

Electronic Advocacy and Fundraising: The State of the Art



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*I*n this chapter, I want to suggest MoveOn as one model for organizing, advocating, and fundraising around the kinds of issues articulated in this book. The goal of MoveOn is to bring ordinary people back into politics. Because today's political system revolves around big money and big media, most citizens are left out. The lock-out has accelerated since September 11. MoveOn is an electronic organizing catalyst for grassroots political involvement of busy but concerned citizens.

The MoveOn family of organizations consists of three entities. MoveOn.org, a 501(c)(4) organization, primarily focuses on education and advocacy on important national issues. MoveOn.org PAC, a federal political action committee, primarily helps members elect candidates who reflect MoveOn values. The MoveOn.org Voter Fund, an organization covered by section 527 of the tax law, primarily runs ads exposing failed policies in key battleground states.

Begun by Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs in the late 1990s, MoveOn asks its members, now numbering more than two million, to propose issue priorities and strategies via Action Forum software. The most strongly supported issues rise to the top, and these become MoveOn's organizational, action, and advocacy priorities.

GETTING INVOLVED

Just out of college, I got into MoveOn almost by accident. In the days after September 11, I was thinking about the tragedy and becoming increasingly worried that it might lead to a very serious change in policy direction for this country and other countries.

I was a web designer at the time. I thought, okay, I'll put a web page up and post some thoughts on how you might address the issue of terrorism, and specifically the attacks on September 11, without launching a never-ending war.

After I put my web page up, I sent it out to about twenty of my friends, just to see what they thought. A friend of mine sent along a petition, which had language very similar to what I posted, so I put the petition on the web site, too, and figured my job was done.

After a couple of days, I checked my e-mail and I had 300 messages from people from all over the world, writing about my website. Soon I got a call from the server administrator, who said, "Your web site's going down. There are too many people visiting it." I realized that 40,000 people had signed the petition. Then the BBC called and said, "So what's this all about?" At that point I realized that this was out of my hands.

Over the next two weeks, about half a million people not only came to the web site but actually signed the petition. I was getting calls from journalists all over the world. I remember one particular journalist in Romania. Five different people had forwarded him e-mail that I had originally sent to my friends. The Romanian asked, "Who are you? What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, I'm just this guy. I've got a web site that I started in my living room. And apparently it's hit a chord."

Then I started getting e-mail from the half-million people who had signed the petition, saying, "Okay. This is great. What are we going to do? Let's do something." I realized that it wasn't enough just to set up my web site. I really had to organize it.

At that point I got in touch with MoveOn, and we essentially merged the two entities. That's the way I embarked on this amazing trip. Since then, the group of people who spontaneously came together over concern for the direction the country was going after September 11 formed the base for our Iraq work and allowed us to mobilize very early on to start talking about the war and then post-war policy.

That group of people reached out to their friends and acquaintances, and the size tripled. MoveOn now consists of 1.4 million people here in the United States and another 700,000 abroad. I still can't fully comprehend that when I hit the "send" button on my e-mail, I'm talking to more than two million people.

Part of my story illustrates why online organizing and advocacy can be so effective. One reason is that it's cheap. I spent \$35 on a website, and a half a million people were able to use it. It can be personal, so the message to my friends was actually from me. It wasn't a slick, organized appeal. There is a way that this medium can touch people directly. It hasn't been fully coopted yet by businesses or corporate entities—and we need to organize against such cooption. It's still mostly a person-to-person medium, and that can be very powerful.

Another important aspect of the online organizing world is that you can simply reach people in the moment they are available with an opportunity to take ac-

tion or to be involved immediately. In some ways it's unparalleled. In a moment, as events unfold, you can get something to them that's quick, easy, and allows them to do what they want to do.

It is very important that, at heart, MoveOn is a two-way medium. My involvement with MoveOn's foreign-policy work didn't come about simply because I put up a website. It happened because I put up the website, people responded by e-mail, and I responded to their e-mail. There is a two-way stream of communication.

BUILDING LONG-RUN CONSTITUENCIES

MoveOn has been exploring how online organizing can help build broad constituencies and broad consensus around important issues. There are many significant opportunities on issues. One of the most powerful and intriguing developments is the aggregation and cross-pollination that has occurred. As Robert McChesney and John Nichols suggested in chapter 30, we got 1.4 million Americans into MoveOn on the basis of opposing the invasion of Iraq, and then many of these people wrote in, saying "We're also concerned about the media environment. We heard Jonathan Adelstein and Michael Copps, the commissioners who voted against the Federal Communications Commission ruling. Let's support them." The ability to bring people together on an issue like the war, and then to address an issue like media consolidation, seems to be very powerful. The power is to address a wide variety of issues and help people make the connections among them, in ways that mainstream media, conservatives, the executive branch, and Congress do not.

Another exciting dimension to online organizing is the simple idea that you can fight and get stronger, even if you lose. By taking a stand and connecting with people emotionally as you organize, you can begin to build a constituency that doesn't go away. So, unlike a traditional rally or march, where you never capture that information, when you're doing this kind of online organizing, you're able to take the energy that comes in and use it to organize a constituency that then takes action. For example, in the fight against the FCC, when its chairman, Michael Powell, decided that he wasn't interested in what grassroots folks had to say, we began to work with those same grassroots people, who had communicated to us their energy to fight. We now have a powerful constituent base for fighting broader media-consolidation issues in the long run.

The underlying idea here is that, if you take on the big, important political fights, you'll bring people in, mobilize them for the immediate fight, and then get them excited for the next fight. That is very powerful organizing. And it's possible, in part, because capturing the people who come in, and keeping them connected, is so much easier in this web-based medium than in most other media.

PROVIDING THE OPPORTUNITY TO SELF-ORGANIZE

The MoveOn strategy also offers unparalleled opportunities for people to self-organize. Our idea is that you actually can trust most of the people out there. Traditionally, there's a sense that the activists in the field need to be led, instructed, and directed to a degree which, in our experience, simply isn't the case.

My favorite example is when we decided it would be important for members of Congress to meet with people, in their home districts, who were concerned about the war in Iraq. We had about two weeks to organize, and no preexisting arrangements with any members of Congress. Because we had only four staff members and no standing volunteer corps, we decided that the only way we could meet our goal was to provide an infrastructure that would allow people to self-organize in their own communities and run the meetings themselves. The results were pretty remarkable. Meetings took place across the country. Almost every senator and a great majority of the congressional districts had meetings. We received calls from congressional staff essentially saying, "Who are these people? We're used to seeing the same old people talking about the same old issues. But these were new people. They came in, they didn't have a staff person with them, they didn't hold any official organizational title, they were eloquent, and they were organized. What's going on?" By providing people with an infrastructure, with a few simple tools, and a few simple guidelines, we were able to excite and motivate people to organize themselves. That is an extremely exciting piece of the work.

FINDING CONSENSUS AND MOTIVATING OTHERS

In addition, the two-way nature of this medium allows you to listen to a group of half a million people in a way that may not have been possible before. For example, MoveOn undertook an online primary. To prepare for the primary, we wanted to ask each of the candidates some questions about their campaigns. Rather than submit these questions ourselves, we essentially allowed our members to come up with the questions. People submitted questions, and other members rated them. The questions that floated to the top were the questions that we submitted to the candidates. Our members sent MoveOn about 1,700 questions, and over 30,000 people rated them. What came to the top and were submitted to the candidates were extremely eloquent and thought-provoking questions. They evoked some great responses from the campaigns.

So there's a way in which you can aggregate and help people sort through their own responses. MoveOn uses this process to determine our direction. We'll say, "What are some important issues to be working on right now?" We look at what floats to the top. You can find a consensus among a very large group of people in a very un-laborious way, compared with what's possible in the offline world.

As we look to the future, MoveOn is experimenting with a lot of things. But what really is exciting is seeing many of these practices become much more common. Other organizations—such as America Votes, America Coming Together, the Media Fund, and the Thunder Road Group—are innovating. In the end, that will lead to even more exciting opportunities. For example, during the 2004 presidential primaries, there was experimentation with a whole array of online organizing techniques that really could change the way campaigns are run in the future. Some campaigns had online groups of designers and content producers who essentially were unofficial media teams. They created posters, flyers, and many other things—again, in a very decentralized kind of way.

Similarly, during the 2004 general election, coalitions of advocacy organizations, including MoveOn and covered under section 527 of the tax law, raised funds via the Internet for media ads, created the ads, aired them in targeted states, led get-out-the-vote campaigns, undertook polling research, and organized rapid-response teams on key issues.

We need more and more of such coalitions to harness our energy and really make an impact. We need to further build on the idea of online organizing of strategies around which people mobilize—to send petitions, contact leaders, and attend events.

MoveOn's organizing certainly reaches the Internet-connected demographic, which tends to be white, middle class, and educated. But we are looking to expand our reach, and I think there are ways we can connect with low-income communities. For example, our political action committee is a get-out-the-vote-type effort that tries to mobilize people who need to be mobilized. Can we get volunteers who are coordinated online to start working in neighborhoods and in areas that don't have a heavy online infrastructure in place? We will try to answer that question and may need help from the kind of inner-city nonprofit organizations. In so doing, perhaps we can begin to help address the digital divide.

FRAMING IDEAS IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Our priority has been on using the Internet and online organizing to democratize media and communication, getting around the establishment-centered mainstream media and elite media system. But we also have been thinking about ways to get the kind of recommendations in this volume into the mainstream and elite media, and about ways of critiquing these media systematically.

As Eric Alterman suggests in chapter 34, we need to learn from conservatives and develop a powerful think tank infrastructure to develop ideas, frame them in mainstream and elite media, identify credible people who can communicate the messages, pitch stories to reporters, and train a new generation of communicators through media schools.

Such infrastructure development has not been the primary domain of MoveOn, although we are considering a venture-capital fund raised from our members to begin building new institutions. We also have had an impact with the paid ads that have appeared in mainstream media. For example, our large “Mis-state of the Union” ad in elite newspapers said “Sixteen untrue words in the State of the Union message helped push America into war with Iraq. It’s now clear that the remaining 5,397 words were just as misleading.” Another ad was the television spot in targeted states that highlighted the net loss of jobs during recent years, something unprecedented since the Hoover administration.

Building in part on the success of these ads, MoveOn has carried out a grass-roots fundraising campaign to raise \$10 million for producing and purchasing television “issue advertising” on policy misleads and failures. The MoveOn.org Voter Fund has produced powerful public education television spots and aired them in targeted states. MoveOn members were asked to propose thirty-second television ads for our “Bush in 30 Seconds” contest. A panel of judges, including Michael Moore, selected the best. Illustrating the corrupted state of corporate media, CBS refused to air the winning commercial during the 2004 Super Bowl, on the false grounds that the winning ad did not meet its broadcasting standards. Yet CBS did air a federal antidrug ad that showed a young woman on drugs watching someone drown.

So CBS helped MoveOn raise the real issue—corporate media double standards. At the same time, the best ads in our contest have been extensively shown on CNN and broadcast media outside of the Internet.

LAUNCHING THE DAILY MISLEAD

MoveOn also is developing a network that allows people to self-organize around media inaccuracy and media bias. I am talking about news stories that essentially are not true, but that quickly assume the status of fact. One such story during the 2000 election campaign was that Al Gore was a liar and said he made up the Internet. While untrue, this story quickly assumed the status of fact because there simply wasn’t an organized infrastructure to respond to the journalistic outlets that were carrying the story, shame them, and push them into more balanced reporting. At the same time, there was a very aggressive right-wing media machine working to get the story out there and well placed.

Using volunteers, we can one-up the extreme right wing by allowing people to report egregious incidents that occur in the mainstream media, verify them through a volunteer infrastructure, and then draw on a network of experts who can contact the journalists involved and play an inside game. At the same time, a grassroots contingent can beat down their doors with concerns about their biased and misleading commentary. We have begun to implement this idea with MoveOn’s “Daily Mis-

lead” (www.Misleader.org), a day-to-day chronicle of the federal government’s distortions, assembled by MoveOn members and staff and then e-mailed by noon Eastern Time. Similarly, we have created Fox Watch (www.AmericanPolitics.com/foxwatch), which utilizes thousands of Americans who monitor the distortions, fabrications and propaganda of Fox News.

Ideally, we want to start to create an environment in which it simply is more trouble than it’s worth for some of these news agencies to get their misleads out there. Does that mean that Fox News, for example, is going to change overnight? No. But I think what is possible over the next few years is that Fox becomes increasingly seen as simply a knee-jerk conservative network rather than a credible source of mainstream news. By highlighting the examples of extreme prejudice and extreme ideological dogma, it’s possible to turn the tide, in many respects, in terms of media content.

FUNDING VIA MEMBERSHIP

MoveOn not long ago received a \$5 million matching pledge from billionaire George Soros. In response, Fox’s Bill O’Reilly claimed that MoveOn was “an extremist organization.” We are putting the Soros funds to good use, and O’Reilly’s words helped us raise more money. But the real key to our funding is that it is based on our membership.

Membership financing is a great model because it takes traditional fundraising and turns it on its head. You can be a member for free, and if you appreciate the service that we offer, then when we ask for contributions. We find that more than pays for our operating overhead.

But even more excitingly, when we have a special project with great immediacy, we can count on our base to rapidly provide funding. For example, with our advertising against the FCC regulations, we went out to our base and said, “Look, we need to raise about a quarter of a million dollars to make this advertising campaign go.” Within eighteen hours, that money came in, and it came in from donors whose donations averaged \$35 apiece. The idea that you can harness lots of small donors is exciting.

MAKING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY WORK AGAIN

The future won’t necessarily be to the benefit of democracy. There are two paths we can follow, and one could be potentially very dangerous. You develop these small islands of people who agree with each other entirely and who are able to filter out the rest of society, so they all visit the same websites. They get their news from these very specialized sources, they talk only to each other, and they reinforce their existing prejudices. They aren’t challenged by data from outside of the system. All of the

techniques that MoveOn has helped develop could be used very successfully in a way that would not serve the country well and would not increase civic discourse.

The other, preferred path is the opportunity to develop broad appeals that bring people together, introduce them to each other, expose them to different arguments, engage them in the political system, and empower them to become active citizens. For example, MoveOn has paired its members at random across the country and had them interview each other. You had people like a high-school student in New Jersey interviewing a septuagenarian in Alabama about his political beliefs. There is a way in which this technology can be used as a tool to bring people together—people who would never have been in the same room under other circumstances. The process can build new coalitions.

In terms of which path we take, it really depends on who does the organizing. It's our choice.

Perhaps the most promising development we can look forward to is a reversion from one-way communication as a primary communication mode to not just bilateral but multilateral communication. The idea is that, as we move into a networked world where less and less of the news and the information we receive comes from a single authoritative source, we build networks and communication media that allow lots of people to talk to lots of people. Ultimately, that process will create a society very conducive to democracy.

The Internet and online organizing are powerful tools that help people undertake work in democracy—with economy and efficiency. They allow people to connect with each other, listen to each other, converse, debate, trust, collaborate, and organize. By joining together and fighting together, we really can make American democracy work again.

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