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Technology and Communication in the Environmental Movement

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Since the Internet boom, there has been a continuous debate in the scholarly literature over whether the online environment has leveled the playing field for American politics and created a truly democratic plane. Those who praise the Internet believe that it has opened up possibilities for small grassroots organizations to hold their own against established, elite groups. Others argue that the same politics have simply been transferred online with the same inequalities. Both sides acknowledge that previous groundbreaking technologies, such as radio and television, were similarly lauded in their times as media that would enable new heights of democracy by educating citizens and expanding communities (Lupia & Baird, 2003). Needless to say, this did not happen in any long-term or measurable way with radio or television, nor do we expect it to occur on the Internet. Commercial interests, entertainment venues, and social networking forums outpaced the educational potential of radio and television, just as they have on the Web.

Yet the potential for the Internet to revitalize democracy in more subtle ways still exists. As the Internet and related technologies have developed during the last ten years, they have created tremendous new possibilities for activists to communicate, mobilize, and fundraise in ways that are cheaper and easier than ever. Environmentalism in the United States and beyond has changed dramatically due to this new medium; the days of canvassing, phone calls, and direct mail are more or less gone, replaced by instantaneous communication, international networks, and an overflow of information. A 1999 article in *Business Week* by Pete Engardio provides an overview of the multifarious ways that the Web has enabled activists to continue publishing and promoting their views. He says:

> By mastering the weaponry of the Web, everyone from clandestine Beijing dissidents to high-powered Washington lobbyists are finding that the Internet is an extraordinary tool

for mobilizing support, raising money, and exerting influence. In the Internet Age, it's possible for a handful of Web-savvy activists to exert pressure on policymakers working out of their homes. The result may be a fundamental transformation of the nature of politics (p. 144).

The promises of the Internet resulted in its rapid adoption across the United States and around the world during the late twentieth century by individuals, corporations, and nonprofits alike. And why not? Putting aside the Internet's entertainment and social value-which has spurred much of this growth, particularly in recent years-its usefulness in interactive information-sharing and organizing is unparalleled. Studies have shown that those who participate in political activities online are more likely to vote than those who rely on television and newspapers (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003), while individuals who are contacted online by political or goodwill organizations are more likely to perform the requested action (McNeal & Fernandez, 2004).

The evidence is everywhere. Internet-related technologies have been highly successful in enabling environmental organizations to inform, organize, and motivate citizens to act on environmental issues - with impressive results. As Kutner notes, "the use of Internet-based technologies by environmental justice activists has already been anecdotally demonstrated to be effective for access, use, dissemination, and creation of information resources" (2000). In a 1999 survey, a full 100% of 76 environmental organizations in New Zealand and Australia asserted that the Internet had helped them become more successful (White, 1999). London newspaper *The Times* reported in 2006 that, "an Internet campaign by environmentalists...forced four companies to dump their shares in Japan's largest whaling fleet" by promoting boycotts that caused the companies to lose contracts and profits (Parry, 2006). The potential political influence of the Web is seemingly unlimited, a circumstance which has had a heady effect on grassroots organizations across the board.

However, although the Internet has been powerfully useful in some situations, it is not by any means a promised land for activist causes. One of the major shifts in American culture that has been brought about by the Internet is a change in the availability of information. From a culture of relative scarcity where information was a valued commodity, we have moved into a technologically rich environment where we are overwhelmed by constant flows of information from a wide variety of media. As David Shenk (1997) observes, "Just as fat has replaced starvation as this nation's number one dietary concern, information overload has replaced information scarcity as an important new emotional, social, and political problem" (p. 29). The availability of information has more than surpassed the ability of human beings to process it, and those who attempt to keep up suffer from anxiety, stress, and mental health problems such as

attention-deficit disorder. At a minimum, information overload has reduced the effectiveness of the Internet as an information source by cluttering its servers with an endless supply of content. Any single message offered online is lost in the melee.

The overabundance of information is a grave issue for those who have valuable educational information to share with the public. Organizations working for environmental causes are finding that although distributing information is cheaper and easier than ever, getting their message heard through the cacophony of communication and media may be more challenging. Plus, some of the current favored strategies for online activism, such as electronic petitions and email campaigns, are proving to be far less effective than previously hoped. At this point, the critical questions for environmentalists to ask are: (1) how *are* we using the Internet? and (2) how *should* we be using the Internet?

Lemire (2002) observes that there are essentially five ways that activist organizations use the Internet at present: (i) to distribute and circulate petitions; (ii) to spark email campaigns to political or other leaders; (iii) to "hack" into and alter official websites; (iv) to promote ideas; and (v) to provide an alternative media source for information. In the five years since Lemire's article, it is safe to say that the "hacking" issue is far less prevalent, but the other four activities are still very much relevant to the current work of online environmental organizations. To these we can add a fifth, mobilization, as it has become increasingly common for grassroots groups to use email and blogs to incite rallies and local protests. Take for instance the recent controversy surrounding the South Central Farm in Los Angeles; on the day that developers arrived to bulldoze the beloved community farm, a notice appeared on *The Grist* magazine's blog calling local activists to rallies at the farm and the town hall. Despite the unsuccessful results, the mobilization possibilities presented by this event are profound.

The usefulness of the Internet for grassroots activism is extensive, but there are significant drawbacks as well. One of the realities of online environmental activism is competition-for attention, support, and funds. If the Internet has leveled the political playing field, it has done so for everyone and favors only those who can pay to get their message out more loudly and boldly than others. This is a side effect of the information overload issue described earlier. Small organizations who maintain a strong local presence in their region are dwarfed on the Web by well-funded national groups. It is true that certain small organizations have grown to major ones on the Internet by electronic word-of-mouth, and this "lottery ticket" is what keeps many coming back to the Web. But this type of attention is not a given, and considering the vast number of grassroots organizations online, those that gain national exposure are a miniscule percentage of the total. The competition problem also encompasses competition within the environmental movement among online organizations. The Internet pits local organizations against

nationals, and animal rights groups against land preservation associations, as they all individually struggle to recruit members, signatures, and donations from the same audience. Where formerly most organizations emphasized issues facing their local area and focused on recruiting members and donations locally (while a few national groups, such as the Sierra Club and the Environmental Defense Fund, addressed national issues), suddenly every group has become national and seeks its share in a limited human resource.

Further complicating the environmental movement's affection for the Web is the fact that some of the favored strategies adopted by online organizations-email campaigns and online petitions, in particular-are not proving to be terribly effective. Anyone on an environmental listserv is sure to have seen an increase in the number of email campaigns and petitions circulating in recent years, and this is no surprise. The ease of responding to these petitions practically ensures a large number of signatures for any major cause. Yet a study of political communication in Silicon Valley found that, of all the methods of corresponding with American leaders, email was the least effective.

> Citizens should be aware that e-mail 'form letters' or petitions usually do not receive much attention or carry much influence.... Even the most carefully composed, original e-mail message may not get a serious reading, much less a reply. Letters are preferred for their formality and perceived seriousness; phone calls and visits have the benefit of a 'personal touch.' The only method of political communication that is consistently less effective than e-mail is fax (Chen, 2004).

An important step for environmental groups in determining how best to take action online is to understand how online political communication works. A study put out by the Congressional Management Foundation suggests that email messages to political leaders can be as effective as postal mail, but form letters of any sort are unlikely to have much impact. As the report explains, "Quality is more persuasive than quantity.... Sending a letter to a Member of Congress is not equivalent to casting a ballot or answering a survey, where the choice with the most responses 'wins.' Sending a letter to a Member of Congress is more like giving a speech at a town meeting or writing a letter to the editor. The content matters" (Fitch & Goldschmidt, 2005). Environmentalists would do well to learn more about how to use technology to advance their government advocacy efforts. To this end, the Congressional Management Foundation offers online tutorials and training on their website, http://www.cmfweb.org, to educate grassroots organizations on how to communicate effectively with Congress. In essence, political communication online is the same as political communication in person: the more personal and thoughtful a message is, the better it will be heard.

Insofar as many organizations rely upon the Internet to share and distribute information, it is important to keep in mind that the quality of content on the Web varies greatly. In a recent opinion piece, BBC News reporter Richard Ladle put it this way: "Misrepresentation of environmental science on the Internet is widespread.... From deforestation rates in the Amazon to climate change statistics, nothing is necessarily how it appears" (2006). Savvy Internet users learn to distinguish the good from the bad, but many others become confused: they may trust information that is distorted and be skeptical of authoritative sources. The result of this circumstance is that most Internet users tend to rely on Internet filters and on people they know-colleagues, friends, and family-to locate trustworthy information online. This means that they are less likely to visit websites or review information that does not already fit their views on any given topic. "Never before have information providers been able to target their audience so accurately; nor have citizens had as great an opportunity to tailor the content of information that they receive" (Bostrom & Kingsley, 1998, p. 164). Like other media outlets, the Internet allows users to decide what perspectives to listen to, and which ones to shut off. The possibilities for discussion among those with differing views-which, in theory, is the foundation of democracy-is extremely limited.

Inclusiveness is an additional consideration in the use of Internet technologies by environmental organizations. It is widely acknowledged that the community of people who frequent the Web is an uneven cross-section of U.S. citizens, not to mention international populations. Although anyone in the United States can use the Internet for free at a public library, those who access the Web most often are in the upper classes of U.S. society. They are the people who are literate, who can afford a computer and Internet access, and who have free time. The Web excludes certain groups of people by its very nature, and any activist relying on the Internet to communicate and mobilize individuals for a certain cause needs to be exceptionally aware of this problem. Those who are active in environmental justice issues, in particular, will find that many of the individuals they would target in their efforts are simply not online. As McNeal and Fernandez (2004) note, "One Internet organization activist stated that their members tend to be more affluent, more educated, and more likely to be white.... The Internet may provide a cheap way to cast a wide net, but no matter how wide the net is, it cannot catch the fish if they are not in the water" (pp. 8-9).

As a final consideration, those of us who remember the world before the takeover of the Internet are aware that although communication methods have changed dramatically in recent years, the basic characteristics of American society have not. The great promises of how the Web would educate and enlighten citizens to make them more engaged in the political arena were, in the end, simply a nice story. "After a steady series of breakthroughs in information technology, we are left with a citizenry that is certainly no more interested or capable of supporting a healthy representative democracy than it was fifty

years ago, and may well be less capable" (Shenk, 1997, p. 68). Instead of becoming primarily an educational tool, the Internet has become a new venue for entertainment in the form of video games, video clips, social networking, and the like. Although many environmental organizations anticipated new breakthroughs through their use of the Internet, they have found that the same rules apply.

Despite these drawbacks, the Internet can be a great friend to environmentalists. The free exchange of information is essential to any movement that seeks to change the dominant culture (Pickerill, 2003), and the Web is a host to all political views without discrimination. The Internet has served environmental organizations well in the past and will continue to be a great resource for fundraising, communication, information and news distribution, and mobilization of members for particular events and campaigns.

In the future, we will no doubt face an increasingly technologically reliant culture with a constantly expanding slate of information tools from which to choose. Environmental organizations need to frequently reevaluate these tools to ensure that they are being used to their best capacities without impeding on-the-ground efforts. While using the Internet for select projects, organizations may benefit from strategies, such as reemphasizing in-person meetings and other types of personal contact, to counter information overload in their membership and build more substantial relationships. As McNeal and Fernandez (2004) point out, it is a common belief among political scientists that political life is social in nature and often requires face-to-face contact. A renewed focus on the local community and the development of relationships with local members will greatly complement online projects. Furthermore, to reduce overload and improve communication with current and potential members, environmental groups may want to consider online collaboration with other like-minded organizations to carry out electronic campaigns, fundraising, and communication efforts. As Sophia Huyer (2002) notes, "[E]mail and Internet networking are a *necessary but not sufficient component* of national and international networking for change" (p. 308). Environmental organizations will be most successful in the Information Age if they are careful to maintain a balance between online activism and the projects that bring their minds and bodies-and those of their members-back to the physical world.

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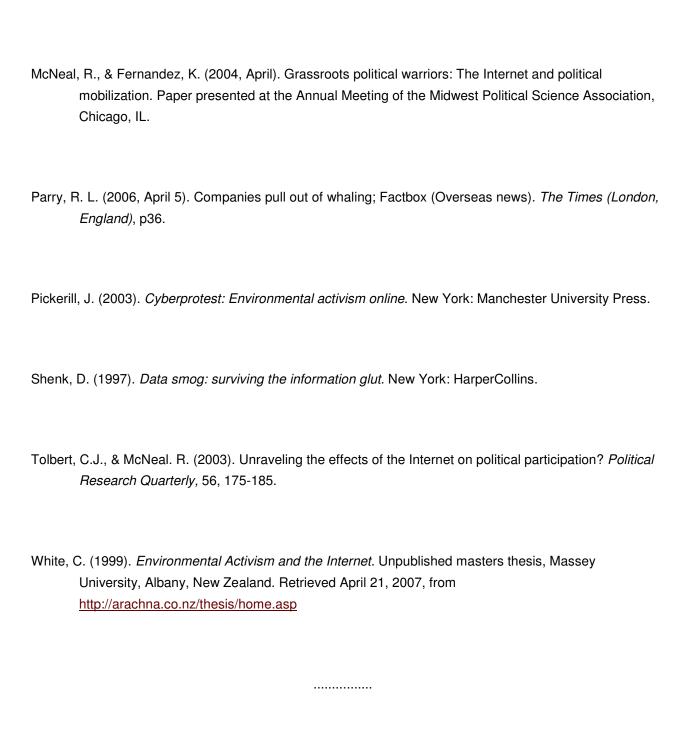
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