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## **Bridging the Internet Divide: An Analysis of the Changing Nature of the Political Communication of MoveOn.org**

**Anne Marie Todd & Christina M. Sabee**

*As part of a burgeoning network of online activism, MoveOn.org has launched a variety of political campaigns, powered largely by its online network. MoveOn's unique methods of incorporating its members' conversations into its public messages reveal how the Internet is transforming the nature of political communication. This paper looks into the conversations among members on MoveOn's electronic bulletin boards and MoveOn's public rhetorical messages, including press releases, advertisements and campaign actions. These conversational and rhetorical media illuminate the links between the communication for internal and public audiences, and offer a look at the changing nature of political communication.*

The nature of political mobilization is changing. Online networks have transformed the ways humans communicate, particularly by empowering non-state actors to organize and mobilize resources within timeframes and geographic distance previously unattainable. In particular, online communication has established an effective mechanism for social movements to influence the politics of the State using strategies of mass mobilization (see Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1994; Jones, 1998; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Smith, Chatfield & Pagnucco, 1997). New technologies such as the Internet and email allow grassroots organizations to coordinate under loose, flexible structures that eschew bureaucratic hierarchies. Due in large part to these online networks, social movements are increasingly contributing to national political discourse. One of the striking challenges facing these political movements today is the strain on resources to communicate and mobilize supporters in an increasingly global, diverse, and even volatile political climate. Thus, the flexible organization allowed by the Internet has enhanced strategies of resource mobilization (Euchner, 1996; Herrick, 1995; Sohng, 1995) and endowed grassroots movements with global reach (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1997; Jones, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). New technologies have empowered political movements to share ideas and communicate strategies more easily, and have thus made information and communication abilities a key factor in

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the success of grassroots political organizing.

This paper explicates the nature of political communication online. Specifically, we investigate who is involved, how online activism affects the actions that political grassroots movements take, and how advocacy groups construct their messages in an online environment. After defining social movements, specifically movements that rely primarily on new information and communication technologies, we introduce MoveOn.org as an example of an online political movement. Then, we analyze the conversations among movement members on electronic bulletin boards and further consider the rhetoric of MoveOn's public outreach through its website, print media and television advertisements.

We examine the conversations internal to this political group as a precursor to its public rhetoric to answer how a political movement organizes and functions online. Specifically, what are the relationships between individual and collective senses of the movement? How does MoveOn incorporate the voices of individuals into its public message and to what extent are individual and collective identities mutually constitutive? This paper contributes to current conversations about social movements in the Internet age by analyzing how electronic advocacy networks provide more than just a vast potential audience; the Internet offers enhanced political discussion where individuals can directly inform the larger movement message. We conclude with an evaluation of MoveOn's conversational and rhetorical strategies as a model for grassroots political campaigns and suggest opportunities for enhancing political communication in an online environment.

### **MoveOn.org and New Social Movement Politics**

MoveOn.org is an online political movement that formed during the impeachment trial of then President of the United States, Bill Clinton. MoveOn has gained national and international attention for its work in the movement opposed to the war in Iraq, its opposition to the California recall, and most recently, the 2004 presidential election. The role of online technology in MoveOn's strategies and tactics is evident in the group's mission to "bring ordinary people back into politics" (MoveOn.org, n.d). "Our international network of more than 2,000,000 online activists is one of the most effective and responsive outlets for democratic participation available today" (MoveOn.org, n.d).

MoveOn exemplifies the political role of successful social movements in an era of online communication. While MoveOn is not the only social movement with a strong web presence, it has been a leader in successful fundraising and publicity. MoveOn has received substantial publicity for its successes as a social movement. For instance, Vanity Fair recently nominated MoveOn for its "Hall of Fame" (Friend, 2004). MoveOn has further received substantial publicity for the amount of suc-

successful fundraising it has accomplished. For instance, MoveOn promoted a nation-wide "bake sale" in which members of the organization sold baked goods in order to raise funds for the MoveOn political action committee. As part of a campaign to raise \$50,000,000 to prevent President Bush from re-election, they raised over \$750,000 in one weekend of bake sales ("MoveOn PAC," 2004), and during the first quarter of fundraising in 2004, they raised \$6,980,000 ("MoveOn's Financials," 2004). In fact, the MoveOn political action committee has received such wide attention for its success, that presidential candidate John Kerry has hired the MoveOn director of special projects as his director of online communications and organization (Mercurio, 2004).

Social movements can be generally defined as socially shared activities and beliefs that are directed toward demand(s) for changes in aspects of social and political life (Gusfield, 1970, p. 2). Movements involve activity, from organizing to direct confrontations that challenge and demand a response from the system. Mobilization and collective action are rhetorical features of social movements, the meaning of which is rooted in a movement's self-awareness. Mobilization is in essence the increased awareness of a community unified by a common political cause. Social movements emerge through the ideological framing of a problem, which mobilizes people into collective action (Harper, 1996, p. 294). Andrews (1980) argues that "a collective must first be conscious of itself. Any movement must deal somehow with social perceptions of reality by using rhetoric to alter, shape, and extend the ways in which the world is seen by those living in it" (p. 279). A collective must first be conscious of itself because, as described above, a movement uses rhetoric to shape the ways in which its participants perceive the world. This awareness provokes collective mobilization, in the form of public rhetoric aimed at political change. The rhetoric of a movement reveals its identity, which in turn influences its tactics, strategies and overarching messages.

Much has been written about how the Internet affects social movements by bringing marginalized voices to public discourse (e.g. Riley, Hollihan & Klumpp, 1997), crossing national borders as in the international environmental movement (e.g. Keck & Sikkink 1998; Smith et al., 1997) and bridging ideological differences as in the anti-corporate globalization movement (e.g. Cockburn, St. Clair & Sekula, 2000). MoveOn is unique among these social movements that utilize the Internet for a few reasons: its activity takes place almost exclusively online; it is a political advocacy group that does not endorse candidates; and instead of mass demonstrations, its physical activity lately focuses on hosting policy speeches by such speakers as former Vice President Al Gore, and house parties to screen anti-Bush administration films. Finally, MoveOn's public rhetoric is formulated and refined by its members' ideas and conversations.

MoveOn's efforts illustrate how political movements have utilized new technologies to create networks of activists linked by email and Internet access. MoveOn uses several computer-based structures that enhance activism. One of the most informal methods of computer-mediated communication (CMC), personal email has a great impact because activists send information to friends, colleagues, and fellow activists who may be inspired to activism by the message. Further, individuals who receive the messages may then forward them to any or all of their acquaintances, which allows activist messages to be relayed to large audiences in a short period of time (Myers, 1998, p. 3). Email is an informal, but highly effective way to relay messages, which can spur people to donate money, show up to a mass mobilization, or at the very least, inform people who would otherwise remain uninformed about certain issues. MoveOn.org uses personal email by establishing a clearinghouse or digest for information, which interested individuals can subscribe to or contribute to in a mutual exchange of information. Digests and listservs are an extremely efficient way for activists to send information to thousands of people they have never met (Myers, 1998, p. 3), and then to have those people send messages on even further to friends, family and other interested people.

MoveOn.org's web site is another medium used to provide information on activist concerns and activities. As a publicly available and one-way form of communication, websites are an easy way for a worldwide public to access information activists want to provide. Websites are also a persuasive way to appeal for action because they allow texts and graphics to be distributed easily to activists who may not be technologically knowledgeable (Myers, 1998, p. 3). A simple URL, or Internet address, can point interested individuals toward information on a website regarding activities in which they may want to involve themselves.

MoveOn.org also distributes information through the use of bulletin board systems, which are used by global and local activists as a forum to speak out on issues, advertise activities or mobilization events and provide important information about movements (Myers, 1998, p. 3-4). Individuals may post information individually, and they may also comment on others' postings, thus creating an ongoing conversation about movement activities. New technologies allow activist groups like MoveOn to wield more power because 1) their communication networks reach more people and thus permit their membership numbers to increase, 2) organizers have more flexibility because communication takes less time, promoting fast action, which is critical to activists' ability to respond to exigencies and adapt their rhetorical strategies accordingly, and 3) technology enables productive use of human resources by increasing participation and making individual activists more capable of action. MoveOn reveals how the Internet changes the meaning of political communication because public rhetoric is shaped by intra-movement conversation.

## **Constructing Individual Political Identity as Part of the Social Movement**

MoveOn.org's activism is informed directly by input of its members (Markels, 2003). And while MoveOn.org emphasizes on their home page that "every member has a voice in choosing our shared direction," the conversations that are encouraged to this end provide much more. Specifically, MoveOn.org provides an opportunity for dialogue surrounding activist issues and the nature of the NSM in their Action Forums (bulletin boards) as well as providing members an opportunity to construct their identity, and that of MoveOn.org, in a public forum. In this section, we illustrate the ways in which MoveOn.org's members participate in conversations surrounding MoveOn.org while simultaneously constructing their own identities and the identity of the social movement.

MoveOn.org's ActionForum software allows members to propose their ideas about issue priorities and possible strategies for action on those issues. The Action Forums encourage members to post thoughts both about activism issues, but also about the nature of MoveOn.org itself. In fact MoveOn.org encourages individuals to post suggestions, criticisms, or other ideas about how MoveOn.org is working. From the bulletin boards, MoveOn is able to "adopt the issues that rise to the top as our campaign priorities, on a cyclical basis" (MoveOn.org, n.d). As a result of the Action Forum "members regularly make suggestions and respond to the staff's and one another's ideas. Automated reports are generated by the server every week, Moveon.org's staff looks at the top-rated comments – and somehow, out of this nonstop frenzy of digital activity, a decision gets made" (Packer, 2003, p. 48).

The Action Forum allows members of MoveOn to collaborate on their activist activities and further empowers members by giving them a direct voice within the movement – a voice that they can literally see when they look at the Action Forum pages because everyone's posts and comments are posted directly onto the website. In addition to this collaboration and empowerment, the Action Forums do even more for the participants. They allow a forum through which individuals construct themselves publicly, and through which individuals may receive feedback for that construction, and thus provide a way for members to construct the identity of the movement at the same time.

Initially, the Action Forum allows members to participate in discussions about important issues to the movement. For instance, MoveOn.org members make attempts at changing the movement itself through the Action Forum. As an example of such conversation, the post below demonstrates a brief call to reorganize the discussion board format. The initial post is clear enough, but also worth noting is that viewers can look at the post and at replies to that post, ratings of that post, or they could reply to the post themselves. Thus, for instance, Larry<sup>1</sup> is able to make a sug-

gestion about how MoveOn.org should organize itself, and is also able to receive comments and ratings about whether other members agree with him.

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## POST 1

**Clearly defined subject areas - real accessibility!**

Would it be possible to re-organize this forum into real and totally accessible subject areas? As it is set up, it is almost useless!

Please consider creating a real subject oriented **accessible forum**.

—Larry (name is changed)

**Scores (1) 100% AGREE**

*Most recent replies:*

*Write Reply | Read Replies (2)*

1. The Leaders don't care about the forum or the web site—NAME DELETED

2. Great Idea – (Larry)

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Other participants on the action forum either offer their own ideas, or they respond to ideas with their own viewpoints. For instance, the previous post had two members respond directly to it. In post 2, a participant responds to an idea that was previously suggested.

Other members suggested that MoveOn.org organize an activity that would act out against Wal-Mart, but one poster disagrees with that. Viewers of this post may read the ideas, and note that one person has replied to the post to say that s/he agrees with it and rates its importance level at 3/5.

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## POST 2

**Oh YES YES YES Let's shutdown Walmart!!!**

So, let's see how this would work. You people are really going to waste your time going to Walmart and fill your baskets with goods made in China, then just leave it at the front of the store? You don't call that JUVENILE? Of course it is. What would that cause? Great overtime for the employees! That's Good!!! There is nothing that Walmart sells that Target, K-Mart, Marshal Fields, Khol's, Sam's Club, J.C. Penny's and Sears doesn't. They ALL carry the same stuff. Good thinking boys and girls, just ANOTHER core belief of the Neo-Nazi Liberal Democrats. Disrupt another American company and cause more chaos for the American people. You continue to have no problem defining yourselves. How bout throwing urine filled balloons at the employees to. What's to stop you. I'm sure the ACLU would come to your aid in a heart beat.

- *Steve Idaho (name is changed)*

**Scores (1) 100% AGREE**

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Steve Idaho makes his viewpoint about boycotting Wal-Mart clear, but the manner in which he disagrees attempts to construct himself, the movement, and the group of people who advocate boycotting Wal-Mart. Schol-

ars have noted the ways in which the narratives that we tell throughout our lifetime describe and even shape who we are (McAdams, 1997; Riessman, 1993). Rather than telling one single life story, and describing oneself in a neat package, individuals will often construct themselves, and tell their life stories in a series of events throughout their lifetime. The only common thread that often connects these seemingly unrelated events is the individual telling the stories.

Steve Idaho constructs himself in relation to the others who he sees in opposition. The implication that the opposition is juvenile is expressed when he refers to the others as “boys and girls.” However, his construction of the boycott supporters’ identities is even more pronounced as he states that this is just another action of the “Neo-nazi liberal democrats.” While Mr. Idaho has constructed the identity of the boycott group as “juvenile” and “Neo-nazi liberals”, he also constructs himself in relation to those others. The implication, from his sarcastic “yes, yes, yes!” to his address of “boys and girls” is that he is distinctly not juvenile, and not a neo-nazi democrat. The way in which he demonstrates his disagreement is to create an out-group of sorts (“you people”) and to place himself outside of that out-group.

As Mr. Idaho constructs himself as “outside” the boycott group of activists on MoveOn.org’s website, it may also seem from his post that he is not a typical member of MoveOn.org at all. The construction of liberals and democrats as “neo-nazi” suggests that Mr. Idaho does not share the views of the organizers at the least, and probably not of the larger membership of MoveOn. However, the nature of the online environment is such that anyone can participate. MoveOn.org does not censor communication on the action forum, and thus, individuals who may hold conflicting views from the bulk of the membership may contribute to discussions and may vote on important ideas. MoveOn is an example of the democratic nature of online social movements because of the inclusion of all voices. While face-to-face social movements typically encounter oppositional voices only from public media, and only after constructing their initial message, MoveOn.org’s action forum allows those conversations to occur all the time, and allows oppositional voices into their decision making process about important issues to consider. Because anyone can contribute, and anyone can vote, MoveOn relies on a purely democratic process – counting on the fact that the majority of their membership and contributors will drive their decisions.

When suggesting routes that MoveOn.org should take in its activism, whether they are members of a majority in MoveOn.org’s movement or of the minority, individuals often include aspects of their life stories to illustrate the importance of their ideas. For instance, the following post illustrates the view of a member about health care.



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**POST 3**
**Healthcare**

A lot of people talk about the 44+ million who are uninsured. I run a small business, but I can't afford health care, so I qualify as one of those 44 million.

But few talk about those who are insured only part of the year, those who are college students, or who go into the workforce in a low-wage job with no benefits. I have two sons who fit that category.

When you put people like me, and people like my sons together, you have a lot of people, I've read its more than 75 million.

Last Spring, my 21 year old son caught pneumonia. His doctor wanted to hospitalize him, but my son had to be treated as an out-patient, because he didn't have health insurance. He is now paying off the \$1000+ bill while working a low wage/no benefits job.

What kind of a barbaric society do we live in?

Where is the outrage? Where is the sympathy for those without health care? What possible excuse can this country offer for failing to provide health care to over 75 million Americans while creating a society that continues to give most of its resources to the wealthy.

My anger burns deep, because I've seen my son exposed to enormous danger, and I couldn't help him, I didn't have the money.

What kind of a sick place has America become?

- Kevin Michaels (name is changed)

**Scores (804) 96% AGREE**

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Michaels suggests, in this post, that MoveOn.org should focus on the health care crisis in our country as part of its activism. In order to support his suggestion, he describes his and his sons' situations as examples of why the health care system in America is inefficient. For instance, he begins by explaining that he is a small business owner who cannot afford health insurance, and does so by suggesting that he fits into the 44 million plus individuals in America who are also without insurance. While constructing himself within a group of people in America who share his predicament, he also explains the stories of his sons, who cannot afford health care for other reasons. While Mr. Michaels describes himself as one who is disadvantaged because of America's health care system, he demonstrates the injustice of this system by the fear he feels for his sons, who he believes are in danger because of their situations, and who he cannot help because he can not afford to. As demonstrated in the post, 96% of MoveOn.org members who responded to the post agreed with Mr. Michaels's concern.

Mr. Michaels tells a part of his life story in this post, and we learn a little about him and his sons from that telling. Because he has told part of his life story this way, and because he constructs himself as a concerned, disadvantaged American, others who view his post may relate more personally to the health care predicament in the United States. Construction of Michaels's identity is, like Idaho's, in relation to an opposition. Michaels implies that his viewpoint is not barbaric, and that it is reasonable when he asks what excuse the opposition might have for its behavior. Those that support Michaels's statement, then, may also find themselves identifying with his stories, and with his construction of himself and the opposition.

As the individuals who post to the Action Forum construct themselves, often through the ways in which they construct others with whom they are in opposition, they are also constructing the movement itself. MoveOn.org takes suggestions from its members about what activities they should pursue. For instance, the MoveOn.org organizers express to their members the following statement.

How does MY voice count? At MoveOn, every member has a voice in choosing our shared direction. Using our ActionForum software, you can propose issue priorities and strategies. Others will see and respond to your suggestions, and the most strongly supported ideas will rise to the top. We adopt the issues that rise to the top as our campaign priorities, on a cyclical basis. In the fall of 2000, for example, our members chose campaign finance reform and protection of the environment as our two top issues. Accordingly, these two issues are our major strategic priorities for the current congress. We'll also continue take the initiative to organize quick action on other timely issues such as the estate tax. (MoveOn.org, n.d)

Thus, as MoveOn.org encourages and provides a web space in which members may construct themselves in a public forum, they also find their movement being constructed by some of those individual snippets of life stories that their members provide. This decentralized formation of the movement message allows for a multi-faceted identity; in the next section we analyze how this is manifest in MoveOn's public rhetoric and the potential advantages and disadvantages of this rhetorical strategy.

### **Public Rhetoric and MoveOn's Political Identity**

A movement reveals its identity through its public rhetoric. Rhetoric enables movements to come into existence, remain viable collectives, meet opposition and bring about or resist change (Stewart, 1980, p. 299). Since its inception during the Clinton impeachment trial, MoveOn has waged national, political campaigns surrounding a variety of issues in-

cluding the War in Iraq, the California Recall, and the 2004 Election. The political rhetoric of MoveOn encompasses a variety of forms and strategies. While the group's website is its primary means of communication among its members and to a broader, public audience, it also produces print media (newspaper advertisements, letters to public officials, billboards, and lawn and window placards), and television advertisements. [Www.MoveOn.org](http://www.MoveOn.org) houses information about MoveOn, (often downloadable) versions of its print and television advertisements, press releases and opportunities for individuals to become involved. Members can participate in a variety of movement activities. Earlier, we discussed the Action Forum, with which individual members influence the public rhetoric of MoveOn. The action forum is advertised heavily on the group's website, and as we discuss earlier, inspires and formulates a lot of MoveOn.org's public rhetoric. In this section, we analyze how and to what extent MoveOn identifies itself as a movement in its public message and how MoveOn's rhetoric locates individuals within the larger collective.

MoveOn.org's public rhetoric identifies itself as a political action network that works to enhance civic democratic participation. MoveOn decries the lack of representation of public interests as a symptom of endangered democracy, citing a "disconnect between broad public opinion and legislative action" (MoveOn.org, n.d). To address this lack of political voice, MoveOn builds "electronic advocacy networks" to support grassroots involvement with information and communication tools to enhance citizen groups' impact. MoveOn's website speaks to the goals of the group to empower individuals.

What is MoveOn all about? MoveOn is working to bring ordinary people back into politics. With a system that today revolves around big money and big media, most citizens are left out. When it becomes clear that our "representatives" don't represent the public, the foundations of democracy are in peril. MoveOn is a catalyst for a new kind of grassroots involvement, supporting busy but concerned citizens in finding their political voice. Our international network of more than 2,000,000 online activists is one of the most effective and responsive outlets for democratic participation available today. (MoveOn.org, n.d)

In defining itself and its goals, MoveOn emphasizes that citizens count. MoveOn frames grassroots involvement as part of one's civic duty and helps individuals find their political voice. With the advent of easy-to-use online technologies, political movements gain new legitimacy and have a more profound impact on national politics.

What does MoveOn do? When there is a disconnect between broad public opinion and legislative action,

MoveOn builds electronic advocacy groups. Examples of such issues are campaign finance, environmental and energy issues, impeachment, gun safety, and nuclear disarmament. Once a group is assembled, MoveOn provides information and tools to help each individual have the greatest possible impact. During impeachment, MoveOn's grassroots advocates generated more than 250,000 phone calls and a million emails to Congress. We helped Congress come to understand the depth of public opposition to impeachment. (MoveOn.org, n.d)

MoveOn strives to make public opinion matter again by enabling vocal political coalitions. MoveOn helps political movements become aware of themselves by connecting like-minded people and then providing the infrastructure for a focused political campaign. MoveOn's public rhetoric focuses on the importance of individual actions by urging people to forward campaign materials to their friends, and to send personal emails to their representatives.

MoveOn.org situates individuals within the collective in order to identify the collective as an active movement. They assign responsibility to individuals as part of the larger social movement activity and purpose. Individuals matter in MoveOn's public rhetoric: individual input reflects the democratic representation offered by social movements. Members help define and refine the political message; they provide a soundboard to clarify the issues for a large and diverse audience. MoveOn's coordinated efforts create clear, targeted campaigns, which have a louder political voice than individuals acting of their own accord—one constituent email may not register on the congressional radar, whereas 340,000 phone calls establish public opposition. Whether or not representatives act on these phone calls, citizens' views affect the tenor, and potentially the outcome, of public debate.

MoveOn's coordination efforts are remarkably minimal; their online communication offers information, which their members can then utilize to become an active and informed citizenry. MoveOn synthesizes these individual actions to make the larger public aware of the collective action. Knowledge is a vital resource for the empowerment of "deprived and disenfranchised people so that they can identify themselves as knowing actors; defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, and transforming their lives for themselves" (Sohng, 1995, p. 3). MoveOn credits its members' preferences as responsible for shaping its message.

MoveOn.org voter fund will kick off an unprecedented grassroots fundraising campaign today with contributions dedicated to producing and purchasing TV issue advertising on George W. Bush and the failure of his presidency. With the goal of raising \$10 million, the

Voter Fund expects to be on the air in selected electoral battleground states through March 2004. "Our members have made it unmistakably clear that they want us to do everything we can during the coming months to get the message out about President Bush's policy mistakes and his mis-leadership" said Eli Pariser, campaigns director for MoveOn.org and MoveOn.org's Voter Fund. (MoveOn.org, n.d)

MoveOn's members are responsible for this advertising campaign—they wield the power of MoveOn's network, advocacy, and they have chosen the target and the medium of the message. "Noting broad opposition to the California recall by MoveOn members', Blades added, 'MoveOn members – across the political spectrum – have begun to connect the dots from Florida to Texas to California and what they're seeing is a very alarming trend'" (MoveOn.org, n.d). MoveOn.org's *members* are connecting the dots, not MoveOn organizers; it is the members' broad opposition that matters—and this is how grassroots movements gain momentum—members take the initiative and provide the impetus for this campaign. While the success of MoveOn's political campaign(s) remains to be seen—largely depending on the outcome of the 2004 Presidential election—MoveOn's techniques change the face of political communication. Individual contributions to MoveOn's public rhetoric alter the traditional construction of political campaigns because the audience helps to determine the message.

MoveOn's members are the energy and support of MoveOn's campaigns, and MoveOn does give its individual members myriad opportunities to contribute, in the "Other Ways to Help" section of their website:

Become a volunteer. If you have some time to give, you can make an impact on issues that affect us all. Keep MoveOn running. MoveOn couldn't operate without your financial support. Speak out. Help set MoveOn's agenda by sharing your thoughts on great goals for our nation in our unique ActionForum. Make MoveOn better. Give us your ideas on how to make MoveOn more effective and easy to use. (MoveOn.org, n.d)

Through these different avenues for citizen participation, Moveon.org provides access to elected representatives. They circulate petitions and email letters for constituents to sign and forward to their elected representatives. By providing quick links to Congresspeople, MoveOn removes impediments to action, namely the time and energy it takes to locate a representative's contact information (and in some cases find out the name of that representative), draft a letter, and either send the email, or purchase a stamp and send a letter. This easy access to mobilization tactics brings together diverse groups of individuals in a nonhierarchical struc-

ture with similar messages against The State (Herrick, 1995). MoveOn removes the mystery and barriers to entry from the democratic process—giving ordinary people a voice in politics.

By giving people a political voice, MoveOn encourages active participation in the democratic system. MoveOn empowers people to become involved in the political process by promoting the belief that their actions can make a difference. One of the primary characteristics of social movements is a sense of community that fosters a shared belief in the efficacy of rhetorical strategies. A movement must involve awareness of a collective action. “Critical to the rhetoric surrounding the Internet use is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community” (Jones, 1998, p. 3). In this way, computer technology has created new agency for communities like MoveOn because it not only has provided a vehicle for communication, but it has also created a strong community imbued with a sense of action.

A successful movement will not only offer a wide range of activities, but also allows activists to engage with varying degrees of commitment (Euchner, 1996, p. 51). MoveOn’s rhetoric allows for such varying degrees of involvement. The simplest action MoveOn asks its members to take is to forward emails. Email’s power, through word of mouth, helps motivate people to increasing levels of commitment as word spreads of MoveOn’s efforts. These letters are part of the petition process that is, perhaps, the base of MoveOn’s Internet campaign. MoveOn.org’s website “enlists users to sign a petition opposing a preemptive strike against Iraq. It then instantly sorts and logs signers by state, to facilitate organizing at a local level” (Clemetson, 2003). Wes Boyd, one of MoveOn’s founders, notes that MoveOn.org’s great strength is flexibility and speed, rather than scenario planning – MoveOn depends on the uniqueness and individuality of the participants rather than outlining a specific and detailed task (Packer, 2003, p. 49).

Financial contributions are another way MoveOn enhances their ability to spread their political messages, and their calls for financial contributions have been astonishingly successful. Online donation software allows users to make credit card donations to anti-war efforts (Clemetson, 2003). To support its television and newspaper ads in December 2002, the site raised more than \$300,000 in 48 hours, with an average donation of \$30 (Clemetson, 2003). MoveOn makes it easy to donate on its website and its emails make donations easy by clicking on the Donate Now button. In its print ads, MoveOn has coupons for mail-in financial contributions and information for accessing its website where online donations can be made. MoveOn’s ability to organize and mobilize resources facilitates political action on a wide scale. The group’s ability to mobilize financial and human resources is enabled through the Internet and represents a new form of activism—what has been called armchair activism. While this type of activism seems passive because it requires little ef-

fort—just a relatively low financial contribution, and a demonstration for those that have time—the Internet allows people to contribute to causes they believe in without expending time and energy that can interrupt their busy lives. This type of activism revitalizes public rhetoric because it gets more people to send letters to their congressional representatives, make phone calls, sign petitions, donate money, and even show up for a mass mobilization. The Internet removes the impediment to political action by easing the process of activism. The meaning of these different actions is that individuals are important and have the power to affect politics, not just by voting, but through dynamic, political communication. MoveOn says that politics is not just a one-way street, the voters tell people what they want, thus increasing outlets for political participation.

### **MoveOn and the Changing Face of Democracy**

How do individuals affect the movement's public rhetoric and what does that tell us about the Internet's effects on political communication? MoveOn incorporates the individual identities of members in their movement to create a collective identity. The individual posts in the Action Forum provide a public record of the movement activity. MoveOn promotes an ideal of democracy empowered by an informed citizenry, illustrating how the Internet alters traditions of political communication and changes the meaning of democracy by emphasizing the role of citizens in powerful collective actions. MoveOn's public rhetoric heralds the Internet as the way to reclaim political discourse and work for real social change. During the California Recall, MoveOn heralds MoveOn.org's PAC as "the Internet group that has proven online activists can also be on-the-ground organizers is now throwing its weight into the anti-recall movement" (MoveOn.org, n.d). MoveOn claims to give individuals political power: by connecting online activists to on the ground organizers MoveOn seeks to give its members real political weight.

In analyzing the significant potential of new technology for enhancing political communication, it is important to evaluate the strengths as well as the shortcomings of technologically mediated communication. Eli Pariser speaks to MoveOn.org's strengths:

There are two key strengths that we have on our side. First the truth is on our side. Second, although we'll never have the kind of money President Bush can raise from his corporate friends, by bringing millions of ordinary Americans together, we can level the playing ground with the special interests. (MoveOn.org, n.d)

Instead of wondering what the average voter gets from these ads, the average voter makes these ads. Instead of political professionals trying to figure out what voters want to hear, citizens are telling the political professionals what issues matter to them. MoveOn empowers the average

voter to become a political player rather than a passive receiver of political messages, and this is transforming the nature of American politics.

MoveOn urges visitors to its website to "Join our international network of more than 2,000,000 online activists, one of the most effective and responsive outlets for democratic participation available today" (MoveOn.org, n.d). MoveOn urges its readers and members to take a stand. By arming the people with knowledge to inspire them to action, MoveOn hopes to give power to citizens to affect change. This strategy aims to prevent elite groups from determining public interest and effectively balances power through the dissemination of knowledge (Sohng, 1995, p. 3-4). New technologies enable new ideas to enter the public domain and thus change the rhetorical control of situations. "Internet democracy solves the problem of how to focus political activism in a vast country of extremely busy and distracted citizens, because what keeps so many Americans busy and distracted these days is the Internet" (Packer, 2003, p. 48). MoveOn.org provides the way for citizens to take back democracy through public participation. In this way, public opinion can become meaningful. Eli Pariser says that, "opinion polls and political rhetoric [haven't] come close to doing justice to American's beliefs" (Packer, 2003, p. 48). MoveOn reinvigorates the opinions of the American people by publicizing them on the Internet. MoveOn's calls to revitalize public participation in policy deliberation illustrate the Internet's power as a tool of political communication and democracy. MoveOn's use of new technologies has been quite successful in allowing activists to adapt to a globalized stage to express their grievances: the group routinely gathers almost one half million signatures in its petition drives. However, there are potential flaws in relying on the Internet as the primary means of political communication.

One of the challenges facing movements powered almost exclusively by the Internet is the risk of discouraging members from acting on their beliefs off-line. Online donations, electronic petitions and forwarding emails are all ways for individuals to contribute to the cause with little effort. This can promote armchair activism, where members feel that they have satisfied their civic obligation and no longer volunteer or contribute to other community causes they might otherwise have supported. Individuals who participate in the movement online may feel that clicking a mouse means they do not have to attend a local rally (Serazio, 2003). The nature of online communication can foster a sense of complacency: members of a "connected" movement never encounter face-to-face the injustices they protest by email, and people immersed in online campaigning can develop a sense that having signed a few petitions, they've signed them all. By maintaining a diverse agenda of causes and offering a variety of ways for individuals to be active beyond their keyboards, MoveOn can combat both armchair activism and activism fatigue.



Another challenge still facing organizers is how to reach traditionally socio-economically marginalized groups that do not have access to the Internet (Hick & McNutt, 2002; Norris, 2001). There are negative impacts facing social movements that embrace new technologies. New communication and information technologies require expensive hardware as well as Internet or other online access, promoting a digital divide where impoverished communities do not participate in knowledge exchange of social movements (e.g. Chabrán & Salinas, forthcoming; Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970, 1975). Reaching people without technological resources and thus access to their networks poses one of the more significant challenges to MoveOn's efforts to increase political participation and enhance democratic deliberation. The group endeavors to bridge the disconnect between public opinion and legislative action, but initial research suggests that as part of this goal, MoveOn must bridge the gap between Internet able and Internet not able people. MoveOn's methods of outreach should include ways to increase their audience and create resources for organization members to engage other individuals in their community who are not technologically "connected."

MoveOn can expand their outreach to connect with communities that do not participate in online activist networks. MoveOn's already established network of volunteer leadership can be expanded to reach marginalized communities without access to electronic network resources. Since MoveOn is a movement organization powered by the ideas and efforts of its members, resources that would be most appropriate would help to create tools for members to reach their surrounding communities. Ways that MoveOn can increase their non-web presence in order to engage a group of people who are currently excluded from the movement might include more face-to-face meetings like the movie screenings described earlier, initiatives to increase postings of the fliers downloadable from their website, more efforts to advertise in local papers, and other communication outreach to increase publicity in non-Internet communities. These are only some of the ways MoveOn could provide resources for activists who want to mobilize or engage people who are not part of the electronic movement network. As their political network adapts to an ever-changing American populace, MoveOn's public sense of collective identity can inform our understanding of representative democracy in an increasingly wired world.

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed.

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