



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

**Models of Online Activism and their implications for
democracy and climate change**

Discussion Paper

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About the Author

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This paper is written in a personal capacity. The views expressed in it are the author's own, and may not reflect the views of GetUp or FDSD. Sally can be contacted at sallyrhill@gmail.com.

About the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development

The Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development (www.fdsd.org) is a small charity, launched in September 2009, which works to identify ideas and innovative practices that can equip democracy to deliver sustainable development.

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Introduction

This discussion paper is a contribution to the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development (FSDS) project on 'The Future of Democracy in the Face of Climate Change'. The project aims to develop scenarios to answer the question '*How might democracy and participatory decision-making have evolved to cope with the challenges of climate change by 2050 and 2100*'.¹ This paper aims to outline the relevance of emerging models of online activism to the project.

FSDS's work is grounded in the insight that established systems of democracy will struggle to cope with the challenge of climate change. There are many possible scenarios. One is a contraction of civil and individual liberties as climate impacts begin to bite. Another is experimentation at the grass-roots level to transform the distribution of social capital, decision-making power and even democracy itself.

The emergence of online communities, particularly those which facilitate political activism, engagement, and democratic accountability, is one field in which the experimentation in this second scenario will take place.

The last decade has witnessed a transformation of the use of the Internet, and with it the potential for political and social gain from online network-building and collaboration. A number of online networks have emerged in response to these phenomena.

One particularly influential family of online organisations emerged in the US, spreading to Australia, the United Kingdom and the globe. This paper focuses on the work of four organisations within that family: MoveOn (in the United States), GetUp (in Australia), Avaaz (a global network) and 38 Degrees (in the United Kingdom). The paper outlines the key features of the organisations. It considers their tactics and the ways in which they have evolved as well as their role within the broader democratic possibilities of digital technology. Case studies highlight ways in which the four organisations have engaged with the specific challenges of climate change. The paper goes on to explore the wider effectiveness of the online model of activism and its possible implications in the context of FSDS's project on 'Future of Democracy in the Face of Climate Change' scenarios for 2050 and 2100.

Throughout, the discussion draws heavily on insights from GetUp due to the author's first-hand experience of the organisation. Readers should not in particular that past tense references to GetUp's work relate to insights from the author's own experience as membership coordinator there over the period 2008-9.

'Web 2.0'

The MoveOn 'family' of online activist organisations, as well as other methods of online political engagement, have emerged in the context of a number of developments. In particular, in each of these organisations' 'host countries', the Internet has moved into peoples' everyday lives introducing unmediated 'many-to-many' communication on a large scale and at relatively low cost. Through newsgroups, chat rooms and other media, internet communication allows the boundaries established by traditional broadcast media (newspapers, television, radio) and one-to-one media (telephone, letters etc) to simply be ignored. Academic commentary as early as 1998 noted that "*the reality of the Internet as a*

massive digital network with open standards suggested that universal and inexpensive access to a wide variety of communication media and models could actually be attained.”²

Beyond this, the use of the Internet has evolved in the last ten years into what is now known as ‘Web 2.0’. ‘Web 2.0’ describes the innovative use of the Internet in almost every aspect of life. Examples include social networking, personal and professional blogging, file-sharing sites on sites such as Flickr, buying and selling goods on eBay, and the host of sites which support information-sharing for purposes as diverse as car-pooling, parenting, film and restaurant reviews and creative collaboration.

Box 1: Web 2.0

The term “Web 2.0” (2004–present) is commonly associated with web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design,[1] and collaboration on the World Wide Web. Examples of Web 2.0 include web-based communities, hosted services, web applications, social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, mashups, and folksonomies. A Web 2.0 site allows its users to interact with other users or to change website content, in contrast to non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them.

‘Web 2.0’, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0, Accessed 20 Jan 2010

‘Politics 2.0’

Inevitably, politics has also been drawn into the Web 2.0 sphere of influence. In April 2010, The Guardian referred to Web 2.0 the ‘new election superweapon’³ and the UK media has also dubbed the 2010 general election campaign the ‘Mumsnet election’.

In the US this is already old news. There, the Democrats’ 2008 Presidential campaign was bolstered considerably by the Party’s effectiveness in campaigning through MoveOn, BarackObama.com, Twitter and Facebook, and in fundraising through online micro-donations.

Box 2: Politics 2.0

Open-source politics is the idea that social networking and participatory technologies will revolutionize our ability to follow, support, and influence political campaigns. Forget party bosses in smoky backrooms... the halls of power will belong to whoever can tap the passion of the online masses. That kid with a laptop has Karl Rove quaking in his boots. And if you believe that, we’ve got some leftover Pets.com stock to sell you.

‘Politics 2.0’, Mother Jones, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2007/06/politics-20-fight-different>, Accessed 20 Jan 2010

Netroots evangelists and web consultants predict a wave of popular democracy as fundraisers meet on MySpace, YouTubers crank out attack ads, bloggers do opposition research, and cell-phone-activated flash mobs hold miniconventions in Second Life.

Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_source_political_campaign, Accessed 20 Jan 2010

Whilst there are some commentators who believe that technology will have no effect on existing problems in politics and representation, the term Politics 2.0 tends to be applied to describe the belief that politics and participatory democracy will be revolutionised or significantly changed.

There is clear democratic potential in the ways in which the Internet and Web 2.0 facilitate network-building. That potential also extends to the development of new measures of accountability and transparency.

Experimentation

One advantage of online activism is the ability of the Internet to facilitate wide dissemination of messages with very little human resource or capital.

For activists, there is a strong advantage in being able to create a 'rapid response', to a problem, and make dissatisfaction or concern felt immediately. In contrast, activist organising in response to an announcement made in traditional media can take a great deal of time to organise and feed-back.

On the flip side, there is also an argument that online activism is ineffective and clutters the real issues. This argument is certainly not without foundation. A great deal of content on the Internet claims to be 'activism' but has in reality more to do with the promotion of personal or financial interests.

In 'An Etiquette Guide to Pushing Your Cause on Twitter'⁴ American political review site Gawker discusses the many campaigns which have been empty, ineffective or counter-productive in relation to their apparent cause. Feminist website Jezebel reviewed recent viral cause campaigns in the article '*Thanks for Sharing but your Bra Colour Isn't Going to Cure Cancer*'⁵. The article criticises 'awareness' campaigns with only tenuous relationships to the issue they're supposedly dealing with.

There are countless examples of campaigns which are touted as 'internet advocacy' when in reality they are little more than attention-grabbing contributions to the more banal corners of social media. One example is highlighted in a piece titled '*Oh Internet Advocacy, the Tale of a Grounded Teenage Who Tried To Unground Herself via Facebook*'.⁶

Online networks or activist groups are often not taken seriously. But there are hints that this is set to change. In Australia, GetUp is currently readying to launch a campaign for e-petitions to be treated the same way by the Australian parliament as paper petitions, so that above a defined threshold, Parliament is required to respond.⁷ Elsewhere, in January 2010, Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* discussed research which "*suggests politicians and pundits should think twice before dismissing the 200,000-strong Facebook group*" that has sprung up around the Proroguing issue in Canada.⁸ That research found that online activists are an older group than people might intuitively guess. The same goes for GetUp's membership in Australia.

Many of the disadvantages and (founded or unfounded) criticisms of online activism are encapsulated in the idea that it produces 'arm-chair activism'. One Australian report cites a

rise in 'slacktivism'.⁹ Countless others have asked whether e-activism really makes a difference.¹⁰

A related (but weak) critique is that online activism encourages only talk at the expense of action. However, in many cases it is precisely 'talk' that those in power find most disconcerting. Politicians and companies are increasingly attuned to their online reputations. Needless to say, if deliberative democracy is accepted as a social 'good', 'talk' represents engagement and deliberation, and should not be taken lightly.

At first glance, it might be argued that the very nature of the Internet is democratic and that it naturally enhances democracy-building efforts because it allows communication and information to be made free and available to all. The online public sphere provides an arena for the scrutiny of decisions by civil society. And the sharing of criticisms, celebrations and deliberation is empowering. Not only does it provide spaces for consultation between public and representatives, but it also shortens the geographic and social 'distance' between citizens and their representatives.

There are almost endless types of experimentation in activism and democracy-building online. In the UK alone, by way of additional example, there are the websites No 10 Petitions¹¹ and the Twitter application act.ly, along with myriad single-issue pop-up campaigns on Facebook and elsewhere online, behaviour change campaigns such as 'We Are What We Do', the mySociety group of tools (FixMyStreet¹², TheyWorkForYou¹³, WhatDoTheyKnow¹⁴, HearFromYourMP¹⁵) and so on. A number of online engagement tools and campaigns have also popped up around the 2010 general election such as Think Act Vote and Vote For Policies.¹⁶

It remains to be seen whether online discussion can provide the informed and rigorous debate needed for it to be valuable to genuinely 'deliberative democracy'. For example, the recently launched 'BritainThinks'¹⁷ website offers a space to post opinion on issues which are apparently of public interest according to its creators; but it may be a stretch to call this an informed, deliberative public conversation.

A Closer Look at the online activism model

1. Origins

The online activism model which has been taken on by the family of organisations including Australian GetUp and US-based MoveOn began as an organic, spontaneous reaction to the use of web technology for a political goal. It has since been used as a tool for democracy-building and political change, with organisations established in a number of countries. The earliest of the family of organisations was MoveOn, which established in 1998.

MoveOn began with two Americans who were frustrated with the misdirection of the nation's and political leaders' focus at the impeachment mess facing President Clinton at that time. The couple sent an email to fewer than 100 of their friends and family asking them to sign an online petition asking congress to "Censure President Clinton and MoveOn to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation."¹⁸ Within a week hundreds of thousands of individuals had signed up, and the pair began looking for ways to enable these voices to be heard.¹⁹ The

use of email, a cheap and instant form of communication, became the defining feature of MoveOn's activism.

The catalyst then, in MoveOn's case, was the perceived failure of existing democratic processes to express the sentiment of a large section of the public. Each of the organisations highlighted in this paper also emerged in reaction to perceived failures of democracy. Arguably, this is what gave them such a strong following at their outsets.

In GetUp's case, the launch campaign surrounded the current government's control of both houses of Parliament; a tangible example of the weakening of political processes. GetUp's campaign 'Save Our Senate' aimed to let Government senators know that whilst their own political Parties couldn't hold them to account any more, GetUp and the Australian public would.²⁰ The campaign was accompanied by a video and television advert in which three non-governing political parties appeared side-by-side to support the campaign.²¹

2. Tactics

One of the most striking features of MoveOn's maiden campaign is that the message spread extremely quickly and widely, well beyond its initial recipients. This phenomenon of viral dissemination, which is particularly associated with online social networks and media, is often employed by marketers and advertisers to promote brand awareness and sell products. But the potential for viral dissemination of messages has also been applied effectively by political groups and NGOs including MoveOn.

The success of MoveOn's initial campaign may essentially have lain firstly with the issue at its core (an impeachment crisis at that time), which resonated well with people and responded to a need and so grew organically, and secondly the use of new technology which could spread and harness a spontaneous, instant response. The term 'netroots' activism²² has emerged to describe this kind of political activism; a concept which is useful in setting online community organising apart from traditional offline or 'grassroots' community organising.

By the time the email-based activism deployed successfully by MoveOn reached into Australian GetUp and global Avaaz, there were a number of clear elements in the campaigning and communication style and a clear model for the groups was emerging.

The emails GetUp *et al* use follow a distinctive style; one based in part on trial and error as well as research about online behaviour. GetUp has tested every part of the communication from subject lines (to maximise opens) to length and style of communication to maximise 'follow through' (i.e. the campaign 'action' associated with the email, whether this be signing an e-petition, writing to your MP or making a donation).

GetUp makes frequent use of stunt-like media campaigns – a symptom of the fact that many politicians are more conscious of what the media is saying about them than what their constituents are telling them. GetUp is also strategic in acting during media 'moments' when a particular issue comes onto the national agenda, and is very conscious of the full media cycle of an issue or campaign.

On occasion, GetUp works by adding force to existing campaigns, sometimes working in partnership with other NGOs, and sometimes independently on the same issue. Both GetUp and similar organisations have gained a reputation for pushing campaigns ‘over the edge’. This is not always welcomed: GetUp have on occasion been criticised for taking the credit for long-running campaigns by influencing a decision-maker at a crucial time.

MoveOn, GetUp, Avaaz and UK-based 38 Degrees all tend to focus on decision-makers and results, as well as long-term campaigns involving awareness-raising and behaviour change. In this respect they are similar to other campaigning non-governmental organisations. In fact, 38 Degrees took its name from the angle at which an avalanche occurs, communicating this sense that they want to tip the balance toward change. However, it is an open question whether overall these online activist organisations actually produce a greater groundswell around an issue, or simply allow their members to give voice to pre-existing feelings.

On the fundraising side, GetUp has also relied on punchy, clever ‘asks’. Appeals are usually around something quite urgent, for example ‘*Get This Ad on TV before the PM decides on...*’, or ‘*Get these people to Copenhagen*’ (for the November 2009 Climate Summit), etc. Fundraising campaigns are almost always focussed on a near or immediate outcome, rather than on funding the organisation’s ongoing work, as with more traditional charitable fundraising. Some of the most successful fundraisers for GetUp were an appeal to fly members of Australia’s ‘stolen generation’ to Parliament on the day that the Australian government said ‘Sorry’ to indigenous people who had been taken into state custody as children, funds for a sky-writer to write a message to senators above Parliament house on the day of an important vote regarding asylum seekers, and television (and viral/YouTube) videos on, for example, climate change (on which, see further the GetUp case studies in the *Appendix* to this report).

3. Key features

Avaaz, MoveOn, GetUp and 38 Degrees each operate on ‘multi-issue’ campaigning platforms and deem themselves ‘progressive’. That is, they work for egalitarian and liberal reform. Each has strong goals which campaigns must adhere to. In GetUp’s case the overall aim is ‘to build an accountable and progressive Parliament - a Parliament with economic fairness, social justice and environment at its core’.²³

The four organisations are entirely independent of political parties. However, MoveOn and GetUp in particular have been very active around election campaigns, with MoveOn raising millions of dollars for the Democrats’ campaigns in both the 2004 and 2008 elections. The question that this begs is how can they participate in election campaigns and seem to unofficially back such a political party while remaining independent? The answer is that the organisations support those candidates who are most likely progressively to effect change and reform. GetUp organised a campaign which involved ‘How to Vote’²⁴ cards – which allowed voters to see which candidates best represented their views on particular issues and therefore to vote accordingly. The UK websites www.voteforpolicies.org.uk and www.votematch.org.uk have recently adopted broadly similar approaches in the run-up to the 2010 General Election.

Whilst it is an online organisation, GetUp has worked to ensure that it has reach both online and offline. Interestingly, the work is often framed internally in terms of online organising (a relatively shallow form of engagement for a variety of reasons) as a tool to facilitate offline organising (which GetUp itself often framed as the ultimate goal and a deeper form of engagement). Whether this is really the case however is at best arguable, particularly in a discussion of whether real engagement with the democratic process comes from turning out to an election party or rally, or whether it entails a constant engagement in public discourse and politics. GetUp also designed a 'GetTogethers' program²⁵ which allowed members to hold meetings in their houses, or in a community setting, to discuss important issues (the 2007 election, reconciliation, and climate change to mention a few topics). One of their most successful climate change campaigns to date was an offline Climate Torch Relay²⁶ around Australia.

While GetUp only ever used the numbers of people who acted on a particular campaign to influence a decision, the power of the well-publicised total membership figure and perceived campaigning and fundraising potential gave weight to all of the organisation's campaigns.

While a great deal of responsibility was felt by GetUp toward its members, the membership also presented great opportunities. GetUp had significant power and influence through communication with its members, and the organisation saw itself as having an awareness-raising and educational role, on the premise that if a person signs up to one campaign he or she might come to have sympathy with an unrelated but equally progressive campaign.

GetUp also takes part in public debate around a number of issues. Since launching a number of large-impact campaigns, GetUp has come to be asked regularly for comment on national issues as the voice of civil society (in contrast to the usual media commentary from politicians, mainstream media and business). GetUp is, for example, part of the conversation around the emergence of 'Politics 2.0' in the mainstream media,²⁷ arguing that the current generation does not suffer from apathy towards politics or issues such as climate change – only a disconnection from the political process, and their ability to affect change. As GetUp Campaigns Director Ed Coper argues:

*"What is often mistaken for apathy is really just frustration with the party-political system. People are far more politically complex creatures than the parties allow for, and are so far removed from the parties' decision-making processes it's no wonder many appear to have switched off."*²⁸

There are hundreds of further examples of media coverage of GetUp's climate and other campaigns.²⁹

GetUp, MoveOn and 38 Degrees aim to address both local and national issues. While they don't have the resources to campaign on every issue, they work to equip people to campaign on and handle local issues. A primary aim of GetUp is to shorten the distance between citizens and the political system (whether representatives or other aspects of democratic processes).

Membership

All four of the organisations highlighted in this paper rely for their effectiveness on the actions of members. This section describes the aims to provide a sense of what it may mean to be a member of one of these organisations.

Signing just a single campaign petition, and agreeing to receive GetUp (or MoveOn, Avaaz, or 38 Degrees) emails, makes an individual a member of the organisation. Subsequently, members receive email updates on campaigns. At GetUp, contact with members is not tailored according to levels of concern for particular issues. Rather, GetUp engaged the same way with all members in terms of the information and campaigns they sent them. The only time GetUp targets specific groups within the membership is when members nominate themselves to receive extra emails on a specific issue.

Members of GetUp typically received one or two emails a week, all with an 'ask'. Asks might range from signing an online petition, to writing a letter to their MP, to making a donation or taking part in a local meeting.

GetUp's large member base of over 300,000 people was built up with a few key campaigns; Save Our Senate, Bring David Hicks Home, End the War in Iraq and Climate Action Now. Members generally sign on because of a particular concern for an individual campaign. Many are likely (based on the author's experience working with GetUp) to have felt disillusionment with formal politics and leadership when they signed up, with GetUp offering an outlet for their frustration.

The GetUp membership model involves an "opt-in" style of membership engagement, so that people are free to act on the campaigns which they are passionate about, whilst choosing not to act on other campaigns. But this model can also be problematic for some members, because it leaves little room for members to voice concerns if they disagree with the stance taken by GetUp.

A note from a MoveOn member is typical of the kinds of positive emails GetUp receives every week.

I can't thank you enough for providing the tools I've always wanted for social change. With MoveOn, I feel like I have a voice in the world and an organization fighting for the same things that are important to me. As a working professional and mother, I don't have time to look up whom to contact on what issues. You make it possible for me to fight against the infuriating things that I see either destroying or about to destroy our country.

Thank you all at MoveOn.org for your vision and your work.

*Sincerely,
Laurie (Matawan, NJ)³⁰*

Critiques of the Online Activism Model

Among the first questions asked of GetUp by members and observers are: how does GetUp decide which issues to campaign on? And, considering there's no flexibility in the 'sign here'

style campaign, and little discussion of or information provided on the issue, how has GetUp come to reach its position? These are clearly important questions for people considering joining as a member.

Internally, the process of deciding what is 'right' to campaign on is a delicate one at GetUp. Campaign choices were made according to the organisation's principles, together with views fed upwards by members through surveys and other forms of communication. More often than not, campaigns responded to a relatively urgent need, reacting to a groundswell of interest from the membership in as little as a few hours. In such cases, the choice to campaign had to be decided by a few people, but reflected the concerns of a large group.

Here is one area where the actual strategies of the organisations can vary from the normative model. For even within the campaigning boundaries of 'progressive' politics, social justice and environmental sustainability, there is of course a great deal of disagreement. It is extremely difficult to allow all members to feed into multi-issue campaign choices when GetUp or others are organisationally committed to campaign only in a progressive direction. Still, there are attempts by all the organisations to involve members in the development of campaigns.

Currently, many online campaign organisations are not utilising the possibilities of Web 2.0 and 'many-to-many' conversations as much as they could. The online campaign model, for the time being at least, still suffers from some of the problems of the 'one-to-many' interaction of traditional politics and media. At times it can feel as though many of the campaigns deserve more discussion. Some of GetUp's members certainly complain that they can only sign on to a pre-decided campaign position, rather than contribute their take on the issue. There is also relatively little room for deliberative discussion and learning about issues so as to reach a balanced conclusion.

Interestingly, 38 Degrees has modified this approach slightly. For whereas MoveOn and GetUp measure a great deal of their success by the number of members, and quote this number frequently, 38 Degrees has chosen to display the number of 'actions taken' (by members) rather than the number of members. This is similar to the technique of another online campaigning organisation which relies heavily on social media and digital campaigning: 'We Are What We Do'. We Are What We Do credits itself with inspiring actions and behaviour changes which are discussed as a grand total of over four million 'actions completed'.³¹ The organisation's credo is that "Small actions x Lots of People = Big Change".

The GetUp membership model was sometimes also source of tension. Whilst campaigns are technically 'opt-in', members received emails about all campaigns, and were included in the total number of GetUp 'members'. People who might only have signed one petition, and subscribed to GetUp emails, were included in GetUp's membership statistics, but did not necessarily agree with all of the organisation's campaigns. GetUp's rationale by way of response is that people are complex creatures and *unlike* political parties, being a GetUp member allows for choice on which issues and campaigns you act on. There is no assumption that members agree, overall, with the organisation's stance.

At GetUp, nearly all communication, even between members, was mediated through the staff of the organisation (at the time less than fifteen people). Very little internal conversation migrated onto the website, blogs and forums. Members are almost invisible to one another apart from a number at the top of the homepage displaying a count of members. This appears to be changing, mainly with the use of third-party social media sites.

38 Degrees, the youngest of the four organisations, has improved on this in the way it operates. The most dynamic part of the 38 Degrees website is the 'community' page³² which links to blogs, Facebook, Twitter, all teeming with discussion of the campaign at hand and of broader issues.

Improvements in this area could potentially afford the four organisations much greater power to act transformationally on the democratic climate. Discussion of this kind could readily co-exist with effective campaigns, strengthening them and at the same time fitting well with the democracy-building ethos of the organisations. On the other hand, this may require the organisations to develop accountability mechanisms for the likely scenario that members disagreed with a choice of campaign. There is also the potential for the weakening of campaigning capabilities.

Surveys and Polls

Australian GetUp carried out a large-scale survey of its members in 2007 called the People's Agenda for the New Parliament³³. GetUp surveyed members again in 2008 and 2009, and has campaigned on the resulting priorities ever since. Avaaz and MoveOn also regularly conduct surveys and polls.³⁴

One feature of these survey and polling results is the prioritisation of climate change and sustainability issues by members. Following polls, all four organisations under consideration have prioritised climate change and environmental sustainability in their campaign work.

One of MoveOn's first major campaigns focused on the Afghanistan and Iraq War and campaigning for a change of power in presidential elections. Of the action areas in MoveOn's 2009 Agenda³⁵ the top four priorities for members emerged as economic recovery, the green economy and climate change, the Iraq War and universal health care. In the poll for the 2009 Agenda each member could vote for three goals. The **Table** below shows the percentages of people who included an issue in their top three goals.

Table 1: MoveOn 2009 Agenda: polling results

Goal		
1.	Universal health care	64.9%
2.	Economic recovery and job creation	62.1%
3.	Build a green economy, stop climate change	49.6%
4.	End the war in Iraq	48.3%
5.	Improve public schools	21.6%
6.	Restore civil liberties	16.8%
7.	Hold the Bush Administration accountable	15.2%
8.	Gay rights/LGBT equality	8.6%
9.	Increase access to higher education	7.6%
10.	Reform campaigns and elections	5.7%

Turning to GetUp, a poll in 2008 led to the creation of a 'People's Agenda for the New Parliament.'³⁶ The top three issues for their members at this time were:

1. Become environmentally sustainable and combating climate change
2. Make high quality primary, secondary, and tertiary qualification accessible to all Australians
3. Respect the rights and improve the living standards of Indigenous Australians

Below this the issues of the Iraq War, health, poverty rights, infrastructure, industrial relations, and building a healthy democracy were also ranked.

GetUp's 2009 'Vision Survey' found that 82% of members surveyed want to be more involved in democratic participation. Their priorities for GetUp's campaigns were:

1. Climate change
2. Water
3. Indigenous equality
4. Economic fairness
5. Rights

In Avaaz's 'People Power in 2010' Survey³⁷ the 48,000 members who participated were asked to rank issue areas in order of priority. The results were:

1. Climate change and the environment
2. Human rights, torture, genocide, human trafficking
3. Poverty, disease and development
4. War, peace and security
5. Corruption and abuse of power
6. Democracy movements and tyrannical regimes

Climate change and climate-related issues (such as deforestation) also topped the list of campaigns suggested for the following year.

The data drawn from Avaaz's 'People Power in 2010'³⁸ has some interesting relevance to the relationship between democracy, climate change, and the people who are participating in online activism. For example, when asked which future campaigns they *strongly* felt Avaaz should run: 73% of members ticked 'Pushing for a strong global climate treaty in 2010', 50% ticked 'Challenging the role of polluter companies and lobbies', and 63% supported 'campaigning against deforestation and saving rainforests'. Of the six most strongly supported campaigns, covering all global concerns, half were directly related to climate.

Major Achievements

Brief consideration of the major achievements of the four organisations on and off the climate agenda can help to build understanding of the potential of this model of online activism. Indeed, at the most general level, the very existence of the organisations themselves is an achievement, for here is a group of independent, self-funded, online communities advocating 'people power' and succeeding in empowering people and effecting change. Quite apart from campaign wins, the organisations have made their presence felt by politicians, by the media and others in power.

The membership levels of the organisations³⁹ and the amount of money that they have raised are also significant achievements.

As a GetUp staff member, it was often said that while the creation of a mass movement for change was a goal, the ultimate goal would be a society in which GetUp didn't need to exist. The aspiration for a democracy that is so healthy that there is no longer any need to campaign for it is laudable. But a healthy democracy of the future will surely mean having many online communities which facilitate participation in politics and democracy.

Turning to a few of the specific major campaigns and wins of the organisations: MoveOn has campaigned against the Iraq War since it began and continues to do so. The organisation raised millions in for the Democrats in the Presidential election campaigns of 2004 and 2008, raising millions of dollars in essential funds from micro-donations and using the Internet to combat the effectiveness of the attack ads and negative campaigning which are prevalent in the run up to US elections.⁴⁰

GetUp's most memorable campaigns include their maiden campaign 'Save Our Senate'; a television campaign against the Iraq War run from funds raised online, a campaign to put climate on the agenda for the 2007 election, a major human rights win around the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, the release of Australian citizen David Hicks from captivity in Guantanamo Bay, stopping the building of a pulp mill in virgin forest in Tasmania, and numerous successful television and viral video campaigns.

38 Degrees, established only last year, has already grabbed its share of headlines⁴¹, especially in the blogging community, and has successfully employed diverse social media for its aims in the UK.

Avaaz has achieved the largest ever climate petition, attracting upward of fourteen million signatures.

Democracy-building

Extrapolating from the evidence of their campaign models, one might speculate that the ideal of democracy embodied in the work of the four organisations necessarily involves universal, perhaps free, access to the Internet as an invaluable precondition for effective democracy.

The vision of democracy that this entails would then encompass free and easy access to informal and formal political processes through e-governance, e-democracy and online grassroots, extra-governmental initiatives and participation. It would also involve free and easy access to information via the same channels. This would include governments having a responsibility to publish public information to an easily accessible forum, and certainly for it to be available online. The free flow of information and transparency must then not only be between representatives or government and citizens, but also between citizens. A guarantee of freedom from online censorship would be a necessary component of such a vision of democracy.

Open online communication between representatives and their constituents could potentially contribute positively both to deliberative and consultative forms of democracy. A “many-to-many” discussion about politics would take place constantly as it does now online; however it would involve a greater or more direct level of engagement with representatives. The ‘shortened space’ between the individual and the decision-maker would be a clear benefit that would both empower citizens and strengthen democracy.

Online politics would need to be supported by civics education, technological and media literacy. In turn, as information and education in politics grows, this might support an interest and connection with the political process and increase engagement.

The continuous deliberation and resulting transparency of online networks would provide an informal but comprehensive accountability measure to compliment current formal public accountability measures faced by representatives.

These factors all have resonance in visions of democracy which already exist. But it is also important to stress that organisations like GetUp see online communication *inherently* in terms of its potential to get closer to, or achieve, democratic aims.

Online activism should also be distinguished from e-democracy and e-governance. These broader terms can encompass anything from government administration (for example, completing a tax return online) to other online civil society groups (which don’t necessarily campaign but work to increase participation, transparency, freedom of information) such as TheyWorkForYou and FixMyStreet which are projects of MySociety in the UK; to online consultative forums between MPs and constituents.

“TheyWorkForYou.com measures and ranks MPs’ contributions to parliamentary debate, with some surprising consequences. Such is the site’s popularity, there is evidence that politicians are asking more questions in order to improve their ranking. Their behaviour is changing as they know we’re watching - isn’t that the point?”

Ed Coper, Campaigns Director, GetUp

Conclusion

There is a range of views on the impact that the Internet could or will have on the evolution of democracy. Some commentators are hopeful that the Internet can break down barriers between the governed and the governing. Many are hopeful that the Internet will revolutionise the climate agenda as existing democratic and political systems begin to flounder. For example, climate activist Al Gore has discussed the idea that the Internet revolution should focus on the climate crisis. ‘Web 2.0 has to have a purpose’ Gore has said. *“The purpose I would urge is to bring about a higher level of consciousness about our relationship to this planet and the imminent danger we face. We have everything we need to save it.”*⁴²

The theory of ‘civic engagement’ offers many insights for improvement in the operating models of the four organisations considered in this paper. Academic Pippa Norris defines ‘civic engagement’ as having three dimensions⁴³. She suggests first that civic engagement

increases 'political knowledge', i.e. what people are able to learn about public affairs, through the free flow of and access to information. Second, it could increase 'political trust', i.e. the public's support for the political system, by enhancing accountability and transparency of political processes and representatives. And third, civic engagement could certainly improve 'political participation', i.e. activities designed to influence government and the decision-making processes, but allowing greater consultation, and the potential to organise, mobilise and act.

Democracy - and certainly the sustainability agenda - could be advanced by the capacity for information and communication available on the Internet. Informed citizens, increased government transparency, the increased deliberation of citizens, and new forms of communication between people and between citizens and elected representatives, because of digital technology, are all among the likely outcomes as the use of the Internet grows.

However, even if the Internet could generate these positive effects for democracy, there is a glaring problem in that access to the Internet is far from universal. The Internet may indeed draw attention to some international issues and improve transparency in un-democratic countries. But the fact remains that most of the world's people cannot access these benefits.

On an international scale, it is also important to consider countries where people are excluded from both democracy and online activism *because* of a lack of democracy; countries where the media and Internet is highly censored. There are global campaigns to democratise and bring civil rights to, for example, China, Iran and North Korea. However it is difficult to imagine that these campaigns have any influence on states which are already under enormous international pressure to lift such restrictions.

When considering online participation through campaigning, the Internet can be seen as an equalising, democratic force. However, it is also important to remember that whilst some barriers to participation are removed by online participation, others are raised. Traditional, pervasive and particularly global inequalities seem to be amplified by the introduction of the Internet. Technological barriers to participation are more likely to affect those people around the world who are already excluded because of age, gender, race, disability, and economic and cultural capital.

Caveats aside, the online global communication flow that the Internet offers provides such enormous positive potential that it is difficult not to focus on this. For internet-based communication offers the potential to bypass geographic dislocation and inequalities, permitting those without resources to have their voices heard on the same stage as the rich and powerful.

If they want to tackle the problem of climate change, organisations based on the models of MoveOn, Avaaz, GetUp and 38 Degrees should evolve so that they engage directly with notions of global rather than national citizenship. GetUp, for example, has a tendency to talk in national terms and act only on national issues, directing members to Avaaz if they wish to take part in an international campaign. Yet the challenge of climate change calls for people of all nations to think outwardly and engage at a global level. If groups like GetUp, MoveOn and 38 Degrees maintain only national campaigns, they feed the idea that nations need to

protect their own interests; an idea which all too frequently fails to serve the sustainability agenda.

A fascinating feature of the four organisations is that participation does not mirror the restrictions built into systems of democracy by means of notions such as the *demos*. Internet-based participation allows for involvement of people who are not allowed to vote such as immigrants or people otherwise without voting rights. Through the Internet, a person's influence over government can potentially extend transnationally to affect foreign governments. This has enormous implications for decision-making in Western countries, such as the UK and the US, which have been externalising sustainable development problems for decades. By this I mean that the problems associated with the means by which these countries gain their resources are put or kept outside the country's borders.

Online activism and political communication also have enormous potential as accountability mechanisms. The UK-headquartered NGO AccountAbility⁴⁴ argues that accountability itself is a driver of innovation in sustainable development. Online communities already enhance transparency and accountability in relation to politics as well as companies. And online communities also keep a watchful eye on themselves: the range of knowledge and opinion which is applied to anything once it becomes available online mean that the web can get to the bottom of things very quickly.

In this age of social media, politicians, governments and companies are learning that they need to be open and engage in conversations with the public, rather than attempting to control messages and responses.

"The challenge for politicians is to embrace Politics 2.0, and its interactivity and accountability. It's becoming clear that if people are not given meaningful forms of engagement within the system, they will find effective ones outside it."

Ed Coper, Campaigns Director, GetUp

Polling data from MoveOn, GetUp and Avaaz is a sign that this shift is beginning to happen. The change is particularly acute around the issue of climate change and sustainable development; an area that cannot be said to have been adequately addressed by current political and democratic systems.

The Internet has the potential to revolutionise civic engagement and strengthen democratic processes, and these revolutionary changes could yield some of the solutions to climate change; the biggest challenge of our age. Online communication and information provide new campaigning, deliberation and participation opportunities, a new 'closeness' regardless of geography, and a realisation of the global nature of sustainable development challenges. These developments have the potential to strengthen democracy and political process to achieve outcomes that really are in the best interest of most people, within nations and throughout the globe.

Changing forms of information and communication technology offer a great sense of the possible. If we extend this sense of possibility to the *uses* of information and communication

technologies - for creating a stronger global network of people, stronger decision-making processes, and a sustainable future - solutions to the simultaneous climate and resource crises which are summed up in the term 'sustainable development' may come a step closer.

Appendix: Case Studies of Online Climate Change Campaigns

1. GetUp



'Counter the Polluter Lobby'

This GetUp campaign raised over Australian\$150,000. An advertisement (see below) was printed in newspapers as MPs returned to Parliament for the year. The advert was designed to counter pressure and fear-mongering by what GetUp dubs the 'polluter lobby' and build public awareness that cutting emissions creates jobs.

ADVERTISEMENT

General Vacancies For thousands of new clean-energy jobs **cleanenergyjobs.com.au**

C'mon Kevin

Accountant, Solar Energy Company

Accountant needed for company installing solar panels on thousands of houses across Australia. Demand for solar panels means new jobs in accounting, finance and managerial positions.

Waiting on strong government investment in renewable industries to unlock hundreds of thousands of clean-energy jobs

To apply call: (02) 6277 7700 - and ask for investment in clean-energy jobs

Where's our PLUMBER

Water-Saving Retrofits

Looking for plumbers to be retrained in installation and upgrade of homes with water-saving technologies. The installation and manufacture of efficient water systems and alternative treatment technologies will create thousands of new jobs for previous and newly trained tradespeople.

Waiting on strong government investment in renewable industries to unlock hundreds of thousands of clean-energy jobs

To apply call: (02) 6277 7700 - and ask for investment in clean-energy jobs

Wind turbine engineer, Wind Energy Company

Looking for ex-automotive industry workers. Gearboxes used in wind turbines are similar to those in cars - engineers trained to work with car engines needed for manufacture and operation of wind turbines. Workers also needed for production and welding of sheet metal for use in wind turbine construction.

Waiting on strong government investment in renewable industries to unlock hundreds of thousands of clean-energy jobs.

To apply call: (02) 6277 7700 - and ask for investment in clean-energy jobs

Economy?

Energy Assessor, Building Efficiency Audit Company

Join an exciting and growing industry, by becoming an energy assessor for this premiere building efficiency audit company. Energy assessors are needed to inspect government and commercial buildings around the country, to help them use energy more efficiently and save money.

Waiting on strong government investment in renewable industries to unlock hundreds of thousands of clean-energy jobs.

To apply call: (02) 6277 7700 - and ask for investment in clean-energy jobs

CUTTING EMISSIONS CREATES JOBS

500,000 jobs waiting to be unlocked

These are just some examples of the hundreds of thousands of new jobs that will be created by moving to a clean, low-carbon economy. To unlock them we need strong emission reduction targets that create incentives for investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency and related industries.

The Rudd Government's proposed scheme will not get us there. In the face of all scientific evidence, it has a woefully weak target and is loaded with exemptions and handouts for polluting industries. Now the Government is under pressure to make it even worse.

Tell Kevin Rudd to make the Government's emissions trading scheme stronger, not weaker, because **Cutting Emissions Creates Jobs.**

GetUp!
Action for Australia
www.getup.org.au

Source: ACF & ACTU - Green Gold Rush 2009

Authorised by Simon Sheikh, 116-121 Kippax St, Surry Hills, Sydney NSW, Australia



'Climate Torch Relay'

GetUp wanted to mobilise and make visible the 'unprecedented movement' they see as necessary to tackle climate change in Australia. The organisation created a device which they called a 'Climate Torch'.

The torch travelled around Australia as communities hosted events to show support. The message as the torch travelled was that GetUp members were demanding strong leadership on climate change – emissions targets, investment in renewable energy, and reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

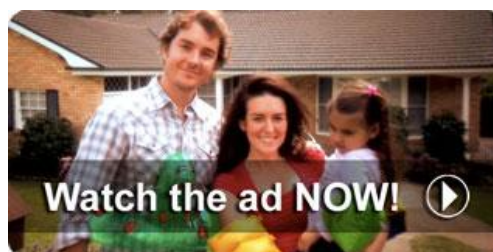
"As thousands of Australians carry the GetUp Climate Torches around Australia, they are carrying a powerful message – to reduce Australia's carbon pollution 50% by 2020. They will carry the torches, and this message, to Canberra where the torches will be presented on October 12th. The delivery will be part of a rally calling for 50% by 2020 emission reduction targets, soon after the final Garnaut report has been delivered and at a crucial time during your deliberations on Australia's 2020 target."

(Ed)Take, for example, the ad that spoofed the Howard government's climate change ads before last year's election. By raising more than \$250,000 through small contributions online in 72 hours and broadcasting it during the AFL grand final to an audience of millions, ordinary Australians were able to occupy a space normally taken by the well-resourced or the well-connected, and directly undermine the government of the day's message.

'Climate Cleverer'

This campaign was developed as a response to a Government ad campaign which GetUp considered to have essentially 'green washed' their climate change policy.

GetUp produced a satirical video which raised over Australian\$250,000 in three days. The aim was to remind Australians not to swallow Government spin on climate change. The video was televised during the Australian Rules Football Grand Final which was watched by 2.57million viewers.



Members continued to donate after this initial transmission and GetUp bought over 50 additional slots. The ad also gained coverage in local and national news and current affairs programs, and newspapers.

2. 38 Degrees



38 Degrees has so far been relatively quiet on climate change. The organisation ran campaigns around the December 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit imploring Barack Obama to Save the Talks at Copenhagen. It has also recently launched a petition demanding A Clean Energy Bill from the UK Parliament. They have a very healthy community on facebook, twitter and their own blog which were particularly active during December and the Copenhagen summit.

The group has begun to be more vocal around the 2010 UK General Election campaign, with democracy-building campaigns such as their

campaign around the controversial Digital Economy Bill, rushed through Parliament before the election.

3. Avaaz



'Copenhagen: The Fight Continues'

Avaaz collected a hefty 14 million signatures toward its Copenhagen climate summit petition calling for 'real deal' from heads of state.

APEC 2007

Avaaz launched a climate change campaign in 2007, demanding 'binding climate targets' from the Sydney APEC Summit (they co-operated with GetUp on the campaign).



4. MoveOn



[Positive Agenda House Parties](#)

In 2006, MoveOn orchestrated an online and offline campaign, holding thousands of house parties at which members discussed MoveOn's progressive agenda. A membership-wide vote placed 'Health care for all, solving the energy and environmental crisis, and restoring our Constitutional democracy' as the priorities for discussion.

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