

GRASSROOTS.ORG; THE INTERNET GIVES POLITICAL ACTIVISTS A WORLDWIDE REACH, BUT IT'S A MIXED BLESSING

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In the 1960s, political protests helped bring a tidal wave of social and political change across the nation. But it was a slowly dripping faucet--the day-to-day organizing, letter-writing and mailing--that kept that big wave moving.

"We used to have mailing parties," says Carl Davidson, chuckling as he recalls the labor-intensive and time-consuming typing, printing, folding and envelope-stuffing of that era. Back then, Davidson worked with Students for a Democratic Society. Today, at 59, he still organizes, moderating an on-line group opposed to the war against Iraq and the policies of the Bush administration.

The Internet, he says, has changed all the rules. "It enables us to do in minutes what used to take us days, weeks and even months," Davidson says.

Groups all along the political spectrum can now reach hundreds of thousands of people instantaneously on-line, raising funds and organizing events with targeted e-mail campaigns.

The speed and reach the Internet provides to organizers became most apparent to people like Joan Blades in March when the idea for a candlelight peace vigil that originated in New Zealand became a reality worldwide in just six days. The event spawned nearly 7,000 vigils in 142 countries.

"I certainly think it has changed the landscape," says Blades, co-founder of the liberal Web site MoveOn.org, "but we're just beginning to realize the possibilities to let people participate."

Based in Berkeley, Calif., Blades and her husband, Wes Boyd, founded MoveOn.org somewhat accidentally during the impeachment hearings involving then-President Bill Clinton. Creating an on-line petition titled "Censure and Move On" that urged Congress toward a quick resolution, Blades says they sent e-mails to about 100 people. In less than a week they had 100,000 signatures. By the end of the impeachment hearings, more than 500,000 people had signed.

Blades says that today, MoveOn has a worldwide membership of about 2 million people, 1.4 million of whom are in the U.S.

Fund-raising has been a particular strength. When the group needed \$30,000 to take out a full-page newspaper ad, members forked over \$400,000 in several days. The donations that came in averaged about \$35, Blades says. The group also raised \$800,000 for the re-election bid of the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, (D-Minn.). After Wellstone's death, they raised another \$700,000 to help finance the campaign of his replacement on the 2002 ballot, former Vice President Walter Mondale, according to Blades.

"What we're trying to do is make participating more gratifying," he says

Conservative groups such as Citizens United, Free Republic and Grassfire.net have also gotten into the act.

Grassfire started in 2000 with an e-mail petition supporting the Boy Scouts of America's policy banning homosexual scout leaders. Steve Elliott, Grassfire's president, says his group's members back an agenda of conservative issues, ranging from late-term abortion to pornographic spam.

Recently, Grassfire took on-line orders from people who wanted to purchase yard signs supporting U.S. troops, and Elliott said the organization also raised \$30,000 to buy billboard space across from the Kodak Theater in Hollywood just before the Academy Awards. "Dear Hollywood," the ad read in part, "Get the Picture. America Supports Bush." Grassfire.net's Web site also lists the names of actors who have spoken out against the war in Iraq.

"I think it's a way for people to take action within the normal course of their lives," Elliott said. "They may not get out and protest, but they can send an e-mail to 20 of their friends."

The flurry of e-mail generated by online antiwar groups in mid-March is what helped bring an estimated 10,000 protesters to Federal Plaza in Chicago and later shut down parts of Lake Shore Drive and North Michigan Avenue. The protest had been planned well in advance by organizers, according to Bruce Beal, a member of the Chicago Coalition Against War and Racism.

Beal said a key advantage to on-line organizing is the ease with which individual groups who believe in the same cause can standardize their messages and logos for a particular campaign. Color fliers can be uploaded to a central site and thousands can download them, print them at home and pass them out. "That feels like real grassroots democracy to me," he says.

Because gaining membership to these groups is easy, however, and messages are transmitted over the Internet, it is relatively easy to find out what a particular group is planning. Beal said police standing next to him during the March 20 protest said they knew all about the planned activities because they logged onto the coalition's listserv.

The downside of Internet activism is that groups are never completely certain about the identity of their members, and they risk having troublemakers disrupt their discussion forums. The latter is solved by banning those who abuse the forums. The former is more difficult because, philosophically, a democratically run group allows open membership. Anyone can lurk silently under an assumed identity and gather information about members of the group and its activities.

The same concern about the authorship of e-mail already gives some public officials pause, according to Jonathan Zittrain, co-director of Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. "It can be difficult to tell the difference between grassroots and AstroTurf," Zittrain says, adding that for this reason phone calls have more clout on Capitol Hill than e-mails.

He notes that law-enforcement agencies also find it easier to monitor groups. Instead of sending an agent to attend a meeting in some church basement, now it needs only place an agent in front of a computer.

Chicago law professor Cass R. Sunstein observes that communicating exclusively with other like-minded people can in some cases be unhealthy. By only sharing information that reinforces their beliefs and perspectives, he says, people can be drawn to more extreme views on issues.

"Some organizations and some Web sites are a problematic form of democracy [because] they don't have internal dissent," he says. "I think on balance [the Internet] is excellent for democracy," Sunstein said. "But there is a risk."

Terrence Hackett is a Chicago writer who specializes in information technologies.

[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: PHOTO (color): This March protest against the invasion of Iraq was one of thousands organized around the world via the Internet. Tribune photo of protest by Charles Cherney.

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