

## ***The Net Works: Prospects for Advocacy and Mobilization Online***

*By Rob Stuart & Jed Miller, the E-Volve Foundation*

In just five years, the Internet has changed from a useful tool to a trusted venue for news, information and even civic participation. What began as a sub-culture of technology professionals is now supplanting many of the basic mechanisms of communication, commerce and commentary in mainstream culture. One critical result of this trend is the emergence of a new citizen audience for political information, one that values direct access, immediate opportunities, and the power to customize and even create its options for learning and taking action.

While some sectors of the American population are not online in as high proportions as others due to socio-economic opportunity, geography or infrastructure, overall adoption of the Internet in the United States continues to increase across all groups, and the reasons people use the Internet continue to grow in number and diversity. According to a Summer 2003 Nielsen-NetRatings survey, an estimated 144 million adults 18 or older have been online in the last 30 days, almost as high as the estimated 150 million registered U.S. voters, and almost 40% higher than the voter turnout in the 2000 presidential election. The Internet is increasingly the first source of information and news for the American public.<sup>1</sup>

As the new information economy gives more autonomy to consumers, donors and activists alike, society's decentralized structure challenges traditional assumptions about membership in advocacy organizations. Recent trends in online organizing suggest that organizations can galvanize large constituencies by empowering individuals to take the lead, as recruiters, organizers and solo actors. These new models for social change action offer a new vision for social change organizations and political campaigns: Instead of coordinating action from a centralized organization and relying on supported from member contributions, groups can now use technology to facilitate decentralized mobilization, supporting members whose main contribution is action itself.

### ***Old vs. New***

Membership organizations have developed sophisticated practices to inform, engage and retain members over time. Quarterly newsletters, direct mail and annual fundraising drives demand a significant percentage of organizational resources and have spawned entire job specializations and related consulting practices. These practices are rooted in communications technology: print, mail, phone and limited in-person contact. These practices are also rooted in traditional assumptions about organizing and membership development.

Though some pioneering campaigns and groups have shown that effective online mobilization is possible and powerful, most social change organizations have been slower to evolve. Groups are clinging to outmoded tools like direct mail marketing and cumbersome perennial publishing cycles. Another trend is for groups to invest in modern electronic tools which end up implemented as electronic substitutes for old style, "top-down" communications. While these methods can save organizations money, they are not a prescription for effectively engaging, recruiting and catalyzing people.

Using Internet tools, organizers can catalyze social networks already in place, instead of building new lists from scratch. Internet organizing also fosters the agency of individual citizens, by passing more tools for activism into their own hands.

For most organizations, donations are the core of the membership strategy and each member's primary form of involvement. Organizations can now launch new models of member engagement which mobilize individuals to take up the cause in direct, cost-efficient ways, becoming actors on their own terms and organizers of further action, rather than passive underwriters of eventual action by paid staff. Internet organizing tools pass the means to create, advocate, protest, reach out and broadcast directly into members' hands. Organizations gain a widespread action force at a fraction of traditional infrastructure costs. Individuals gain an experience far more engrossing than check-writing and far more rewarding for anyone who values personal action in the quest for social change.

### ***Success Stories***

A handful of Internet-savvy organizations have gotten the message, and these pioneers are now mobilizing tens of thousands of people in support of environmental protection, peace and their chosen presidential candidates.

#### *Heritage Forests*

In the year 2000, even as unbridled hype about the Internet gave way the harsh realities of the dot-com bust, an online campaign at OurForests.org demonstrated the enduring potential of the Internet as a medium for organizing.

The Heritage Forests Campaign used OurForests.org to collect and deliver citizen comments to public officials on a draft of the Roadless Area Conservation Rule to govern the use of National Forests. An online advertising campaign drove people to the OurForests.org site and gathered 180,000 comments there in just three months. The cost of the online effort was \$1.11 per comment. At the same

time, a direct mail campaign generated about 121,000 comments, at a final cost of approximately \$20 per comment.

Dollars-per-comment figures don't tell the whole story, however. Online campaigning offers three distinct advantages over other organizing methods. The first is speed: messages are delivered in minutes, not days. The second is low marginal cost: it takes very little more effort or technology to send a message to 1,000 people or 100,000 people. The third is probably the most important: a well-run online campaign yields the valuable long-term asset of ongoing relationships with large numbers of closely-engaged activists. The 300,000 people in the OurForests database remain a tremendous asset in implementing and defending the Roadless policy.

### *Howard Dean Campaign*

In his meteoric rise to front-runner status, presidential candidate Howard Dean demonstrated that an electronically-enabled constituency can raise money, awareness and its own membership through the powerful tools of self-organization. The Dean campaign took its early lead in the 2004 election cycle thanks mostly to the success of its Internet-based campaign techniques.

In just nine months, the Dean campaign found and mobilized a national constituency of more than a 600,000 supporters. This breakaway network owed its existence largely to MeetUp.com, a web service that enables like-minded citizens to connect online in order to organize and meet in person. According to The New York Times, the initiative had drawn 55,000 people in 250 local communities by summer 2003.<sup>2</sup> "Meetups" are created by the participants; though the central campaign continues to promote, encourage and support the local gatherings, the momentum comes from the local enthusiasts who create and "host" each event.

The Dean Campaign stunned the world and rewrote the playbook for the 2004 campaign by raising nearly 3 million dollars online in the space of one week, relying largely on small donations averaging \$75. Dean went on to raise more than \$40 million, mostly in small online contributions.

Dean's competitors scrambled to understand and apply his lessons strategically. Nearly every Democratic contender re-modeled their Internet outreach. General Wesley Clark entered the race with a sophisticated strategy already in place online. In early 2004, the Republican Party rebuilt and relaunched the GOP.com site, "to empower like-minded Americans at the grassroots level while motivating them to become active participants in the political process."

As the initial campaign contests approached in Iowa and New Hampshire, the Dean organization was not able to translate its success with distributed mobilization into coordinated outreach and get-out-the-vote efforts on the ground. The fledgling toolset that created hundreds of small "Meetups" and millions of dollars in Internet donations did not offer immediate solutions to the traditional challenges of the last-minute on-the-ground campaign.

Whatever his political fate, Howard Dean re-shaped the campaigning process. He will be seen as the breakthrough campaigner online just as John F. Kennedy was with his use of television and both Barry Goldwater and George McGovern were for their direct mail fund-raising." <sup>3</sup>

### *MoveOn.org*

With massive initiatives opposing the Clinton impeachment and the war on Iraq, MoveOn.org has proven that the new lever of social change is not the ballot box, but the inbox of your email program.

Using a few home-grown web tools, MoveOn.org recruits, trains and empowers its "members" to put their own energy into specific, usually time-sensitive, tasks like petitions and targeted contributions. MoveOn.org's basic recruiting tool is email forwarding. As friends and colleagues have told each other via email about MoveOn.org campaigns, the group's database of email addresses has swelled to more than 2 million members.

From a marketer's perspective, it is always better to have issue messages come from a relative or a colleague than from a faceless organization. Like Tom Sawyer painting his fence, the savvy Internet organizer deploys a group to do the work that traditionally falls to centralized staffs and organizations. With only seven paid staffers, MoveOn.org has repeatedly organized events exponentially beyond what their organizational capacity could allow, capitalizing on existing relationships among current activists and new recruits. In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Democratic organizer Simon Rosenberg praised MoveOn.org because "they ask people to do things. ... They treat their supporters like they are important people and not just donors." <sup>4</sup>

MoveOn.org has also had unprecedented success sparking local action, including community rallies, large-scale anti-war protests and a huge influx of submissions to its recent "Bush in 30 Seconds" ad contest.

For the ad contest, MoveOn.org invited people to develop and submit 30 second videos critical of the Bush Administration. The initial contest judging was done by more than 100,000 online viewers, whose ratings allowed the favorite ads to "emerge." The top-rated ad "Child's Pay" also won top marks from a panel of

pundits and filmmakers. With member funds collected online, MoveOn.org was able to air the winning ad alongside the President's State of the Union Address.

Though unsuccessful in halting the U.S. invasion of Iraq or securing the Democratic nomination, the respective efforts of MoveOn.org and Howard Dean show how networks of people can be gathered and mobilized online more quickly than was previously thought possible. The Internet challenges conventional issue advocacy organizational structures. To deploy technology successfully in the cause of social change, leaders of campaigns must embrace its power to facilitate connections, not only to create and control them. When motivated constituents and potential recruits can interact with an issue on their own terms, the issue and the sponsoring organization both benefit.

While a central organization may develop the tools and action prompts, the Internet should be used to empower individuals or groups to perform many of the tasks associated with a centralized staff, reducing overhead and maximizing efficiency at savvy organizations. Issue-oriented groups and political campaigns committed to inspiring an active citizenry should develop Internet organizing tools and techniques that facilitate independent individual actions, rather than anchoring themselves at the center of all citizen response. Relying on Internet infrastructure, Network-driven online advocacy organizations have the potential to effectively mobilize citizens on social causes across their towns, the country or around the globe.

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### *About the Authors*

Rob Stuart is the Senior Vice President of @dvocacy, Inc., an online political advertising company and the founder of the E-Volve Foundation, a new online capacity building initiative. He acts a senior advisor to MoveOn.org, Oceana, Environment2004.org and several other political and philanthropic organizations on Internet strategy and constituency outreach. Over the last twenty years, Rob has worked in the political and philanthropic sector establishing organizations and programs to increase organizational effectiveness and civic participation through the strategic use of technology. He is an accomplished advocate and community leader and serves on the boards of numerous non-profit organizations.

Jed Miller is a director at the New York non-profit Web Lab, where he oversees projects for Small Group Dialogues (SGD), a tool to create online discussions of

unprecedented structure and quality. In 2002, SGD was used in the "Listening to the City" citizen summit on rebuilding the World Trade Center site, held in partnership with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. Jed also acts as web editor for The New York Times Institutes for Journalists, a project of The NYT Company Foundation. He was interactive editor at NYTimes.com, where he managed all reader forums and also created the web discussions for the Pulitzer-winning 2000 series on race in America.

The E-Volve Foundation is a strategic think-tank that works with non-profits, foundations and public interest groups to create definitive models for technology-enabled organizing. E-Volve's goal is to make dynamic online connections between issues, constituents and organizations more prevalent. E-Volve supports new technologies to present information, galvanize engagement and tap directly into citizen's social networks. E-Volve has launched a small number of strategic partnerships and is conducting a series of innovation projects, all built on replicable best practices for technology-enabled organizing.

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<sup>1</sup> "Counting on the Internet." Pew Internet & American Life Project. December 29, 2002. [www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org).

<sup>2</sup> Nagourney, Adam. "Howard Dean, Web Master." The New York Times July 6, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Dionne, E.J. "Dean Innovates Fund Raising for Democrats." The Charlotte Observer July 10, 2003

<sup>4</sup> Schneider, William. "Connecting With the Wired Left." National Journal/The Atlantic July 9, 2003