
Power to the Edges: Trends and Opportunities in Online Civic Engagement

2005 Final Edition 1.0



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By:

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“Electronic democracy allows citizens to find one another directly, without phone trees or meetings of chapter organizations, and it amplifies their voices in the electronic storms of ‘smart mobs’ (masses summoned electronically) that it seems able to generate in a few hours. With cell phones and instant messaging, the time frame of a protest might soon be the nanosecond.”

—George Packer
“Smart Mobbing the War”
New York Magazine
9 March 2003

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Foreword

To Our New and Old Friends,

In 1995 the Rockefeller Family Fund made a small grant to the Washington Environmental Action Voters Effort (WEAVE) to match environmental groups membership lists with the statewide voter registration rolls. What was then a new and transformative use of technology, matching lists to more strategically target registration and voter education activities, is rather tame by today's standards.

The emerging field of online democracy described in this paper has changed everything we thought was possible back ten years ago, or even suspected five years ago.

2003 and 2004 marked the convergence of youthful energy, fueled by a familiarity with a new generation of digital technology, and the political process. Consider Joshua Rosen, a young Oscar-winning film designer, whose first web site helped more than 270,000 citizens register to vote online at a cost of less than \$.20 each. Web sites have given way to blogs, podcasts and other web-based services that empower non-technical users to self-publish and participate in online discussions. Yet most nonprofit groups have yet to engage in these powerful new forms of civic engagement and organizing.

The future of civic engagement belongs to communities and organizations that can most effectively align online and offline strategies and activities, and that harness the passion of individual activists.

I invite you to be part of our growing E-Volve and PACE communities. Tell us what you are thinking about and what you're experiencing.

See you online!



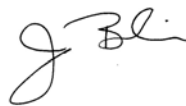
Rob Stuart
Co-Founder, President
The E-Volve Foundation

Dear Fellow Traveler,

By the fall of 2004 there was great buzz in the air about the dramatic influence of the Internet on the Presidential election campaign. Political pundits pondered—are we witnessing the transformation of democracy as we know it, with online voter registration, online campaign financing and online issue advocacy? Or is technology providing pathways for civic participation but not fundamentally changing the relationship between citizen and civic institutions? These are the kinds of questions that inspired ***PACE*** to commission ***Power to the Edges 1.0***.

Power to the Edges 1.0 is a snapshot of the current state of online democracy—it is a travel guide, first and foremost, dedicated to donors and foundation staff who are taking the journey or considering the journey of investing in online engagement efforts. This is a primer and also a work-in-progress; it is our 1.0 version. We officially and eagerly ask that you, the reader, contribute to creating our second edition, 2.0.

As a fellow traveler, please share your experience and offer your perspective on ways to harness the power of technology to the advantage of our shared intention: to inspire active citizenship and cultivate a healthy and vibrant democracy. You can post your comments by visiting the ***PACE*** website www.pacefunders.org or participating in our online discussion hosted by the E-volve Foundation at www.evolvefoundation.org.



Jill Blair
Executive Director
PACE - Philanthropy for Active Civic
Engagement

Acknowledgements

- Research assistant: Aaron Pava.
- Advisors and contributing editors: Jed Miller, Henri Poole, Dan Robinson
- We also thank those who took time to speak with us. A list of interviewees is included in the Appendix.

About the Authors

Jillaine Smith has held leadership positions in both nonprofits and foundations over the last two decades, supporting and tracking nonprofit use of the Internet. As a certified organizational development consultant (Georgetown University, 2003), she currently helps organizations assess, build and sustain the readiness to implement their communications and programmatic initiatives. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Communications (UC San Diego, 1982), and is currently pursuing accreditation through the Coaches Training Institute as a leadership coach. Jillaine has served on several nonprofit boards, and is board chair of iEARN-US: the International Education And Resource Network. www.jillainesmith.com.

Martin Kearns has many years' experience working in politics and the environment; he is currently Executive Director of Green Media Toolshed (GMT), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping the environmental movement communicate more effectively. Marty is an emerging leader in the exploration of "network-centric advocacy" and runs a blog on this topic at www.network-centricadvocacy.net. Kearns holds a Bachelor degree in Political Science from LeMoyne College and a Masters degree in Environmental Studies from Yale.

Allison Fine had the privilege of joining the E-Volve team in 2004 and has been sprinting to catch up with this extraordinary movement ever since. Prior to her engagement at E-Volve, Ms. Fine was the Founder of Innovation Network, Inc. (InnoNet) and served as Executive Director and President from 1992-2004. She has written numerous articles and reports for publication in such journals as *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *NIDR Forum*, and *Foundation News and Commentary*, and has co-authored studies for the Aspen Institute Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Ms. Fine has a Masters in public administration from New York University and a Bachelor of Arts in political science and history from Vanderbilt University.

About the Partners

PACE – **Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement** is an emerging community of philanthropy comprised of donors and grantmakers who share concern about the condition of democracy in the United States and a belief that philanthropy has the power to improve that condition by supporting pathways to participation. The members of the board of ***PACE*** believe that broad and informed public participation is the bedrock of a free, democratic and civil society. The ***PACE*** mission is to inspire interest, understanding and investment in civic engagement.

PACE supports and nurtures collective reflection among donors and grantmakers and encourages vigorous debate and knowledge development about effective methods for strengthening democratic practice in communities across the nation.

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Staffing for ***PACE*** is provided by BTW Consultants – *informing change* (www.informingchange.com), a Berkeley, California firm specializing in organizational development, planning, and program evaluation for the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors.

The E-Volve Foundation was founded in 2002 by Rob Stuart and Dan Robinson. **E-Volve** represents a unique presence in the grantmaking and technology communities; a focal point for resources and know-how to encourage citizen action through the use of next generation technologies.

The mission of **The E-Volve Foundation** is to identify, support and promote open source technology efforts that provide opportunities for people to participate in democratic processes.

We are capitalizing on the remarkable and dizzying improvements in technology by finding great ideas for communities who have previously not engaged online, and to enable people to participate in discussions about issues, to organize, communicate with one another, join together with a common voice, and work towards a cleaner, healthier, more just world.

E-Volve's efforts focus on several activities. We:

- Raise money to provide seed grants for online democracy efforts.
- Provide technical advice and assistance to current and prospective grantees.
- Connect members of our network to one another
- Provide information and analysis on the state and future direction of online democracy
- Sponsor gatherings with great thinkers to discuss new ideas that that we haven't even imagined yet!

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Executive Summary

The age of connectivity brought about by the Internet and other digital information technologies is reshaping how Americans do business, obtain news and information about the world, engage in social functions, shop, express their creativity, and engage in community life.

This report provides an overview of the state of online democracy; what it is, where it is headed, and what it means for activists and those who support them. In preparing this report, we conducted a review of relevant literature, monitored current online discussions on related topics, and conducted in-depth interviews with leaders in the fields of online technologies, nonprofit capacity building, citizen engagement and social networks. This effort is intended to be a snapshot in time, not the ultimate guide, and to serve as a jumping off point for further discussions to occur online about how these tools and the culture of online civic engagement can be further developed and scaled for broader, deeper and more lasting citizen action.

Traditional ways of engaging civically are coming to an end. For example:

- Large numbers of people can be mobilized within hours—even minutes—to donate, volunteer, protest, call Congress, boycott—all at little or no cost.
- Individuals are by-passing the work of established parties and organizations with their self-generated campaigns.
- Individuals, groups and organizations are generating their own news without the benefit of mainstream media.

For the purposes of this report, we use four meta categories to describe the kinds of activities included in online civic engagement.

- **Collaboration:** many people working together on a single activity, effort or project. Types of technology include wikis, and Yahoo groups discussion boards.
- **Communication:** talking with and among constituents. Examples include email, chat rooms, listservs, text messaging using cell phones, and instant messaging.
- **New media/Content development:** generating and disseminating original news. Examples include web sites, web logs (blogs), newsletters, RSS (news syndication software), and podcasting (regular audio programming delivered via the Internet to an iPod or other MP3 player).
- **Organizing/Collective Action:** coordinating the activities of large numbers of activists and supporters. Examples include smart mobs, meet-ups, virtual phone banks, online petitions, and volunteer management databases.

Online activism does not preclude or even dilute the need for “on land” activism, nor does it change the ultimate ends of citizen engagement, but it does require a change in culture for organizations to successfully engage in it. In particular, nonprofit organizers must be aware of the impact that online technology has in three main areas: fundraising, targeted communications, and field management.

The implications for practitioners are significant and challenging. Organizations must:

1. Nimblely jump on to the fast-moving wave of opportunities that the Internet both delivers and makes possible.
2. Integrate online activities with offline.

3. Leverage extended networks of activists, friends and sympathizers across issues areas.
4. Lead using a new set of facilitative skills.

The report concludes with a series of findings and recommendations of the ways that organizations, individuals and philanthropy need to adapt and change to keep pace with the continuing dizzying changes occurring technologically. In order for online democracy to flourish and become the backbone for a renaissance in civic participation, philanthropy and nonprofits must also keep pace by investing in networks of organizations and people that can best take advantage of this new environment, while supporting new training, leadership and planning skills.

Definitions

Civic engagement refers to activities by which people participate in civic, community and political life and by doing so express their commitment to community. Such activities include volunteering, voting, community organizing, political advocacy, giving and other acts that demonstrate a commitment to participate in and contribute to the improvement of one's community, region, nation and the world.

Online citizen engagement refers to the development and use of Internet-based and other digital tools, resources and spaces through which people can learn about and practice civic engagement.



Introduction

The age of connectivity is reshaping America, changing the landscape of commerce, manufacturing and society... and quite possibly democracy itself. Email, web sites, instant messaging and blogging as well as music sharing, voice over Internet and text messaging over cell phones are all restructuring the way individuals, companies and nonprofits interact with each other and with their communities. For example,

- Online businesses like Orbitz, Travelocity and Cheapfares.com are moving the traditional travel agency towards obsolescence.
- Dinner party invitations are sent via Evite not Hallmark.
- Blind dates are arranged through text messaging on cell phones.
- Google has become a verb and replaces trips to the library.
- Shopping increasingly happens online instead of in malls.
- Musicians bypass record labels and place their music directly online; listeners bypass retail music stores and create their own music CDs through such services as iTunes.

These changes also affect the field of civic engagement as organizations adapt these new tactics to their work. Large numbers of people are being mobilized within hours—sometimes minutes—not just to donate, but to volunteer, to protest, to write to congress, to register to vote, to boycott – all at little or no cost. Individuals are by-passing the work of established parties and organizations with their own online campaigns. Individuals, groups and organizations are generating their own news without the benefit of mainstream media.

Traditional ways of doing business are coming to an end. For those concerned with building an active citizenry, these changes need to be understood and harnessed.

The Purpose of this Report

This report describes for nonprofits and the foundations that support them what this new field of online engagement is, how this changing landscape challenges traditional models of civic engagement, yet opens up new opportunities to design, deliver and fund efforts to encourage citizens to participate in democracy.

We review trends in the development of the Internet and its use in civic engagement efforts, and what this means for those who support such efforts. We close with an overview of opportunities to improve, accelerate, leverage and direct the positive trends in civic engagement.

This paper draws on a review of recent articles, studies and online discussions as well as in-depth interviews with 19 leaders in the fields of online technologies, nonprofit capacity building, citizen engagement and

social networks. If there is an abundance of examples from the 2003-2004 U.S. presidential campaign season in this report, it is because this period exemplified a rush of applications that also apply to other forms of civic engagement. The appendices include a list of people interviewed, a short bibliography and a glossary of relevant terminology.

YOUR FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT

We hope this report serves as a jumping off point for further discussions about how these tools and the culture of online civic engagement can be further developed and scaled for broader, deeper and more lasting citizen action.

In any field that is exploding in practice and potential, often more questions are raised than answered. We have highlighted questions at the end of the report that deserve further attention. We invite you to join us in discussion of these issues and questions at www.evolvefoundation.org.

The Changing Landscape of Citizen Engagement

The December 26, 2004 tsunami that hit the communities encircling the Indian Ocean will be remembered as one of the world's worst natural disasters. It may also well be remembered as one of the earliest successful uses of the *entire continuum* of Internet and other communications tools to respond, to help, to grieve:

- Within 12 hours after the initial earthquake, individuals dispersed throughout the globe created SEA-EAT (the South-East Asia Earthquake And Tsunami web site and blog) in order to coordinate the tremendous amount of news, information and reactions that were dominating web space. Two months after the disaster, SEA-EAT remains one of the top ten most visited humanitarian web sites.
- Weblogs ("blogs") served as the earliest reporting mechanisms letting the world read, see and hear the initial results of the disaster. They were also used to very quickly respond to the outpouring of support and grief.
- Within 10 days, *online* contributions from individual Americans matched the \$350 million pledge of the U.S. government; total online donations worldwide reached \$750 million by January 10th.
- Online, user-editable encyclopedias called wikis were created to document the event for posterity.
- Mainstream press incorporated eye-witness accounting through an online blog.
- Cell phones and "short message service" (SMS) or text messaging were used by citizen journalists to report on the aftermath of the tsunami from places without Internet



infrastructure. Using similar technology, the Alert Retrieval Cache was created for future disasters.

- Relief organizations—many reeling from the public scrutiny that followed donations made in response to the September 11 disaster in the U.S.—were much better positioned to use the Internet to communicate to donors how their donations were being used. The United Nations is planning an Internet-based system to allow the public to track the flow of donations from pledge to project.

The tsunami aftermath and other stories throughout this report illustrate the changing landscape of how people engage with their world—a relationship increasingly swayed by the power and potential of the Internet and other digital technologies.

STATE OF THE FIELD

In the face of a decades-long pattern of low voter turnout, declining membership in associations and drops in percentages of individual donations to political parties and political campaigns, it seemed an unlikely time for the beginning of a revolution. Yet that is what has occurred online in the past few years.

The time for change was ripe for many reasons, chief among them:

- The cost of technology and access continues to drop, and although a digital divide persists, it is closing and will continue to close over the next decade.¹ Internet usage continues to broaden both in terms of who is online as well as what they're doing online.
- The coming of age of a new generation of tech-savvy people has created a tipping point in the use of the Internet for commerce, conversations and group association.
- The “organization-centric” model that has traditionally dominated the civic engagement landscape has begun to show cracks. Often organizations serve as the primary intermediary through which citizen engagement occurs. The pressure that these organizations experience to build membership and revenue in order to sustain their activities competes with their ability to engage and listen to the very individuals they need in order to accomplish their mission.
- Individuals are tired of being talked *at* and only asked for funds by political parties and organizations. With the Internet's ability to create and sustain many-to-many conversations, more people are seeking *authentic* engagements and opportunities to be more fully a part of campaigns and causes, not just check writers or names on a membership list.
- People increasingly express a willingness and enthusiasm to connect online to others around an issue of mutual interest, with 84% of individual Internet users having joined at least one online

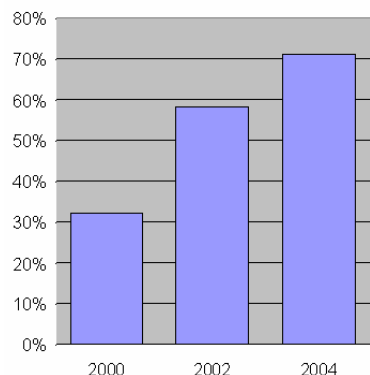
group. The rise of Friendster and other social networking sites demonstrate the interest that people have in becoming more connected with others across geographic, economic, racial and social divides.

- The growing popularity of open source software, and its increased application to online activism and citizen engagement, is a natural fit with the values and leveling effect of Internet-based organizing.

To better understand the implications these new approaches have for civic engagement organizations and those who support them, we will first examine Internet usage across several sectors, and provide an overview of the different approaches to online civic engagement.

Snapshot of Nonprofit IT Use

High speed access for nonprofits approaches universality:



The estimated overall average rate of Internet use among nonprofit employees increased from 33% in 2000 to 56% in 2004. Broadcast fax, online chat and text messaging also showed huge gains.²



While seemingly separate, we will show how three parallel tracks of Internet usage—nonprofit use, commercial use and individuals’ use—inform the future direction of civic engagement.

NONPROFIT INTERNET USE

Few national studies of nonprofit Internet use exist, although regional studies such as those conducted by the Bayer Center for Nonprofits (Pittsburgh, PA) and the Center for Nonprofit Management (Los Angeles, CA) show that technology and Internet use by nonprofits has grown steadily in the last ten years.³ A recent study conducted by the Council on Foundation’s Technology Affinity Group (TAG) indicates that foundations are in much the same boat as the organizations they support.⁴ The studies that do exist tend to focus more on *access* than on how the Internet is being used inside of organizations or what impact this use has on mission. Therefore, most of what we know about nonprofit Internet use is derived anecdotally from those working inside of nonprofits and those providing support to them.

Nonprofits⁵ started *actively* using the Internet with the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1994.⁶ Since that time, most nonprofit as well as foundation use of the Internet has focused primarily on supporting or improving *existing* ways of doing organizational business. For example, nonprofits use:

- Web sites as electronic versions of a print brochure or annual report;
- Email alerts and newsletters to augment or replace print communications or appeals to membership and the public;
- Write-your-Congressman appeals that use email instead of calls or hand-written letters; and,
- “Donate Now” buttons to collect donations online.

TAG’s recent report on their survey of foundation use of technology underscores this focus of Internet activities on *existing* practices:

“Today’s challenges continue to center around the use of electronic communications. However, the biggest challenge in April 2003 is to figure out how much more sophisticated uses of websites can streamline *existing* foundation operations and replace *existing* technology systems. For example, rather than building an informational website similar to a brochure, grantmakers are trying to figure how to provide applicants with online grant applications and provide donors with secure access to fund balances and statements.” [our emphasis]

Unfortunately, as Jason Lefkowitz, Manager of E-activism at Oceana, an environmental advocacy group, points out, even this use of technology to support more traditional activities is “not rationalized or brought together in any way.”⁷ And the surveys mentioned above support what technology support providers serving the sector know from experience: namely, neither

nonprofits nor the foundations that support them have high instances of planning to guide their technology and Internet use.

That said, we are beginning to see changes in how nonprofits think about and implement the Internet to engage their constituents. Robert Sherman, Program Director for Effective Citizenry for the Surdna Foundation, points out that the explosion of what technology can do is “resulting in a transition from static information, to some sort of interactivity, to now much more back and forth between the organization and its members.”⁸

For instance, when the assault weapons ban was about to expire, the National Rifle Association began to look for different ways to leverage use of their web site for advocacy purposes. “We dedicated an entire portion of our site to just that issue,” NRA’s Director of Grassroots Division, Glen Caroline told us. “It included an interactive quiz for press, streaming video, and allowed our members to get information directly from our site to contact media and lawmakers. Promoting this specific area of our site worked very well for us.”⁹

Online Organizing Manager Ruby Sinreich of Planned Parenthood Federation of America is also sensing a sea change in how staff members are seeing the power of the Internet. “It’s slowly seeping in, and we’re slowly integrating the Internet into our other organizing work,” she told us. “Howard Dean had a big impact on our organization. We saw him doing things online that had never been done before, and now, people have become more interested in what’s possible through the Internet.”¹⁰

COMMERCIAL SECTOR INTERNET USE

In the commercial sector, Internet use has evolved from supporting *traditional* practices (such as marketing and sales) to the creation of entirely *new* business models, increasing efficiencies in business development and costs, streamlining logistics, increasing productivity, and saving money. Those companies that have changed the most have also understood the power of the network that connects them internally, with suppliers and with customers:

- Every time a customer buys something at Wal-Mart, the scanner transmits the details of what, when and where of the purchase to central logistics, helping the company not only understand buying habits by region, but to deliver the appropriate products for the appropriate customer base to the appropriate geographical location.¹¹
- Holding no more than seven hours of inventory, Dell Computers makes computers more quickly and cheaply than any other company. Allowing consumers to customize their own computer system online, Dell can then take delivery of parts on an as-needed basis.¹²
- Transforming the relationship between the company and the consumer, a growing number of corporate web sites encourage consumers to provide feedback and even serve as “content police.” Readers write reviews of books on Amazon. eBay sellers are rated by buyers as to their trustworthiness.
- Apple Computer, which leverages new capabilities in bandwidth, storage and connectivity, recently sold its 200,000,000th (that’s two hundred millionth) song. Its service, iTunes, is revolutionizing the music industry, allowing consumers to design their own albums which are then offered to the broader consumer base—a variation of Amazon’s “readers who bought this book also bought...” Toyota is also experimenting with user-driven design for their automobile line.

“In each of these businesses, the consumers are also the producers of what they consume,” wrote Howard Rheingold in *Smart Mobs*. “The value of the market increases as more people use it, and the aggregate opinions of the users provide the measure of trust necessary for transactions and markets to flourish in cyberspace.”¹³

These *entirely new* business practices are made possible because of the Internet and the changes in network technologies that connect people to businesses, businesses to each other, and people to one another.

Webby Award Trends

Called “the Oscars of the Internet,” this annual competition honors the best online sites in a variety of categories. Reviewing the winners over the last ten years reveals an evolution of online usage:

- Find information (movies at IMDB, finance at Motley Fool; humor and satire at the Onion, voter information at CalVoter.org)
- Purchase products (Amazon, Etoys, PayPal)
- Donate (HungerSite’s one-click donations)
- Act (ActionNetwork, Act4Change)
- Find volunteer opportunities (VolunteerMatch)
- Share music (Napster, Kazaa)
- Organize friends (Evite)
- Customize news (GoogleNews, BBCNews)
- Seek and create alternative news (Alternet, Moveable Type, Wikipedia)



INDIVIDUALS' INTERNET USE

Quote

"My wife and I moved to our town three years ago, and we've been busy trying to raise two little ones. We hadn't been as involved as we would have liked... The Dean campaign was the impetus to jump in – and as a result we're meeting our neighbors, traveling to surrounding towns, marching in parades and fliering at local events. The end result is that for the first time we feel anchored in a community."¹⁴

– Rick Klau

Individual Internet usage in the United States has increased significantly since the first commercial web browser came out in 1994. By the middle of 2004, approximately 60 percent of all Americans were connected to the Internet. And how are they using it? Roughly fifty-seven percent of time spent online is devoted to email, instant messaging, or chat rooms, with the remaining 43 percent divided between game playing, surfing and shopping (in that order).¹⁵ Online shoppers jumped from one million in 2000 to 83 million just four years later.¹⁶

Researchers have also found that Americans increasingly derive satisfaction and a sense of community from their time online:

- 84 percent of Internet users have at one time or another contacted an online group.¹⁷
- 84 million have used the Internet to get political news or to participate in the 2004 campaigns.
- 38 million have sent email to government officials to influence policy decisions
- 36 million have joined online support groups¹⁸

A significant number of people are engaging in a variety of ways online, and doing so proactively and with satisfaction, making the online environment a veritable breeding ground for civic engagement.

However, the current demographics of a typical Internet user do not map to the average American. In addition to being more educated than the general public, a high percentage of Internet users are considered 'influentials'—a group of highly informed and active individuals that makes up only 5-10% of the general population, but 69% of the online population.¹⁹ Americans who are more likely to be active in civic engagement are also more likely to be online. However, as young people, naturally accustomed to working with technology, step into adulthood and leadership positions, and as the technology itself becomes more and more integrated into our lives, we expect the demographics of Internet users will more accurately reflect the nation's.

At the turn of the millennium, these parallel tracks of nonprofit, commercial and individual use of the Internet began to converge. The lessons learned from the commercial sector in networked business activities and the subsequent changes in the company's relationship to its customer began to emerge in civic space—especially during the U.S. presidential campaign season of 2003-2004. During this time we saw significant changes both in how organizations engage citizens and how citizens themselves engage in public policy. We make this distinction intentionally because the two are no longer mutually exclusive and the implications for nonprofits and those who support them are, as we will later see, significant.



Before the Internet revolution, a grassroots organization could only communicate with a handful of supporters through regular mail, or would need to invest significantly in ad purchases and traditional media—all very expensive, time-consuming efforts. Now, not only can a small advocacy group communicate with thousands at virtually no cost beyond a website and email system, but individuals can do the same. Even young children.

In 2000, four-year-old Alex Scott was battling neuroblastoma, an aggressive childhood cancer. Alex set up a lemonade stand to raise money for “her hospital.” She raised \$2,000 that year. In 2002, the lemonade stand “moved online” as the Scotts put out a call over the Internet. Providing downloadable advertising fliers and coupons for free lemonade mix, a network of lemonade stands in every state as well as in Canada and France raised \$700,000 before Alex lost her battle with cancer in August 2004. Just three months later, her goal of \$1 million was surpassed.

This is just one of many stories that demonstrate how engaging people online is faster and less expensive than traditional forms of organizing. Online organizing can reach more people with greater frequency and gives people the opportunity to shape the work in real and meaningful ways.

In delving into the sphere of *online* citizen engagement, three points must be kept in mind:

- First, the examples of online engagement that we highlight throughout this report are changing at lightning speed as additional tools and applications are developing in ways and forms that we have yet to imagine.
- Second, the outcomes of online engagement are still the same as more traditional efforts: individuals donate money and time to worthy causes, people register to vote and show up at the polls, policy makers listen and legislation is passed.
- Third, online engagement does not preclude, exclude or even dilute the need for “on land” (or offline) engagement such as house parties and door-to-door canvassing. Rather, as experts along the political continuum agree, traditional forms of engaging citizens remain the most effective for connecting and organizing. The relationship between online and offline citizen engagement requires a constant flow back and forth that balances the need for scale with the need for the intensity and personal connection that comes from in-person gatherings and activities.

Categories of Online Civic Engagement

Collaboration: Many people work together on a single activity, effort or project, supported by such tools as wikis, Yahoo groups and discussion boards.

Communication: Speak not only “to” or “at” but *with* constituents using email, chat rooms, listservs, cell phone text messaging and instant messaging online.

New media/Content

development: Generate and disseminate original news through web sites, web logs (blogs), e-newsletters, RSS (news syndication software) and podcasting (audio programming delivered via the Internet to an iPod).

Organizing/Collective Action:

Coordinate the activities of large numbers of activists and supporters with smart mobs, meet-ups, virtual phone banks, online petitions, volunteer management databases.

Quote

“Electronic democracy allows citizens to find one another directly, without phone trees or meetings of chapter organizations, and it amplifies their voices in the electronic storms of ‘smart mobs’ (masses summoned electronically) that it seems able to generate in a few hours. With cell phones and instant messaging, the time frame of a protest might soon be the nanosecond.”²⁰

– George Packer

The key to understanding online civic engagement is *not* to focus on the latest tool or even the latest tactic. Rather, the key is to recognize that engaging people and organizations in this new environment requires new ways of thinking and new organizational models in order to build a more informed and engaged citizenry. The following section delves into some of these new ways of thinking and functioning.

NEW TOOLS BRING NEW FUNCTIONS

While the Internet is bringing about major shifts in a number of civic engagement practices, our review indicates that campaign genesis, communications, field management and fundraising are those aspects that are most affected by recent online developments.

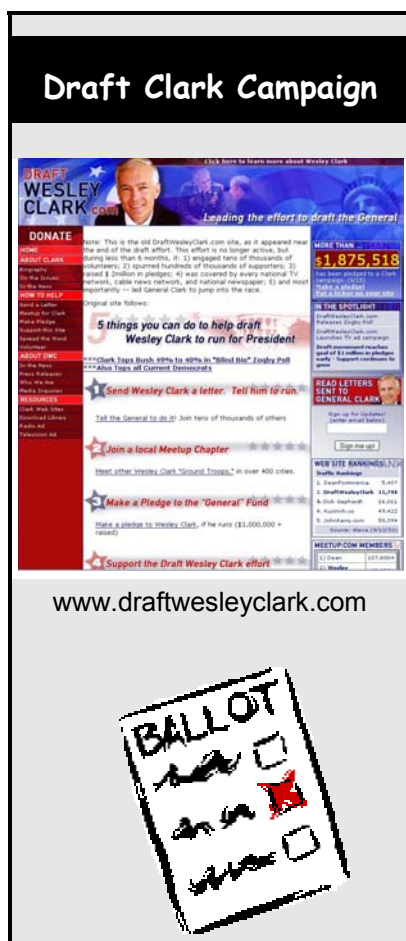
1. Campaign Genesis

Traditionally, most civic engagement campaigns have been designed, initiated and carried out by organizations. Today, supported by the Internet and other communications tools, loose *networks of individuals* can accomplish campaign objectives and deliver intense bursts of power on an issue—either in partnership with or completely independent of organizations.

Two stories in particular illustrate how individuals—outside of traditional organization-driven campaigns—used the Internet to band together and exercise their civic muscle.

Sinclair Broadcasting Group (SBG) is a media conglomerate that owns more than 60 stations and captures 24% of home viewers. In the final days before the November 2004 presidential election, SBG announced that affiliates should pull local, networked programming in order to air a purported anti-Kerry documentary. Within 72 hours of SBG’s announcement, a group of individual activists quickly banded together and created www.boycottsbg.com. Activists accessed this online database that was linked to a mass mail feature to bombard SBG advertisers with more than 100,000 boycott threats. Within a week, advertisers started pulling their advertising dollars and SBG experienced a \$60 million loss in the value of their stock. SBG backed off its insistence that local broadcasting be pulled for the documentary.²¹

This completely self-organized effort was not sponsored by any one organization. “Not one of the media watch dog organizations was involved,” pointed out Jason Lefkowitz.²²



Also in 2004, one citizen was encouraged to run for President of the United States due to a grassroots effort initiated by another citizen. John Hlinko created the Draft Clark campaign and within sixty days generated enough critical mass of popular support and funding to convince Wesley Clark to run in the primaries. Within a short amount of time, a distributed network of more than 100,000 people called for Clark to throw his hat in the ring. The campaign received over \$1 million in pledges. “People new to politics were engaged and generated all sorts of ideas for getting the public’s attention,” Hlinko told us, “including attaching Clark candy bars to business cards and handing them out in Times Square.” The campaign also let people find their own niche; no one discouraged the “Bark for Clark” contingent of dog lovers.

Hlinko insists that the implications for future elections are profound. “Future candidates will be selected not by parties but by citizens. If a candidate has no online citizens movement trying to get them into the race, they’re probably not compelling enough.”²³

Are issue-based campaigns organized by nonprofits headed in the same direction?

2. Communications

The traditional model of civic engagement communications was a “broadcast” model—defined messages disseminated from a central source (usually one organization) attempting to reach as broad an audience as possible. The Internet and digital communications offer new models and alternative forms of media to push out multiple and diverse voices.

Narrowcasting. Internet use, especially when communications and online donations are well integrated with backend databases, allows organizations to reach out to particular types of people with messages relevant to those audiences. Such segmentation in the past would have been prohibitively expensive for most nonprofits and was therefore limited and selective. Instead, nonprofits tended to seek and develop broader messages in an attempt to attract as many people as possible to their cause.

The low cost of the Internet and the inexpensive and easy ability to target *defined* communities of interest allows organizations to move beyond the general public or their loyal membership and reach into new markets to help further their cause.

For example, when faced with the re-authorization of a bill that funds protected lands, one environmental organization chose to reach out to people beyond their traditional membership—in this case, off-road vehicle enthusiasts. “They may never be members of the organization, but they’ll contact their Congressperson about those trails they love,” said Greg Adams who provides Internet consulting to nonprofit organizations. “Interest-area message boards and listservs made it much easier for us to find these people and to proactively engage them.” A surprising secondary outcome was the organization’s resulting jump in membership.²⁴

Alternative Media, Alternative Voices. When Hugh Heclo wrote about “issue networks” in 1978, he could just as easily have been referring to today’s blogs:

“Increasingly, it is through networks of people who regard each other as knowledgeable, or at least as needing to be answered, that public policy issues tend to be refined, evidence debated and alternative options worked out—though rarely in any controlled, well-organized way.”²⁵

The mainstream media, once a primary vehicle for moving people to action, is no longer the only game in town for getting the word out or for coverage of issues. Whether coordinated through an organization, or catalyzed by the passion of one or a group of individuals, the Internet now provides the ability to create grassroots media activist networks. Web logs (blogs) in particular have become their own independent media, as have “podcasting” (disseminating audio feeds to iPods and other digital audio devices) and RSS feeds (a standard for easily sharing digital news content and low-cost digital video and audio production delivered through web sites).

This shift in “news production” is analogous to the shift noted above in the commercial sector. “We’re not just consumers of opinions or information or petitions or actions,” Micah Sifry, executive director of the Personal Democracy Forum, told us. “We can also be the producers of them.”²⁶ And producers who can influence other producers.

For example, Dan Rather and CBS News were “taken out” for their story about Bush’s military record. A loosely organized but synchronized network of bloggers and savvy political strategists turned a mistake into a media frenzy. Within a few hours, one set of bloggers was researching and posting facts that contradicted Rather’s story, while others forwarded the post within minutes to other boards and media outlets.

More recently, CNN executive Eason Jordan resigned after bloggers refused to let go of a comment he made about U.S. military targeting and killing journalists in Iraq. Journalist Tim Reid summed up the impact on both men for the *Times Online*:

“The key to the fall of both men... is that without being exposed by the lightning-quick and unregulated ‘blogosphere,’ they probably would have escaped unscathed. The mainstream media, instinctively more reluctant to attack one of its own, may well not have questioned the authenticity of the CBS documents. And without the online fury that greeted Mr. Jordan’s alleged comments, the story would probably have quickly disappeared.”²⁷

When a *Washington Times* sports editor published a story claiming that the environmental organization Oceana wanted to prevent people from fishing... ever, Oceana posted the story to their organization’s blog where visitors broke it down and “peeled it apart like an onion,” said Jason Lefkowitz, Manager of E-Activism at Oceana. “The story got picked up at Daily Kos, and ultimately made it back to the *Washington Times*, where I imagine the press guy was banging his head against the wall because some random guy on the Internet did a better fact-checking job than he did.”²⁸

Blogs are also being used by entire communities to form alternatives to their local media. Ruby Sinreich, who runs Planned Parenthood for America's online organizing, also actively tracks local politics in Chapel Hill, North Carolina through a local blog. "In local politics, it's difficult to get information about local government—it's just not very sexy for traditional media to cover," Sinreich told us. "Even a good local radio station frequently does not give you the back story. But when we talk about local politics on the blog, it's infused with opinion: 'this is what's going on and this is what I think about it.' I don't have to write like a reporter and give an opinion I don't agree with... The kind of news we see through the blog is more authentic..."²⁹

This and many other examples of blogging affirm what Lester W. Milbraith wrote way back in 1963: "You get much better information from people who know you, know what your interests are, and know that they can trust you."³⁰

Electoral campaigns are beginning to see the value of using these alternative "media." In what was seen as a political first, the Democratic National Convention gave media privileges to bloggers at the convention.

3. Improved Field Management

Traditionally, the creation, coordination and evaluation of field activities was a high cost center for nonprofit organizations that included, among other things, printing and dissemination of campaign materials, hiring effective field organizers and recruiting and managing large numbers of volunteers. But recent campaigns illustrate how powerfully the Internet can be used to manage field operations.

As part of its campaign activities, the AFL-CIO created an online management center that posted both canvassing and phone bank instructions. A database fed events information to email tools that notified volunteers of the activities nearest them. When recipients clicked to RSVP, their responses were sent to local organizers for follow-up. The database was constantly updated to be used by management to assess in real-time the overall campaign's progress.³¹

The Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign site (www.GeorgeWBush.com) was named one of the Top 10 best political web sites by PoliticsOnline. Its "Action Center" provided a variety of online tools to help supporters become involved locally. A fully searchable online database of donors sought to demonstrate greater transparency in campaign contributions. PoliticsOnline also recognized the site for its online chats and web-video political advertising.³²



AdvoKit, a joint effort of the E-Volve Foundation, CivicActions LLC and @dvocacy, Inc., was used by both issue-based and electoral campaigns in the months leading up to the 2004 elections. AdvoKit serves as an online hub for a campaign's voter registration, voter ID management, get-out-the-vote, canvassing and phone bank operations. When used by a coalition of organizations to encourage newly registered low-income, minority and young voters to vote, AdvoKit helped manage 500,000 voter records, 15,000 volunteers and 110,000 individual voter contacts. Oberlin College students used AdvoKit for an email campaign that resulted in hundreds of students being reached and three times the number of students voting as compared to the national election four years ago.

4. Fundraising

Electoral as well as issue-based campaign fundraising has long been dominated by the traditional "rule of thirds": the top ten gifts accounted for one-third of all money raised; the next third came from the top one-hundred donors; and the top five hundred gifts accounted for 90% of all money raised.³³

The increasing willingness of individuals to make online transactions plus the significantly lower transaction costs of online giving has flipped this longstanding rule on its head. As a result, organizations and campaigns are experiencing an increase in the number of smaller contributions. For example, Dean for America raised more money than any Democratic presidential primary campaign in history, all with donations averaging less than \$100 each.³⁴

This shifting of power from large dollar donors out to the average citizen may have profound affects on the political system.

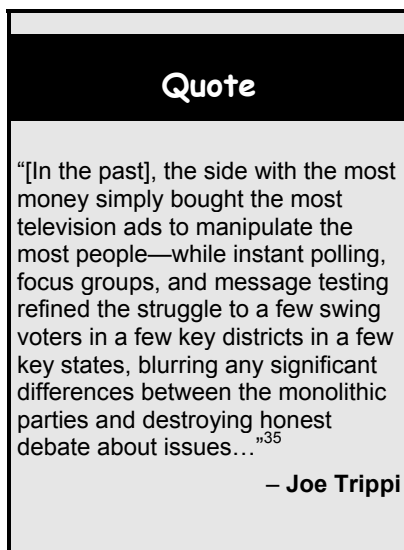
Carol Darr, director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, says this development will change campaigns significantly. "This ability to get small money is going to change who runs for office. People who otherwise wouldn't run because of the expense, now will."³⁶

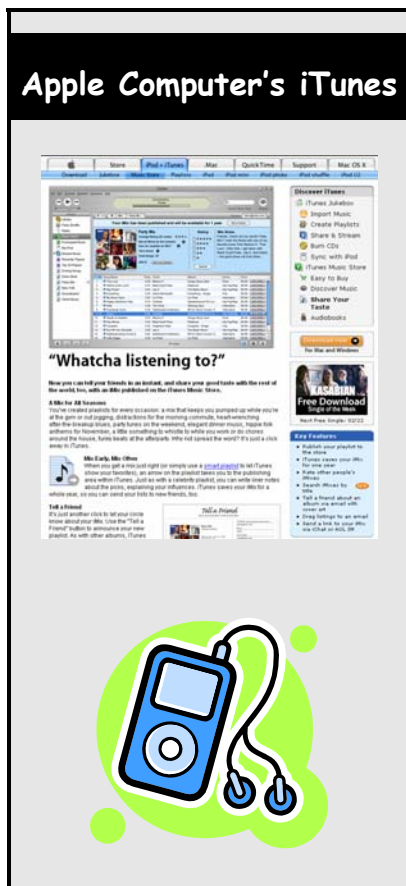
We have seen the first glimpse of the power that results as campaigns, tools and strategies unite with serious civic engagement efforts. Online communities successfully interfaced with traditional campaigns. Bloggers pushed money into the coffers of candidates. Online debates sharpened talking points and strategy. Meetups were "sanctioned" by both sides of the political spectrum.

INTO THE FUTURE

The new tools and the changing functions of civic engagement described above do not exist in a vacuum, but are further influenced by a variety of forces driving our economy and our society into the future.

On the commercial front, forces will continue to push the growing computing and communications power into more and more markets. With increasing speed and efficiency, finding and connecting people to the issues that concern them will become significantly easier and more widespread.





Smaller cities like Birmingham, Alabama will look more like today's wired communities in San Francisco and New York City. Broadband access, wireless devices, cell phones, satellite radio and satellite TV as well as the skills to use them will climb up the ranks of new generations of users. Voice Over IP (VOIP) will allow groups to have constituents call their elected representatives directly from the Internet.

The individual will continue to see leaps in the computing, organizing and communications power delivered to them. Hardware will become faster, smaller, more intuitive and capable of storing significantly more data than a "traditional" desktop computer. In addition, consumers themselves will be increasingly involved in the design of products and services. Individuals will be connected with rich on-demand media programming like Apple Computer's iTunes, delivered directly to their computers, televisions, handheld devices or cell phones. With the ability to search and filter one's information preferences, individuals can side-step mass-market broadcasting on the way to content when and how they want it.

Additionally, the tools to manage, coordinate, synchronize and direct teams and production over long distances will continue to grow. Following such examples of Cisco, Dell and Wal-Mart, the corporate world will continue to tap labor, materials and skills at lower costs, moving the tools from inside company walls out to suppliers, contractors and temporary skilled labor across the country and overseas. Data and online communications will continue to help industry supply chains become faster, more agile and easily re-arranged. And nonprofits will not be far behind, adapting these practices to mission-driven activities, and developing entirely new relationships and campaigns never possible before the Internet.

Implications for the Civic Engagement Field

The new models of civic engagement may seem undirected, unprofessional, misguided and at times harmful to the very goals towards which a nonprofit or foundation may be working. What's required to make these new models succeed may well be a world-view shift.

Douglas Rushkoff describes one such shift in thinking that took place when painting moved from two-dimensional representations to the use of the "vanishing point," which gave images depth. "A renaissance is a dimensional leap, when our perspective shifts so dramatically that our understanding of the oldest, most fundamental elements of existence changes."³⁷ As commercial companies have begun to figure out, networked business requires a shift away from the two-dimensional model of company-to-consumer to a third dimension that engages the buyer in the design and delivery of the products.

Dell's business model is based on flexibility. The company's leadership understood the power of networked communications to transform their organization. Nonprofits and those who support them need to make this same shift, to experience the Renaissance of civic engagement, shifting away from an organizational-centric perspective to a *network-centric* perspective.

Foundations will not be immune to this required shift in perspective. Ben Binswanger of the Case Foundation is not alone in his concern that such a paradigm shift is possible in philanthropy. “Current philanthropic culture and practices do not tend to support efforts that have unpredictable outcomes,” he told us. “Just-in-time and network-centric advocacy might sound good, but there are too many unknowns for most philanthropists.”³⁸

That said, Stephen Heintz of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund recently told foundations that they “must do more” to transform society, moving beyond their comfort zone and exercising “courage, not caution.” He encouraged foundations to take more risks in funding more experimentation, and in increasing financial and intellectual support for advocacy.³⁹

The increasingly connected nature of society and increased pace for social engagement are overwhelming traditional models for planning, funding and channeling public interest. New models of civic engagement require a different set of benchmarks, skills and training. In fact, the changes have very little to do with technology or the Internet and everything to do with building entirely new organizational cultures.

KEY FINDINGS

Based on our research, we found four areas that demand attention by the institutions that promote and support civic engagement—design a *connectivity* strategy, be nimble, push power to the edges, and build network-centric leadership.

DESIGN A *CONNECTIVITY* STRATEGY (NOT A TECHNOLOGY STRATEGY)

In the most successful examples of online citizen engagement we have studied, the use of Internet technology to create opportunities for people to engage in real and lasting ways were always present. But while a function of technology, what was more strongly present was a *culture of connectivity* embraced by the practitioners.

Ruby Sinreich of Planned Parenthood Federation of America told us that a sea change is beginning in PPFA affiliates. “A few affiliates—no more than 10 of our 120—have hired e-organizers. These are people who understand both the technology and work of organizing. Those jobs never existed two years ago.”⁴¹ Sinreich’s own title recently changed from Technology Field Manager to Online Organizing Manager.

William Greene of Strategic Internet Campaign Management, Inc. pointed out that “online fundraising must be integrated with offline fundraising *and* be integrated with a back-end database that tracks exactly what channels funds came through. This lets you know how to go back and communicate with those particular people.”⁴²

But those who have experienced success integrating technology and Internet use into their programmatic efforts warn not to over-rely on the tools.

Quote

“The killer apps of tomorrow’s mobile ‘infocom’ industry won’t be hardware devices or software programs but social practices... The most far-reaching changes will come, as they often do, from the kinds of relationships, enterprises, communities and markets that the infrastructure makes possible.”⁴⁰

– Howard Rheingold

“Email alone won’t mobilize voters,” said AFL-CIO’s Tom Matzzie. “Face-to-face contact is still the most valuable technology for voter mobilization.”⁴³ And NRA’s Director of Grassroots Division Glen Caroline concurred: “Electronic capabilities are a means, a tool, to alert people to things,” he said. “But as far as motivating people to do something—there is no substitute to getting into the field.”⁴⁴

Sadly, technology and Internet communications are still—in most nonprofits—segregated from the rest of the work of the organization. Even in the Dean campaign, now famous for its use of technology during the primaries, had its problems—and these centered, according to Zephyr Teachout, on the lack of integration:

“The internal structures of campaigns have been built for thirty years with three autonomous groups that largely don’t interact – finance, field, and communications. The internet created chaos and loads of infighting because it breaks down those walls... now I see it more as an inherent structural problem that no organization has well solved.”⁴⁵

Valdis Krebs, who consults and writes about social networks, added that the Democrats may have gotten the technology right, but not the sociology. “Part of what happened with the Dean campaign is they had all these people online, they got them well connected. And everyone who could show up in Iowa received orange hats and talked to voters. But the problem was that these people didn’t know the folks they were talking to; they were strangers in a strange land, and the locals didn’t trust them.”⁴⁶

The situation inside of nonprofits is similar: “People in leadership need to take more responsibility for the technological aspects of their organization,” shared an internal nonprofit staffer who preferred to remain anonymous. “For too many people, the Internet is still an after thought. Currently, the people who are hired to implement technological solutions are hired by people who do not understand the problem; they’re neither able to hire the right people nor be able to evaluate their work.”⁴⁷

BE NIMBLE, BE QUICK

In the pre-Internet days, campaigns might last 14-18 months and organizations could predict how to influence an agenda and sway the interest of the public and politicians. Today’s connectivity, combined with the public’s shrinking attention span, has led to shorter windows of time to attract and move to action those people concerned about a particular issue.

The recent tsunami disaster is a case in point. Within hours, the Internet responded with a wave of its own as an unprecedented number of people all over the world used web sites, blogs and email lists for the collection and coordination of support. But this window of response didn’t stay open long. A month later, almost to the day, media and public attention had dwindled to a trickle.

Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior



Quote

"For the first time in my life, maybe the first time in history, a candidate lost, but his campaign won... This was nothing less than the first shot in America's second revolution, nothing less than the people taking the first step to reclaiming a system that had long ago forgotten they existed... If every business and civic leader in every sector of the economy and in every segment of society doesn't think that in the next decade they're in for Howard Dean-style surprises... they haven't been paying attention."⁵¹

—Joe Trippi

Organizations that were quick enough to ride this wave generated millions of dollars in support and succeeded in garnering a significant amount of media and public attention. The total amount raised *online* was \$350 million.⁴⁸ Just two weeks after the tsunami, one online fundraising company reported that its clients had raised \$30 million online for relief efforts, coming in at a rate as high as \$89,000 per hour—eight times the normal rate for December.⁴⁹

But being nimble enough to ride these waves requires the ability to respond quickly to current news and events, and to tie the organization's issue to the public's passion. For example, Greenpeace International usually sends out its ship *Rainbow Warrior* to protest threats to peace and the environment. But the organization was nimble enough to redirect its marine efforts to help another nonprofit, Doctors without Borders, distribute supplies to tsunami-affected areas of Indonesia. The ship's crew made daily entries in Greenpeace's Blog, tying their passion for saving the environment to the world's passion for saving tsunami victims.

Most organizations are too sluggish to respond in such a timely manner—both in the nonprofit board room and at the foundation grantmaking office. When referring to the Sinclair Broadcasting story mentioned earlier in this report, Micah Sifry, pointed out, "we didn't wait for Bill Moyers to sound the bugle call—it happened organically and moved quickly. Had we done this through a traditional organizational model, we'd still be waiting for the board to sign off."⁵⁰

PUSH POWER TO THE EDGES

Perhaps the most important outcome of the recent developments in online civic engagement is the extent to which organizations and campaign organizers are changing the nature of their relationship to and with the citizens they seek to engage. This phenomenon, frequently referred to as "pushing power to the edges," seeks to take advantage of the individual's increased power (due in large part to new technologies) to engage actively in campaigns—with the same information and tools—as campaign professionals.

For organizations, this means not only allowing but actively encouraging and supporting citizens to help design their campaigns and to build and carry out their own supporting efforts. Doing so requires that organizations loosen their controls and let go of their territories, fiefdoms and competitions with each other. If they don't, citizen-driven campaigns will happen without them.

But what exactly does this look like in practice? Drawing heavily from lessons learned during the presidential campaign season of 2003-2004, it looks like this:

Meet Them When and Where They Are

New models of civic engagement require a new premise. Instead of "pulling" individuals into membership and defined and controlled roles of engagement, organizations will need capacity to "push" skills, analysis, tools, arguments and resources out to individuals and communities online and offline.

To be successful working in this new environment requires flexibility in how and when we ask people to participate in activist efforts. Instead of forcing participants into a form of “membership” or some carefully defined role, it is widely anticipated that the next generation of volunteers and activists will expect to be voluntary “free agents”, able to engage where and when their passions lead them. The next generation organizations, those that serve their constituents well, will view this as an opportunity to provide easy and convenient access to meet their interests and styles.

Although, as mentioned earlier, the digital divide is shrinking, the divide remains significant in marginalized communities. The absence of diverse voices in policy, issue and campaign discussions and activities is harmful to these communities and to our democracy as a whole. There is a clear and immediate need for efforts aimed at bridging this gap, to ensure that these voices are heard and that the Internet doesn’t become captive of a small segment of activists who do not represent the country as a whole.⁵²

Give Them What They Need

Organizations engaged in promoting civic engagement must encourage and support those they are engaging to do their own organizing. This requires giving citizens tools to engage in their own existing and natural networks—not false networks created by organizations that have little if any relevance in the daily lives of their constituents. Both Democrat and Republican campaigns didn’t merely bring people into their fundraising dinners, but gave them tools to organize and carry out activities in their own neighborhoods.

For example, the Howard Dean campaign took great advantage of Meetup.com. Initially created to help individuals with shared interests and hobbies outside of the civic arena find and physically meet, Dean organizers quickly adapted the tool to support home parties that raised money for the campaign and motivated volunteers.

“We didn’t have campaign offices in each of the fifty states. [We used] Meetup.com [to have people] meet the first Wednesday of every month,” Dean campaign Internet advisor Joe Trippi told NPR’s Fresh Air program. “Participation went from 2,000 to 190,000 people planning campaign activities... a breakthrough in using the Internet to get thousands of people to do things in their own communities.”⁵³

“Meetuppies,” as the campaign called these participants, provided the campaign with ready-made, cost-free, on-the-ground organizations in key states that would otherwise be ignored so early in the nomination process. In Washington State, 1200 people attended a campaign rally without any advance work or in-state staffers. “In this new calendar, where that whole first 15-state process happens in a matter of weeks, we couldn’t do it without the Internet and without something like Meetup,” Trippi said. “It would cost millions of dollars in campaign field staff to do what you need to do this time. In the past, you moved key staff like chess pieces, but that cannot happen this time. There’s not enough time or money.”⁵⁴

The Republican “Create a Bush-Cheney Ad” campaign asked individuals to design their own ad. The risk here was that anti-Bush activists could use the



same tool to create counter ads—and they did. But the Republicans may have pulled the plug too soon, not letting the network affect kick in to validate or deny the way the way the site was being used.

Outside of electoral campaigns, AFL-CIO enabled organizers to pick and choose those components of an issue campaign that made most sense to the local context and making templates available for download for locals to use.

Learn With and From the Grassroots

Successful campaigns use the creativity and innovation of the grassroots to improve the campaign. For example, the Dean campaign received and implemented several ideas from individuals that came through Dean’s “Blog For America.” At the suggestion of a supporter, the campaign made available on its web site downloadable and customizable flyers so that splinter groups such as “Americans Abroad for Dean” could adapt campaign materials for their own outreach efforts. Trippi insists that “what would have taken 3-4 months offline happened in minutes.”

In another example, fifteen hundred people submitted full length commercials in response to Moveon’s campaign ad competition. 100,000 people judged and evaluated the commercials. But aside from the sheer number of participants, their passion or even the voice that the project gave the community, the intelligence of the judges was critical. MoveOn asked its community to select the ads that would be most influential in swing states, among swing voters—not the ad the viewer *liked* the most, or the one that spoke to *them*, but the one viewers thought would influence swing voters the most. Later traditional focus group work confirmed that the free labor from the Internet was right.

Get Out of the Way!

People at the grassroots must have greater control over *what* they say, as well as *how* they say it. Through the practice of “viral emails,” a campaign encourages people to forward an appeal to like-minded folk, based on the principle that people are more likely to respond to a friend or neighbor than to an unknown and distant organizational entity.

The Environmental Defense Action Fund allowed members of its action network to select from a variety of electronic “postcards” about global warming to forward to friends. The organization recognized that individuals know which message will resonate most with their peer groups. The “baby postcard” was EDAF’s most successful card, generating over 200,000 petitions to push for passage of the McCain-Liebermann bill that targeted reductions in greenhouse gases.



Undo It.



Do something today your kids will thank you for later, help undo global warming. Go to undoit.org to sign the online petition supporting the McCain campaign Climate Stewardship Act, and discover other ways you can help undo global warming. Click here to help leave a better world for your kids at undoit.org.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE
ACTION FUND

GLOBAL WARMING
UNDO IT.

www.undoit.org

Definition

Network Centric:

1. A robustly networked force improves information sharing and collaboration, which enhances the quality of information and improves shared situational awareness, resulting in enhanced collaboration, self-synchronization, improving sustainability and increasing the speed of command, ultimately resulting in dramatically increased mission effectiveness.⁵⁵

2. An individual acts as part of a coordinated network... relies on dense communication ties to provide the synchronizing effects, prioritization and deployment roles of the organization.⁵⁶

By letting thousands of people spread the word to people they already know, campaigns can grow exponentially faster, at a lower cost, than through any other medium.

This strategy is one that nimble companies such as Dell and Wal-Mart have been using for years: give staffers on the ground the authority to make decisions tailored to their markets without having to check back constantly with the home office. But it is a radical, and some would say risky, way to organize a campaign, where control is usually guarded.

“Most campaigns have real top-down controls,” says Carol Darr, director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, at George Washington University. “They’re apoplectic about people not speaking for the campaign, afraid that somebody will say something that will reflect badly on the candidate.”

As Rick Klau reflected on last year’s presidential campaign, “[We] shifted the responsibility outward to the fringes, getting the grassroots involved. Fundraising? They can raise their own money. Events? Plan their own. Posters? Print their own. Meetings? Meetup.com. Never had a campaign given up so much control at the outset.”⁵⁷

David Weinberg, a marketing and campaign consultant, said that the Internet was designed for pushing control and responsibility out to the edges. “The old typology was that each point connected to a controlling center that was either selling you soap or selling you a candidate,” he says. “With the Internet, the center is still broadcasting to the ends, but the ends are now connected to one another.”⁵⁸

BUILD NETWORK-CENTRIC LEADERSHIP

A wholly different orientation to the work of organizing currently being discussed in military, corporate and organizing circles is called “network-centric.” The differences between the traditional style of organization and a network-centric approach are noted on the chart below:

Traditional	Network-Centric
Canvassing: Volunteers organized and sent out from central headquarters.	Individuals enabled with technology from their homes are synchronized to canvas their own neighborhoods.
Communications: Dedicated staff manage all outreach and response.	Collaborative space for formation of key communications distributed and managed by a connected team of volunteers.
Data gathering: large purchase of data and voter information from vendors for access by select campaign staff.	Distributed creation, collection and verification of many data sources by many volunteers.
Campaign committee: small tight group meeting primarily across a table in a smoke-filled room.	The grassroots becomes the campaign committee participating in calls, decisions and functions of the old inner circle.

Working in a network-centric environment requires that organizations change the way that they lead and manage campaigns and constituents. These changes may be grouped in the following categories:

ESTABLISH AND SUPPORT “CONNECTORS” & LEARNING CYCLES

The future of civic engagement will no longer be focused on campaign “middlemen” to act as command and control managers, but rather “connectors” to form and shepherd people into organized networks and engage those networks on *multiple* issues. The skills necessary to bridge this difference—facilitation, listening, collaboration, information sharing—will need to be taught and positively reinforced.

MEMBERSHIP ALONE IS INSUFFICIENT

Membership is frequently quoted as an indicator of a civic engagement campaign’s success—results like 150 new members signed up, or an 80% retention rate of existing members is often cited. But the future of civic engagement requires a re-examination of this emphasis.

Organizations should anticipate that the next generation of volunteers, donors and activists will expect to be free agents who engage where and when their passions lead them. Political movements are a reflection of the will of *people*, not of organizations.

For example, while some organizational leaders feel that local issues are a distraction from national or international issues, local issues can be wonderful entry points to broader civic engagement of “unexpected” constituents—as described above when the national environmental group found from working with off-road vehicle enthusiasts.

Organizations need to be ready and willing to accept and leverage such engagement.

A new generation of field organizer needs to be trained. New ideas about “credit” and recognition need to be developed and adopted. New leaders need to focus on breaking campaigns into a series of small, actionable items that ad hoc communities can claim and complete. New strategic views of timelines and organizing need to emerge. The civic engagement community will need to commit some of its best talent to measuring network throughput and network efficiency rather than merely organizational-based benchmarks such as number of dollars raised, number of members joined.

IS THE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION DEAD?

In his examination of today’s political ideals, University of California at San Diego Communication Professor Michael Schudson writes that, “we are witnessing a long-term trend that is weakening the authority of established institutions.”⁵⁹ While this resonates with what we are seeing in the increasingly network-centric online civic engagement field, it does not mean the role for organizations has disappeared.

Even the most powerful networks have hubs, a vision or a leader at the core who serves as an evangelist, and out from which the network grows. Especially when a campaign is national, the groups at the edges benefit from a connection to the center. For example, Meetups were used during the presidential campaign by both Democrats and Republicans to engage and empower citizens to self-organize, to fundraise on their own, to get out the vote in their communities. But had these groups been disconnected from their center – the campaign—they would have been less likely to connect with other Meetup groups, less likely to be as successful without knowing how the other Meetups were doing.

While a network-centric approach to civic engagement does not necessarily signal the demise of organizations, it will be necessary to rethink organizations. Institutional economist Oliver Williamson writes that, “in environments where speed is critical, networks make sense because they reduce transaction costs by combining flexibility of markets with the trust relationships of hierarchy.”⁶⁰

INVEST IN SOCIAL CAPITAL

Strong social capital is the foundation of such trust. It is the “grease” that enables people to set aside self-interest and personal priorities to help one another. A huge opportunity exists to take a quantum leap forward for social good with a new form of social capital bred and sustained through online engagement.

Few organizations strategically build social ties and target the interpersonal dynamics that enable personal collaboration across organizations, socio-economic classes, issue areas and geographic boundaries.

In a movement that can not be controlled by traditional hierarchy or easily cajoled into toeing the line, social capital is the currency that is traded across all lines and organizations. The biggest opportunity in today’s connected culture is to foster ties at the individual level.

DEVELOP NEW EVALUATION & FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

As the civic engagement process becomes dependent on ad hoc group formation, new evaluation and feedback mechanisms will be needed to review and appraise the work of the network. Organizations and those who support them would do well to share the results of past successes and failures immediately. Additionally, as campaigns are considered for support and implementation, questions might shift from “How is this work unique?” to “How will this effort leverage what others are doing in this field?”

We also recommend organizing, as Kathryn Montgomery calls it, a critical mass of the civic dialogue and action knowledge into a coherent, clearly marked civic center.⁶¹ The continuing dialogue that this report begins at www.evolvefoundation.org is one of many places to build that critical mass.

Clearly new leadership skills are required to shepherd organizations through a period of change and adoption. A civic engagement renaissance requires creating, supporting and sustaining a *culture* for taking advantage of the

increased data processing and analysis that will lead to greater understanding of who the organization is reaching, how they're responding, and how best to keep them engaged.

But as we know, cultures don't change easily. Believing in the need to have authentic conversations with constituents, pulling the technology staff and functions out of their silos, working across issue areas and across organizational boundaries are but a few of the very difficult changes that need to take place in order that nonprofit organizations. Of course, none of this happens without the right frame of mind. A blog without a culture of participation, inclusion, openness and nimbleness is an empty shell. Once acceptance of these values takes hold, organizations will no longer cling to the size of their budgets, membership lists, and staff as measures of success. Rather, these changes can bring about greater returns on investments as smaller, leaner organizations use their networks instead of building in-house capacity.

"Be prepared to think in a more visionary way," Micah Sifry recommended. "Invest in people who are building tools that are meant to empower users, not just tools that organizations will use to prop up existing centralized practices."⁶²

pug.meetup.com



Conclusion

Culture and society are changing. The country is increasingly connected and mobile. Groups of tens of thousands of pet lovers can unite into an organized cluster to act independently of an official organization. These new activist entities can collect and spend money, coordinate relief efforts, provide services and exercise sufficient sophisticated self-governance to direct the energy of the volunteers to solve problems. Will traditional nonprofits interact with these new entities and engage differently with their own members and volunteers using technology? This is an open question.

We are at a turning point in how Americans participate in civic discourse, where the barriers to full participation are lowered, and the potential for powerful participation increased. While the last many years have focused on training individuals and building organizational capacity in specific areas, now is the time to "wire" these investments together while supporting new training, leadership and planning skills.

The movements shaping today's body politic demonstrate what is possible with new leadership, new strategies and new tools. The future of civic engagement belongs to communities and organizations that effectively align online and offline policy, strategy and campaigns efforts; and it belongs to those that harness the passion and power of individuals.

Join Us For Further Discussion

As mentioned in the foreword, we don't intend for this report to be viewed as a conclusive study on the state of online democracy. Rather it is the beginning of an ongoing conversation about trends in the field. We hope that you will join us at www.evolvefoundation.org as we wrestle with questions such as:

- Where and how does leadership appear online? What are the qualities of online leadership?
- When are people left out and what is the impact?
- Is online engagement a new form of democratic practice or is it a new vehicle for exercising democratic rights?
- Does technology produce a net gain in activism, inspire new activists, or simply redirect old activists to a new outlet?
- Is it the technology or the people who catalyze campaigns?
- When do citizen-generated efforts fail to exert influence?
- When and how must on line information be vetted, mediated, moderated to be useful?
- What happens when power is placed in the hands of the people?

Endnotes

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People Interviewed

The following people were interviewed for this report:

1. Greg Adams, Partner, American Strategies; consultant to Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee
2. Ben Binswanger, Executive Vice President, Case Foundation
3. Glen Caroline, Director, Grassroots Division, National Rifle Association
4. Carol Darr, Director, Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, George Washington University
5. William Greene, CEO, Strategic Internet Campaign Management, Inc.
6. John Hlinko, Vice President of Marketing and Creative Engagement, Grassroots Enterprise
7. Valdis Krebs, Management Consultant & CEO, OrgNet
8. Henri Poole, Community Technology Consultant, CivicActions LLC
9. Gideon Rosenblatt, Executive Director, ONE Northwest
10. Ruby Sinreich, Online Organizing Manager, Planned Parenthood Federation of America
11. Robert Sherman, Program Director for Effective Citizenry, Surdna Foundation
12. Micah Sifry, Consultant to Public Campaign
13. Vince Stehle, Program Officer, Nonprofit Sector Support, Surdna Foundation
14. Ginger Thomas, Executive Director, Youth Noise

In addition to the interviews above, we incorporated into the report comments from the following people who spoke at the “Beyond Election 2004: Using the Web to Turn Energy into Lasting Support for Your Issues,” hosted by Democracy in Action, Washington DC, 9 December 2004:

15. Andrew Hoppin, Civic Space Labs
16. Jason Lefkowitz, Oceana
17. Tom Matzzie, Washington Director, MoveOn.org; formerly Online Mobilization Director, AFLCIO; July-November 2004: Worked for Kerry Campaign
18. Ryan Ozimek, PICNet
19. Adam Ruben, Moveon.Org

CONCEPTS:

Civic / Citizen Engagement

"There are many ways in which people participate in civic, community and political life and, by doing so, express their engaged citizenship. From volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy, the defining characteristic of active civic engagement is the commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's community, neighborhood and nation."

—from *PACE Organizing Framework*, April 2004

Online citizen engagement / Online activism

The development and use of Internet-based and other digital tools, resources and spaces for the practice of civic engagement activities.

Digital Divide

A social and political issue that became popular in the late 1990s referring to such gaps as:

- those who have *access* to computers and the Internet and those who do not (socio-economic);
- those who can effectively *use* technology effectively (literacy / capacity);
- those who have access to or can produce quality, relevant and useful *content* and those that do not.

Electronic Democracy

The use of electronic communications, such as the Internet, to enhance democratic processes within a democratic republic or representative democracy. Can include direct citizen participation in public policy; increasing transparency and accountability; electronic voting.

Network-centric

A term initially adopted by the military and many say would not have gained prominence without the Internet. Describes an approach to operations that recognizes and seeks to make the best use of interconnections between units (including the customer, as well as the producer). Often used as an acronym to "organization-centric."

Organization-centric

Where operations are designed, funded, coordinated, delivered and evaluated through (usually) one central organizational entity.

Power to the Edges

Shift power from a centralized source to peer-to-peer organization.

Smart Mobs

A concept introduced by Howard Rheingold that refers to a recently established form of social coordination made possible by using modern technology, such as the Internet and wireless devices like mobile phones and PDAs. Contrary to the usual connotations of a mob, behaves intelligently or efficiently because of its exponentially-increasing network links.

TOOLS / TECHNIQUES:

Back-end (as in databases)

In software design, the front-end is the part of a software system that deals with the user, and the back-end is the part that processes the input from the front-end.

Blog

Derived from the term "web log," a web-based application used to post journal-like commentary, running from individual diaries to political campaigns, media programs and corporations. Many enable visitors to leave public comments, leading to a community of readers centered on a particular blog.

Blogosphere refers to the totality of weblogs or blog-related websites. The phenomenon has also led to the creation of a new verb, **to blog**.

Broadband

High-speed data transmission (512 kilobits per second or more) over the Internet through, for example, DSL or cable modems. Has enabled the transmission of far more than just text, including video and audio.

Chat / Instant Messaging

An online tool (through either a service like AOL or a software program like Yahoo Messenger or IRC) that allows two or more people to communicate in real-time through text, audio or even video.

CRM (Customer Relationship Management)

Generally refers to processes and procedures for managing information about and communications with an organization's or company's customers. Also used to describe software for this purpose.

Extranet

Like an Intranet (see below), but usually open to a broader constituency than just the employees of one organization. Often used to share information and build community among disparate but related groups.

Intranet

A local area network (LAN) used internally (and usually privately) by an organization for internal information sharing and work process coordination.

“Killer-app”

A computer program that is so useful that people will buy a particular computer hardware, gaming console, and/or an operating system simply to run that program.

Listserv (often misspelled “listserve”)

An electronic mailing list application, originally developed in the mid 1980s for the Bitnet computer network. Used generically for any mailing list application of that kind.

Meetup

An online social networking portal that facilitates offline groups around a common interest, such as politics, books, games, movies, health, pets, careers or hobbies. Users enter their zip code and the topic they want to meet about, and the website helps them arrange a place and time to meet.

Message / discussion boards

A web-based application for online discussions, usually organized by topical “threads.” May or may not be deliverable via email. Includes Usenet.

Open Source (a.k.a. Free Software)

Any computer software distributed under a license that allows users to change and/or share the software freely.

Podcasting

A conjunction of the term “iPod” (a particular product of Apple Computer) and “broadcast,” refers to the dissemination of audio files (most commonly in MP3 format) over the Internet to digital audio devices (e.g., an iPod).

RSS Feeds

Really Simply Syndication or Rich Site Summary. (Both are accurate.) A standard and method for sharing content across multiple web sites. A program known as a feed reader or aggregator checks RSS-enabled web pages on behalf of a user and displays any updated articles that it finds. RSS is also widely used by the blog community to share the latest blog entries' headlines, or even the entries themselves, across multiple blogs.

Short Message Service (SMS) / Text Messaging

Short message service (SMS) is a service available on most digital mobile phones and other handheld devices that permits the sending of short text messages.

Social networking tools

A category of internet applications (such as Friendster, Tribe, Linked-In) to help connect friends, business partners, or other individuals based on shared interests.

Streaming (video, audio)

Where initial transmission of audio and video over the Internet required a recipient to download an entire file before it could be heard or watched, this technology transmits the audio or video in a stream of “packets” that can be heard/watched as they arrive to the recipients computer.

VOIP / Voice Over Internet Protocol

Also called 'Internet telephony', makes it possible to have a telephone conversation over the Internet instead of over dedicated voice transmission lines such as a telephone.

Wiki

A web site that allows users to add content, as on an Internet forum, but also allows anyone to edit the content. "Wiki" also refers to the collaborative software used to create such a website. An excellent example is <http://en.wikipedia.org>.