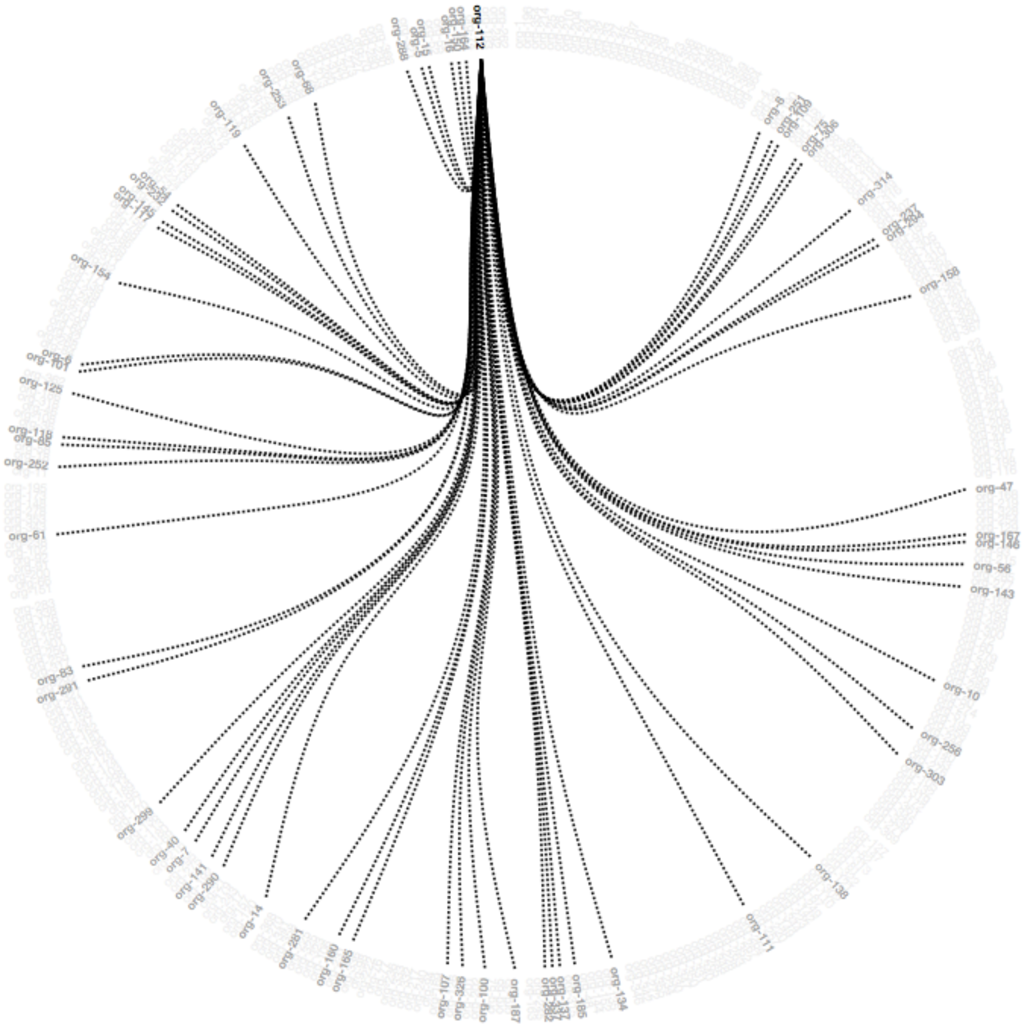

Figure 2c: Ideal-type strengthener

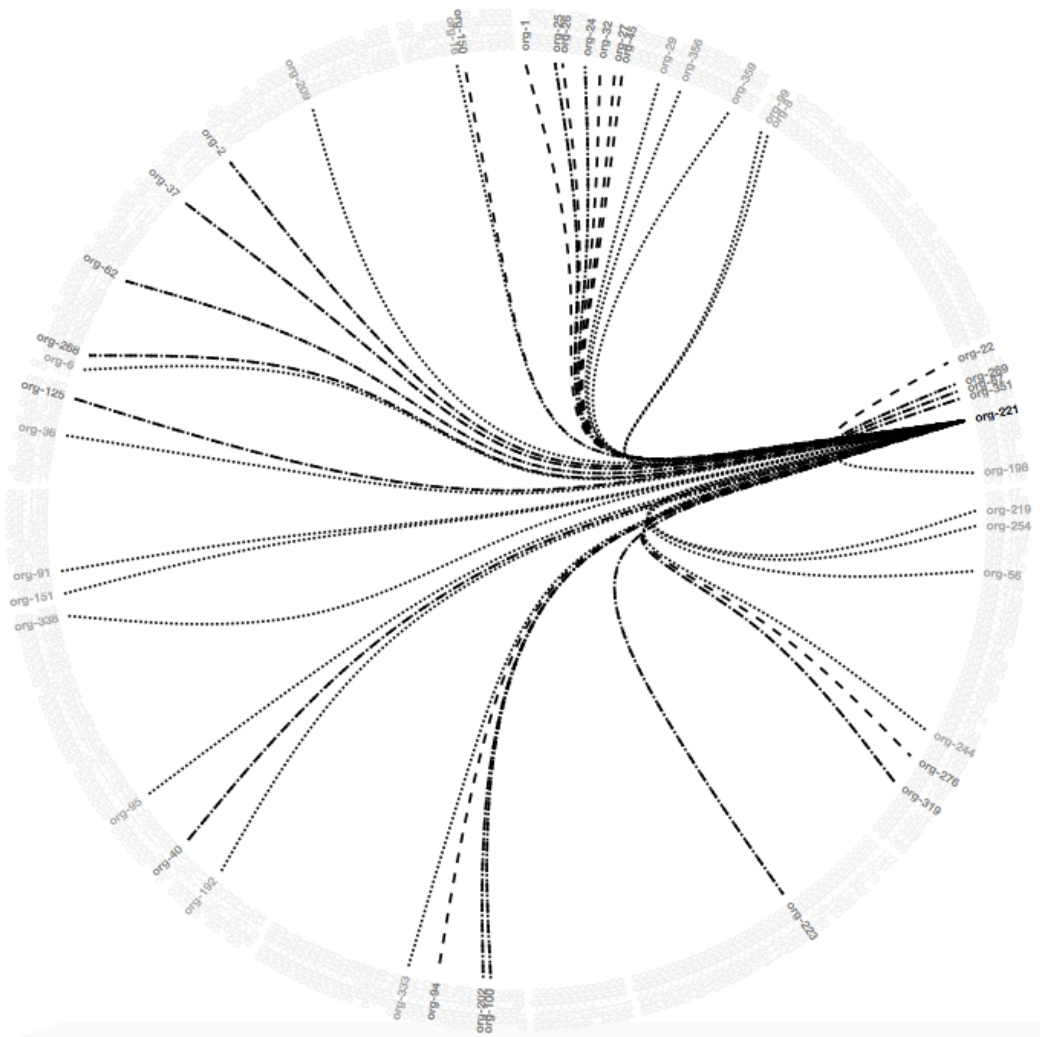

Figure 3: Venn diagram of mechanism combinations

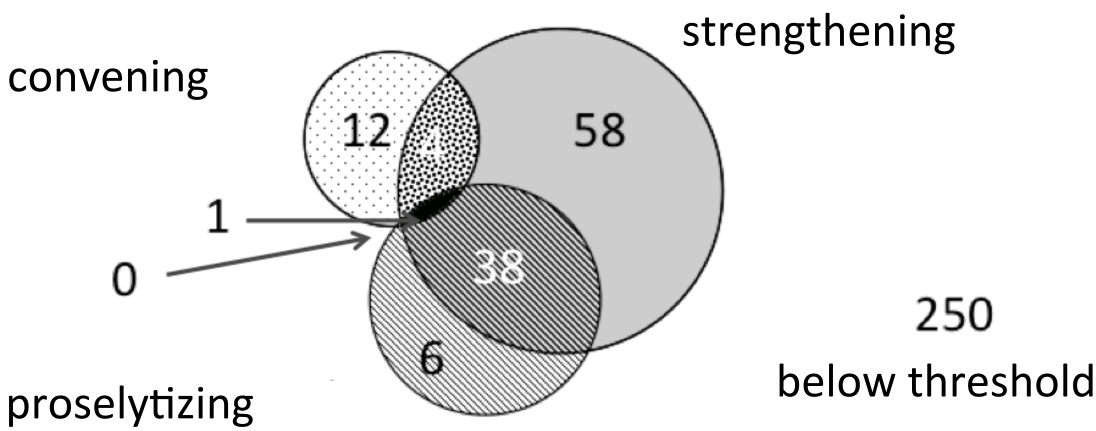

Figure 4a: Give Well

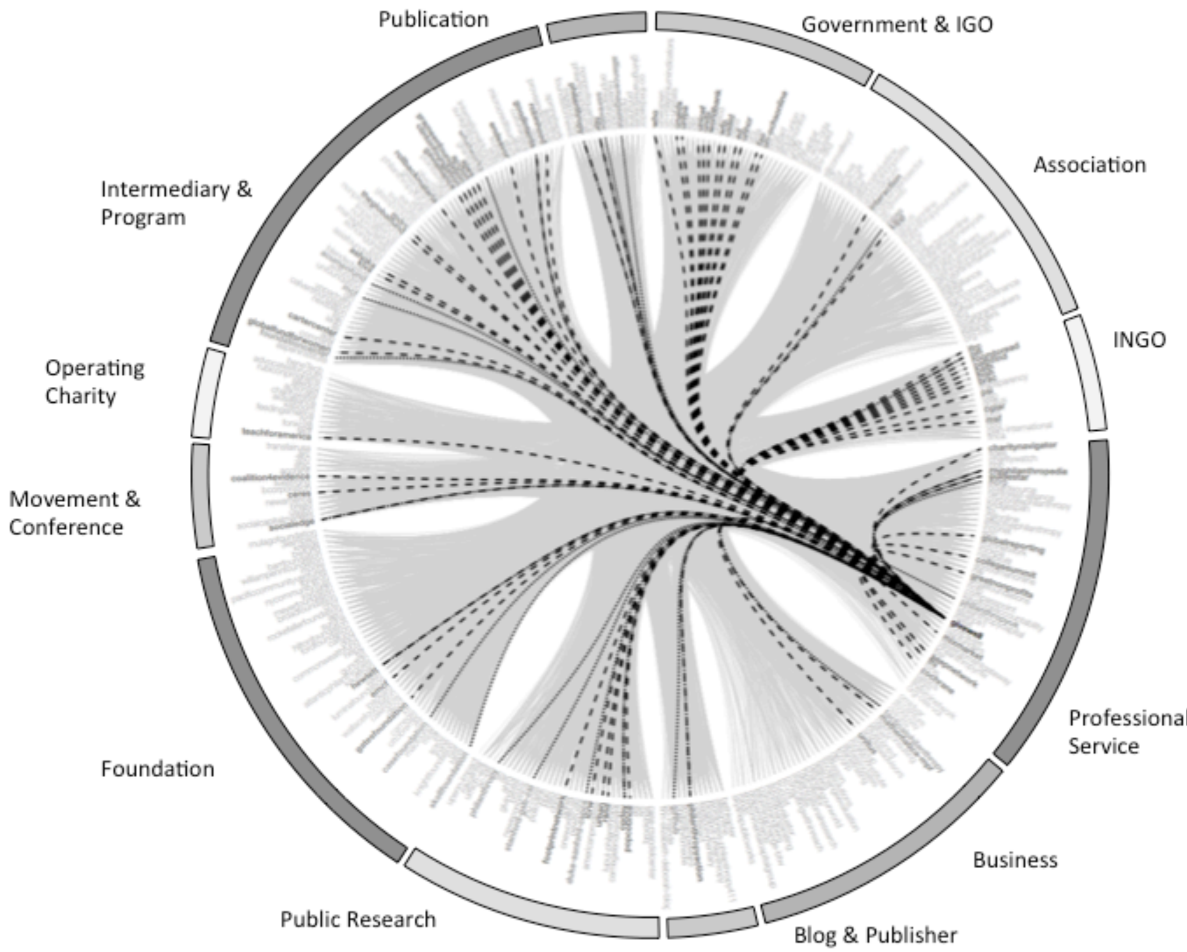

Figure 4b: UNICEF

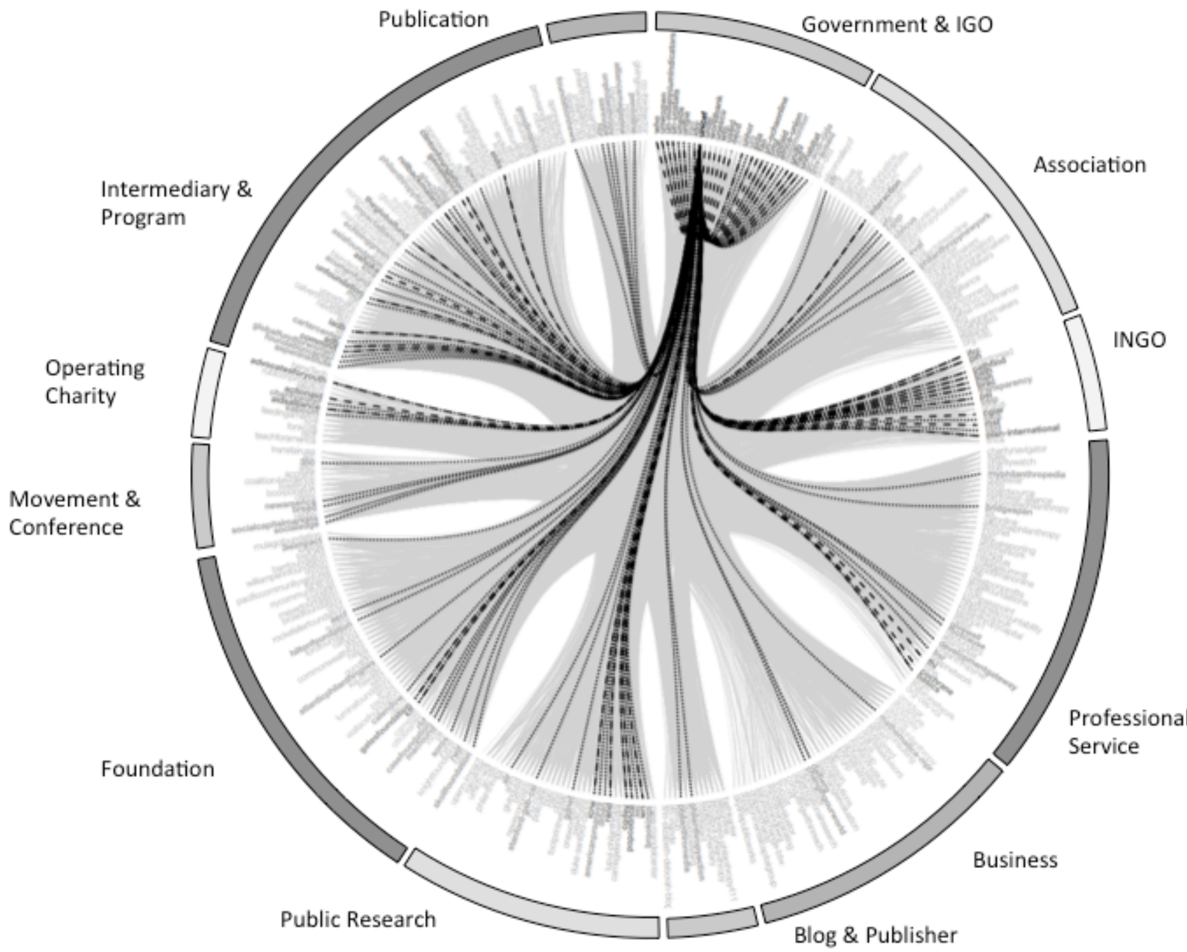

Figure 4c: Hewlett

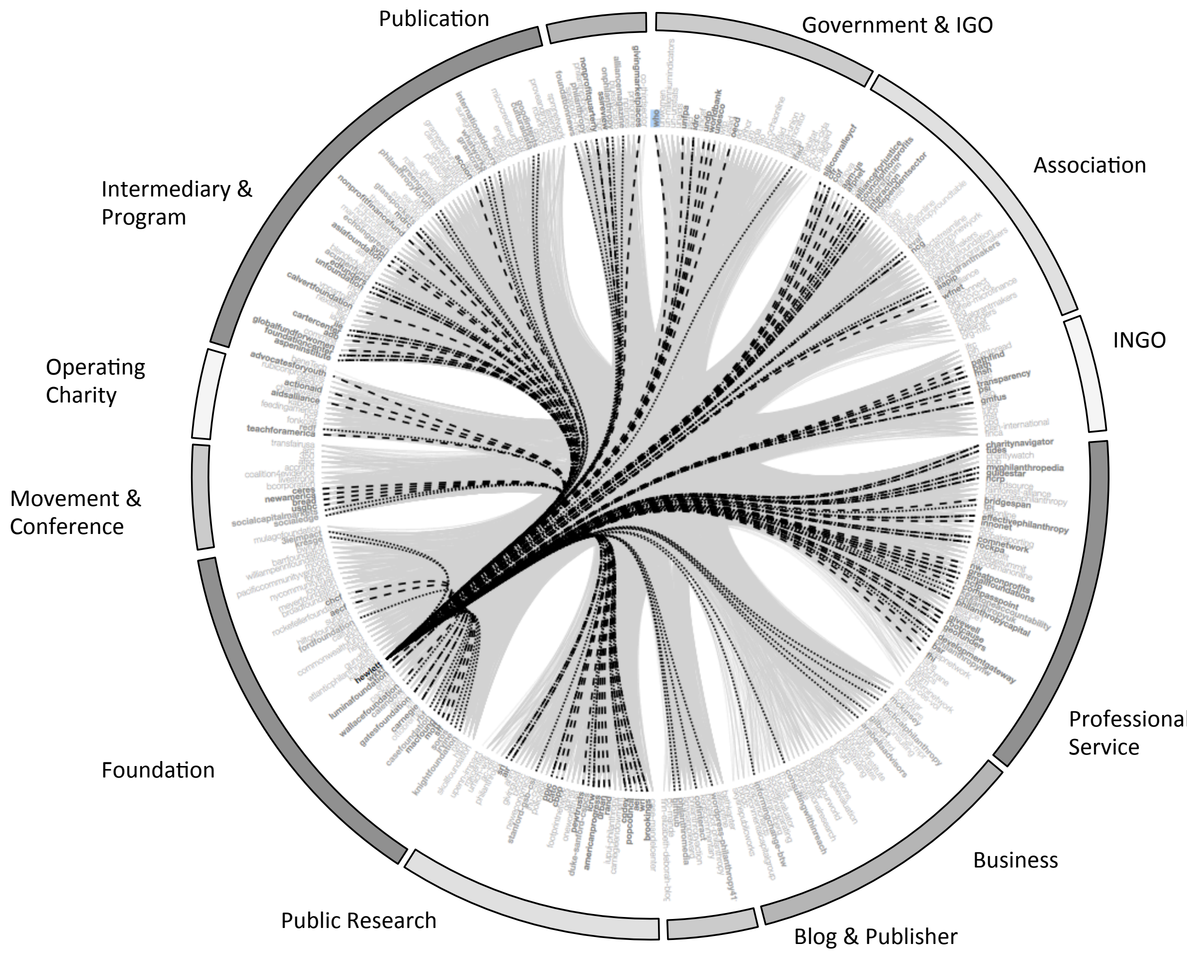

Figure 4d: Acumen

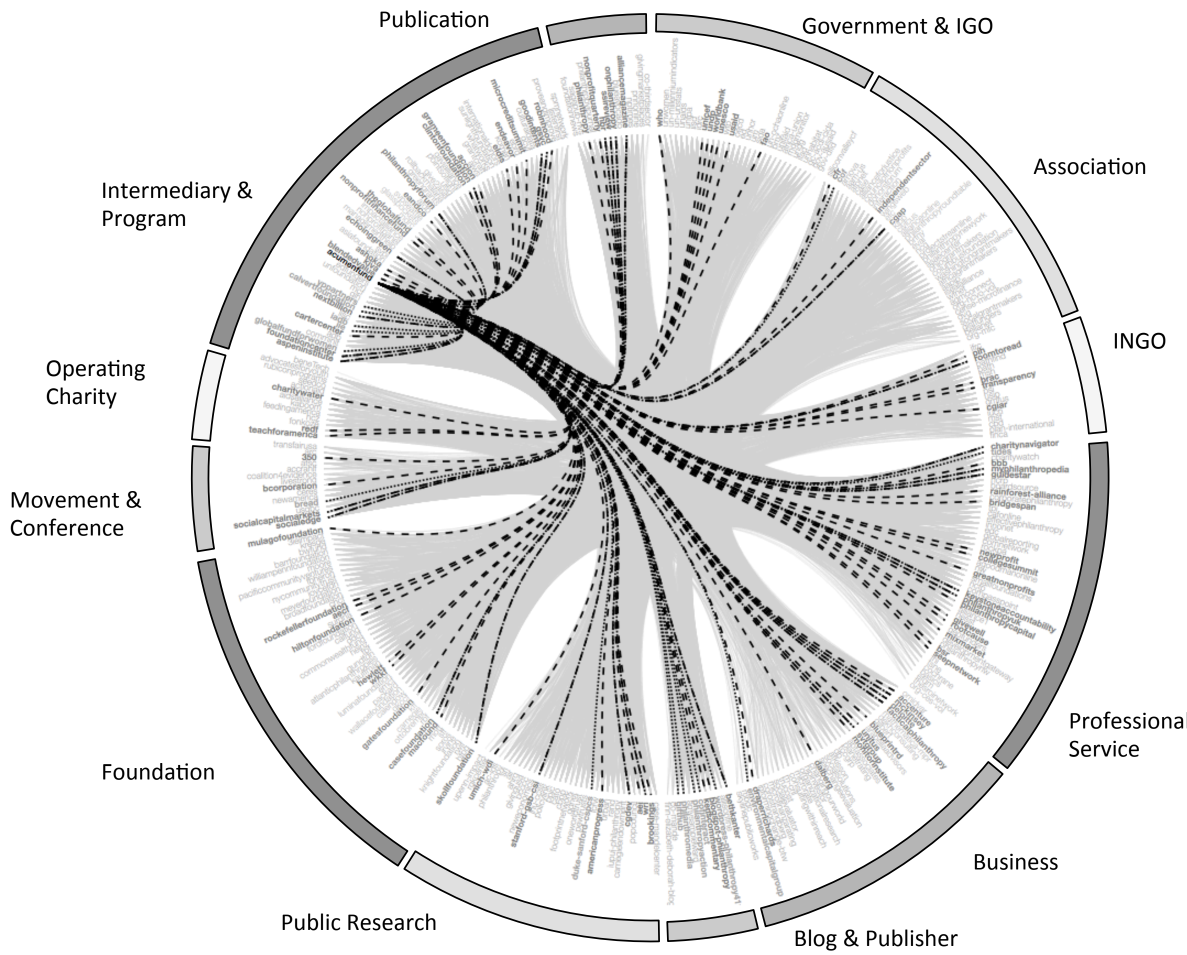

Figure 5: Form and mechanisms