



## Internet Activism and the Democratic Emergency in the U.S.

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### abstract

The Internet renders efficiencies in political organization and mobilization. Already, network technologies have assisted activists in protests of corporate-led globalization, facilitated union struggles, provided alternatives to mainstream news media, and generated a new on-line model of political fund-raising. However, activists and elites both have relied on the Internet, and the cumulative effects are murky. The US presidential election of 2004 provides a prism through which to assess Internet strategies as a means for non-management stakeholders to influence the course of American politics. Republican party dominance of the mainstream media and the three branches of government increase the challenges of stakeholder organizing, particularly given the evidence of a shift toward authoritarian rule. I intend to examine Internet activism with respect to such organizations as MoveOn.org and TrueMajority.org; both of which claim to represent workers, environmentalists, and allied stakeholders.

### Introduction

The Internet has altered the conduct of business and the practice of politics, but the contours of this change can only dimly be perceived. This technology renders multi-directional communication nearly instantaneous and reduces the marginal cost for each new recipient. The so-called 'virtual workplace', in which employees perform and coordinate much of their work on-line, is the subject of experimentation. Web protests have compelled low standards employers to acknowledge worker abuses and have required manufacturers to correct product defects. Similarly, the Internet has permitted citizens to broadcast protests of government policy, to coordinate demonstrations around the world, to report human rights abuses to a global audience, and to advance perspectives overlooked by mainstream media or targeted by government censors. The Internet is spawning new forms of journalism (for example, the weblog or 'blog' – a personal journal) and new on-line activist organizations (e-unions and grassroots campaigns) (see Jacobs and Yudken, 2003).

Internet activism contributes to the vitality of civil society. By civil society one means the realm of intermediate associations which check the abuse of power by the state and other powerful institutions and increase society's capacity to resolve vexing problems (Levine, 2000). Pre-Internet computer networks helped build space for civil society and

trade unionism in 1980s Poland. Today the Internet poses a challenge to authoritarian governments seeking to control the flow of information.

The U.S. Defence Department's role in the development of the Internet resulted in a system providing redundant paths of communication in order to reduce vulnerability to attack. An unintended result is an architecture that fosters the development of network structures in civilian and commercial applications. That is, the Internet facilitates the creation of informal and fluid organizations based on lateral relations among employees, consumers, and citizens. These parallel structures are not constrained by formal organizational boundaries or hierarchies. For this reason, they are potentially effective as vehicles for campaigns by such corporate stakeholders as employees, consumers, and others (Jacobs and Yudken, 2003).

The fact that nearly anyone can construct a website gives the Internet the power to challenge power relationships. At the same time, the myriad views advanced on-line can be bewildering. Of course, nothing in the technology precludes deliberate deception, incitement, or exaggeration – Sunstein (2001) has warned of the perils of ideological polarization in this context. Web users have learned to consider the identity and vested interests behind websites and to search for validation of arguments.

## **The Importance of Stakeholder Organization**

Abusive authority in the workplace and corporate injury to the community are enduring obstacles to social justice and human development. Those without authority in the corporate context (the 'economic non-authorities' as Greenstone, 1977, labelled them) have an interest distinct from those who own or manage. Given the persistence of abusive forms of authority in 'market' relationships, activism by such 'stakeholders' as labour, consumers, and environmentalists derives its rationale from the need to counter such power. If anything, the consistent growth in size and resources of the corporate enterprise makes the need for counter-organization greater.

Stakeholder organizations, including labour unions and non-governmental organizations, require several characteristics to be effective. They must have the capacity to monitor corporate and government behaviour, to develop strategies of response, to mobilize their members for common action, to seek allies in the public at large, to negotiate solutions, and compel enforcement of negotiated agreements. Trade unions practice these functions in the context of collective bargaining. Note the efforts of anti-sweatshop groups to do so. The Worker Rights Consortium and Fair Labour Association have developed competing codes and monitoring regimes for apparel manufacturers (see Worker Rights Consortium, 2004). WashTech.org, an on-line association for high tech workers at Amazon and Microsoft, has built an active on-line community and has scored successes through litigation and pressure tactics (Jacobs and Yudken, 2003). Internet activism provides a new platform for monitoring, deliberation, mobilization, and effecting change.

## The 2004 Elections

The 2004 elections in the United States present a case study of the impact of the Internet on stakeholder activism. Two significant developments defined the extraordinary context of the 2004 elections. First, the older media of newspapers and broadcasting have become increasingly concentrated in ownership and control. Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, a handful of media companies have reinforced their dominant position in radio, televisions, and cable. Viacom and Clear Channel own a decisive share of radio stations. Viacom, Disney, and GE have multiple stations on cable and broadcast television. These powerful corporations are susceptible to the Bush administration political influence. Clear Channel, for example, has organized rallies in support of the Administration's Iraq policy (Rampton and Stauber, 2004: 108-109). Sinclair Broadcasting directed its stations to pre-empt network programming to air a documentary critical of Bush's 2004 opponent, Senator John Kerry. This reality elevates the importance of the Internet as a vehicle for dissenting voices.

Secondly, the Republican Party dominates all three branches of the federal government and practices an ideology which is hostile to most conceptions of stakeholder power. The Bush administration represents a conservative corporate constituency, much of it nurtured in the low regulation anti-union states of the South and West. Schattsneider (1960) observed in *The Semi-Sovereign People* that one of the great achievements of democracy was to compel business leaders to contest for power in a pluralist politics rather than to govern directly. However, contemporary Republicans at times seem to be seeking to create the one-party politics of the South on a national scale (Lind, 1996).

Robert Kuttner warns of the danger of one-party government:

Even more insidiously, the radical right would likely use its wall-to-wall control of government to reduce liberties, narrow electoral democracy and thereby minimize the risk that it would ever lose power. Republican one-party rule would also strategically target progressive habitats, changing laws that currently tolerate or incubate oases of progressive political power and build liberal coalitions, such as the labour movement, universal social insurance, and an effective and valued public sector. (Kuttner, 2004)

## New Political Formations

From the late 1990s to the present time, unions, environmentalists, public interest activists, and others have turned to the Internet to combat Republican initiatives. MoveOn.org emerged in response to Republican efforts to impeach and convict President Clinton. Other Internet organizations reached prominence with respect to the suppression of the Florida vote in the 2000 election and the Iraq war. In all three contexts, activists found the broadcast media and major newspapers largely unresponsive to their concerns.

The Washington press corps seemed to share the Republicans' hostility to Clinton (see Blumenthal's *The Clinton Wars* for a thorough analysis of the media's shortcomings). MoveOn was organized to urge Congress to censure President Clinton for his

misbehaviour and 'move on'. On-line activists provided critical assistance to beleaguered Democrats and placed pressure on Congress.

Media coverage of the 2000 election tended to treat irregularities and voter fraud as a bipartisan initiative. Buzzflash.com, Democrats.com, and similar sites provided Democrats with the means to sift through the conflicting information about the vote count. When a consortium of American newspapers released a misleading report based on their analysis of the Florida ballots contending that President Bush would have won the election under most recount scenarios, these websites exposed contradictions in the official story (Parry, 2001).

Major newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* uncritically disseminated White House misinformation about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in the months leading up to the Iraq war. The Democratic Party lacked a consensus policy. Leading Democrats in Congress, including Senator Joseph Lieberman (Democrat-Connecticut) and Richard Gephardt (Democrat-St. Louis), endorsed the broad outlines of the Bush administration approach. Several on-line organizations assumed a leadership role in organizing anti-war Democrats. Two of the most effective were MoveOn.org and TrueMajority.org, an initiative of Ben Cohen of Ben and Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream. Former Vice President Al Gore chose MoveOn as a sponsor for his major speeches criticizing the Bush Presidency. Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, an anti-war candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, turned to a commercial affinity group site, MeetUp.com, and to the MoveOn model to mobilize his supporters. Buzzflash.com and Democrats.com scoured the press for articles challenging Bush claims. In effect, the Internet, not the formal party apparatus, emerged as the major platform for Democratic activists.

The founder of MoveOn.org Joan Blades has described her organization in this way:

The powerful thing about MoveOn is that it is not a one-way broadcast media [sic]. The Internet, when used best, is a two-way media. We get thousands of emails. We have a forum in which people can post comments and those comments can be rated so we get a sense of what tens of thousands of people feel most passionately about. We also do surveys when we're trying to figure out the right thing to do. We aim to express the passion of our members in something actionable that we can all in fact do. (McNally, 2004)

MoveOn.org now claims 2.8 million members. MoveOn activists have sponsored bake sales, anti-war vigils, composed anti-Bush advertisements, staffed phone banks, and endorsed candidates. The technology permits the coordination of grassroots meetings, facilitates fundraising in small amounts, builds a sense of community and efficacy among participants, and instantaneously disseminates information.

MoveOn has brought back older traditions of political oratory. MoveOn-sponsored addresses by former Vice President Al Gore have been carefully crafted, carefully reasoned arguments, rather unlike most contemporary political rhetoric. I attended one such address on October 18, 2004 at Georgetown University. Gore spoke forcefully about the authoritarianism and wilful disdain for facts that characterize the Bush administration, pointing out incidents in which the administration has suppressed information in order to pursue an ideological agenda of expanding corporate power.

MoveOn communications with the membership ensured that there would be a sizable and well-informed audience in attendance. The cable television-sponsored C-SPAN channel broadcast Gore's speech to the nation.

MoveOn bundles old and new organizing techniques. Gary Wolf (2004), writing in *Wired*, doubts the originality of MoveOn's political recipe: "The group's massive, virally spreading petitions, its decentralized fieldwork, and market-tested messages have not produced a fresh, original form of politics. Instead, they've stirred up a weird mélange". MoveOn even has professional marketing and polling consultants, not to mention the financial support of George Soros. Of course, as Wolf admits, the organization's significance is not a function of novelty per se. Progressives have built successful mass organizations with the help of alternative media during many periods. One need only remember the important roles played by the Oklahoma Socialist paper, *Appeal to Reason*, *LaFollette's Weekly* and Wisconsin progressivism (see La Follette, 1968), the *Village Voice* and reform politics in New York City.

TrueMajority.org is the project of Ben Cohen, a business leader long associated with various campaigns for corporate social responsibility and responsiveness. Cohen reports TrueMajority's membership as 435,000. The following organizations have endorsed the principles of the campaign: National Council of Churches, Campus Greens, Co-op America, Global Exchange, Greenpeace, INFACT, the Service Employee International Union (SEIU), etc. Noteworthy entries on this list are a few historically significant proponents of corporate social responsiveness: INFACT, Greenpeace, and the National Council of Churches. TrueMajority does not formally participate in presidential politics but it has coordinated lobbying and demonstrations in support of social welfare spending and enhanced diplomacy.

According to *PRWeek* (Quenqua, 2002), TrueMajority works through Internet economies:

The free site operates on the principle that millions of citizens feel strongly about the same issues, but lack the time to take action to support them. True Majority users, who agree on 10 basic principles, are periodically sent e-mails that give them the opportunity to send a fax to their congressmen with a single click. Those principles include championing human rights, ending American dependence on oil, renouncing the militarization of space, and getting the money out of politics.

Democratic Presidential candidate Howard Dean sponsored an important website, *DeanforAmerica.com* (itself inspired by *MoveOn.org*), that played a significant role in establishing the viability of his candidacy. Clearly, Dean's Internet strategy was not sufficient to counter the swell of criticism that emerged in the traditional media (as well as the controversy surrounding his 'scream' in a campaign speech widely disseminated by e-mail). However, *DeanforAmerica* has now been transformed into *DemocracyforAmerica.com*, which is seeking to involve Dean supporters in Congressional campaigns. Moreover, the Service Employee International Union (SEIU), which originally supported Dean, is consciously applying the lessons of the Dean experience to its own web projects, including *FightfortheFuture.org*.

Another important element of Internet activism is its contribution to intelligent vigilance. On-line activist journalists or bloggers have scoured the Internet for evidence of questionable political tactics and abuses of due process. For example, one site, [emergingdemocraticmajority.com](http://emergingdemocraticmajority.com), has subjected mainstream political polls to a thoroughgoing analysis. In American politics, misuse of polls by the media runs rampant. Thoughtful investigation by Ruy Teixeira at [emergingdemocraticmajority.com](http://emergingdemocraticmajority.com) and others provided the critique that MoveOn used to challenge the Gallup polls, a very prominent firm that Democrats have long suspected of deliberately over sampling Republicans. Economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman relied in part on Teixeira's analysis in order to frame a warning that media misrepresentation of public opinion might facilitate Republican suppression of likely Democratic votes:

...there is a widespread public impression that Mr. Bush holds a commanding lead.

By the way, why does the Gallup poll, which is influential because of its illustrious history, report a large Bush lead when many other polls show a dead heat? It's mostly because of how Gallup determines "likely voters." And as the Democratic poll expert Ruy Teixeira points out (using data obtained by Steve Soto, a liberal blogger), Gallup's sample of supposedly likely voters contains a much smaller proportion of both minority and young voters than the actual proportions of these voters in the 2000 election.

...we must not repeat the mistake of 2000 by refusing to acknowledge the possibility that a narrow Bush win, especially if it depends on Florida, rests on the systematic disenfranchisement of minority voters. And the media must not treat such a suspect win as a validation of skewed reporting that has consistently overstated Mr. Bush's popular support. (Krugman, 2004)

Bloggers and assorted websites provided an early warning system alerting activists to decisions by Republican Secretaries of State that might obstruct voting by recent registrants. [Dailykos.com](http://Dailykos.com) assembled a database covering such stories.

One significant success of the progressive blogosphere came in the struggle with Sinclair Broadcasting over its decision to air a controversial documentary attacking Senator Kerry's anti-war actions on its many affiliates. Bloggers helped organize a campaign of public pressure on Sinclair, including calls to advertisers and investors to abandon the company. The New York State pension system added its weight to the campaign, challenging the ethics of Sinclair's in-kind contribution to Bush's re-election. The broadcaster ultimately chose to air a relatively balanced program on Kerry's Viet Nam service and other issues ([Dailykos](http://Dailykos.com), 2004).

Many bloggers have introduced internal review systems according to which member submissions are posted once and then upgraded in placement if other members 'recommend' them. Moreover, favourably reviewed posts are sometimes cited on friendly sites. Thus does a comment expand in influence.

Blogger Chris Bowers provides some general analysis of the so-called 'blogosphere'.

The left-wing political blogosphere has been, for quite some time now, an independent, collaborative, freeform news and analysis project that is geared primarily toward agitation and action. We are not trying to do the same thing that Reuters, CNN and the Washington Post claim to be doing. We are not just trying to present information and let those who consume it decide for themselves. Our content is actively geared toward political organizing. (MyDD, 2004a)

Bowers maintains that the left and right halves of the blogosphere function differently. He argues on the one hand that left-wing blogs tend to emphasize discussions on an array of issues, providing detailed content and community comment. On the other hand, right wing blogs (for example, drudgereport.com, newsmax.com, freerepublic.com, and instapundit.com) tend to observe the chain of command in the Republican hierarchy. They practice the web equivalent of the bullet vote by directing their web traffic to a single story. This magnifies their impact in the mainstream media. The right-wing blogosphere “stays more on message, and has easier access to larger media outlets than the lefty-blogosphere” (MyDD, 2004b).

The difference Bowers perceives between left and right bloggers may be largely a function of the structure and practice of the contemporary Republican party. The party itself is highly disciplined and centralized. It stands to reason that allied bloggers would submit to this discipline. On the other hand, the libertarian right often supports different sorts of blogging.<sup>1</sup> Some sectarian parties of the left sponsor only official websites under strict central committee control.

## The Democracy Deficit

The new political initiatives on the Internet must contend with a variety of factors that contain democracy in the US. One of the best known features of the federalist structure of the American system is the electoral college. The electoral college consists of the real ‘voters’, those who cast the decisive ballots for the presidency. In theory, states’ electoral votes are cast in accord with the preferences of the state popular vote. The presidential election is actually fifty-one separate state elections (including Washington, D.C.). States make their own rules for voter registration, ballot access, voting technology, etc. This vastly complicates the political struggle.

The US has a robust civil society, with groups of many kinds competing for citizens’ attention. However, the federal system permits substantial variation in policy on the political process, and democracy is ‘apportioned’ unequally. Unions, environmental groups, and other stakeholder organizations are seldom truly national organizations because of their weakness in the more conservative, ‘business-friendly’ states in the South and West, unlike the Chamber of Commerce, which is active and effective in all states (Schattschneider, 1960).

The Internet may help produce and sustain national organizations promoting stakeholder interests despite the challenges of the federal system. The Internet provides ‘free spaces’, in the vocabulary of democracy theorist Harry Boyte (1989). Boyte describes free spaces as a realm of “voluntary associations that sustain an important measure of independence from large-scale systems and institutions of government” (Boyte, 1989: 138). He points to the example of African-American beauty parlours, which nurtured the civil rights movement in the South, and one must also stress the role of African-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Andrew Sullivan’s site, [www.andrewsullivan.com](http://www.andrewsullivan.com)

American churches. Safe spaces, of course, do not themselves build movements. The Internet can provide the link between small groups of dissidents and national efforts.

## Counting the Vote

Ironically, President Bush's apparent electoral victory may have set the stage for a powerful confirmation of the value of web activism. Multiple allegations of Republican voter fraud have surfaced, and the blogs have become the primary source for relevant information. Disseminating their work on the web, statisticians have reviewed exit polls that had predicted significant Kerry margins in battleground states and have hypothesized about anomalies in the vote count. Missing voter registrations, questionable treatment of 'provisional votes', shortages of voting machines in minority neighbourhoods, 'inflated' numbers of absentee ballots, large majorities for Bush in counties with a Democratic registration advantage, possible tampering with electronic voting machines, uncounted votes for Kerry, and other charges (almost all of these problems in Ohio and Florida) have been weighed in the blogosphere. The mainstream media have been slow to investigate these claims.<sup>2</sup>

As I have suggested, Republican practices do suggest a troubling pattern. Republican Secretaries of State have been extremely aggressive in manipulating voting procedures to the benefit of the party. To add to suspicions, Diebold Election Systems and Election Systems and Software, two of the major electronic voting machine companies, were founded by brothers and bankrolled by a leader of the Christian right and advocate of theocracy (Fitzrakis, 2004). Leveraging advantage in the Republican-leaning corporate sector (including the voting technology companies) seems fully consistent with overall party strategy. Conservative jurists like Antonin Scalia (Nichols, 2004) argue that there is no federally guaranteed right to vote and that state legislatures have the ultimate authority to devise relevant standards and practices. This provides a jurisprudential foundation for Republican voter suppression tactics.

Fans of the Spielberg film *Minority Report* may know that writer Philip K. Dick was an insightful and occasionally delusional social critic. Dick's award-winning novel, *The Man in the High Castle*, is a disturbing tale of layered illusion. The Axis Powers have won World War II. On the other hand, dissidents, consulting the *I Ching*, insist that it was the Allies who won. Competing versions of reality demand disparate patterns of verification. Today the voting sceptics are testing their hypotheses in debate on the blogs. One finds that Kos on Dailykos and Chris Bowers at MyDD have distanced themselves from those alleging fraud but the sceptics continue to post their evidence for fraud on these sites.

Earlier in this essay I identified a few crucial characteristics of stakeholder organization: the capacity to monitor corporate and government behaviour, to develop strategies of

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2 A December 15 article in *The Washington Post*, "Several Factors Contributed to 'Lost' Voters in Ohio" (Powell and Slevin, 2004) delicately covered the controversy and some commentators on the cable news networks have done so as well.

response, to mobilize members for common action, to seek allies in the public at large, to negotiate solutions, and compel enforcement of negotiated agreements. The preliminary evidence suggests that the Internet supports stakeholder organization on all of these dimensions.

The following questions are crucial. First, can the Internet counter the fundraising advantages of right-wing corporate interests? Howard Dean's fundraising successes and blogger fundraising for other 2004 candidates suggest some curtailment of the Republican advantage. Small amounts of money may be bundled for maximum effect by web activists. MoveOn threatens to render some of the traditional fund-raising leaders irrelevant and has antagonized them by claims to this effect.

Second, can progressive bloggers and websites constitute a robust alternative to the corporate media and ultimately pressure the mainstream media into change? There have been many small victories thus far, for example, the 'Stop Sinclair Campaign'. However, the news departments for the broadcast and cable networks remain subject to pressure from the corporate office and sensitive to Republican pressure. It is likely that the major newspapers and networks will be slow to investigate election irregularities. In their pursuit of 'balance', they will continue to downplay the egregious nature of Republican efforts to suppress votes. Progressive activists will rely upon the bloggers and a small subset of newspaper columnists to tell the story. This constitutes a modest but significant success in the development of alternative media.

Third, can the Internet facilitate mass organization and mobilization in 'hostile' political jurisdictions (for example, the non-union South or Republican-ruled Ohio)? Here the preliminary evidence with respect to the 2004 election is negative. Internet activism was unable to prevent Republican strategies to suppress the minority vote in Ohio and probably several other states. However, this is a long struggle, and it represents nothing less than the redemption of the post-Civil War years of Reconstruction. The progressive blogosphere remains deeply engaged in this struggle.

With the Republicans' successes in extending one-party government, the Internet will continue to be a major platform for the democratic opposition. There will almost certainly be a battle within and about the Internet over privacy. Republicans and corporate interests may seek to use the network for purposes of surveillance rather than lateral communication, as was evident in the Pentagon's 2002 'anti-terrorism' program called 'Total Information Awareness' (DARPA, 2002).

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